

The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge



Best of Poetry

Ben Nardolilli

Best of Fiction

Brenda Blakey



The Corner

Club

Press



The Corner Club Press

July 2011

Volume I • Issue III

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

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Any resemblance to actual events, persons living or dead, locales in the
poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

Letter From the Fiction Editor

Dear shadows, who are my readers and writers,

Here we are with another fabulous issue of The Corner Club Press. We have been open for six months, and we hope to survive six more months and live on thereafter. We don't have the amount of pieces we did last issue simply because last issue was so time consuming, and we are busy college students after all. Yet, The Corner Club Press will always release when we say it will release.

I also regret that I couldn't work with the teens this issue, but ballet is in my schedule now, so I simply had no time to provide proper feedback and work on edits with them. I have also recently begun freelance editing, and that is time consuming as well. But I promise there will be a teen in the next issue with a wonderful piece.

I hope you enjoy this issue, as I enjoyed reading the pieces I've chosen. To me, they get better and better with each issue, and I suppose it should be that way. Lastly, we plan to include another surprise in our next issue, one I hope you readers will find interesting.

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes
Founder and Fiction Editor

Letter From the Poetry Editor

Writers and Readers,

We bring to you our latest issue of *The Corner Club Press*. Within the past six months, we have worked diligently to offer readers the highest quality contemporary poetry and fiction. This issue has been no different from the last two in our gratefulness to be working amongst such talented writers.

However, there is one addition to this issue that cannot be overlooked. We decided to welcome writers who may not ordinarily submit due to age stigmas that may exist in the publishing world. As a nod to our open-mindedness and appreciation of writing in all of its various forms and styles, we were happy to encourage teen writers to submit their works. I have personally been delighted at the sophistication of the poems that we have received from young writers. We hope to continue this offer of personal critique and suggestion to future young submitters in upcoming issues.

Also, I would like to note that I was particularly impressed with the poetry published in this issue. It was difficult to narrow the high number of submissions down, but the best has been included in this issue. Writers, please continue to submit and to support our magazine. Check in with us at our website, our Facebook page and our Twitter account to stay informed about deadlines and events.

Thank you,

Daphne D. Maysonet
Co-Founder and Poetry Editor

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Ben Nardolilli

Last Minutes

Tall, black window cuts the derelict
Night into framed pictures
I can easily take and call nothing
More than a background.

Nothing is blue, nothing outside
At least, nothing creeps in
To fight the blue I own outright
In my curtains and rug.

Opening the window up recycles
The bedroom air to replace
Molecules with a new circulation,
But it lets in the chaos too.

Ben Nardolli is a twenty five year old writer currently living in Arlington, Virginia. My work has appeared in Perigee Magazine, Red Fez, One Ghana One Voice, Caper Literary Journal, Quail Bell Magazine, Elimae, Poems Niedergasse, Grey Sparrow Journal, A Hudson View, The Toucan, Contemporary American Voices, the Eudaimonia Poetry Review, Rabbit Catastrophe Review, Gloom Cupboard, and Beltway Poetry Quarterly. In addition I maintain a blog at mirror-sponge.blogspot.com and am looking to publish my first novel.

Ben Nardolilli

Hold Your Nose

I came up to them after the walk
Through the desert and the careful
Path marked by the absence of cacti.

Swirling blood-red wine in glasses
Big enough for my head to swim,
They laughed on the beige balcony.

Facing me, they asked for a description,
I told them the house was a shoebox,
A decapitated diorama, if they preferred.

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Gregg Winkler

The Problem with Brothers

Do you suppose that James,
The Brother of Jesus,
Ever looked at his brother with more hatred
Than all the demons in hell?

Jesus -- always so good,
Always so perfect.
Always better at making Mother's Day gifts out
of clay
Always remembering to say excuse me when
he burped
And never forgetting to put away his things
when he was done with them.

Do you suppose that James,
When Jesus was executed for his crimes,
Looked at his mom with an "I knew it" look on
his face?
And thought to himself, "Finally!"

Finally.

Gregg Winkler is a writer from a small town in Oklahoma. Upon first meeting him, many people remark that they thought he'd be taller. More poetry, fiction, and nonfiction by Mr. Winkler can be found in various places online and in print.

Adrian

Keep Them Safe

When dark sets determined into old wooden walls
Even young bodies become nostalgic hosts
Crawl-space halls then gape, glottal and most
Horrific to my widened eyes, but I'm fully enthralled
With memories I thought I'd lost, engrossed

These ice-eyed darling things, frail, gasping in the
dark
Shiver underneath rough forceful learning
And crack apart; there's no discerning
Between malignant lies and truths told, stark
And barren before the break of morning

Gather the pieces, before invading morning,
Curious for forbidden midnight pasts,
Drips golden over blue edged glass
And melts it all away; I am, familiarly, torn in
Pieces, their innocence (always) never lasts

Keep them cold, insulated in my secret place:
A box blackened with burning no-action plans
No one could ever understand
How I love their pallid fragment graces
Whispering softly in my ears, trembling in my hands

Adrian is a 16 year-old genderqueer homeschool student, with pretentious ideas and aspirations. Ze writes, paints, and performs compulsively, and loves and hates an awful lot.

Kenneth Homer

Counting Coups

A small painted band circles the buffet
--- No war whoops but savage nevertheless
Fearsome in intensity:
One spearing a small bit of prosciutto
Others in echelon, seizing fragments of flesh
Relishing the butchery of pastries,
Carrying canapés to their safe haven.
After the attack the stories begin:
The boasting, the braggadocio, the counting of
coups.
Many scalps hang from the lodge pole tonight:
The pregnant daughter without a husband in sight,
The chieftain of commerce more feathers than glory,
The thief, the wayward wife-- cutpurse and cutnose
Being especially esteemed trophies,
The scalps no longer small parcels of humanity,
But objectified--- cured so they do not stink
The drumbeat of indiscretions large and small
Continues through the night,
All feasting on rumor and innuendo--
The sweet juice of gossip,
And the fat from slanderous fabliau dribbling down
the chin,
Each knowing wink or nod a counting of coups--
Counting coups and reveling in their savagery,
The fires burn brightly in suburbia throughout the long
night.

Kenneth Homer



Business Poetry 101

Young entrepreneurs enrolled in Business Poetry 101
Feign interest as the teacher scans a line,
Each upbeat or downbeat a bull or a bear.
But the teacher has found something fungible in the work

Most will not profit from the class
And see it as a loss.
The principal work--
Something about wind rippling waves of grain,
About the long green
About the folding green
About the wind touching us all like some invisible hand
Touches not a one.
The sheaves of wheat are green; their papers mostly red
And all dream of laissez faire.

The poet speaks of moral hazard
But how to enter a soul into the ledger
And how will benefits accrue?

Kenneth Homer

Hugh Fox

MAZURKAING *

Polish-French upper-classing it, what
do you mean you can't walk in those
shoes, the gardens and stone palace-houses,
or downtown in an apartment three minutes
away from *creme brule* and the best polock
sausages, what do you mean you can't get
it up, stop projecting into a fifty year future,
this is E Major time, a waltz-march-lullaby
my fairest lady, lie me down to just BE,
at least evenings/nights, never without her.

* Scriabin's Etude Op.2, No.1, Mazurkas.

Hugh Fox has his Ph.D. in American Literature from the U. of Illinois (1957), taught American and English lit and writing for some forty years at Loyola U. in L.A., 30 years at Michigan State and other schools. He has 120 books published and the latest are: THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY (Sunbury Press, short stories), REUNION (Luminis Press, a novel), DEPTHS AND DRAGONS (Skylight Press in England, a novel), IN THE BEGINNING (Muse It Up Press in Canada, another novel). He is dying from prostate cancer but still manages to make it to concerts, plays, ballet, etc. every night.

Bullbla



Ascent

They left every stone unturned
Every rose untouched,
In the rubble of a shrine
Of those that once had loved
They lay quietly
Their faces upturned
Towards the sun
Their tears vaporized
To ascend
To become
A story that will never end
Life begins at the turn
Of a long winding way
Journeyed
In a day

Bullbla

PD Lyons

Canada

Where I could step out into the night
Smoke with the stars
Hear an ocean just beyond the pines
And something'd draw the
Dog off barking
Into a pitch black forest where really anything
could be
When all I wanted was a sparkling solitude of
Orion
But you know when the s.o.b. came back
All proud of himself wagging his tail –
All I could say was
Good boy - Good boy

PD Lyons been writing since 12 years old, now a bit older than that and still going. small magaz ahnd ezine through out the world. originally from connecticut lived aborad for the last 13 years. newest book published by Lapwing Publications Belfast, Caribu & Sister Stones. Please check out PD Lyons Poetry Project link to video invitation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sjr-7VXnUgsb> and/or visit [pdlyons blog for poetry publishing info and new releases: http://pdlyons.wordpress.com](http://pdlyons.wordpress.com)

Michael Bernsten

The Service

They come to worship a copper cancer saint.
The chewed wooden pews hide their hymnals,
which must be touched to be heard, much like
memories.

They come to celebrate the nativity.
A fog as agitated as a ghost provides the incense.
The blue stillness above absorbs their homily.

They come bearing gifts of flees and plague.
Water drips from the opened ceiling,
mixing with cobwebs that cover the altar.
This is his body and blood.

They come to offer twigs as their prayers
for the cherubs protecting their young,
for the five purple spotted eggs baptized in secret.
These are to be his new covenant.

Michael Bernsten teaches Composition, Creative Writing, and Literature at the University of Louisiana. His works have appeared in Untoward Magazine, Canyon Voices, and Prick of the Spindle among others.



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/Boo5oX8UJA/ref=s9_simh_gw_p351_do_i1?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKXoDER&pf_rd_s=center-2&pf_rd_r=114RN81oE1XXVZ52TAG3&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

Famished

You are what you eat...

7-26-2011

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[http://www.goodreads.com/book/
show/12009705-famished](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12009705-famished)

BY LAUREN HAMMOND

Kids on Mars are disappearing,
save them, join

THE PACK

LM PRESTON

Stories for and
about kids

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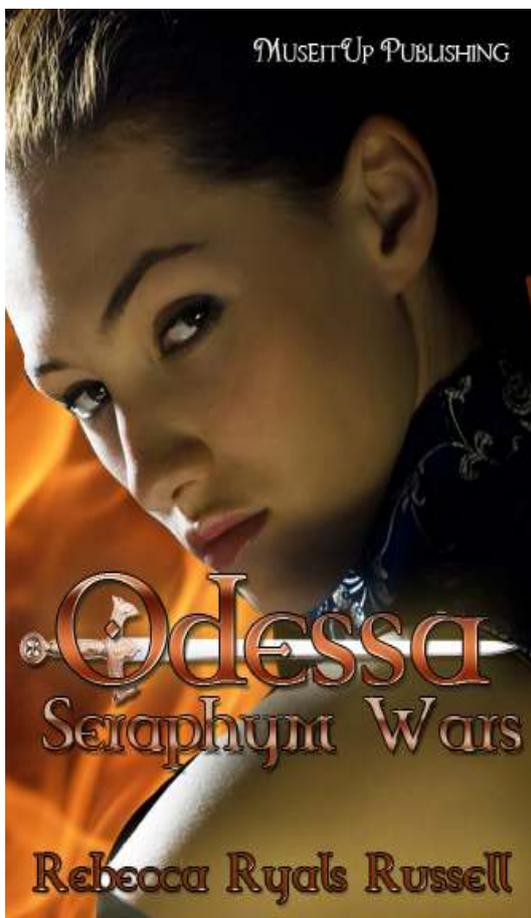
Bandits

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that overcome the impossible. . .”

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“Myrna Ashlin Watts graduated from High School in Jacksonville, Fl. just in time to find herself transported to a bizarre and primal planet corrupted by demon-dragons. And they want her DEAD. Her problem is she has been recruited to kill *them*, too.”

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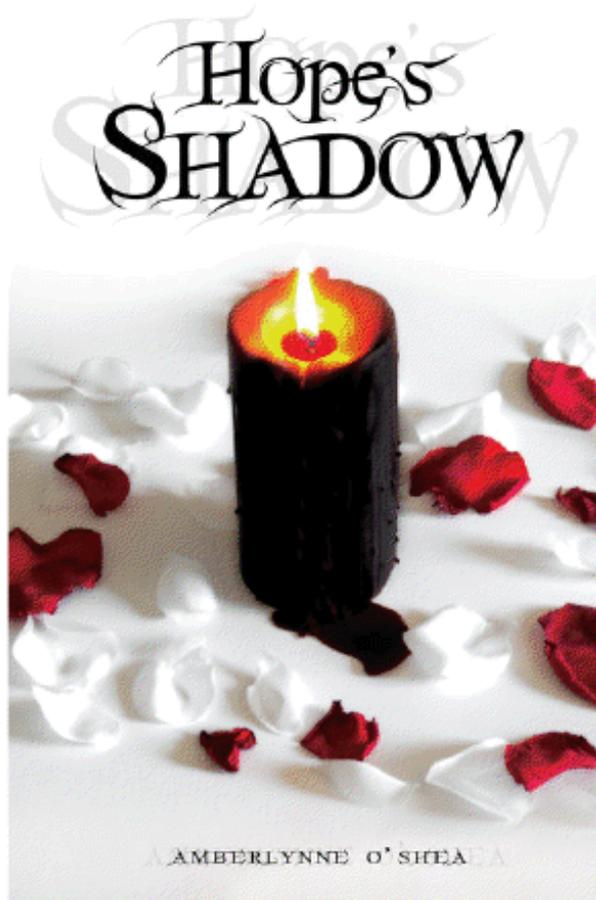


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Brenda Blakey

Pretend

I enter the plane in front of Allen. His cell, barely pressed to his ear, allows a female voice to leak out. Her words, intermittent but sweet, mix with engine fumes; the combination makes me queasy. The familiar female voice has a syncopated cadence. "...miss you honey...call me." Allen answers, "Of course, Mr. Fineman, as soon as the holidays are over. Bye now."

We take our seats, me at the window, Allen at the aisle, and an empty seat between. Allen refers to the middle seat as the 'throw away' because nobody wants to buy it. Nobody wants to be hemmed in, least of all him. After ten years, I understand. It's an advertisement: 'Opening for new trophy wife, help me look good to clients, no family dramas, please.'

Our marriage is defined by what we pretend. I pretend he's not a womanizer. He pretends I am too dim-witted to catch him. I pretend he will want children one day. He pretends I'm happy with the way things are.

Allen takes one of those airline magazines out of the seat pocket in front of him and pats his jacket. "Rachel, glasses please."

I open my purse and fish out his spare pair, but drop them between the seat and the arm rest. "I'll get them." I see them poking out as they rest next to a piece of paper wedged there.

I hand him the glasses and pluck the paper out. It's one of those business reply cards found in magazines. Fascinating how they get into the magazines. A puff of air splays the pages partially open while a suction hose draws a reply card up and shoots it into the magazine. The

card is thicker than a regular piece of paper because its tinsel strength must withstand the pressure of being sucked up without ripping. Ex-print buyers know this stuff. Useless stuff. The card is blown in, but ironically, when you open the magazine, the card falls out. That's the beauty of it. Once it falls out, someone's bound to pick it up and put it to good use. Marketing genius. I flip the card over. *Parents*. A grocery list is scrawled in the card's white space:

milk
bread
after shave
hair spray
diapers
baby shampoo

I stare at the card. Baby shampoo. My thoughts wander to the day that my life was blown between the pages of Allen's career.

After only two months of marriage, Allen told me to quit my job as a Senior Print Buyer. "Sweetheart, you don't need to work. Anyway, I want you to help me stay organized and climb ladders and have parties. It'll be great."

"Allen, we *will* have children, won't we?"

"Sure, sweetheart, in a few years, just as soon as I make partner." He made partner four years later. It's been six years since he made partner. Ten long years without children.

My gaze is frozen on a point beyond the list. The card has a powerful tinsel strength; the past has blown it between the pages of my future.

"What's that?" He snatches it. "*Parents*. Glad we don't have to worry about that crap." He crushes it and it falls on the floor.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and pick it up, pick myself up. A rumble

builds and roils out in a declaration that is guttural and defiant. "I. Want. Children."

"Rachel, what in the hell is wrong with you?"

Tears volunteer and I ignore them. I put the card into a zippered pocket in my purse.

"As soon as we land, I'm leaving you."

"You're--leaving me? Why would you want to do that?"

"I'm leaving you for--for my children."

He glares at me for a long second. "Rachel, you don't have children."

"That is the most enlightened thing you ever said to me, Allen. Too bad you don't understand it." He pretends I hear his tirade, white noise like the roar of the engines. But I stare out the window trying on baby names in pink and blue.

Brenda Blakey, a native of Atlanta, experienced early retirement from the printing industry. Now she writes from a southern porch--minus the mint juleps. Her work can be found at With Painted Words, The Camel Saloon, and elsewhere online.

Laury A. Egan

Payback

Jodie was bored and feeling lonely. Her mother couldn't be interrupted--she was home but in her real estate office attached to the house, seeing clients. Her father was in New York City, at work, and all of her few friends were at camp, the beach, or busy. Late August, hot, humid, grass brown, some leaves gathering in the yellow gravel driveway. Nothing to do.

She dumped three teaspoons of sugar in a tall green glass. Poured in iced tea, walked out onto the screened porch, and sat on the sofa. Maybe read a book, she thought, but she felt too twitchy. Sometimes being nine wasn't fun. If she were older, she could drive her mother's black T-Bird to the stables and ride her favorite Palomino horse, King. She wanted to be anywhere else, doing anything.

After she finished her tea, Jodie went outside to the driveway, wishing there were some kids in the neighborhood. Except for Mr. Micelli up the street, who she helped with his vegetable garden, she didn't know anyone else nor were there many houses nearby. As usual, she was on her own.

She grabbed the pink ball she'd bought at Woolworth's with her allowance. It felt smooth in her hand, light and bouncy. She began throwing it against the brown siding of the house, above the garage doors. Over and over, she tossed and caught it, until finally she was sick to death of doing that and threw it as hard as she could one last time. It hit the edge of the plywood backstop that held the basketball hoop and angled sharply to the left, scooting through weeds, under the two-rail fence, and out of sight down the cliff.

"Damn!" she shouted, even though her parents had forbidden her to curse.

She walked to the fence, stood by three skinny white birch trees, and peered over the side, hoping the ball had hung up on the tufts of tall grasses that clung to the cliff. No such luck. Then Jodie saw a spot of pink lying in Reverend Innish's patch of green yard.

"Damn!" she shouted again. His house, which was halfway up the hill, looked like a large shoe box shoved into the nearly vertical slope. It was reachable by walking around the hill and climbing about a hundred zigzagging steps. A lot easier to go straight down the slope, she thought.

Jodie had never actually met Reverend Innish, nor did she know much about him. She hadn't a clue where he preached, although her mother had once remarked that he was a crazy old fraud. Since her parents thought all religionists were either dumb, brainwashed, or crooked, Jodie didn't know whether the Reverend was in one of those categories or really nuts. All in all, she'd just as soon avoid meeting up with the man.

It was mid-afternoon. Nothing happening until cocktail hour, when her mother started dinner, her father made scotch-and-waters, and she had a Coke. This seemed like a long way off to Jodie, and though she wasn't interested in playing catch anymore, she didn't want to lose her new ball. And, besides, she enjoyed the challenge of climbing up and down the cliff, twice timing how long it took to dash from top to bottom and vice versa. On one of these races, the Reverend had come out of his house and yelled at her, saying she was going to bring the hill down on his house. Jodie thought these crazy comments supported her mother's claim that he was a loony, but at dinner her father explained that it was a "slump-block zone," where areas might suddenly collapse due to heavy rain or other disturbances, and then the top would slide downward or fall over like a big orange-dirt wave.

Jodie hadn't seen any evidence of this, but it was in her mind as she climbed the fence and began edging downward, holding onto clumps of grass, small bushes, and the occasional sassafras tree that had found root in the steep cliff. Swinging from handhold to handhold, she quickly descended.

When Jodie reached the corner of Reverend Innish's yard, she jumped onto the grass, sweat pouring down her face and neck. She stood still and listened, in case the Reverend was home, but heard nothing except her own heavy breathing. Her ball was near the house, lying in a shaft of sunlight, lit like some kind of glowing, pink Easter egg. She stepped forward, silent as an Indian, and picked it up.

"Don't touch that ball, young lady!"

Jodie froze and dropped the ball on the ground.

Reverend Innish was standing on the gray slate path that led from his front door. He was thin and tall, though his head hung forward like it was heavy on his body. He wore black pants and a black shirt with a white clerical collar that peeked from behind wisps of uncombed gray beard. His eyes were small and black, his cheeks bright red.

