

The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge



Best of Poetry

Valentina Cano

Best of Fiction

Robyn Ritchie



The Corner

Club

Press



The Corner Club Press

September 2011

Volume I • Issue IV

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

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poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

Letter From the Fiction Editor

Dear shadows, who are my readers and writers,

We've had to release a bit late this time because unfortunately our schedules are incredibly crammed and it was absolutely impossible for us to