Before Jodie could back away, he rushed toward her and snatched the back of her tee shirt.

"I have told you not to climb on the hill!" he said.

She stared into his beady eyes and tried to wriggle loose, but he had a good grab on her.

"Let me go!" There was no point in screaming for her mother because she was too far away.

Reverend Innish's lips twisted into a weird grin. "You will come with me, little girl, and we shall discuss your sinful wickedness."

"No!" she said, but the man's fingers were strong.

He started walking toward the front door, pulling her along behind him. She threw a kick at his legs, but he didn't seem to notice. After pushing the door open, he forced her into a small, dark hall that smelled of mildew and cat urine. He shut the door behind them and shoved Jodie into a living room lit from two large windows set into the slant of the roof. Leaves scurried across the windowpanes, making little ticking noises. For a moment, she was sure she'd fallen into a scary Halloween movie, complete with three enormous, hairy cats. One orange beast sat on a high-backed chair, a big black one lazed on the sofa, and a white cat lay on a burgundy-and-gold hooked rug.

Jodie detested cats. And these three looked wild, like they could claw skin to the bone.

"Sit," the Reverend commanded.

Jodie saw a rickety wooden chair and quickly did as he asked. She felt trapped and frightened. If something happened, her parents would never find her.

"I want to go home!" she told the Reverend Innish.

"Ah, yes, my dear, you shall. Once we've had a little chat. Now, what is your name?"

She didn't want to tell him, but she didn't want to make him angrier. "Jodie."

"Jodie, is it? Well, well." He rubbed his hands together as if they were cold, but considering the heat and airlessness in the house, Jodie couldn't imagine this was the case.

"You have no right to keep me here," she insisted, coming to her feet.

"Sit down!" he bellowed.

She sat, his loud voice echoing in her ears and around the room.

The three cats seemed undisturbed by the noise, as if they were used to it.

"Now, that's better," he said in a whispery voice. "We shall have a discussion about your transgressions." He hovered over her, casting a shadow that made a chill race down her spine. "My, you do have pretty brown eyes," he said, reminding Jodie of the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*. He touched her hair. "And such lovely dark locks, too."

"Leave me alone!" Jodie jerked away from his fingers.

He smiled, revealing crooked, yellow teeth. "Ah, well, then. Enough of that I suppose. We must get down to the business at hand."

Jodie didn't like the sound of this any better. She observed that his clerical collar was dirty, fraying where it pressed against his neck, that he smelled of sweat and the house's dampness.

"You recall that I told you not to climb on the cliff?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you wish to apologize and to promise you shall never set foot on the hill again, so help you God?"

She had no problem lying to God, who probably didn't exist, or Reverend Innish, who did, but was obviously crackers. Promising something in general, however, was giving her word and had more to do with her honor as a person. All in all, Jodie didn't know how to narrow her response so she could abide by it. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry if I disturbed you, sir."

His eyes smoldered with madness or anger, Jodie didn't know which.

"That is not what I asked!" His voice rose again, becoming more shrill. "Apologize for your grave misdeeds! Swear to the Lord Almighty for his divine forgiveness!"

Jodie couldn't hitch up the connection between God and a little afternoon cliff-climbing, but then she never thought about God much. "I shouldn't have come on your property," she replied.

The red color drained from his face. "Do you refuse to apologize? To promise this will never happen again?" He glared at her, waiting, his expression stern. "Oh, what a stubborn child you are!" he said. "I am aghast at your temerity. What a blasphemy against God!" The Reverend lifted a bony fist into the air.

Imagining a blow to her head, Jodie shrank into her smallest self.

Reverend Innish lowered his arm and let it fall against his trousers. "You have not been properly raised, young lady. What church does your family attend?"

Jodie risked a glance at him. "None."

"But surely this is not true! Where were you baptized?"

"I don't think I was."

"What?" The Reverend pressed his lips together and frowned. "I am grievously concerned for your soul! Your parents are irresponsible and dangerously misguided. I shall have to speak to them about this. To show them the light and save you from dwelling in the fires of hell."

Jodie didn't like the way the Reverend was talking about her parents. So far as she could judge, they'd done fine by her. She didn't want to argue, however.

He considered for a moment and then said, "Well, this certainly explains your wicked behavior. You have not been raised to respect God and his commandments. You are an immoral child who needs to be taught a lesson." He stared down at her, waiting for a response. When none came, he said, "Do I understand that you still refuse to repent?"

Jodie wanted to scream "yes" and sling a few curse words at him, but she was too afraid.

"Very well," he said, frowning, "I must consider the matter further."

With this, Reverend Innish turned and walked down the hall, past the front door, to a kitchen counter, where he was partly out of sight but close enough to block her exit. Relieved by his absence, Jodie sighed, straightened in the uncomfortable chair, and looked about the room, at the strange paintings hung on the knotty pine walls. Some featured stormy skies lit by violent blazes of lightning, which struck half-naked women whose eyes rolled toward heaven. In the background, bystanders stood with bleeding arms raised in terror or cowered behind trees and rocks. On other canvases, people were running in fear of devils erupting from underground fiery caves. Jodie didn't know if these creations were done by the Reverend, but she suspected they were, since an easel leaned in the hall and a paint box was tucked into a bookcase.

She sat there, waiting to meet her doom, feeling hot and breathless. The black cat licked its paw with a pink tongue, yawned, showing sharp white teeth, then stared at her without blinking. When Reverend Innish returned, he carried a tray on which sat a green metal pitcher streaming with condensation, two ruby-red metal cups, and a plate of vanilla cookies. He set the tray on the table in front of Jodie, who was astonished at this turn of events.

After regaining his seat, the Reverend poured dark punch into the cups. Jodie didn't want to touch anything this man offered. She was annoyed with herself for being scared, but she was scared all the same.

"Here you go, Jodie, my dear," said Reverend Innish, in a strangely sweet voice. He handed her a cup and offered the cookies.

Jodie shook her head.

"But you mustn't be impolite," he whispered.

With a shaking hand, Jodie accepted the cup but refused the cookies, which looked like the cats had been nesting on them.

"After you," he said, raising his cup.

Jodie hesitated and then took the smallest sip she could. The punch tasted odd, fruity and finny, as if it had been stored in the pitcher for a very long time.

After she swallowed, the Reverend laughed, but his laughter was frightening. "This is what you get for climbing on my hill, young lady!" He leaned forward in his chair and waved a bent finger in front of her face. "And for refusing to apologize to God." His eyes seemed to gleam with red fire, like the devils' eyes in his paintings. Then his mouth twisted into a smile. "You have had a nice drink, haven't you?"

Jodie didn't know what to answer. She glanced at the front door and wondered if she could sprint past him.

"It is a delightful concoction," he continued, "but, I fear, not one I shall deign to drink." He placed his cup on the table and scrutinized Jodie. "You know, my dear, you should never accept food or drink from strangers."

Jodie nodded nervously.

"And, my little heathen child, you should not have done so this afternoon!" He lifted his chin and inhaled a large breath through his thin nose, as if he were breathing all the air from the room. His face reddened again and his eyes grew large and excited. "Do you know what this punch is?"

She shook her head.

He chuckled, leaned toward her, and hissed, "I have given you poison!"

Jodie gasped. Her hand instantly clutched her throat. "No!" she screamed, flying to her feet and tossing the punch in his face. She ran past him and burst through the door, his laughter ringing in her ears, crossed the yard, and scrambled frantically up the hill, sure he was right behind her.

At the top, having beaten all previous records for speed, she glanced down to see if Reverend Innish was on the cliff, but he wasn't in sight. Shaking with terror, Jodie rushed inside her house, locked the door, and ran into the bathroom. She filled a glass with water and rinsed her mouth, spitting out whatever might be left of the juice.

Was she going to die or had Reverend Innish lied about the poison in order to frighten her? Jodie was almost certain the punch wasn't poison, but even so she felt sick and queasy, angry and scared. She wanted her mother, but her mother had set very strict rules about bothering her during office hours. Jodie also worried she might be punished for climbing on the cliff, especially since an adult--Reverend Innish--had told her not to do so. Her parents, however, had never forbidden her to chase balls that fell over the side, only told her to be careful. And their opinion of the Reverend was not high, so maybe he didn't count as an adult. Finally, Jodie decided if she had swallowed poison, she'd be dead by dinnertime, and there probably wasn't much that could be done to save her anyhow. She went into her bedroom, crawled under the covers of her bed, and waited for the worst to happen.

That evening, her parents had cocktails as usual, but Jodie carried her Coke into her room, saying she wanted to read, which she tried to do, although her thoughts kept returning to her afternoon encounter with the devil below. The soda settled her stomach, so that she became less fearful that she had drunk poison and more furious at the Reverend. By seven o'clock, Jodie decided it was safe to join her parents for a steak dinner.

After eating, Jodie watched television and then pretended to go to sleep, all the while considering how to take revenge. As the moon rose and the house grew quiet, an idea came to her. She slipped out of bed, dressed in navy shirt and jeans, crept down the hall and downstairs, through the basement to the garage. From under her father's workbench, she grabbed an aluminum pail and let herself out through the door.

Outside, it was warm. Mosquitoes buzzed near her ears and bit her arms and face, but Jodie was determined. She walked to the street and headed for Mr. Micelli's house, skirting the dark forest which looked dangerous even in bright moonlight. She imagined all kinds of wild animals peering at her with yellow eyes through the thick laurel bushes. Or Reverend Innish hiding behind a big oak tree, ready to pounce and drag her down into his hell-house. She began to run.

When Jodie reached her neighbor's garden, she saw that he had finished picking the beans and peppers, but a few rotting tomatoes still drooped heavily on the vines or had fallen to earth. Jodie selected eight large tomatoes and placed them in her bucket. She returned to her driveway, climbed over the split-rail fence, and hesitated. Though it was thrilling to be on an adventure, she kept picturing the Reverend's paintings and the lightning bolts that God hurled at guilty people. She didn't believe in God, but the Reverend was very real and seemed to grow more monstrous in her mind the more she thought about him. Still, she was determined to avenge what he'd done.

Jodie edged around the large bulkhead below her patio and descended a few feet until she was directly above Reverend Innish's house. She considered getting closer, but she was too frightened to venture far from the safety of her house. The moon glinted on the windows below and made the white stucco walls glow. Otherwise, the house was dark. After wedging the bucket behind a bush and planting her feet se-

curely, she grabbed two big tomatoes and threw them on the windows slanted into the roof.

Splat! Splat!

Jodie grinned as she saw them squirt all over the glass and drip their gooey red guts down the white walls. She threw two more, her aim perfect, then two more. The living room lights came on, but she heaved the last two tomatoes down the hill. When the outside spotlights flooded the yard, Jodie figured it was time to hightail it. Grasping the pail's handle, she rushed upward and over the fence and into the garage, where she returned the bucket under the workbench. Then, in her room, she changed into pajamas and went to bed.

As she lay there, her heart thumping from excitement, Jodie was satisfied with her mission, though she felt a little guilty about taking tomatoes from her neighbor, even rotten ones. She felt no guilt about throwing them on Reverend Innish's house, however, and decided that if God couldn't bother punishing him for frightening her, then this was proof God didn't exist or was off loafing somewhere. In either case, she never wanted anything to do with religion again.

After making this vow to herself, Jodie replayed the vision of the tomatoes as they exploded on the windows.

Splat! Splat!

This made her smile. Regardless of whether the Reverend Innish was or was not a preacher, he was an evil old guy and she had paid him back.

Laury A. Egan's work has received nominations for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Web, storySouth Million Writers Award, and Best of the Net. Two of her stories were selected for "story of the week" by Short Story America, where they were read in 56 countries.. Her fiction has appeared in Tryst, The Battered Suitcase, Paradigm, Leaf Garden, The Maynard, Broomstick Books, and others and anthologies. Her two poetry collections, Snow, Shadows, a Stranger (2009) and Beneath the Lion's Paw (2011) were published by FootHills. Web site: www.lauryaegan.com

Lauren Bates

I'll Fly Away

Wind whips my face as we weave through the countryside on another beautiful spring afternoon. Dad's driving as crazy as usual, passing every vehicle that's not quite up to his speed standards with a well-worn hand gesture or four-letter word. I can see Mom's jaw clench with each "Move it, grandpa," that he mutters. I just chuckle and enjoy watching the almond blossoms cascading down from the trees on either side of the road. My hand itches to reach out and catch one, but I know Mom would probably yell at me if I extended any part of my body past the barrier of my half-open car window. I'd be subjected to at least a few crippling minutes of her nagging me about my arm getting hacked off by a car in the opposite lane, or something silly like that.

"Honey, don't you think you're driving a little too fast for these winding roads?" Mom asks.

"Nonsense. Back when I was growing up, I used to cruise through here going at least seventy," Dad says. He lets one hand off the steering wheel to fiddle with the dial on the radio for a few moments, teetering between Eric Clapton and Toby Keith.

Mom sighs and leans back in her seat, massaging the base of her neck with her fingers. Today it looks as if she's choosing to leave it at that, rather than chastising Dad over how the times have changed or that he has a family in the car to worry about.

Dad seems to have settled on a smooth jazz station akin to what you'd hear in an elevator at a Ramada Inn. He bobs his head slightly and whistles softly through his teeth. I close my eyes and bask in the warmth of the sunlight and the avoided argument.

Mom coughs to break the silence before saying, "So, Jeremy called today."

Suddenly my throat feels like it's been filled with cotton. I swallow, cracking one tentative eye open to gauge Dad's reaction. I watch his knuckles pale as they clench the steering wheel tightly.

"Meredith," he says slowly, "I thought I'd made it clear that I didn't want you talking to that boy."

"That boy is our son, Bill! I will talk to him just as often as I please, thank you very much! Silly me for thinking that you would want to know how your only son was doing."

Dad's eyes are fixed forward as he rockets around another curve. "He is no son of mine."

I fight to keep all of my attention on the passing scenery as the two of them descend into yet another screaming match over Jeremy. The vast fields and foliage that had previously been so engaging are now unable to distract me from the cacophony that has erupted within the confines of the car. My eyes start to prickle and burn as I hum along to the radio in an effort to tune them out.

I want to see Jeremy, I really do, but it's been hard to keep in contact with him ever since Dad threw him out on the doorstep six months ago. The image of my father, red-faced and screaming as Jeremy stormed down the front steps and drove off with his then-boyfriend is forever burned into my mind. He stood on the porch, spitting obscenities about how he'd never let a fag under his roof as long as he lived.

As much as I try to avoid it, I can't divert my attention from the scene unfolding in front of me. Dad's head is swiveling violently as his attention is split between the road and the dispute. Mom's turned in her seat, making exuberant hand gestures while her mouth moves at a mile a minute. I can see the faint beginnings of tear tracks creeping down

from beneath her sunglasses.

I hate Jeremy. I hate Jeremy for being the spark that lit this fuse that we have all been trying to ignore for the past few years. I hate him and I love him so much. I love him and I can't help the tears that finally spill over my eyelids because I miss him and he's left me to deal with the shattered remains of our family all by myself.

I trap my bottom lip between my teeth and bite down hard. I can feel a sob rattling in the back of my throat. I force my gaze outside the window to the now-blurred landscape that had bestowed such a wonderful sense of peace upon me before. I beg the passing trees for sanctuary, silently pleading for them to somehow set me free.

A flash of yellow catches my eye and I see a small bird perching on one of the trees up ahead. I watch as it hops off its branch and soars away towards the sun. I can't help but look after it, trying to spot just where on the horizon it disappeared.

Dad swears loudly as the tires skid across the pavement. My stomach lurches, and suddenly everything is upside down. I hear Mom scream and the screech of metal, and then there is nothing.

* * *

I feel as if I am a dense fog. My mind feels hazy as I try to collect any shred of thought. Like catching water with open hands, each little sensation trickles away just as I grasp on to it.

A gentle beeping resonates through the void. It pierces through my befuddled consciousness like a lighthouse at sea. It beeps again, slicing through the silence and slowly dragging me up from the depths of nothingness.

The beeping continues from somewhere off to my left, only now it's constant and becoming rather obnoxious. The backs of my eyelids

are illuminated by what appears to be artificial lighting, but I can't seem to be able to open them to check. In the distance I can hear the thrum of daytime traffic, occasionally dotted with the honk of a horn or the screeching of brakes.

Suddenly my mind is flooded with a farrago of memories: the vein in Dad's neck throbbing, Mom's voice growing more and more shrill, a speck of yellow disappearing into the sky, a turn taken too sharply, and then nothing.

Before I can further process what is going on, my train of thought is interrupted by the creak of an opening door. I listen intently to the squeak of rubber soles against polished linoleum as its volume increases steadily.

"Oh, Liz."

Just two words and suddenly my heart feels heavy and swollen. Jeremy is here! He's here with me and I want nothing more than to reach out and touch him, let him know I'm okay, tell him how much I love him and I miss him and I want to come live with him and his new boyfriend in Los Angeles, but again I can't even open my eyes to look at him.

I hear well-worn bedsprings creak and moan as a weight settles near my legs. A warm hand touches my knee.

"I'm so sorry Liz. I'm so, so sorry," Jeremy says with a slight quiver.

I want to ask him what he's sorry for. Is he sorry for leaving me? Is he sorry for ever admitting to Dad that he was gay? Is it something else? I want to ask him, but I can't. I struggle for my voice, but it seems to be trapped in my throat. I try to open my eyes again, but my eyelids feel like they're glued shut. I try with all my might to lift my arms and embrace him, but they just won't seem to listen. Despite all of my efforts I remain motionless.

I feel strong arms wrap around my shoulders as Jeremy buries his face in the crook of my neck, crying openly. I can feel the collar of my top growing damp with warm tears as Jeremy's unshaven cheek rakes against my skin like sandpaper. I want to cry too. I want to cry and scream until my voice is hoarse and every last tear has been squeezed from my eyes. I want to cling to Jeremy and tell him it's okay, but I can't.

* * *

"Well it's been over four weeks now and Elizabeth hasn't shown any signs of recovery, Mr. and Mrs. Dawson," Dr. So-and-So says to my parents while he clicks his pen.

"What, do you think we're just going to call it quits after one month? Lizzie is our baby and we're going to be here for as long as it takes until she's well again!" Mom says.

"I'm not saying anything of the sort, Mrs. Dawson. I just want to let you both know that after four weeks without response from Elizabeth, we're going to have to move her to a more permanent room here."

"Oh, my Lizzie," Mom moans before she breaks down into a puddle of sorrow. I can hear Dad's feeble attempts to calm her while the doctor prattles on about the conditions involving my relocation.

Has it already been four weeks? How time flies when you've become trapped inside of your own body. The one good thing that seems to have come out of this is that Jeremy seems to be back in my life. He's been visiting me nearly every day. In fact, Jeremy's visits are easily the best parts of my days here at Witmer Memorial. He fills me in on all that he's done since he's been gone. There is never a day that goes by that he doesn't express just how much he loves me and how much he misses me when he's away.

I suppose a change of scenery could be nice, not that I would really be able to appreciate a new room. Maybe my new room won't

be so close to the freeway. Maybe I'll get some new nurses who don't complain as much about cleaning my bed sheets so often. Maybe I'll have a nice view outside my window for Jeremy to look at when he comes to visit, and maybe one day I'll get to look at it too.

* * *

The weeks seem to be turning into months here. Each day blurs into the next so easily that I'm worried that I'll never get well again. Jeremy tells me that he's trying his best to come in as often as he did in the beginning, but the time between his visits seems to grow longer and longer. Maybe I'm going crazy. I suppose it's possible. I only feel at peace when Jeremy is here with me. He's the only thing that can keep my thoughts from drifting away to the dark places.

The doctor tells my parents the same things over and over again. No improvement. No estimated time of recovery. Just wait and see. I don't want to live out the remainder of my days hooked up to machines in a hospital room, but my window of escape seems to be shrinking rapidly with each passing day.

I'm so tired.

* * *

Mom's crying on my chest again. I can feel each hot droplet that falls from her swollen eyes to its death on the nasty hospital gown that I've been wearing for the past nine months. Maybe sometime last spring I would've felt a fraction of remorse for making the poor woman weep like this, but right now I just want her to get off me.

"My Lizzie, my poor Lizzie," she says over and over again. I hate it when she calls me Lizzie. It makes me think of a lizard, and I really don't appreciate being named after some scaly green monster that lives under rocks. Then again, the lizard probably doesn't like being named after a dirty, drooly human vegetable that hasn't been able to do so much as

wiggle a toe in the past eight months, three weeks, four days, two hours and thirty-two minutes (give or take a few seconds).

The nine-month anniversary of "The Incident," as the family has so glibly dubbed it, is fast approaching. Honestly, I don't really see a nine-month anniversary as anything worth celebrating. I'm sure Mom regrets now not celebrating every waking moment that I was alive, or at least alive by my standards. The family hasn't mentioned the impending reminder, of course, but I can feel it on their minds. It's in the way Dad sighs a bit more than usual, or when Mom begins to break down over seemingly insignificant things.

Jeremy's the only one who seems to see past the delusion that Mom and Dad are still under. Their hopes, their optimism, their positive attitudes have given me nothing but sorrow. They still seem to think, after all this time, that one day I'll miraculously wake up and we'll all live happily ever after like the fairytale family that we never were. As if.

Things have been royally fucked up since the beginning. Dad must be screwing at least ten different women for his weekly "bowling nights with the guys." Every time he stops by there's a new fruity aroma hiding under his cologne. Mom never says anything. She tries her best to cover up the sadness that's rooted itself deeper into her voice over the past nine months. She wouldn't want anyone asking more questions. But Jeremy knows, and that's why has no desire to come into Dad's good graces again.

Jeremy knows the perpetual hell I've existed in for the past nine months--maybe even longer. I can't remember if life was much better while I still had control over my body. I can't say I'd be particularly overjoyed if I did ever manage to "wake up" from this. Honestly, I feel like I may be more awake now than I was before the accident. It's amazing just how conscious I am now that I'm more or less terminally unconscious. Physically I am dead to the world, but mentally I am still clinging on to

the last shreds of my former self. Still, it's unbelievably exhausting being subjected to live day-to-day in an empty shell. I might as well be dead.

Mom excuses herself from the room, sniffing and reciting her well-worn line of, "just gonna go freshen up a bit." In reality she's just going out behind the hospital to suck down a cigarette real quick. I know; I always smell it on her when she comes back in. It's impossible to miss as it permeates my senses just as potently as if she were blowing smoke rings into my unresponsive face. Jeremy probably knows. Jeremy always knows, but I doubt he's said anything. Speaking for Dad, I doubt he'd bat an eyelid, even if Mom were to do a line of coke on my bedside table.

Ten minutes after her departure, I hear the door click open again. The stench of cancerous exhaust mixed with honeysuckle perfume announces my mother's presence. It's funny; I used to always associate the cheery smell of Mom's perfume with things like fresh laundry, loving kisses, and eye-crinkling smiles. Now it's forever married to the stench of tobacco. She creeps over to her spot near the window and sits down quietly. It's pointless. I wouldn't "wake" even if the ground split open and I plummeted to the center of the earth, but she keeps it up as some sort of motherly ritual.

"Lizzie, I have to go now, but your brother should be here tomorrow to visit and see how you're doing," she says. She sighs again, breaking the brief silence before leaning down to press her lips to my forehead.

The door closes one last time and I am alone. If one could die from boredom, I would have ages ago. I don't know what they all think I'm doing all day every day. Sleeping? Hardly. I can think and reason and make jokes the same as I used to, the only problem is that I can't tell anyone. I've lost all traces of voluntary movement.

Mom and Dad seem to believe that I'll come out of this like some kindergartener put down for a really long nap. Like I'll just wake up one day, bright-eyed and refreshed and say, "That was a pleasant rest, now let us all return home, Mother and Father!" They don't know that I'm a prisoner here in my own body, just waiting to die. Jeremy knows. Jeremy always knows. He knows that this body, this grotesque sack of organs, is shackling me to this life. My soul, my very being, has been tugging at the restraints and aching to fly free for months upon months, but it's weighted down by the burden of mortality. Jeremy's told me how much he wishes my parents could just let go, let go of the pathetic wish that I'll come back and things will be somehow right. He thinks they're being selfish by holding me here in this suffocating hospital room that smells like bleach and latex. He says he's going to talk to them soon about pulling the plug, something he's been telling me about for quite some time.

How I wish it were that simple, but I know that once he brings it up with them they're never going to let him be alone with me ever again. They'll drive themselves mad with imagined scenarios in which he sneaks in and yanks my life support from the wall, injects potassium chloride into my feeding tube, straps a bomb to his chest and obliterates everyone within a two-block radius. No, it will never work. They don't realize it's what I want. They don't know I'd rather end it now than live another second longer hooked to this machine and hooked to this life. I can't stand another morning of the hustle and bustle of city life just outside the window of my virtual prison cell. I can't stand being here while the other patients moan and groan as the doctors and nurses run back and forth, up and down the hallways all day long.

So, I will lie here until Mom and Dad miraculously realize that I will never be their smiling baby girl again, or I will continue to exist in this unbearable place until the sky rips open and swallows the world whole. Either way, I will remain trapped, here inside my own body, until death ulti-

mately swoops down and sets me free.

* * *

My face feels warm. I open my eyes to see that I'm standing in the middle of an endless meadow filled with wildflowers of every color imaginable. The eternal fields sway back and forth in a gentle breeze. Laughing, I start to run towards a distant and inviting horizon. The grass tickles my bare feet as I dance and twirl across the rippling sea of green.

The wind catches in the folds of my hospital gown and my feet are lifted from the ground. Suddenly I'm soaring up into the sky, swooping through the clouds while the ground beneath me disappears. I reach out and trail my fingers through one of them, leaving shallow tracks in its side.

A little yellow bird flutters down and lands on my outstretched hand. I reach towards it with my other arm to stroke the back of my finger against its downy head. It chirps happily before spreading its wings and taking flight. I smile and open my arms wider as I soar after it and disappear into the sun.

I'm Lauren, a 4th year college undergraduate who enjoys reading and writing fiction in my spare time. I love the fluidity and ever-changing nature of literature. I am excited by the prospect of new fiction, and I hope that I will be able to contribute to our generation's work.

James Mascia

City of Darkness

Just beyond the edge of the city, there was only darkness. A man could be easily swallowed by it and never return. The craggy stone walls stood only just out of sight, but they might as well have not been there at all. Nothing pierced the darkness, not even us.

The dark was our barrier—our cell walls—our confinement. There I stood on the border of light and dark, praying for the courage to cross over into the black of the underground labyrinth. Someone needed to. It was our only chance.

My foot wavered, hovering above the ground, ready to make that first step. It refused to make touchdown in the shadows though, and hung limply in the air, until I pulled it back into the light.

We were taught to fear the darkness even before we were able to walk. It was so ingrained in our psyches that it physically paralyzed us. No one, no matter how hard they tried, could take that step I so desperately wanted to take. Still, I couldn't do it, even knowing there was much more to fear inside the glowing city behind me.

I swore, picking up a small stone and hurling it into the darkness, as if my attack would cause it to back away. But it didn't budge, standing resolute like a sea of nothingness before me. The stone smacked against the cave wall and rolled down, dislodging small pebbles and sand in its way. I couldn't actually see it, but the sound echoed through the cavern.

More echoes followed, but not from falling stones. The tap, tap,

tap of hard-soled boots ran toward me. Hard, ragged breaths accompanied the boots, and I knew whoever it was had been running a marathon to get here.

“Evan!” the owner of the boots yelled. Abby approached, standing by my side and gasping for breath. “I’ve been running all over, looking for you.”

“Go home and forget you found me.” I didn’t bother looking in her direction. “I’m not going back.”

Even though I couldn’t actually see her, I knew my wife’s slim jaw hung slack, leaving her mouth gaping for a moment before she could find the power to speak. Her auburn hair was probably a mess, as she ran out of our dwelling without bothering to fix it. Her tiny stature was probably at its full height as if to intimidate me into returning. She probably expected me to just say, “Okay, let’s go back and act like everything’s normal.” I was too far past that. I could no more go back to the city than I could push through the darkness.

“At least tell me what’s going on. It’s been three days now.”

I ignored the prompt. I couldn’t tell her. I’d tried—boy, had I tried. I couldn’t lay this burden upon her. It wouldn’t have been fair. Better she lived in ignorance. At least she’d live.

I reached out, touching the darkness, watching my hand all but disappear into the shadows. I held it there for a few seconds, feeling the coldness the dark brought with it—longer than my last attempt. I pulled my hand back into the light like I’d been burned by fire. My fingers flexed before my eyes as I checked to make sure they were still there. They were.

“At least eat something.” She pulled a thin, pale wafer from her pocket. “You haven’t eaten in days either. You must be starving.”

As if it were a reflex, my hand whipped around and slapped the wafer from her hand. It skittered on the ground before breaking on a small rock at the edge of the shadows.

Abby dove after it. She picked up the broken food and shoved half of it back in her pocket before quickly backing away from light’s edge. Her face was red, and when she spoke, it was in that high-pitched squeal she had whenever I’ve just done something incredibly stupid. “That’s our ration! They won’t give us any more until tomorrow.” She held the half-wafer before my face.

“Keep it away from me.” I stepped back as if she held poison in her hands.

“You need to eat something.” She tried again to force the wafer on me. “Our harvest isn’t for another six weeks almost. How will we survive if you drop dead of hunger?” When she said “we,” her hand slid down over her stomach. The gesture was meant to make me see reason, but she didn’t know the things I now knew.

I grabbed her arm and pushed it into her body, moving the stale wafer away from me. “We can’t eat that.”

She looked me right in the eye and laughed. Her bellow echoed from wall to wall of the large cavern and I was sure there wasn’t an ear in the city that didn’t hear. “So, what do you expect to eat then? There isn’t anything else. Maybe I can whip up some rock soup to suit your fancy.”

I would have been angry with her, but if I were in her position, I’d

have said the same thing. I couldn't be mad at her anyway. How could I? She was only looking out for me, like she always did. It wasn't her fault I just couldn't stomach those nasty wafers any longer. She was also right—if I didn't eat what was essentially our only source of food, I would die. This was the reason I'd stood here for three days, trying to push through into the blackness. It was the only means for my survival—for our survival.

“Will you talk to me?” she wailed. “What happened the other day?”

No words would escape my lips. As much as I yearned to tell her, I would take that secret to the grave. Even mentioning it could be enough to destroy everything we'd built in the last century. No—as horrible as it was, I couldn't do that.

“Abby, honey.” I grabbed the hand that didn't hold the wafer. “I need you to trust me. This is something I need to deal with. And if I do find a way out of here, you'll be coming with me.”

She stepped back, her face had gone pale with the realization there would be no going back for me. “Evan,” she said weakly, almost like she had to force the words through her lips, “there's nowhere to go. All there is out there is nothingness. And even if you made it through, the world above is barren. There's no way to survive.”

“How do you know?” I prodded. “No one's been up there in almost a hundred and fifty years. A lot could have changed. Think how much has changed here in that time.” So much had changed, at least for me, in just the last few days. Why couldn't the world above be better than when we'd left it?

If we could grow crops down in the darkness, without aid of the sun, then why couldn't we do the same aboveground?

More footsteps charged behind us. These weren't like the hurried, frantic footsteps of Abby. These footfalls had a purpose. Even before they came into sight, I knew what they wanted. I'd been expecting it, and was surprised it had taken this long. Apparently, I would be going back to the city.

Five of them surrounded Abby and me. They wore helmets, supposedly for protection, but now I think it was so the common people couldn't tell who they were underneath. Two of these faceless enforcers grabbed Abby and pulled her away from me. She struggled and fought against their restraining grasps, but to no avail.

I didn't move, just stared at the two men as I said slowly and calmly, "Leave her alone. She hasn't done anything."

The men stopped dragging her, but maintained their grip. Abby continued fighting, but wasn't strong enough. "Stop struggling," I told her. "They aren't going to hurt you. They're here for me."

Her eyes fixed on mine, accusing me of doing nothing. There was nothing I could do. If I struggled, they might take her too. I had to make sure that didn't happen. Turning away from her out of both guilt and duty, I looked to one of the faceless men.

"Councilor Lucien wants to see you." He brandished a knife in my direction. I suppose to a normal person that would seem threatening. I hardly took notice.

"Let her go." My tone was non-combative, but held a slight hint of danger in it. "She's innocent and she's expecting our baby."

The men loosened their grip, but didn't let go until the man with the knife gave them a nod. Abby rushed back to me, holding me tightly.

I returned the hug, not wanting to let her go, but knowing I had no choice. Pushing her away, I looked into her beautiful eyes. "I want you to go home, and I don't want you to worry. No matter what happens, I want you and the baby to be safe."

"Evan, tell me what's going on. Please."

"It's better that you don't know. Abby, you need to trust me." I grabbed her chin and gave her a peck on the lips.

I turned and glared at the men. "Make sure she gets home. If I find out anything happened to her, I will come after you." The threat was empty, I could no more find this man after he walked away than I could find my way through the darkness.

He nodded, took Abby by the arm, and escorted her off. She looked back over her shoulder, her eyes pleading with me one last time to tell her what was happening. I stood as the other four men bound my wrists with some wire.

As Abby disappeared, her eyes were still trying to find me. When she was gone, the others led me to the city center where Councilor Lucien would be waiting. I'd met the man several times, and would say I knew him pretty well—at least I once thought I did. But he'd allowed such horrors to happen under his watch. So, he couldn't have been the man I'd thought he was.

We passed the generators. The life giving machines hummed like they always did. The ancient devices were growing old, but with the constant maintenance on them, they'd probably run another hundred years. The electricity they produced powered not only every home in the city, but also the sun lamps for our crops.

People were out on the streets as I was marched through the city. The way they stared and pointed, it was like they were watching a parade, and I was the finale. It was like they'd never seen a criminal before.

Many knew it would be the last time they'd see me. Most people, when brought in like this, led by an armed regiment of guards, seldom came back out.

The long walk to the city center seemed incredibly short today, as if time didn't want me to savor my last moments of freedom. It was the largest building in the city, at four stories tall and could pretty much be seen from anywhere. The doors and windows were all darkened to hide the evils that went on inside. Most people trusted their leaders to do what was best for them, but those same leaders didn't want to deal with the prying eyes of the public. It was only a couple of days ago that I finally understood why.

I'd never really been one for a fight, but when they wouldn't give me an extra ration for my pregnant wife, I had to take matters to the top. I'd stood right at this very entrance, looking into the dark tinted windows, willing myself to step forward and finally pushing myself in.

As soon as I entered that day, I knew something was wrong.

That same feeling that passed over me again as the masked men ushered me through the doors. This was the last place I wanted to be, but didn't have much choice.

The small, dimly lit room that served as the lobby was as bare as it was the other day. A few doors led off the room, and a spiral stairway led to the upper levels. The same rude secretary, who barred my entrance to see Councilor Lucien, sat behind an old lifeless-looking wooden desk. If only I hadn't tried to sneak past her, things would be very differ-

ent.

I couldn't take my eyes off the doors I had gone through. They looked so innocent. The casual observer would see them as just another office or meeting chamber. But behind them was a set of stairs, and down those stairs, the largest grinders I had ever seen. Giant stone wheels spun, crushing anything placed between them into a pulpy, pink paste. They dumped dozens of them on the wheels, alive or dead, I couldn't tell. It only took seconds before they were mashed and unrecognizable. I closed my eyes, hoping the darkness would be enough to clear the image from my mind—it only made it more potent.

"He's waiting." The secretary waved a hand in the direction of the spiraling stair. The helmeted men, without ceremony, snatched hold of my arms and guided me toward the stairs—ever closer to my awaiting doom. We passed the second floor, and the third, taking the stairs to the very top of the building, and with every one I took, the lump growing in my stomach gained another centimeter.

Waiting at the top of the stairs was another pair of men, standing to either side of an ornate door that appeared newer than half the buildings in the city. One guard opened it as we approached. I was led into the Councilor's office. If I thought the door was elaborate, it was nothing compared to the sheer opulence of the room I now stood in. A brand new desk, and gleaming electric lights. I'd never set foot in a room as bright as this one. While it was comforting to be so far from the darkness, the light in this room set me on edge even more than the darkness ever could.

"Evan, my good man, how wonderful to see you again," the Councilor said, "please, take a seat." He was much too happy for my liking. A man in his position shouldn't have been nearly as excited to see

a lowly grunt like me.

The two men stepped away, allowing me to move freely to the red cushioned seat in front of the Councilor's massive desk. Lucien took a similar looking chair on the opposite side. He then pressed his hands together, creating a steeple with his fingers.

I'm sure he was waiting for me to say something, but I wasn't about to oblige. He had me brought here—he would be the first to speak.

But he didn't—not at first anyway. His eyes continued their unnerving gaze over his fingers to bore into my head in search of some un-found truth—a truth I wasn't giving up if he didn't ask. To give it up would mean the end of me. The problem was, we both knew he knew the truth already.

He put his hands down and finally spoke. "I understand you came to see me the other day. I'm sorry I was unable to set up a meeting."

"I'm sure you are." Even though I was terrified, my anger at the man overrode it at that second. It was, after all, his fault I was in this situation. If he'd just seen me the other day... "Your secretary made it very clear you wouldn't be bothered with matters like mine."

"I'm here now. Why don't you tell me what's troubling you." He leaned back casually in his seat.

Finally, I had the ear of the Councilor. I could tell him about Abby needing more rations, I could tell him about anything I thought could be improved in the city. The problem was, none of that really mattered anymore.

When I didn't respond, Councilor Lucien pulled a pair of wafers out of his pocket. He slid one across the desk to sit in front of me, and brought the other to his mouth. He chewed the disgusting treat, seeming to savor every bit, before finally swallowing. My stomach did backflips, and if there was anything in it, I'm sure the contents would have ended up all over the floor in front of me.

"I think you should eat something," he said. "I am told you haven't eaten since your visit to the lower levels. You must be famished."

And there it was—the nail in the coffin. He knew I'd found my way to the lower levels, and he knew what I'd seen there. Now he was teasing me, offering me the only food we had available, which he knew I would never eat.

I couldn't look at him any more, embarrassed by the fact I would rather starve to death than eat a single wafer.

"Why won't you eat?" he asked. "Have you seen something you weren't supposed to?"

I didn't look up. I couldn't. My anger, which had been my last reserve of strength, had abated. My head hung limply, eyes staring at my bound wrists, as my mouth formed a single word. "Yes."

"What did you see?"

Shaking my head, I tried to clear the image burned into my brain out. Asking me to retell it was like torture.

"Come, Evan," the Councilor prodded, "you can tell me. Knowledge isn't a crime after all."

Was he trying to trick me? Was this some plot to get a confes-

sion? Nothing about his tone, his body language, anything, led me to trust this man—or his words.

“Evan, my poor, dear man, these sights are too much for one man to contain within. Better you let this burden out here, among friends, rather than out on the streets. They would never understand.” He paused as he rose and walked around the desk to stand over me. His hand fell onto my hunched back, caressing me as a mother might a child. “But I think you know that already, or you’d have spread the word to all four corners of the city. My reports say you haven’t even told your wife yet. What’s her name again?”

“Abby,” I croaked automatically, barely able to get her name through my lips. “And I haven’t told her to protect her.”

“Because she wouldn’t understand,” he concluded.

I nodded. “I guess.”

“I know what you’re going through, Evan. Six years ago, when I took this position, you wouldn’t believe what I went through when I found out.” He patted my back, then grabbed my chin and tilted my neck, so I was looking directly into his eyes. “I wouldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. I grew distant from the people I cared about. Sound familiar?”

Again, I nodded. “But we’re... What about those people?”

“Criminals. Thieves. Rapists. Psychotics. Degenerates. Our society would collapse if we allowed them to roam free.” He held up a hand to stop any objection I might have had. “Besides, we don’t have the space or resources to keep them contained. How old are you, Evan?”

The question took me off guard. It seemed to come from nowhere, though it could have been the stress had caused my focus to go

awry. I was just barely able to stammer, "Ummm... Six... sixty harvests."

His eyes closed, and I could tell he was calculating. "About twenty-seven years above ground—give or take."

"Why does it matter?" I forced myself to ask.

"You'd be too young to remember when the food shortages began. I myself had only eight or nine harvests behind me at the time. If you think rations are strict now, imagine a time before we started making these little jewels." He pointed to the wafer, still sitting on the desk, seemingly staring at me. I could barely bring myself to stare back.

"Just one of these has enough nutrients for one person for one day," Lucien said. I don't know why. It was information everyone knew. "We use our garden harvests, but there is one other ingredient—a secret ingredient."

"You made us cannibals!" I shouted. I couldn't tell from where in my body the outburst had come, but the Councilor was right, it felt really good letting out what I'd held inside for days.

"Yes, and that's what I struggled with when I found out. Until one day, I asked myself, which is more important, my morals or my survival—not just my survival, the survival of my entire species."

He scooped the wafer off the desk and held it before my face. My instinct was to bat it away, but this time I hesitated. My hand hovered between my lap and the wafer, waiting to strike, yet not daring.

"So, I ask you now, Evan. Will it be morals or survival?"

The wafer might as well have floated freely in the air for all the attention I paid Councilor Lucien at that moment. All that mattered was

the wafer and the choice.

He was right—knowledge wasn't a bad thing. The more you knew, the better off you were. The better you are, the more informed decisions you can make. It made sense.

On the other hand, until a couple days ago, I was perfectly happy being ignorant of the origin of those wafers. So knowledge, in that case was about the worst thing ever.

By grabbing the wafer, I would essentially be condoning what it took to create them. By chewing it, I'd be an accomplice to murder. By swallowing it, I'd be sending my very being to the depths of the darkness, and I'd never return. How could I do that?

How I wished I'd never laid eyes on that room—the workers, feeding the bodies into the grinder, the red meat oozing out the other end. How I wish I could forget the smell of flesh wafting up to my nostrils and, despite the sickening sight, making my mouth water. It would haunt me forever, and every time I gazed upon one of those wafers, it would remind me of that room.

Apparently growing impatient, the councilor spoke. You would really consider the destruction of our race than accept reality." He pulled away, placing the wafer back onto the desk, and heaved a sigh. "Do you doubt my words?"

"If I don't tell anyone—"

"You wouldn't need to. Your behavior would be enough. Here's what would happen—you won't eat, drawing attention to yourself, growing sicker and weaker each day. People will offer you their rations, which you will, of course, refuse. This will make people question why you

refuse to eat. Then you will die, as all people who starve themselves do. There would be an uproar, and the people would demand answers. I, as the ruling body, would suppress this knowledge, but some adamant idiot would find the truth. Then one of two things would happen: first, more people will starve themselves, dropping our population drastically until, within a few generations, we will simply become extinct. Or, second, the people will demand we stop using criminal corpses in our wafers, some resorting to terrorism, and the ruling body will be forced to comply, and thousands would die due to lack of food and we would become extinct in a few generations.”

Was there a third option? If so, I couldn't think of it, and I tried with all my might. Councilor Lucien's argument was pretty convincing.

“Now, as I'm sure you know, I cannot allow that to happen.” He sounded almost sad as he spoke, yet the grin on his face told me he was anything but. “So, I am going to give you another chance. You can either take that wafer, shove it in your mouth, chew and swallow it with a big smile, or I can have you, your wife, and unborn child, tossed into the grinder together.”

How dare he threaten my wife? I sprang to attack but a pair of hands pushed me back into the seat before I could fully stand. I hadn't noticed one of the helmeted men had returned to stand behind me.

“Why Abby? She hasn't done anything. She doesn't know anything.”

“Not yet. But I'm afraid if you disappear, she'll ask questions, and the whole cycle to our downfall would begin. As I said, I can't allow that to happen.”

The wafer was once again plucked from the desk and held be-

fore me. As my gaze went back and forth between Lucien and the wafer, I couldn't help but think accepting the food would be like selling my soul.

A little voice in the back of my head told me if I did sell my soul, it would be for a good reason. Abby would live. I couldn't think of a more important, or noble reason to take the wafer.

My bound hands made it halfway from my lap to the food, but then dropped again. I shook my head. "There has to be another way."

"Believe me, Evan," he responded, "if there was another choice, I would take it. But I am open to suggestions."

Nothing. I could see no other option. I couldn't let him hurt Abby, and our child. And though important, saving my entire race took second place to that fact.

My hand shook as I pushed my arms to lift them. After struggling for what seemed like an eternity, I forced them to reach out and accept the wafer from the Councilor's fingers. It felt like a lead weight—much heavier than it had been only a couple days ago. It could have been weakness from lack of nutrition, but I was sure the extra weight was from what the wafer represented to me now.

My hands held it before my mouth, which refused to open. I gave serious contemplation to throwing the thing in Lucien's face and charging out of the room, but I knew I wouldn't get far. Even if I did manage to make it to the outskirts of the city, the wall of darkness would keep me contained until they caught up with me.

"Knowledge isn't a crime, Evan," I heard the Councilor's voice, as though from a great distance. "It's what you do with it that matters."

I hadn't done anything wrong.

"We're only trying to ensure our survival."

I could save my race by simply eating this wafer.

"Eat the wafer."

Slowly, my jaw unclenched and my lips opened. My hand slid toward my open maw.

"You'll feel better once you've accepted there's no other choice."

The tip of the wafer barely grazed my lips.

"Eat the wafer."

I closed my eyes and threw the food into my mouth. It tasted as grainy and mealy as it always had. Nothing felt at all different about it as I chewed and eventually swallowed. It was amazing how easily my body accepted the food. The warmth that spread through my limbs was amazing, as if it was the first time my blood had pumped through them in ages. Once I was certain the item had landed safely in my stomach, I opened my eyes again.

Looking upon me, with a very satisfied look on his face, was Councilor Lucien. "Undo his restraints. He's free to go."

I lifted my wrists, happy I could go home and be with my wife, as the men pulled the bindings off. I stood and went to the door, not able to look the Councilor in the eye anymore. But as I reached the door, he said, "Wait."

I shut my eyes and sighed before turning around to look vaguely

in his direction.

“I will see that your wife gets the extra rations she needs until your baby is born. However, I want you to understand, there are no second chances. We will be watching, and if I find that you aren't eating again, I will have you brought in. Next time I promise, you won't leave this office.” It wasn't as much a threat as it was a warning. Still I couldn't help but shudder inside. I'd made a deal with the devil, and I'd pay for it every day of my life.

The stairway through the door appeared shrouded in darkness. Still, I stepped through the doorway and descended. Passing the snotty secretary, I gave a curt nod and walked out the door.

I stopped in the middle of the street and gazed up at the cave roof and its long stalactites hanging high above my head. I was free, and yet I didn't feel it. As I trudged home, to let Abby know I was okay, I couldn't help but run through my entire conversation with the Councilor through my head.

There had to be another option. Something I hadn't thought of before.

As I made it to our small home, it came to me. The only true option was my first option, the one I'd been contemplating for days. I'd been too scared to go through with it, mainly because it was the unknown. However, the words of Councilor Lucien echoed through my mind, “Knowledge isn't a crime.”

And it wasn't. Knowledge was about the greatest thing a person could have; only those who lived in ignorance were afraid. I couldn't live in ignorance anymore, I had to know. I had to try.

I opened the door, and was surprised when Abby jumped into my arms before I was able to step foot across the threshold. "I've been so worried. What happened? Are you in trouble?"

"No," I told her, embracing her. "Everything's going to be just fine."

"Great! Did you get the extra rations?" she asked.

I pulled away from her and nodded. The light in her eyes, telling how proud she was of me once again tied my stomach in a knot. If she only knew what I'd done for her, she'd probably feel as sick as I did. That part, I would never let her know.

"I have a surprise for you, but you have to come with me—now."

Her eyebrow arched as she tried to settle her confused thoughts. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. As a matter of fact, here, wear this." I grabbed an old rag and tied it over her face, covering her eyes. "Wait right here, I just need to get something."

Grabbing a canteen, filling it with water, and stuffing what seeds we hadn't planted this rotation into my pocket, I clasped my wife's wrist and led her out of the house.

We walked at a quick pace through the city to the outskirts, where I'd stood for too long, trying to cross over. This time I would take Abby with me. No more would I be ignorant to what lay on the other side. Even if there was nothing but desert on the land above, we would find a way to survive. We couldn't live here anymore.

"Evan," she pleaded, "where are you taking me?"

I checked over my shoulder several times. There were no helmeted men on the street behind us. The Counselor hadn't made good on his threat to have me watched. It was a relief to know we'd at least have a head start.

"I can't tell you." I tried to sound as jovial as possible. "I'll let you know when we get there."

Thankfully, she accepted the answer this time.

I stood for a moment, at the edge of the darkness, realizing for the first time that it was the city itself that was shrouded in darkness. All the people were blissfully unaware of what was going on everyday around them. There would come a time when they'd all need to open their eyes. But not today—the Councilor was right about that. The knowledge would destroy them all, as it had almost done to me.

I looked back on the city one last time. Then, checking Abby's blindfold was secure and grabbing her hand tightly, I took my first step into the dark.

Kate paced the hard, tiled waiting room floor as I held our six month old, Daniel – bouncing him up and down on my lap. I wasn't the only person gazing at my wife. Everyone's eyes were on her – even the nurse at reception looked on nervously, with her hand ready to push the panic button.

“Honey,” I said, but she didn't seem to hear. Her eyes were wide, as if looking to something far in the distance. The deep purple bags under her eyes told the story of her three long nights awake in bed, waiting. “Kate,” I said a bit more forcefully.

This time she stopped her anxious movements just long enough to turn in my direction.

“Sit down.” I kept my voice soft and calm – quite a contrast to how I actually felt. My insides were in knots and though I had forced myself to sleep, mainly by downing a few pills, I was still mentally exhausted. It had been a trying couple days, but one of us had to keep it together.

“I can't.” A tear rolled down her face. Her cheeks tightened and turned crimson. The nurses had already informed her that they would sedate her if necessary, but she still looked ready to snap. “What if it comes back negative, Brian?”

Daniel stirred in my lap and whined, and I held him tighter so he wouldn't slip from my grip. “Then we'll deal with it. But I'm sure everything's fine. It was just routine.”

She resumed pacing. “One in seventeen,” she said several times. Her voice was so low, that if I hadn't seen her lips moving, I probably wouldn't have known she'd said anything.

I put Daniel in his carrier and popped the pacifier into his mouth. He eagerly sucked on it and closed his eyes while I stood to block my wife's path. I grabbed her by both shoulders and forced her to look into my eyes. She winced as I grabbed her too hard – my agitation getting the better of me.

"You need to calm down. You're making everyone nervous."

Kate scrutinized the room, as if noticing the other people for the first time. She took note of their fearful gazes, like she'd just walked into a bank, carrying a very big gun and demanding everyone's money. She nodded, wiping another tear away with her wrist.

I guided her to the seat next to mine and made her sit. As soon as her butt touched the cushioned vinyl, a nurse opened the door to the examination rooms and called, "Walker."

Kate let out a gasp, like she suddenly couldn't get any air into her lungs, and the tears gushed forth.

I picked up Daniel, still in his carrier, and grabbed my wife's hand, pulling her behind me. We followed the nurse, who led us into one of the exam rooms. The room was sterile and cold, no decorations adorned the walls. The flat table in the center looked less than inviting.

The nurse barely looked up from the chart she held as she opened a cabinet and pulled a syringe out. "I'm going to need a small sample," she announced, looking at us. When she saw my wife, gazing at her in terror, she added, "Ma'am, I know you're nervous. Many parents are. But there's really nothing to worry about."

She approached us, the needle sparkling in her hand. I set Daniel down on the table and rolled up his left sleeve.

This was the part I hated most. Though I didn't need to, I held Daniel down as she plunged the needle into his arm. He let out a loud

howl, spitting his pacifier on the table next to his head, as I'm sure he experienced more pain he didn't understand.

I made cooing noises to help calm him as I scooped up his pacifier and tried placing it back into his mouth. After the sample was tucked safely in a carrier, I picked him up and cradled him in my arms, trying to convey the message that he wasn't alone and that everything would be all right.

Kate did her best to comfort him as well. Her help was welcome, but not effective, as she looked a fright herself. "It'll be okay, Danny." She stroked his bald head.

"About how long?" I asked the nurse.

"Ten minutes. Doctor Spector will be in to tell you the results."

"Is there anything you can get my wife?" I whispered into the nurse's ear.

"She'll be fine," she said, though she cast a nervous glance at my wife when she took the blood-filled syringe and stepped out of the room.

"Something's wrong," Kate said as soon as the door shut. "I just know it."

"Three days," I stated. My jaw tightened, but I held back the shouts that wanted to escape my throat. "You've been beating yourself to death. Please relax."

"We should have done it sooner. Then we'd know already. We wouldn't have to wait."

"You know we couldn't have the procedure until he was six months old. And even if we could, you'd have been just as bad."

"One in seventeen!" she said to the wall, like I hadn't even spoken. "Doctor Spector said, 'One in seventeen.'"

"I heard him!" I yelled, then took a deep breath. My patience was wearing thin, and I prayed the doctor would come in soon because I didn't know how much longer I could deal with my wife's hysterics. *Keep it together*, I reminded myself.

Daniel started crying again, this time because of the tone of my voice. I rocked and cooed him once again until he calmed down.

"I'm sorry," I apologized to my wife, who seemed to be focused for the first time in days. "Let's just sit and relax until the doctor comes in."

She did as I said, looking like she wanted to cry, but trying to keep herself from doing so. The short outburst I'd had seemed to have an effect on her. By showing a little bit of my own pain, she finally knew I understood what she was going through; in essence, our shared anxiety made her feel better.

Ten minutes passed and the doctor didn't come. After another ten minutes, I began pacing the near barren room. The test was taking much too long. Kate was ready to burst. This time, I shared the feeling. Almost forty minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

Doctor Spector stepped in. "Okay," he said, studying the chart. "We have the tests results." Then he stopped. He didn't say anything, but kept his eyes fixed on one point on the document.

"And..." I prodded.

As he looked up at us, I felt the tension grow like a monster. For a second, I thought he was doing it on purpose, a game to see which one of us would snap first. I looked from him, to my wife. She stared at the doctor like a deer would look at the hunter just before running off into the woods.

"Negative," he said. "I'm sorry."

My legs melted beneath me and I dropped into my chair.

My wife did the same, tears returning to her eyes. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it so tight, I thought she'd fracture my bones. "What does it mean?"

We both knew exactly what it meant, but somehow, we needed to hear it from the doctor to make it official.

"It means the resequencing didn't take." He stepped in front of us and leaned against the exam table. "This isn't the end of the world."

"Like hell it isn't!" My wife's voice spit venom at the doctor.

He showed no reaction at all. "Listen, I know you want the best for your child. All this means is that he will develop at a slower rate than other children."

"He'll never be normal then?" I looked down at Daniel, napping restfully in my arms, unaware anything was wrong. I'd always heard of developmentally challenged children. I never thought I would have one.

"It's not like that at all. You can expect his first words at about one year, and toilet training anywhere from eighteen to twenty-six months. He'll even be able to start school by the time he's five."

My wife covered her face with her hands, like this was too horrible for her to take. Her back shuddered as she sobbed. "Why?" she managed to groan.

It was twice as slow as a normal child. That meant he'd be in his twenties when he graduated college instead of the normal age of twelve. I couldn't stop the shudder at the thought.

"We don't know the full reasons, but like I told you when you brought him in for the genetic resequencing – for some reason, one in seventeen babies are immune to the procedure."

I don't think my wife heard the response. She rocked back and forth and continued to sob.

"He'll seem so big compared to all the two year olds in kindergarten. Do you think he'd fit in?"

"There are always special schools. They are designed to accommodate... children like Daniel."

"I want him destroyed!" my wife spat out. I don't think I have ever seen such anger come from her. "No child should have to live like that."

I put my hand on hers, trying to calm her. I looked at Daniel and wondered if I could go through with destroying such an innocent life. I doubted I could. "Is there anything else we could do?"

"Treat him like any other child." Doctor Spector grabbed the chart and made his way to the door. He opened it, but just before walking out he said, "Bring him back next month. We'll do a cognitive test to make sure the procedure didn't take. Then we'll discuss your options."

Placing Daniel in his carrier, I looked at my wife.

Kate no longer appeared nervous, and she was no longer sobbing. She stared at our child. It was a cold stare that sent a chill down my spine. "I will not have a special child, Brian. What would people say?"

Suddenly it hit me. She hadn't been awake, and pacing around, and anxiety ridden for days because of her concern for Daniel. She was concerned about herself and the way others would think about *her*. It was a side of my wife I had never seen before.

"Kate, calm down." I picked up the carrier and went toward the door, almost afraid of what she might do to Daniel if I lingered too long. "We're going to bring him back in for more tests in a month. Then we can talk about this."

But there was no talking to her – no reasoning with her. The look on her face said it all. The baby – Daniel – would need to be destroyed.

I walked out of the exam room as quickly as I could, letting my

wife relax before she did anything stupid. I wouldn't do anything until after we brought him back for the cognitive tests.

Could Kate be right? Was it worth all the pain and suffering he would endure, if he couldn't live a normal life? I wondered what my own parents would have done if my genetic resequencing hadn't taken. Would they have destroyed me?

I shook my head. I wouldn't think about that. Daniel was my son. I would love him, even if he was... special.

James Mascia has had several short stories published in various magazines and anthologies including: The Collector in L&L Dreamspell's Sci-Fi Anthology, Guardian in L&L Dreamspell's Paranormal Anthology, Fear, Frozen Fire and Ten Minutes in A Thousand Faces, a journal of superhuman fiction. James has also published his first novel, High School Heroes, with L&L Dreamspell, with the sequel Camp Hero, scheduled for release this September. Mr. Mascia has also turned High School Heroes into an award winning webcomic on Wevolf.com.

Matthew Falk

Among the Civilians

Shawn was the sixth person to rent the upstairs room in as many months. It's like the place is cursed; no one ever stays there for very long. Before him there had been Andrea and Sue, hard-drinking twin sisters with aspirations of being professional chess players. They'd been preceded by Matt and Mary, who stayed home playing video games all day and probably sold drugs; random people would come and go constantly, staying for only a few minutes at a time. In between Andrea-and-Sue and Matt-and-Mary, there was a guy whose name I never even had the chance to learn, he was in and out so quickly. He was a cook, I think, and had only one tooth.

The main problem with the apartment is that it's so small and weirdly laid out. The low rent persuades prospective tenants to overlook this fact at first, but only at first. Like most of the large, turn-of-the-last-century lumber-baron mansions in this neighborhood, this house was chopped up during the 1960s and 1970s into separate rental units, four of them altogether. Both of the units on the first floor are roomy enough, although mine is full of awkward, hard-to-clean corners. But of the two second-floor spaces, the front is more than twice the size of the back. Moreover, the back apartment, the one that's so hard to keep rented, is the architectural equivalent of a patchwork quilt; the ceiling slopes at an unbelievable angle, the window is only 2 inches above the floor, and the kitchen is so small that the fridge is in the living room, next to the closet.

In my opinion, the other reason no one wants to stay in that unit is that it's right next to Lily's. No one can stand Lily. At least I can't. At one time, she was probably OK, but her husband shot himself in the head about five years ago, and since then she's lived alone and has picked

up all the eccentric habits of an older person with no one to tell them when they're being impossible. She had a dog for a while, a great big Rhodesian ridgeback that seemed to keep her somewhat grounded in the world of normal human concern, but then the dog died, too. Now the only thing she ever wears, apart from her work scrubs, is a faded gray Mackinac Island souvenir sweatshirt that's at least two sizes too big for her. She keeps her hair in a bristly buzz cut, and she has this pair of lop-sided glasses that she probably picked up at Goodwill. But I heard she has a ton of money stuffed under her mattress, and she pays her rent in cash.

The other member of our little community is Pablo. Pablo lives next to me on the first floor. He doesn't work, and the state pays his rent. At any given moment of any given day or night, he can generally be found sitting in front of his CD player in his underwear, with a set of huge, DJ-style headphones over his ears, shouting along with his favorite songs. As a vocalist, what he lacks in skill he makes up for in volume and enthusiasm. He has about a dozen CDs that he plays over and over again, but because of his idiosyncratic sense of melody, it took me about a year before I recognized any of them. He particularly favors a singles collection by U2; there's something strangely affecting in the way Pablo bellows, "In the name! Of love! One man! In the name of love!" In the summer time, when everyone's windows are open, the neighbors occasionally come over to ask him to shut up, which he will do for about ten minutes before starting right back up again.

Despite his quirks, everyone likes Pablo. His steady routine stands as evidence of stability in the world, as reassuring as sunrise and seasons. Lily, on the other hand, not so much. But somehow Shawn seemed to get along with her right from the start, which gave me hope that he might stick around a bit longer than his predecessors and change the revolving-door policy on that apartment. The first time I saw them together, just

a few days after Shawn moved in, they were chatting amicably on the front porch. They were talking about hospitals. Lily works in one; Shawn's spent a lot of time in them, apparently.

"When I first got back from Afghanistan," Shawn was saying, "they stuck me in Bay Med for observation 'cause they thought I was drinking too much."

"We had a drunk in St. Mary's last night," Lily said. "He ate two pieces of lasagna in five minutes and threw it all up. Plus, Jeanne called in sick so I had to do her rounds, only I don't really think she was sick. I heard her tell Tom last week her sister was goin' to be in town."

While Lily talked, Shawn lit a cigarette with the stub of the one he'd just smoked, then dropped the old butt into one of about half a dozen empty beer bottles that surrounded him. His broad face, with its flat nose and tiny dark eyes, expressed nothing but interest in Lily's whining. He didn't seem to mind that she hardly listened to anything he said, except to pick up on key words that she could use to transition the conversation back to her. With the hand that wasn't holding the cigarette he kept sweeping his hair out of his eyes. When he saw me he waved.

Lily, who had been deadheading the petunias in her hanging basket, turned around and said to me, "You need to clean out the lint trap in the dryer. It's a fire hazard's what it is."

"OK," I said, which was how I responded to most of Lily's requests, although I had no intention of complying. She thought that because I was the caretaker I was supposed to do all sorts of mundane tasks that, I felt, she should have done herself. She was always asking me to change light bulbs for her or flip the circuit back on after she tripped it by running too many appliances at once. I thought about explaining to her that removing her dryer lint was not in my job description, but decided I didn't care enough to pursue it.

“Newport?” Shawn said, holding out his pack. I took one and leaned against the wall to smoke it. Then Shawn said, “You wanna see my scar from when I crashed my motorcycle?” Without waiting for an answer, he lifted up his shirt to show me.

The scar ran in a crescent shape from below his navel up to his rib cage. Pinkish-brown against Shawn's pinkish-yellow skin, it looked like a toy train track. “I was in the Marines for four years,” he said, “done all kinds of dangerous shit, and then I'm home for a month and this happens. Funny thing is, I was totally sober for once, riding along at not even thirty miles an hour. This god damn deer jumped in front of me, scared the crap out of me. I flipped over and ended up on my back in a ditch, with the bike on top of me. Hadn't been for some kids came along and found me, who knows, I might still be there.”

“Whole family of deer at the cabin last weekend,” said Lily. “They eat up all the corn. Ken used to shoot 'em, but since he's gone they're all over the place.”

My cigarette was down to the filter, so I flipped it off the porch into the grass. “Well,” I said, “you guys enjoy this nice afternoon. See you around.”

A few days later, I was coming home from work and Shawn was on his way out. A little girl was with him, a grimy, pudgy, olive-skinned kid maybe eight years old or so. He told me she was his daughter and lived with her mother on McKinley St.

“Say hi to the nice man, kiddo,” he said. The child pouted and hid behind her father, gazing at me with watery eyes. “She's afraid of strangers sometimes,” Shawn said. “I think it's her mother's doing. Roxanne's a piece of work, most paranoid lady I ever met. If I had a nickel for every time she called the cops on me about something stupid, man, I tell you. We're gonna go get some ice cream, ain't we, kiddo?” The

child nodded without smiling, her eyes still fixed on me, the scary stranger.

A pair of matching bicycles, bright green with blue handlebars and seats, one full-size and one child-size, leaned against the side of the house. "Since they took my license away," Shawn said, "these here's how I get around."

"I see," I said.

"Wanna know why they took my license away?"

"'Cause of your motorcycle accident?"

"Ha ha, good guess, but no. On account of my PTSD. I gotta take these pills, they make me dizzy sometimes. I'm not supposed to drink when I'm on 'em, so let's keep that between us, all right? Back in the Corps, I'd be driving all kinds of ricketyshackle vehicles through the desert, all up and down them mountains, never had no problems, now I'm home they say I ain't fit to drive nothing."

The child had climbed onto the small bike and was tooling in an elliptical pattern around us as Shawn spoke. "The kid's getting antsy," he said. "Best be on our way. You gonna be around later? We should have a couple beers."

"OK," I said. I watched them ride to the end of the driveway and down the street toward the corner store. Shawn's bicycle veered and wobbled, as if he were just learning to ride and had taken the training wheels off too soon.

Later that night, my phone rang. I was reading, so I let it go to the answering machine. "Hey, buddy, it's me," the machine said. "It's Shawn. I seen your lights on, man. I just kind of wanted somebody to talk to. Maybe you're in the can or something. I'll call back." Sure enough, five minutes later, the phone rang again. Determined to nip this intrusion

in the bud, I answered with a brusque, "What." Shawn invited me upstairs to drink with him.

"I'm in the middle of something," I said.

"Oh, well, never mind," he said. "Sorry to bother you. That's all right." But he didn't hang up. He just stayed on the line and didn't say anything. As the silence thickened, I started to think about what it must be like for him, how it seemed life had been hard on him and he was probably lonely a lot. Despite what Lily might say, I'm not a total asshole. So I finally said, "OK."

"OK?" Shawn repeated. "You're coming up?"

"Yeah. Just one drink, though. I really am kind of busy."

Shawn appeared overjoyed to see me. He opened the door and handed me a Budweiser, then stepped aside to usher me into his apartment. I could tell he was already drunk. There was almost no furniture in the room, just an old TV perched on top of the fridge, an armchair that had most of its stuffing poking out through various rips and tears, and some boxes piled up in a corner. The place smelled like a frat party.

"You wanna watch some TV?" he said.

"OK," I said. Shawn sat in the chair, picked up a remote control from the floor, and turned on the TV. He flipped through the channels until he found a wrestling match. The volume was all the way up. At least we wouldn't have to talk much; it was far too loud for that. My head started to hurt almost immediately. I was already trying to think of a discrete way to excuse myself and go back downstairs.

Bored by the homoerotic spectacle of muscle-men in garish costumes rolling around on a mat, I looked around the room. Mounted along the far wall was a series of large glass display cases, maybe half a dozen or more. They were full of knives. Shawn saw me staring at them

and got excited. "Check 'em out!" he shouted.

I went in for a closer look: Civil War antiques, ordinary Swiss army knives, ceremonial swords, high-tech hunting knives, and so on, sorted and lined up in neat rows. Shawn, as if out of reverence, turned the TV down. "Roxanne hated those," he said, with pride in his voice. "She thought the kid was goin' to get into 'em and cut herself up. Told me I had to get rid of 'em. But I got rid of her instead." And he laughed, a thin, high-pitched sound.

I felt I should say something but couldn't think of anything. I took a long swallow of beer. "Impressive," I managed at last. "Got a cigarette?"

While we smoked and drank more beer, Shawn told me stories about each of the items in his collection. The first few had been left to him in his grandfather's will; that had been what got him into collecting. He told me where he'd acquired each one, how much he'd paid for it or, in some cases, who had given it to him.

After maybe an hour of this, Shawn switched over to talking about his ex-wife, the child's mother, paranoid Roxanne. He was extremely drunk by then, and he wasn't making much sense. He started getting agitated, raising his voice. I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded a lot. Shawn mumbled and ranted by turns, getting more and more worked up, and then all of a sudden he started to cry. He seemed to have forgotten that I was still there. The wrestling match had ended, and now an old Japanese monster movie was on. Some kind of giant butterfly was shooting laser beams from its antennae, and skyscrapers were burning. I let myself out as quietly as possible. Shawn didn't even notice.

A couple days after that, I came home and he and Lily were out on the porch again. Shawn waved at me like before and said, "Hey, good times the other night, buddy. We should do that again."

"Yeah," I said, and kept walking. Lily said something or other but I was in the house before she could finish her sentence. The rest of the afternoon I spent inside, hanging out with my cat and avoiding human interaction. I kept thinking about those knives, how weird it was for Shawn to be so enthusiastic about something like that. I thought about how awkward it had been when he'd started crying about his ex, how out of place I'd felt. I wondered whether it was the drugs he'd said he was on that made him act that way or something else, something deeper.

Around dusk I went out to get some cat food and bread and cheese from the corner store. As I was leaving the house, Pablo was getting out of his car, a decrepit Buick Skylark with no muffler. He'd been at his sister's house doing his laundry. He'd stopped using the facilities in our basement after an alleged incident where, instead of standing in front of the washing machine and watching it for the whole cycle, as he usually did, he'd gone upstairs to get a Coke, and when he returned someone, presumably Lily, had put his clothes into the dryer.

The inside driver's side door handle had broken off at some point, so to get out of his car Pablo had to roll down the window and stick his arm out. Sometimes when it was cold, the window would freeze shut, and he would just sit in the car until Lily or I happened to come by, and then he would tap on the window and we would open the door for him.

It wouldn't be winter for a few months yet, though, so Pablo didn't have any trouble with his window this time. He did, however, seem to have some difficulty getting the basket of laundry out of the back seat. It was piled precariously high.

"Need a hand?" I asked.

Pablo looked startled and a little alarmed. I'd never offered to help him carry his laundry from the car before, and by his expression I could see he was trying hard to process this new twist in our relationship.

Later I realized that I'd made the offer as a way of atoning for not having been friendlier to Shawn the other night. It was a vain attempt, though, because Pablo, after some reflection, said, "Nah, I'm good," then walked quickly to the house, leaving a trail of rock-and-roll t-shirts and holey socks behind him. I thought about picking them up for him but decided that, after all, it was none of my business.

When I got back from the store, there was a phone message from Shawn. He wanted to hang out again. I ate a cheese sandwich and tried to convince myself that I should call him back because that would be the right thing to do. But instead I picked up a book and flopped down on the couch. The cat came in and sat on my chest. After reading just a few pages, I nodded off.

Very early in the morning I woke up, a little sore from sleeping on the couch. The cat was gone and the book was on the floor. I went down the hall to piss and heard a strange, muffled sound coming from the bathroom ceiling. It took me a few minutes to figure out that it was someone yelling. In my half-awake, rather disoriented state, I thought it was Pablo, indulging in his musical pursuits, but then I realized that it had to be Shawn.

I tried to listen closely, but I couldn't understand what he was going on about. As far as I could tell, his voice was the only one I was hearing, so he was probably alone. Maybe he was yelling at someone on the phone? While I was trying to work it all out, a siren got louder and louder, until I couldn't hear Shawn anymore. I returned to the living room, which was illuminated by the flashing blue and red and white lights of a cop car that had just pulled into the driveway.

This wasn't the first time the cops had showed up at the house at disconcerting hours. A couple times they'd come looking for Matt and Mary the drug dealers, although they never did anything except give them a stern talking-to. Also, Lily called them whenever someone in the

neighborhood was having a loud party or she thought she saw someone lurking somewhere. My policy, whenever they're in the vicinity, is to try to become invisible and stay out of the way. I hate talking to cops. I've been told this attitude is a sign of a guilty conscience, but I have no opinion about that.

Furtively, I peered through the gap between the curtain and the window, thereby seeing without being seen. In the street in front of the house was a fleet of emergency vehicles: an ambulance, a fire truck, at least three police cruisers. I wondered why they always send a fire truck to this sort of thing. Wouldn't they want to save those for an actual fire? A gaggle of EMTs and cops were standing around on the lawn, their radios softly sputtering in a language unintelligible to civilians.

At the sound of a scuffle on the back stairs, the personnel came to attention. Shawn was being dragged out of his apartment. I couldn't see him from where I was standing, but I could hear him. He was still shouting: "I'm a Marine, god damn it, don't *fuck* with me! A fucking Marine!" Then there was a sharp cracking sound and a brief bright arc of light, and Shawn shouted, "You can't tase me, assholes! I'm a Marine!" But they tased him again anyway, and he finally quieted down.

Then the cops shoved him into my field of vision, and I saw him fall on his face in the dewy grass and lie there, kind of twitching a bit, his arms stretched out as if in supplication. There was blood all over his clothes. Near him on the grass was one of his beloved knives, a long, partially serrated one with a leather handle that I remembered he'd said had been given to him by a guy in his unit. Its blade was shiny with blood. A pudgy cop picked it up with latex gloves and dropped it into an evidence baggie.

Shawn didn't resist at all when a couple of EMTs hoisted him onto a stretcher. They wheeled him into the back of the ambulance and closed the door with a bang. One of the cops talked to the driver of the

fire truck, and it pulled away. The ambulance was next to go, accompanied by one of the cruisers. The remaining cops conferred briefly. One of them spoke into his radio, and then they got into their cars and drove off.

I lingered at the window for a few minutes, but nothing else seemed about to happen, so I went to the kitchen to make coffee. As I rearranged the week's worth of dirty dishes in the sink to make room beneath the faucet for the carafe, I thought about Shawn. What the hell had happened up there? Was it a drunken accident, or was he trying to get attention, or what? And who had called the police?

The old tap whined and coughed before giving up a stream of cloudy water. As I measured out the coffee the cat wandered in. He gimped over to his bowl and sat next to it, staring at me.

"Hold on there," I said. "You know how it works. Always coffee first."

"Mrow," the cat said. After filling his bowl with fish-shaped brown pellets, I went into the bedroom and changed out of the clothes I'd slept in. Then I returned to the kitchen, where the cat was still immersed in gobbling up his breakfast.

"You don't have to eat it all at once," I said. "This is why you can hardly walk, fatty."

I poured myself a mug of coffee and took it out onto the porch to see if the debris on the lawn would explain anything. The sky had that greenish-gray tinge it sometimes has just before the sun comes up. I sat on the steps, listening to the ordinary sounds of an ordinary Michigan morning: the banter of sparrows and jays, someone's yippy dog, several alarm clocks buzzing. Then there were heavy footsteps on the stairs, and the front door swung open. Lily came out and stood behind me, loudly mouth-breathing.

"Morning," I said in an obligatory way, without turning around.

"You get a load of all them goings-on?" she wheezed.

"Hard to miss," I said, hoping she'd go away and leave me alone with my musings. But before that could happen, Pablo ambled over. He had on shorts and a backwards baseball cap, making him look like the world's oldest teenager.

"That was pretty far-out, huh," he said. "If that's who they let into the Marines these days, no wonder our country's in the shitter, you know?"

"Tell me about it," Lily said.

Pablo nodded sagely. "What do you reckon they'll do with him?"

"Oh, I expect they'll just look after him for a couple days," Lily said, "and then he'll be back."

"I wonder," Pablo said, "if anybody'll come and clean all that blood off the grass."

They continued to converse in this fashion, while I finished my coffee and wished I had a cigarette. Lily asserted that it was Roxanne who'd called the cops. She said she'd heard Shawn talking on the phone intermittently throughout the night, each call more intense and full of drunken emoting than the one before, and while she hadn't been able to hear everything he'd said, she was pretty sure he was arguing with his ex about their daughter.

"And then he did that thing where he suddenly goes all bat-shit crazy," Lily said. "You've seen that, right?"

Pablo said no, he had not seen that thing. I confessed my own ignorance as well, although I thought that I'd come close to seeing it on wrestling night, expect that I'd left before things got too out of control.

"Well you're lucky then," said Lily, "'cause it's not a real nice thing to see. He knows he ain't supposed to drink with that medication. He

started screaming how he was goin' to kill himself and how that would show Roxanne and everybody they couldn't treat him like a dog anymore, you know, drunk talk like that. Ken used to get like that, too, when he hit the whisky too hard. So I can understand why Roxanne would call it in. You got to take that kind of thing seriously, no question."

No one ever came to clean up the lawn, but it rained a lot later in the week, and that did it. While Shawn was still in the hospital, the owner of the building came over, carried Shawn's belongings down to the basement, and changed the lock on his door. "Can't have no more police over here," the owner said to me. "I'm fed up with this. Rather have it vacant than have this bullshit."

When Shawn came by to pick up his stuff, he looked rested and alert. He rode up in a battered black pick-up truck driven by a short hairy guy with a lumpy nose that looked like it had been broken more than once. I went out to unlock the basement for him and help him carry his things to the truck. Shawn gave me a big smile. "Long time no see," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "So are you OK? Where are you going to go now?"

"I'm fine, buddy," he said. "I'm gonna stay with my cousin for a while, that's him in the truck. He can get me a job at his plant."

"That's good. Sorry it didn't work out for you here."

"No big deal. Ain't nothing new. All my life I've moved around a lot. Tell you what though, Roxanne, man, she's psycho. She wants to press charges on account of she says I been endangering her kid. Me, I want to sue her ass right back for harassing me all the god damn time. Hey, whyn't you come over later for a while? We're on Columbus between Eighth and Ninth, the yellow house with the big old tree in front of it."

“OK,” I said. I knew I wouldn't go, though. I knew it was the last time I'd ever see him.

But I was wrong about that last part. A few months later, I was shoveling snow off the front steps when I noticed some footprints leading to the back door. Shawn's apartment had been rented again by then, but the new occupant, a cab driver named Esther, was out of town, so the footprints aroused my curiosity.

I followed them and found Shawn, swaying back and forth and trying to force his key into the lock. “What the hell are you doing?” I said.

He mumbled something. He seemed to be trying to ask why the door wouldn't open. “You don't live here anymore,” I said. His eyes narrowed and he shook his head as if I were trying to sell him something. “Remember?” I said. “You live over there now.” I pointed toward Columbus Street. He began kicking the door and trying to force it open with his shoulder.

“Shawn,” I said, “stop that. Shawn, come on.” Whether because I said his name or because he just ran out of steam I don't know, but he suddenly turned around, stumbled down the stairs, and half sat, half fell down in the snow. He looked like a frightened child rather than a fucked-up ex-Marine with impulse control issues. He was sniffing like a child, too. I left him there and walked over and rang Pablo's bell.

“I hate to intrude,” I said. “It's just, Lily's at work, and someone needs to give Shawn a ride home. He'll never make it on his own.”

“How come Shawn's here?” Pablo said.

“I think he got lost. Do you have a few minutes? I'll ride along and tell you how to get there.”

Pablo nodded, then closed the door. A few minutes later he opened it again and came outside, wearing his greasy winter coat and

holding his keys. "I'll go start it up," he said.

Shawn was sitting where I'd left him. He was slouched forward with his chin on his chest, his legs splayed in front of him in a V shape and his hands lying limply in his lap. A bright orange hat perched atop his head like a Shriner's fez. His shoulders rose and fell slowly with subdued sobs.

"Pablo and me are gonna take you home, all right?" I said, crouching in front of him. Shawn looked up at me, confused, with snot running down his face; he looked down at the snow, around the yard, then back at me. He extended one chapped red hand for me to help him up. I put an arm around him and all but dragged him to Pablo's loudly sputtering Skylark, then helped him into the back seat, where he lay on his side with his knees against the window.

It was less than five minutes to Shawn's cousin's place, but by the time we got there he was snoring. Pablo drove slowly down Columbus while I looked for a yellow house with a big tree. It was right in the middle of the block. There was a lopsided one-armed snowman in the yard and plastic toys were strewn about, half-buried in drifts.

Shawn's daughter answered the door. If she recognized me, she didn't let on. She didn't say hello, just stood meekly in the doorway, giving me the same glassy-eyed stare I remembered from the last time I'd seen her. "Hi," I said. No response. "Any grown-ups home?" Still staring at me, the kid started picking her nose.

It was late afternoon and already starting to get dark. I walked back to the car, opened Pablo's door, and said, "Help me get him in the house, and then I guess we're done."

The little girl stood to one side, watching me and Pablo carry her father down a dim hallway that smelled like wet wool. It was a difficult task; Shawn was dead weight. Once, he moaned and seemed about to

wake up but didn't. In the living room, we laid him out on an overstuffed plaid sofa.

"You keep an eye on your dad, now, don't let him wander off again," I said to the child, who, of course, didn't answer me. Pablo and I let ourselves out, then drove back home in silence.

David Ewald

Attractive Nuisance

I was in town on business. This was before the advent of the Internet so there wasn't much to do except watch the latest stock reports and the occasional bad movie on the local soft-core porn channel. My apartment was adequate. I'd rented out the luxury suite for that week and it came equipped with all the amenities: microwave, dishwasher, high-pressure shower-head, rooms big enough for a family of five. The man who checked me in was from Pakistan, I think.

"Only for the week," he said. "That's special rate, sir. You'll like."

He was old and lived in an apartment at the back of the lobby, behind the check-in counter. His wife or daughter came in carrying a small child. Tagging behind was a girl of about seven or eight. The woman and her baby paid me no mind and went directly to the counter where she spoke to the man in their own language. I realized the little girl was looking at me.

"Hello," I said.

She put her index finger in her mouth, tugged at the corner of her cheek, her finger working like a hook, and then walked around to join her mother. The Christmas lights gave off a haloish glow. Outside, cars crawled by. A small but well-adorned pine tree squatted in one corner, ablaze in all its synthetic glory.

"I'll be back here at five pm Friday to check out."

"Check out time is eleven am, sir."

"In the morning then. Eleven."

"Very good, sir."

The motel complex had three floors and all of the rooms but mine faced inward onto the below-level open air parking garage. Some of the doors and windows had been decorated festively, signs reading Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, and here and there a string of lights blinked or a wreath gave off its scent of the otherworld.

Beyond the heavy door with my room number on it was a long dark staircase ascending to another door, this one wooden and not needing a key, and beyond that the apartment. I entered carrying my suitcase and satchel. My tie had gone askew and after setting down my possessions on the queen-sized bed I went into the bathroom to straighten it out.

The living room was especially cold and the heating unit looked to be on the fritz. I didn't dare switch it on at this point. The track for the sliding glass door had rusted considerably enough to prevent the door from being moved more than a few inches. Though the glass was grimy with a film of dust I could still see the descending clouds, the cold color, and the rooms far across the way in another wing. Few lights were on, fewer decorations back here. I moved to the dining nook and stood at the window, this one clean compared to the sliding glass door. As if it were new and had recently been replaced.

Down below was a fenced-in courtyard in the center of which was a sizable circular lawn. The grass looked well-maintained, as did the single rose bush at the lawn's heart. At this time of year the flowers were all but dead, but I could imagine at other times during the happy warm seasons the flowers looking robust in the sun, and the bees buzzing, and the scent overpowering.

A single rose bush in the center of the circular fenced-in lawn. I found that odd.

As it was late I fixed myself a quick dinner from the few items I'd

picked up at the store before check-in. I ate in front of the TV in the massive studio-like living room. After the stock reports and the end of my meal I flipped to the soft-core porn. After that I went to bed.

I woke up in the middle of the night with the usual need. My bladder was nothing if not porous. On my way out of the bathroom I thought I saw—of all things—fingers curving around the corner of the wall that faced the open living room. The fingers, I thought, were small. They, I thought, were white.

It might have been my mind, in which case I could go back to bed. But just as easily it might well have been a person, a sneak, the Pakistani girl perhaps (the fingers might *not* have been white), in which case I could definitely *not* go to sleep. I could not be sure so I erred on the side of curiosity and turned the corner. I saw no one.

I'm not sure what compelled me to go to the window above the dining table in the nook. Something compelled me even then.

All the lights in all the rooms on all three floors were out. Through the clouds the moonlight illuminated the courtyard. Standing just outside the black-painted iron gate encircling the lawn was a little girl in a fetching dress. She looked familiar.

But she was not the Pakistani girl.

She was blond, her long hair braided into a whip that fell down her back. Her dress was cream-colored and spotted with polka dots. She was barefoot and pale.

She no longer reminded me of someone. She was that someone.

I had not seen this girl in three decades.

"Cindy," I muttered, for I was into muttering to myself at that time.

I watched as the girl, Cindy, passed through the gate without opening it. One moment she was standing outside and the next....she

was beside the rose bush. I watched her reach a hand out to touch an empty stem. She seemed to mime plucking a flower then placing it to her nose. I watched, my mouth undoubtedly ajar.

Her fingers still pinching the imaginary flower, Cindy gradually looked up at me. Toothlessly, she smiled. I ran.

I ran from the window and out of the apartment, down the dark staircase and through the secure front doorway. I ran to the opposite side of the landing, found the staircase leading to the rear-facing wings of the apartment complex and tackled these new steps two or three at a time. I didn't care how scared I was. The truth was I was not that scared. Certainly not as scared as I was that day three decades earlier, when I'd believed I'd seen her for the last time.

Cindy Cindy Cindy Cindy Cin—

I turned the corner and came out onto the open communal area. Fast approaching the fence, I strained so that I could see. Through the black-painted bars I saw the rose bush quite clearly, but Cindy was no longer there. Perhaps she had gone behind the bush; I would have to be inside to be certain.

I attempted to open the gate with one hard tug. When that didn't work I looked up for the latch and found instead a padlock barring entry. I gripped the padlock and yanked. Tighter than an elder's ass on a mission.

She had to be behind the bush; no other explanation was forthcoming and there wasn't much time left. I had already lost her once; I was losing her again now. I jumped and grasped the top of the fence. Using my formidable upper body strength, I pulled myself up so that I could swing my arms and then my entire body over the top of the fence. I landed on the other side gracelessly, with enough lack of skill that my ankle twisted a little and I had to limp around the side of the rose bush.

Cindy was not there.

"Where are you," I muttered. "Are you...."

"Sir. Sir!"

I turned from the rose bush to face the old motel owner. His hands were extended through the bars. Behind him a small group of concerned citizens, fellow motel people, had gathered.

"Yes?" I said meekly.

"Sir. You are causing quite the commotion. These people are trying to rest."

"Oh." I had since found my shoes to be of great interest.

"Sir. You were shouting."

Had I been shouting? If I had I hadn't heard myself. But then so often I had not heard myself—at other times, in other situations.

"What was I...um...What was I...saying?"

"Guy kept saying a name," offered up one squinty-eyed motel person.

"Some girl's name," ponied on another.

"Sir. Please come out now."

I did as I was asked. When I had successfully grunted my way over the fence to the outside-side I stood before the gathered throng and apologized to those who remained. They looked but briefly in my direction before leaving. The old motel owner was also on his way out.

I stayed him with a "Wait" and a hand on his arm. He hovered dispassionately, a voice on the brink.

"Why is the gate locked?"

"The gate is locked, sir, so the roses are not disturbed."

"Have they been disturbed before?"

The old owner, possibly from Pakistan, pulled away and continued walking back to those he loved.

* * *

"Now," Cindy said. "This is where we wait. When they come over that ridge, we open fire."

Shielding my eyes, I looked. Nothing of note could be seen above us. I looked to the other side of the canal, at the wall sloping to the sky, and saw the same.

"What about the other side? You don't think they're going to come from there?"

"They won't come from there."

"Why not?"

"That's not what *the scouts* say."

Her shadow crossed over me, and I took advantage of the blocked sun by lowering my hand. Cindy wore jeans, a button-up checkered shirt and boots. Her long blond hair was in the braid she liked.

"This is stupid," I said. "They have the high ground."

"But I'm Annie Oakley and you're the Lone Ranger. They can't beat us." She squinted at me. "What's wrong?"

"Playing this is stupid. Those shows are over."

"So?"

"So...what about *Dragnet*?"

"*Dragnet* doesn't have any girls I can play."

"What about...." I tried to think of a woman character in *Dragnet*, but none came to mind, and what's more I was now distracted by a

strange sound. It couldn't have been an earthquake because we would have felt the ground shake. Instead there was only a faint hiss farther along the canal bed. The hiss intensified sharply into a whoosh that sounded as if a busy freeway were rushing toward us. Now the concrete started to vibrate. I then knew that sound.

"Water," I said.

Cindy looked at me. Her eyes widened. She knew I wasn't lying this time.

"Maybe it's only a little," she said.

"I don't think so. Run!"

Just as I cried out we saw the water rise up in the distance along the canal bed. It was coming fast. Both of us turned to run up the side of the ridge. The slope was concrete and there was no ladder, no hand- or footholds. I was small and light and kept hunched over as I ran up. I was going to make it. I could see the top just ahead. Behind me I heard the flood flash by—and I heard a scream. I grabbed hold of the top of the concrete ridge and let my lower body slide down, hoping that Cindy would be there to grab my ankles or feet. She wasn't there. I heard her scream again, and when I turned I closed my eyes at what I saw. She had fallen. Older than me by a year, she was also taller and more awkward. It was that awkwardness, that gangliness and lack of centering her gravity that had caused her to slip as she crawled up after me. And now she was being carried away, this ten year old girl, and I could not open my eyes for fear I would see her as I last saw her, arms and head just above the deluge, her eyes and mouth open forever.

* * *

It wasn't a dream, but it was what I woke up from to find her beside me—in spirit if not in the flesh.

“Cindy,” I said.

She stood over me, but in this darkness and without my glasses I could only make out her outline, a fuzzy form. It was her, though.

“Cindy,” I repeated.

I watched, rigid, as Cindy, still wearing the polka dot dress, turned and headed toward the bathroom. I fumbled for my glasses, turned on the bedside lamp, and then slid out of bed.

I found her sitting in the tub. She was still not clear to me, so I turned on the light and that's when I saw I was mistaken. It wasn't Cindy. It was a girl who looked quite similar to her, about the same height, the same hair color and length, the same braid and a similar polka dot dress. But, I saw now, the dress could well have been from the eighties and not the fifties. The girl was not my Cindy, my friend. Most telling of all was her face—the eyes were brown instead of blue, the nose free of freckles; even the facial structure, the cheek bones, jaw, brows and dimples were off.

“What the....”

The girl, who I also realized was a bit younger than ten—perhaps seven or eight—opened her mouth while staring at the showerhead, as if waiting for the water to fall. She was screaming in silence. She was drowning. Her fists flew out, her hands like claws, and she grasped at the tile wall even as she sunk backwards. I stepped toward the tub once she'd disappeared into it and out of view. Looking in I saw only emptiness.

“Who are you,” I said. “What are you telling me?”

I sensed her behind me, and when I turned the dress was just disappearing around the doorway.

I ran out and into the dim light bleeding from my bedside lamp. I

could not see the girl, this Cindy impostor, anywhere in the room. I ran around the bed and looked on that side. I checked under the bed and again in the bathroom. No one.

In the dining nook I stared out at the single rose bush in the circular gated area. Again, no sign. I was headed back to the bedroom when I yelped and jumped back. The girl was standing in front of the door leading out of the apartment. Her hands were folded before her. She looked solemn. Suddenly she backed up through the door, which I threw open and, finding no one, descended the stairs rapidly.

She was on the street, walking away from the motel. As I hadn't taken my watch I had no idea of the time but it must have been early, the dead hours when no cars passed by, not even the medics. I kept my distance, fearing that if I drew too close she would run or, worse, simply vanish, never to reappear. As I walked I wondered how I could've gotten it wrong; how could I have mistaken this girl for Cindy? For as I followed she seemed to look less and less like her. She seemed to get shorter, as did her hair. With each step her skin turned even more white until it appeared nearly translucent.

She didn't have far to walk. From the main drag where the motel lay it was only three blocks down and three blocks to the right. We were now in a residential area, and I was following the girl past darkened houses and faint glow of the occasional corner street lamp. I heard a branch snap, a door slam in the distance, but I was not afraid. She was with me.

And then we were at a house, darkened like all the others. This house the girl approached. She walked up the driveway and toward the front door. After taking a quick look around, I followed her. She led me not to the front door as I'd expected but instead around the side of the house. Undergrowth was thick here, and I kept feeling as if something were crawling up my pajama-pant leg.

The girl had stopped ahead on the side of the house. She was looking through a window high enough up for her to have to stand on her tiptoes. Cautiously, I moved toward her. She did not back away from me but instead continued to look.

The window peered into an office. At the large desk opposite us a man hunched in front of a desktop computer. What he was doing I couldn't tell. The only light in the room came from the screen. I could not yet see this man's face. His back remained to us.

I turned to find the girl staring at me. For a second I startled and stepped back, for now the girl had next to nothing in common with Cindy. She was incredibly young, at most three or four, chubby, had short red hair and skin so translucent I could see veins. Her skin looked unnatural, but then I had to remember the way she'd died.

And then I *knew* how she had died. I suspected I knew *where* she had died as well, and I had a good idea of who had killed her.

"Oh God," I said, staring through the window. The man began to turn and get up. I gasped and dropped to the ground. From there I crawled.

Back on the street I stood waiting for the girl to appear. After half an hour of freezing while not seeing her, I headed back to the motel with an idea of what I had to do.

* * *

The old owner stepped back from the heating unit.

"It is all okay, sir. It is working fine."

"Then there's something else I need you to help me with."

Taking him forcefully by the arm, I directed him to the window overlooking the single rose bush in the center of that circular gated lawn.

"What happened there?"

"Nothing, sir."

I grabbed him by the arm again and forced him to look. "Don't give me that. You don't want to remember what happened there, or is it you had a hand in it and you're covering up?"

"Sir. What are you accusing me of?"

I made sure to breathe before speaking. "That used to be a pool down there, but a little girl was killed, she was drowned in that pool, so to erase the tragedy the place was covered up. The rose bush is the only thing to remember her."

I could tell I had reached the owner in some way. Still, he shook his head. "Why do you believe this?" he said.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"What will it benefit you?"

"I care!"

I grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him toward me. Our faces were now very close.

"Tell me what happened, or I won't be able to save your granddaughter or daughter or whoever the little girl is I see living with you."

The owner's eyes widened and his mouth worked soundlessly like that of a fish out of water. I pressed on.

"It's going to happen again. She showed me who did it then. Same guy who's going to kill another little girl now!"

With surprising strength and swiftness the owner wrenched free from my grasp. I was too bothered now to accost him further. If what I had said had not been true before, it was true now.

The owner did not storm away, nor did he say he was going to call the police. Instead he stood with his head bowed to the carpet. He seemed to be debating within himself. At last he said, "It's not all wrong, this story."

"It's all *right*."

The owner held up a hand. "It was a pool," he said. "A girl did drown. She was here with her family. She went out to the pool in the morning, the gate was not shut fully and...."

"And you think she fell in," I said. "On her own."

"She did fall in alone, sir. She was four years old. No one else was there."

"No witnesses?"

"The pool had to be destroyed. An attractive nuisance."

"A what?"

"Attractive nuisance," the owner repeated. "You are wasting your time—and my time. Making an accident a crime."

"Didn't you feel *anything* when you found out this little girl had died in your motel's pool?"

"Sir," he said. "I did not work here then." With that he turned and left the apartment.

* * *

That night, Monday, the girl visited me again, and this time she spoke as she cried over what had happened. My story was true. The man in the house, the previous owner of the motel, had drowned her in the swimming pool early that morning when she'd gone out while her parents slept. She'd fought, but there was no way she could change the ending. This new story, though, she could control. The man had taken a

trinket of hers from the murder scene, a trinket that had been forgotten in all that grief, and if I could find this trinket in the man's house, where he still kept it hidden, I would have the evidence we needed.

The next morning I watched as the man left his house. He was dressed in a track suit, sneakers, sunglasses. He did some stretches, then jumping jacks and breathing routines—all in his front driveway. Behind him the garage door opened and a sedan pulled out. The man stood aside to let the car pass, but it stopped to let him lean in and, I assumed, kiss goodbye whomever was driving. As the car hit the street I saw enough to know it was a woman, though I could not get a clear view of her face.

The car gone, the man continued his warm-ups for another minute and then took off. From behind the tree I pondered what I had seen. The man was younger than me, perhaps by as many as ten years, which would have put him at twenty-nine. But if he was that young then he must've murdered the girl even younger, probably in his early twenties. Could he have owned a motel at that age? Regardless, he had at least worked at the motel, and a sick, despicable youth had grown into a husband and homeowner, cover for his darkest impulses.

His run could be brief, in which case I would have to move fast. I hurried across the street and over to the side of the house. I passed the office window. The girl had told me the previous night that there would be a key under a potted plant on the back patio, and sure enough there was. With this key I opened the side door that led into the garage, found that door to be unlocked just as she'd said, and slipped into the house. From there it was only a matter of making sure the evidence was present. I was overjoyed to find it was.

I didn't go to work after that. I went back to my apartment instead. When I woke the TV was on, I was curled up on the couch in a position reminiscent of those mummified victims of Mount Vesuvius, and my

coworker was standing over me.

I sat up quickly, the blood to my head all at once, and blinked my eyes like beating wings.

"Christ," he said. "Look at you. What's going on? The man upstairs is pissed. He knows you missed the meeting today."

"I expected this," I said, and I pinched the bridge of my nose in an attempt to stop my headache.

"Couldn't you wait until, you know, after Christmas to bottom out?"

"There is no Christmas!" I leapt up as I said this. Incensed, my eyes surely blood-shot, I must've terrified my coworker, for he backed away.

I continued to advance on him, a little man, a mean man who had never been chosen for anything short of the job he held on to as if it were his manhood. "There's no New Year," I said. "No bowl game, no chili with cheese and onions, no parade and certainly *no resolution!*"

This last must've been a roar. My coworker turned and ran. He flung open the door and pounded down the steps as many as he could at a time.

* * *

It was time to end this, time to check out. That Tuesday night, with the girl by my side, I again walked over to the man's house. Although it was late, he and his wife were just sitting down to dinner. Through the large front window I looked in from my crouched position. Husband and wife had their heads bowed over their food, a reminder of what could never make up for the loss I'd experienced when I was nine. I looked to my side. The girl was no longer with me, but I knew what I had to do. Getting up I went to the front door. As I was about to ring, headlights flashed across, red and blue lights followed, I heard tires screech, a horn

blare short and sharp, and a voice said, "Hold it."

I turned to see two police officers heading up the driveway from their vehicle, its doors still open, lights still flashing. The officers did not have their guns drawn, but I put my hands out anyway to show I meant them no harm.

"I'm so glad you're here," I said. "I was going to have you show up later, but now's an even better time, I think."

"Have you been to this house before?" one of the officers said. He was reaching not for his gun but for the handcuffs nearby.

"Of course," I said, and that's when the front door opened. The man stood in the doorway, wearing glasses not unlike mine, with a soft face not unlike mine—only younger, a memory. He shifted his weight to his other foot. Through the slim opening to his side I could not see his wife. I noted that opening.

"He the one you saw creeping around last night?"

"And this morning," the man answered. "We think he might've broken in."

"Did you force your way into this house, sir?"

"For a reason," I said. "To find the proof that this man murdered a little girl, a four-year-old girl, in the swimming pool of the motel not far from here. He did it—he worked at the motel at that time!"

Not only did the man laugh, but the officers chuckled as well. One of them asked the man what he thought of my accusation, to which the man answered that he had never been to the motel in question, though he'd seen it from the road many times. He had never worked at any motel; he was a writer who made his living at home.

"Bet you'll write about this," one of the officers said, to which a fresh round of laughter brayed.

I knew where this was going. I didn't care, though. I would show them.

Before the laughter and the shaking of heads could subside I bolted for the doorway. The man's eyes widened and the officers cursed and shouted at me. I could feel them close behind as I slammed into the man and knocked him to the tile. Now I heard the officers shout to halt, stop or they would fire, but I knew they wouldn't fire, not in this hallway with its pictures of the childless couple together, nor would they fire into any of the rooms I might have gone into. I ended up in the office, the computer on, the monitor dark, and I got down on my knees and with the aid of the hunting knife I'd bought that day I forced open the lowest desk drawer.

I brought out the evidence just as the man, followed by the officers, rushed in.

"There!" I cried. "There!" In my hand, clear for all to see, was a bright plastic trinket, the kind four year old girls of that time would wear around their wrists. It was the very same trinket the girl had worn when she was murdered, when the man in this office, this "writer," forced her head under the water. I explained all this to the officers, pointing at the shocked man several times, and still they trained their guns on me.

"Drop the knife! Drop it!"

"Drop it now or we will fire!"

They wouldn't. And ruin this man's possessions? The legal ramifications alone would do them in.

"Admit it," I said to the man. "Admit it now!"

"I've never seen that before in my life!"

To the officers I said, "This killer's going to kill again—the little Pakistani girl at the same motel! If you're not going to bring him to justice and

save—" Without finishing my sentence I leapt at the man, the knife out. The officers did not fire. They continued to shout, but now I had the man by the arm and was pulling him toward me, the knife at his throat.

The man's eyes were wild with fear, the same fear the girl he'd drowned had felt. I smiled. "You're going to—"

I heard the gun's report before I felt the hit to my head—and even then the feeling was so brief it was as if I had never existed.

* * *

So there was blood—my blood—and more on the computer, the hanging cabinets, the desk and drawers. I know because I saw it, I saw it over and over for a time, and then I no longer saw it, and now I am here with the one I had tried to save and the one I never tried to save.

It's difficult to describe this place. Perhaps it's *no place*, neither heaven nor hell, free of Satan's power but not privy to it either. I can only say I am here, and every so often I am compelled to step out and drift, to look at the world as it continues to change, even as I do not.

The man never did kill the little Pakistani girl, nor did he kill anyone else. But that doesn't mean he won't ever, and when he does I'll be watching, ready to tell someone new.

David Ewald is the author of a novel in stories, He Who Shall Remain Shameless (forthcoming from Macromere Press), as well as a full-length play, Mormania (Paragon Theatre's The Trench). His short fiction and dramatic work have appeared or are forthcoming in BULL: Men's Fiction, The Chimaera, The Harrow, The Bend, Eclectica, Morbid Outlook, Denver Syntax, and Spectrum. He teaches writing, literature and theater at Arapahoe Community College and lives in Denver, Colorado with his wife.

Dorian Dawes

I Am a Dream

People like Isaac Winter do not walk in the day. They will not be found near the trimmed lawns of suburban landscapes, and the cloudless blue skies most find so pleasant and pretty. They're so far removed from such things resembling normality and safety that most make the fatal mistake of assuming that such creatures do not exist. They are wrong of course, for anyone can find them. They're crouching silently in the dark alleys, drifting through clouds of fog and cigarette smoke. Long fingers twirling about dyed black hair, fingernails painted black, glitter dripping from their eyelids; they're almost inhuman with those stares. Boys like Isaac Winter live in darkness, and that's what makes them such a delicious and special find.

When I met him, he did not once look upon me because as fond of darkness as boys like Winter are, their eyes cannot penetrate the gloom to see me lurking beneath it all, watching breathlessly. Not that there is much to see, for at my will I can become the void itself, without shape or form, the essence of nothing. Such are my talents, and on the day that I first gazed upon that narrow face, I'd taken the form of a dewdrop on a fly's wing.

It is not common amongst my brethren to take on such seemingly insignificant shapes and guises, and I don't see why it should be. After all, why become the silk strand of a spider's web when you can travel miles as the fierce electric energy of a lightning storm, or intimidate all living creatures as the primal roar of a lion, the vibrations of a stampede. It's much more glamorous to be a star exploding in a distant nebula than a lonely petal on a withering houseplant.

But that's why I choose to be these inconsequential things. For

while my brothers and sisters engage in becoming spectacles of themselves, noticed and feared by all things around them, they miss so very much. I become small and invisible, so that I can be effaced by the glory that are the burning embers on a cigarette hanging out of a beautiful boy's mouth, the melting ice-cubes in a glass of vodka, held by the most slender and pale hands, the whining passionate note echoing out of a guitar.

I'm the first of my kind to ever fall in love with men. A certain kind of man, you must understand, as not all are as attractive to me. I suppose that's caused by my remembering what I was before I began transcending into all sorts of being.

All of us began as something else: insects, people, stars, whatever. We can't say why, or how, but one day we were trapped within one body, and the next the world was ours to explore, and we could be anything our hearts' desired. Many of us have forgotten our original states. I am one of the few to have fleeting memories of the creature I was before.

I was a boy. I wore black clothes and listened to whining, passionate music, and danced around in bars like a leaf shaking on the wind, and I would know full-well what it is like to be a leaf clinging tightly to a branch in a wind-storm, a most tumultuous existence that I embraced until I withered and died and was forced to transcend into another form. I remember many hot mouths on mine throughout my more promiscuous days. In fact, I think my last human memory is of a warm hand belonging to a beautiful man sliding down the front of my pants.

Often, I wonder what his reaction was when suddenly there was nothing there for him to grab. I withered away from him slowly, shrinking smaller and smaller as my entire body shifted into something else, another being. It was the first form I was to take, and he never realized it, but I became a sweat molecule on his skin.

Most of us who transcend don't spend very long in their first forms, and as I've said, they often go on to become grander things, but I've been content to become a silent, invisible observer. I like to watch the boys I once would have seduced, and to fall in love with them until they grow fat and old, and are no longer of interest to me. It's a shame that they just don't die young. They'd all kill themselves if they knew that their lush, androgynous beauty would one day turn into fat and wrinkles, and the memories of all that they once were would serve only to mock the horrors that they'd become.

Winter was the prettiest one I'd ever seen. I decided to follow him and became a follicle of hair upon that lovely head and stayed with him for as long as I could. There's something wonderful about being able to take in the scope and the magnificence of a boy from such viewpoints. You can't appreciate it as something large and grand. To truly see what unique creatures they are, you have to diminish, and allow them to *be*.

If you're not looking, you can miss the most incredible things. Like when he got home and slammed the door to his apartment closed, the angry inflections of his voice as he told his father to stop yelling about him about petty things such as college-work and grades. The passion in his voice—if I had a cock it would have been hard. Such nonsense was below him, he was an artist. A musician. Of course he was. Something about a musician's hands always seems to attract my attention.

When he climbed into the shower, I became a fragment of dirt trapped beneath his fingernails because I wanted to follow his hands as he moved them all over his slender, pale body. How I desperately wanted a tongue to lick his hip-bones, and fingers to trail across his rib-cage. I was so thrilled when he began to touch himself in the shower, finger-fucking himself as he masturbated. How happy I was to enter into him, and that's when I made my decision.

See, it's not always recommended that we take on organic

forms. Living beings are so complex and take up such energy to manifest. It's so much easier to slip inside of something that already exists, such as a breath of wind, or a clap of thunder if you like things that are grand. But to materialize your being into matter that is simply not there, is to risk becoming trapped once more into a permanent body. It's never been proven, but whenever I see a bird crash into a window-pane, I wonder if it is trying to become the glass, and is confused that it has failed.

The freedom that we experience is one that we do not take for granted. We embrace the ability to change at will, to be free of a limited form, and to experience, to see, and know all things. Floating disembodied through the air is one of the greatest joys I have ever known. The fear of becoming trapped again is a constant nightmare, and a fate not even the meanest of our kind would wish upon another. To taste freedom only to be locked once more in a cage is the root of all horror, and the depths of all sadness.

I risked it all for the need to experience this boy. I needed hands to caress him, a mouth to kiss him, a body for him to hold and to love. As he slept that night, I did what none of us have ever been brave enough to do, I became again a boy. I tried so very hard to become as beautiful as I could, reaching into his mind and pulling from his thoughts the very ideal of a perfect body, and a face he could not resist.

Had anyone looked in on his sleeping form at that moment, they might have seen something resembling a gentle mist hovering over him. I was working into a body. I might have been content with watching him like the others, but I needed to touch him, to feel him, and in order to feel, one must have *flesh*. The change was painful, particularly so as I grew nerves and could feel bones being created, could hear the cracking of my own skull, sensations that had long ago become but a distant memory were flooding back to me. How long had it been since I'd smelt,

or heard, or felt anything, so content I'd been with the vague sensation of merely knowing but never experiencing? I felt as if I'd woken from a long and strange dream.

Maybe that's what we are, dreamers, all drifting through the dream of this world, and it's what enables us to change form at will because we don't really exist. We're only fragments of thoughts, hopes, and memories, clinging to the energies of the air.

I woke him with a kiss. He did not seem to be afraid of me. He only asked, "Is this a dream?"

"Yes," I told him, "Enjoy it while it lasts, for it will be gone by tomorrow."

His mouth felt so good on mine, the first I'd enjoyed in so long, his tongue running hot down my throat. I wanted to choke on it. How I loved feeling his skin so warm beneath my fingers, the full length of his cock in my hands. Such a sweet sensation, I'd gladly have abandoned an eternity of freedom to be imprisoned just for these blissful moments of touching and knowing and feeling again. I fully enjoyed feeling his hips buckle against mine as I slipped inside him, his round buttocks clenching tightly about me. I embraced and mentally catalogued every moan and heartfelt cry, sharing in them with my own, until soon I was coming inside of him, and his beautiful cock was squirting everywhere. I licked the semen from his skinny stomach and held him.

There was not a moment of horror for me that night. I never once feared becoming trapped again in a mortal body, for all that mattered to me was a chance to hold this beautiful boy in my arms, and what hell could await me if I should wake up in the morning and still be in this body, still holding him? Not hell, but heaven I should think. It became a pleasant notion to me, to remain human, to fall in love with this delicate creature and be forever by his side. Even growing old temporarily lost its

ability to terrify and repulse me. For the first time in my ever-changing existence, I was content to merely be, and to be a part of this world, instead of watching it from afar.

These moments were soon gone. I awoke as a mere current of air, the energy to hold on to the illusion stripped from me, and when he opened his eyes I was nothing to him but a beautiful and erotic dream, quickly fading in his memory. I never left his side though, never. I learned the truth of how it is that creatures like myself can become trapped within a single form.

In his mind, there still existed a version of myself I'd left with him, and upon awakening, he wrote me into a song, a beautiful song that he sang so loudly. I felt myself slipping away and becoming something else entirely. My body was now made up of chords strummed loudly on a guitar, and a raw passionate voice singing about a boy who came to him in his dreams. I exist in music and lyrics.

I will never be a leaf, or a spider's web, or gravel on the sidewalk again. I am a song, and I live forever on the lips of those who have the courage to open their mouths and sing.

That's my wife over there on the couch, sidling up to the burly young man with the blood-red hair and beard. We're newlyweds. We married on December 20th and honeymooned in Helsinki, Finland, to take advantage of the delightfully long nights. I'm sure you haven't noticed—no way you could—but she's an honest-to-goodness vampire, although those adjectives might not be holy appropriate, if you'll forgive the pun. Wait! Don't be skeptical. I tell you she *is* a vampire with all the necessary rights, privileges, needs, and longevity properly bestowed. See the way she's drawn to his thick-veined neck? I had better get over there quickly.

We met at a small cave-like night club in Transylvania. Veronica was the club's star chanteuse, and I'd been traveling with an Adventures Unlimited tour group. Her sweet vibrato thrilled and chilled me to the bone. I felt such overwhelming love at first sight that I left the tour immediately and began pursuing this glorious creature.

In the beginning, when she revealed who and what she was, I fought my impulse to freak out. I looked deep into those dark gypsy eyes and told her I didn't care. She brought up our age difference: four-hundred thirty-three years, to be precise. I told her she didn't look a day over twenty-five. On one of our early dates, I thought I'd aged a hundred years in five minutes when I caught her staring at my prominent Adam's apple, but apparently she's had the will to resist. At least so far. Now that's real love for you.

Why in the world would I fall in love with a vampire? I'm just a quiet Jewish boy from New England, a librarian and writer. Veronica comes from a family of gypsies on her grandfather's side. I asked her

how she got sucked into the life of a vampire. She hadn't a clue. In fact, her strait-laced peasant parents kicked her out of their hut and disowned her. Her history was all too thrilling for me. I married her two weeks after that first divine evening.

Veronica loves to travel. Not with organized tours, of course; that would be too totally awkward. She also loves to cook and has mastered some of my favorite Jewish dishes. She makes a delicious matzo ball soup from *scraaaaatch*. And her chopped liver made with schmaltz (chicken fat to you) is to die for--you should excuse the expression.

Imagine the faintest breeze on your face as you run your fingers through black hair so fine, soft, and silky that it floats almost weightlessly. Veronica's skin is so white and creamy, it's like diving into a bowl of Ben and Jerry's pure vanilla ice cream. I can trace her sylphlike neck down to breasts rosy as two peaches, svelte hips, and graceful yet muscular legs, developed from all her rigorous nocturnal activities. Sometimes when we're cuddling I do have to remind her that a squeeze is just a squeeze and not foreplay for her midnight snacks.

I admit to having a problem with her choice of outfits. Black is not only basic, but her only color. I've complained that her wardrobe is too dark and offered to install a 100-watt bulb in our room to prove it. But Veronica insists that she has no trouble distinguishing the eight individual shades in her closet: ebony, midnight, charcoal, jet, licorice, raven, and sable.

It's really convenient having a resident vampire with supernatural powers about the house, especially for the heavy chores. At first when Veronica changed her shape she freaked me out—as a bat she comes and goes as she pleases. But her bat form comes in handy for replacing a roof tile, pruning shrubs, hanging pictures, and adjusting drapery pleats—without a stepstool, mind you. Then there are all those wonderful stories she has to tell, at least twenty lifetimes' worth. These conversations

never end. Why she should want me is another story. She says I'm so understanding. Besides, she hadn't had a stable lover in 133 years. I guess that's a pretty long time to wait for consensual sex.

I never tell my wife, of course, but anxiety hovers about my head like a persistent mosquito. What if she gets caught? Will our bizarre life be exposed and disrupted by some creep eager to sell our story to a scandal sheet?

Shortly after our marriage, Veronica came to me with an astonishing proposition. She would give up roaming after midnight if I would supply her with a blood substitute. What triggered this scheme, so out of character, was her whispered confession to me. She's getting a bit worn out from *Life in the Dead of Night*, especially because her joints are showing signs of arthritis. Her long, slender fingers are beginning to look like claws.

I threw myself into the project of researching a blood substitute. By the time I'd finished, I swear I'd learned enough to pass as a hematologist. The blood trail led us to Boris, the Transylvanian butcher, who cheerfully developed a complete formula for her. The mixture was a compound of largely cow blood, a lesser amount of a bovine equivalent, a dash of bat fluid, and a number of vitamins and minerals that are on no human's required daily minimum list. The mixture had to be consumed at the temperature of warm milk. Veronica claimed she could sustain a long-term, happy, healthy body on this substitute.

Then we hit a roadblock. I wanted to return to live in Somerville, Maine, where I'm currently employed. Boris the butcher turned out to be a gem. He had a cousin, Igor, living on a farm not sixty miles from Somerville. Boris would entrust his precious formula to Igor, who agreed to furnish adequate quantities of the life-sustaining solution on a biweekly basis. Both the butcher and the farmer benefited from this arrangement. Every four months I let her drain a pint of the real thing from me, and

we'd wind up having the wildest sex ever.

With that problem licked, we turned to the next dilemma: our sleeping arrangements. We drew up the specifications for a queen-sized coffin and shopped around for a builder. That was the easy part. But have you ever tried to buy fitted sheets for a coffin? As you might expect, Veronica's mattress contains fifty pounds of her native Transylvanian soil.

We settled on a two-story white clapboard house just outside Somerville and proceeded to board over all the upstairs bedroom and bathroom windows. You see, artificial light is okay, but she must avoid the sun at all costs. No, not skin cancer or anything like that. It's just that a single peek at Ole Sol and she'd be devastated--or so she tells me. First, a half-millennium of age wrinkles would invade her ivory skin. Then, twenty agonizing minutes later, all that would remain of her would be a small pile of bat dust where she stood. To guard against this calamity, we set at least two alarm clocks for four-thirty every morning to remind her that it's coffin time. Ah, coffin time! Veronica has this skimpy little see-through bat costume. The salesgirls at Frederick of Hollywood might call it a teddy. Wow-eee!

Our home contains no mirrors. We couldn't afford to replace them every time she happened to glance in one. Five mirrors shattered in the first week alone. Now, admittedly, this is odd. Vampires' images don't normally appear in mirrors. Veronica is in a class by herself. The standard-issue rules don't always apply. Granted, with her enduring beauty and luxurious hair, she doesn't need a mirror, but it's a damned nuisance for me to shave without seeing my face. After weeks of nicks and Band-Aids, I rescued the situation by letting my wife shave me. Of course, I tell her to speed it up when she spends too much time admiring my neck.

Veronica is in great health. The last cavity she had was in 1873.

This doesn't mean we don't have tremendous dental bills. It's her fangs. When we step out at night--dinner, a movie, or sometimes dancing--people notice them and begin to point. It's downright embarrassing for her, so she goes to our dentist every two weeks, and he files them down. He charges extra for the worn-out drill bits and grinders. We pay the outlandish bills because he knows we can't complain.

Our closest friends are sworn to and entrusted with our secret. However, one of our snoopy neighbors suspects and seems fanatically driven to find out for sure. Freddy Burns, a gruff reclusive sort, lives in the dilapidated rancher next door. Late one evening, he spied Veronica under the streetlight, when she was setting out food for the bats, a tasty selection of insects and mice. He's been prying ever since. A few nights ago, I caught him hiding in his overgrown boxwood bushes, wearing a night-vision helmet. All the lights in his house were off. I don't know what he expected to find.

One Sunday afternoon the doorbell rang at the worst possible moment--during a Patriots-Colts game, in sudden-death overtime. I discovered Freddy Burns on our front porch waving a large crucifix in my face. A crucifix!

He growled. "I got an idea there's a vampire in your house."

"Not in this house, not on your life," I chuckled, hiding my exasperation. I decided to go on the offensive. "A crucifix doesn't offer protection in a Jewish home. And besides," I scolded, "vampires are never Jewish. But even if they were, only a potato latke would do." I slammed the door on his dumbfounded expression and assumed that was the end of his nosiness. Boy, was I wrong.

I'm a writer for *Popular Vampires Magazine* and, for the most part, I work at home. I usually bike into the Somerville Post Office on Mondays to mail in my manuscripts. Freddy must have seen me leave last

Monday noon because Linda Mayfare, across the street, saw him march across the lawn from his place to ours, carrying a long wooden tent stake and a masonry maul, a sledgehammer, she called it. Linda knew he was up to no good when he picked the lock on our front door and slipped inside.

One can only guess what he had in mind as he climbed the wooden stairs to the second floor. He couldn't have been on the landing very long when Veronica left our bedroom for the bathroom and discovered him standing there.

She approached him slowly, a grin growing wider and wider across her face. Nearly two weeks of fang growth emerged beyond her lower lip. Her next dental appointment wasn't until Wednesday. The whites of her eyeballs began to glow, flashing an eerie illumination throughout the upstairs hall.

Freddy gasped and dropped the stake and maul. As his trembling body backed away, a large wet spot appeared on the fly of his khaki trousers. Another step back ... and another . . . He screamed as he tumbled down the stairs in a perfect backward somersault. Veronica glided down the staircase to where his lifeless form sprawled.

As I came in the front door, I found her hovering over him. A glint of light reflected from one fang, another sparkled from an eye. She licked her lips and smiled broadly. I instantly guessed her intent: to drain every drop from her would-be attacker. She hadn't noticed me--too fixed on her target. Frothy saliva leaked from the corners of her mouth.

"Veronica," I called sharply. "No! We'd never be able to explain it. We couldn't be together any more."

The threat hit home quickly, and a great shadow of darkness came over her. Excruciating disappointment. She knew she couldn't have it both ways. Her eyes grew softer and bore tears. I told her I was

proud of the restraint she showed. I took her in my arms and walked her back to our room, where I tucked her into her coffin.

An hour later, I'd restored my own composure enough to call the police. The two detectives were skeptical about Veronica's passive role in the calamity and wanted to interview her. I explained that she has a rare vision disease, just diagnosed, causing near-blindness. She'd surprised the intruder, who fell to his death. I promised they would have her written statement the next morning.

I also pointed to the stake and maul and told the detectives about Freddy's vampire delusions. Fortunately, I had a well-rehearsed speech, laced with psychiatric parlance, implanted in my brain for just such an occasion. I expounded on the tragic mental illness of our neighbor, Freddy the paranoid-schizophrenic. A statement from Linda Mayfare confirmed Freddy's strange behavior. At last, all this excellent documentation convinced the police: Veronica's sudden appearance in the hall had thwarted Freddy Burns in his mission to kill a nonexistent vampire.

In a matter of days, everything returned to normal--as normal as marriage to a vampire can be. Lately, Veronica has hinted at wanting to have a baby. A baby? Oy! Now *that* makes me a little nervous.

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I'm not a tolerant fellow. When someone tells me he hears voices but no other human being is nearby, I assume he's one slice of bread short of a sandwich. So when *I'm* the one hearing strange conversations, I keep these odd little crumbs to myself. I'm nobody's fool, you know.

But I'm in a quandary, a crazy situation, and, frankly, I'm ashamed to even talk about it. The conversations *I'm* hearing--are they real or not? There's not a living soul within a mile of this country house I inherited. It sits squarely in a golden meadow of tall grasses, bordered by dense woods. I'm a solitary man, and I like it that way.

So whose voices are they? From where did they originate? And why are they plaguing *me*?

My first awareness of these intruders came around nine one evening, while I was preparing my usual snack at the kitchen table. As I spread cream cheese on a toasted bagel, I heard voices, both male and female, mingled, in ascending and descending decibels. At first I thought they were coming from the radio on the counter. But when I reached over and rotated the volume control clockwise to ON, no sound burst forth. I patted the top of the plastic casing. It was cold to my touch. The radio had definitely been off. I increased the volume, but only static greeted me. No voices, no music. I turned the dial to OFF with a firm click.

The voices emanated from elsewhere in the house--the front door, I presumed. I confess I often neglect to lock it. So I laid the knife across the top of my plate and called out: "I'm in the kitchen, come on in."

A prolonged silence stalked me, as if it were alive and waiting for me to say something else. "Who's there?" I shouted. The silence hovered, taunting me. I hastened into the den, thinking that I'd left the television alive and still speaking. But no, the dark screen reflected the room in its mirroring glass. Neither the stereo nor any other part of the home entertainment system could have spoken. I had borrowed its extension cord to power a new reading lamp in the living room next to my recliner.

The hairs on my neck prickled, shivers crawled up and down my spine as I realized that mere electronics played no part in this phenomenon. I began to notice something else, too. When I approached either of the arched doorways to the living room, the voices grew louder and more distinct. But when I actually crossed the threshold onto the Oriental carpet, they stopped, as though they'd detected an interloper. Perhaps in some mysterious way, they considered me an eavesdropper. I tried a new tack, slowly backing out of the room. As my steps receded into the hall, the conversation resumed, as if the voices shared secrets I had no right to hear.

I'm a pragmatic guy and don't take kindly to being conned. No way would I let these renegades--voices, spirits, whatever they were--get the better of me. I stepped back into the room and exited quickly, again and again, faster and faster. Ha! No voices! It wasn't until I lunged forward onto the carpet and dropped into my recliner that I heard them again. What had changed? Did they decide that I posed no further threat to them? Or did they merely choose to ignore my presence? I'll never know.

Against my better judgment and despite all normal reasoning, I uttered a few words, surely loud enough to be heard. But the strange tongue of the voices--a mixture of French and Dutch--trampled my words like stomping feet. As I sank deeper into my recliner, normally a haven of comfort and pleasure, a suffocating heat permeated my body.

Peeling off my lounging robe, I conjured up a final, desperate strategy. I scanned the array of pictures on the wall opposite where I sat. These works of art, my most highly prized possessions, filled me with an almost sensual pleasure.

My gaze landed on an eighteenth-century Flemish oil, framed in ornately carved wood. I had purchased it at a charity auction just last week and hung it in a place of honor, over the mantel. The richness of the scene captivated me with its true-to-life quality: a kitchen in a humble cottage. A peasant girl, perhaps age fifteen, stood before a large stone hearth. Wearing a blue apron over a starched white dress, she ladled a mixture, thick and dripping, from a cauldron suspended over the open fire. The flames glowed in a brilliant palette of orange and amber, casting their light on the strands of her straw-blond hair. In one hand, she held a palm-sized Delft bowl, decorated with blue windmills and flourishes. She had mounded it high with the mixture, which I assumed to be porridge.

For a fleeting moment, my eyelids fluttered under such intense study. But when I looked again, something about the tranquil scene disturbed me. In a nearly imperceptible way it looked different. Breath caught in my throat. I rubbed both eyes with balled-up fists, then opened them extra-wide, staring hard as if to force the painting into compliance, into restoring the scene that I had so lovingly purchased. But my efforts provoked an even eerier result. The painting had changed yet again--dramatically this time. The serving girl no longer stood at the hearth. She had moved to the rough-hewn table, and the Delft bowl now sat before an old woman seated there. The mound of porridge had diminished by several spoonfuls. Beside the bowl stood two tall glass carafes. Wait a minute! When I bought the picture, they were both filled to the brim with ruby-red wine. Now one was only half-full; the other completely empty.

By the time I dared to take yet another peek, the peasant girl had disappeared from the painting altogether.

Let me make something clear. I never saw her--or any other figure in the oil painting--actually move about. What evolved instead was a bizarre sequence of stills resulting in perceived motion. Each time I turned my head away, even momentarily, or if I merely blinked, the scenes seemed to skip in a preposterous cinematic progression, as though I were watching an early 1930s movie. What I witnessed changed neither by pixel nor by projected frame. Whatever transformations occurred seemed more related to my own interactions with this phenomenon than to any mechanical explanation.

And I couldn't help but wonder what had happened to the voices. I lowered my gaze to collect my composure and slow my merciless heart, whose thumps and throbs rocked my entire torso clear through to my spinal cord. I could, I thought, leave the room and go to bed. But I would only have been kidding myself. I would have lain awake all night, agitating over my denial and imagining that my mind had completely lost its anchor of sanity.

Hypnotized and helpless to stop myself, I stole a fresh glance at the painting. The peasant girl had reappeared, and now the voices resumed in the strange tongue. The old lady screamed at the girl. In contrast to the frames of still images, the voices sounded fluent and fluid. Although I have no actual knowledge of the language, which I now assumed to be Flemish, the hag's acrimonious tone left little doubt of her intent to wound with words. As if to clarify her meaning, she upended the Delft bowl, and the porridge plopped to the floor in scattered lumps. The girl's expression conveyed all the emotion of a stone. Not an eye blinked nor a lip pursed, convincing me that I had witnessed routine rather than rare behavior. The hag's wild, frizzed gray hair intensified her malicious manner.

Thus a drama unfolded before me, no less convincing than any daytime television soap, except for its unnatural choppiness. I did not recall ever having seeing the faces of these two females before. Yet something about them seemed familiar. A pang of guilt and fear shuddered through me. *I knew them*. And then I realized I had developed personal feelings for these two supposed strangers, feelings as disparate as war and peace.

I had been drawn into this tale as surely as if the artist had painted me into his canvas more than two hundred years ago. To prove the point, a few blinks later, a man appeared at the door, hat pulled down over his eyes and coat collar turned up. He exchanged words with the young girl. In English! Something about a lame horse. Something more about severe weather. He appeared to be requesting shelter for the night. I heard his first name, Raul, but his family name grew muffled as he faced the wall to remove his crushed velvet hat and broadcloth coat.

When Raul turned frontal once more, I experienced the shock of my life. In spite of his authentic period dress, he was the spitting image of me. Every proportion and color just so, down to the tiny purple birthmark on my left cheek. And the bone structure typified every male in my family: high forehead, wide-set eyes, nose hooked like an eagle's, and square jaw. *My God, how was this possible?*

The old lady hadn't taken notice of the stranger; she'd fallen asleep in the cradle of her two crossed arms on the table. Even her snores bellowed with violence. The now-emptied wine carafes suggested ample cause for her current state.

The girl directed the newcomer to the opposite end of the long wooden table. She set before him a tankard of beer and a hunk of coarse black bread on a flat metal plate. The man ate and drank quietly with the manners of schooled gentry.

In my anxiety to devour the saga developing before me, I found that I'd been blinking at a frantic rate, so I tried an experiment. When I squeezed my eyes shut for any length of time, by listening keenly I discovered that the voices continued without me, and so did the action. I could still hear the log fire crackling, the tankard clunking down on the table, and Raul's chair legs scraping on the plank floor. If I half-opened my eyes and glanced at some other part of the kitchen, such as the ceiling, the same was true. But if I stared hard at the painting without blinking, the action stopped. Of course, I couldn't hold out for long, and then the action started up again--at a later point in what appeared to be a predestined sequence of events.

During my experiments, I'd failed to notice that two more strangers had entered the cottage. Only they weren't strangers at all. The pair seemed to belong there. The older of the two, a man in his early forties, hugged the peasant girl in a fatherly manner, while the young man, in his late teens, I gathered, chatted excitedly with her. As both were fair-haired and ruddy-cheeked, they appeared to be sister and brother. The boy held up two limp squirrels by their tails, his offerings for their next meal.

Raul rose from the table, bowed respectfully, and extended a friendly hand to the late arrivals. A boisterous exchange of introductions took place. The lad laid out the game on the sideboard, and his father poured water from a white porcelain ewer to wash his hands. Father and son were about to take chairs on either side of the fashionably attired guest, when their attention shifted to the opposite end of the table.

No mistake, the horrid snoring had ceased. The old hag had lifted her head a matter of inches so that one eye pierced the forest of disheveled frizz. She raised her head altogether and ogled Raul for several minutes until recognition registered.

"Grab him!" she shrieked, flinging her withered body against the

back of her chair. "Hold him, Jean! Don't let that high-born devil of a ro-
dent get away."

The father, Jean, shoved Raul down into the chair and pinned his
left wrist to the chair's arm while his son, Yves, did the same with the right
wrist. They didn't know why. They were just accustomed to following the
old hag's orders. They appeared to live by *her* consent in *her* cottage.

"Clarisse!" she shouted. "Bring the rope from the woodshed and
tie that scoundrel to the chair."

When her granddaughter hurried out to fetch the rope, the old
lady pointed an accusing finger at Raul, taunting him in a low, deliber-
ate, and vengeful tone. "My name is Aimee Montand, but I'm sure you
have already forgotten the likes of me, eh?"

Raul shook his head. "We've never met, madam. I would have
remembered you."

"Well, I certainly remember you. One tends to remember one's
own wedding night. Don't you think?"

A look of astonishment crossed Raul's patrician features. He strug-
gled in vain to free his wrists. "Ordinarily, I would say so, madam, but in
this case, I'm sure you've mistaken me for someone else."

The old lady scowled. "I was a lot younger then. And quite pretty.
At least, you thought so then."

Clarisse returned with the rope and wrapped it several times
around each of Raul's wrists, binding them to the chair arms, then four or
five times around his midsection and the back of the chair. With cal-
loused fingers, she secured his ankles to the chair legs. As each loop of
the rope tightened, Raul's limbs twisted and strained.

"Stop! You've got the wrong man!" His protests continued until
the old woman drew close. Raising her gnarled hand, she slapped him

across the face, leaving a red blotch that traveled from his right cheekbone down to his chin.

At this juncture I felt that I'd seen enough, so I attempted to leave my recliner. But I couldn't get up. I couldn't even move my wrists or ankles, nor could I pull my body out of the chair. I quickly examined my arms and legs, but found no visible excuse for my total physical restraint. Further, a sudden numbness I'd felt in my right cheek was turning to pure pain. I winced and tossed my head back and forth. I was no longer a mere spectator. For whatever reason, for whatever purpose, I realized that Raul and I were in this together.

Aimee's voice rose to a howl as she stood over Raul. "Do you still think you have a landowner's right to my body and my baby? You invaded my body without love, without passion, even without desire. Isn't it a sad, ironic fate? My name means "loved one." You took me as your possession, a mere object of no worth to be used and disposed of. A repository, a means to alleviate your so-called manly urges. You did this because your noble father told you of this ancient coming-of-age rite. Some nobility, hah! And when my poor husband protested, you had him killed. As if that wasn't enough, when you learned that I had given birth to your child, you stole my baby because your own marriage was barren. Your fancy lady couldn't make babies? Or was it that she didn't want to make babies and spoil that fancy figure of hers?"

"But madam, this can't be," cried Raul. "I'm innocent!"

"You can deny it from now to kingdom come, but I know I've got the right man, Raul Longchamps. I know every inch of your naked body from that terrible night forty-three years ago. You sent your two armed servants to fetch me to the Longchamps estate on my wedding night. I fought off the three of you as long as I had strength. I remember every bone in your face, every muscle in your back and arms, the red crescent on your neck, the two moles on your right shoulder, the sword wound

across your left hip. Even that tiny birthmark on your cheek." Aimee ripped away one shoulder of Raul's ruffled white blouse, sending two pearl buttons flying, to expose the damning marks of nature.

"But I am innocent and I can prove it." Raul flung his head right and left, his eyes pleading as he sought a sympathetic response from his captors. He found none. His attention returned to Aimee.

Aimee wasn't listening, but her granddaughter wore a dubious look. "How can you prove it?" she challenged.

Raul fixed his gaze on Aimee. "Yes, I am my father's son, so I am destined to carry his likeness and his genetic blemishes for life. If it pleases you, there are two factors that can prove my innocence. The first is that I have no scar of any size stemming from a sword wound on either hip. But to prove that, you would have to release my bonds, wouldn't you?"

"Don't listen to him, Mother," pleaded Jean. "It's only a ruse for him to escape."

But Raul had captured Aimee's attention. I could see a marked change come over her. The fierce anger was melting like snow in the sun. In its place, softer eyes seemed to be searching for something in the man she'd accused. She began to back away from Raul's end of the table.

"You mentioned two factors," said Clarisse. "What's the second?"

"Next week," replied Raul, "on the twenty-third of May, I shall be forty-three years of age. Does that date hold any special meaning for you, madam?"

Aimee stumbled and dropped into her chair. She pulled her wild hair away from her face, only to have it spring back once more. In that instant, I discovered a frightened woman shedding genuine tears, perhaps for the first time in more than forty years. She responded in a low,

scratchy voice. "On that date I gave birth to a healthy baby boy, whom I named Pierre. Only months later, he was torn from my arms. He'd just been weaned." She wiped her tears in her billowing sleeves.

"Madam, if the circumstances of your accusations are true, and I have no reason to believe otherwise, we are mother and son reunited. And the culprit you seek to punish was none other than my deceased father, Raul Longchamps III."

"Jean! Release my son!" gasped Aimee between sobs.

"But the Church says the sins of the father are incumbent upon the sons!" cried Jean. "He's just as guilty as the old man."

"For the love of heaven," she retorted, "cut him loose! He's *my* son and *your* stepbrother. All those bad things happened before he was born."

While Jean and Yves freed their captive, Raul told them how his father had died. The lustful woman he'd called "Mother" for most of his life had been prone to lapses in fidelity, so Raul, the senior, had been forced many times to defend his honor on a field of combat. Over the length of their marriage, he'd accumulated a number of wounds, one of which festered cruelly for more than two bedridden years before oozing the life from his wasted body. As expected, his wayward wife had deserted him long before.

Raul sprang up as soon as the ropes fell away from him. He walked the length of the table and dropped to one knee in front of Aimee. "Madam, I sincerely hope that one day, when all is past and forgiven, we can both enjoy the love and closeness a mother and son are entitled to."

Aimee pulled Raul's head to her breast and sighed deeply. She motioned for the others to gather around her as well. "After my hus-

band's death," she murmured, "I married his brother and brought sadness and spite into his life, too. He died a few years later, but not until I had given birth to you, Jean." She reached out to take hold of Jean's hand and looked into Raul's eyes.

"Jean's wife is away, visiting her sick mother. All those years of sulking and meanness were wasted. Perhaps there's still time for all of us to come together in happiness as one loving family."

"I'd like that," murmured Raul.

"I'm so glad, Pierre," sighed Aimee.

"You called me 'Pierre' again. Does that mean you've forgiven him?"

"No, my son," she said in a low raspy voice. "There's a special niche in the depths of hell for the likes of him. I shall willingly follow him there and take my personal revenge on the monster. I shall reach through time, space, and barriers to have at him. But for now, I shall set all that aside and enjoy my family. 'Raul' reminds me too much of your father. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. It seems such a small price to pay," declared Pierre.

I felt a tear rolling down my cheek, so I brushed it off with my right forefinger. It took a few seconds for me to realize that I was no longer tied to my living room recliner by bonds real or ethereal. I stood and shook off the stiffness. The wall of oil paintings seemed to recede. I singled out the one painting in which my likeness had been immersed. Pierre, Aimee, and the rest of the family were seated around the long table. The shutters had been thrown open and a broad sunbeam danced through the open window, as if it were a new guest, illuminating the individual faces. I tried one more blink, one for the road as they say, but all action had ceased to exist. I tried again and even fluttered my tired lids, but to no avail. I flung myself back into the recliner and jumped up again

without making a difference.

Scanning the other paintings, I wondered what fascinating narratives they concealed. But both the late hour and exhaustion let me know I was ripe for bed. I took one more look about the living room and turned off the lights. Listening carefully for the voices, I was relieved to hear none as I left the room.

Upstairs in the bedroom I undressed to take my shower. In the full-length mirror, I saw my naked self with two dark brown moles on my shoulder and a bright red crescent along the side of my neck. These were genetic markings, passed from my own father and grandfather. Some generations past, I suppose I could have descended from Raul Longchamps III. After all, my name is Ralph Long.

Oh, yes! The mirror reflected a scar running across my left hip. This ever-so-faint remembrance of a wound could have been from a broadsword. But maybe not. I'm pretty sure it happened when I was only eleven, as I crawled through Billy Archer's broken basement window.

With my index finger, I traced the path of the wound across my hip. As I did so, I felt a sharp pain suddenly rake across my left cheek, and my eyes focused higher in the mirror to see fresh bloody scratches there, amid my late-night facial stubble. At my finger's touch, the wound grew brighter and redder. And once again I heard voices calling to me.

The appearance of this awful reminder took me back in time to my freshman year at Ohio State. One night in particular--the night I forcibly took the innocence from a girl I'd only just met at a fraternity party. This wasn't a memory I was proud of. I'd let my unforgiveable passion run away with me. She'd struggled, scratching my cheek, then cried silently through it all. Now what was her name? Annie Moran, I think. At first Annie sought to report me to the authorities, but I convinced her that she would be publicly disgraced if she did. I offered her money; she refused. I heard no more from Annie Moran, and by my sophomore year I'd put

the entire incident out of my mind.

The voices grew louder now. No, a single voice, an angry, vengeful tone, clearly that of Aimee Montand coming from my bedroom mirror. I watched as an elaborate gilt frame formed around it. I sought Aimee's image in the mirror behind my naked reflection. Instead, I appeared to be standing in the painting's eighteenth century great room. Aimee's voice emanated from a much younger woman's body. Upon further scrutiny, I discovered the body and face of Annie Moran.

I spun around to look behind me, expecting to see my own comfortable bedroom. It wasn't there.

Submission Guidelines

The Corner Club Press is an on-line non-profit magazine distributed as a free PDF download. We publish every two months.

Content

We will consider unsolicited material submitted by any writer. Submissions must be original and not previously published elsewhere. We appreciate well-written, creative, and thought-provoking work that has both literary merit but can cater to a wide audience. Simultaneous submissions are encouraged.

We will not accept any form of erotica, fanfiction, high fantasy, or any children's fiction, EXCLUDING young adult. We do accept creative non-fiction. Short stories should not be more than 7,000 words, and poetry must not go beyond 5 pages. We accept multiple submissions, but this must be noted. Maximum of 3 for short stories, and maximum of 5 for poetry. If you're submitting both poetry and short stories, please submit them in different documents. If accepted elsewhere, notify us immediately.

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Please e-mail all submissions to **submissions@thecornerclubpress.com** as an attachment. In your header, let us know if you are submitting a poem or short story, put the word count (short story) or page count (poem), then put the title of the work. In the body of your e-mail, please put a short bio you'd like to appear in the magazine should your piece be

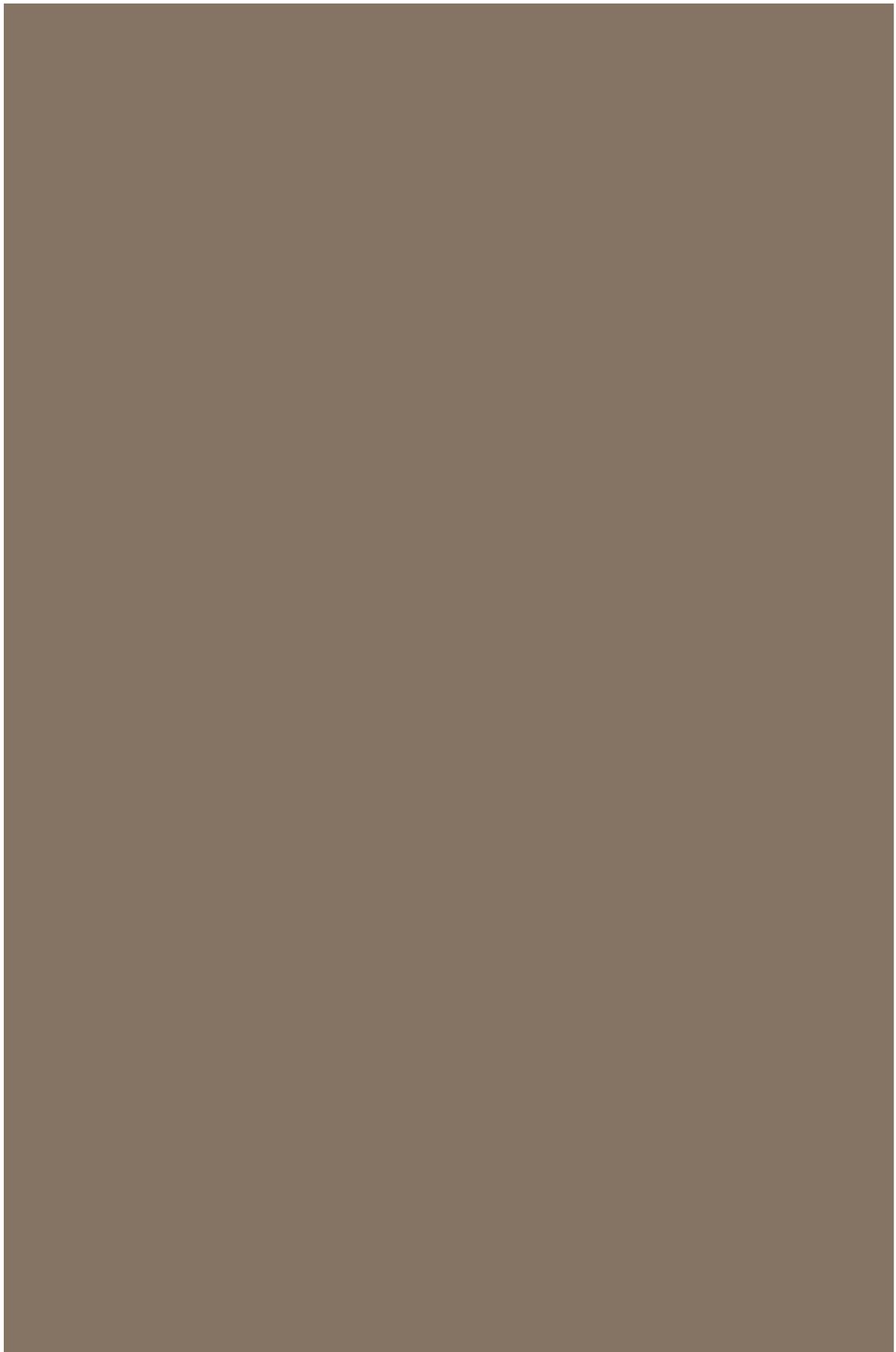
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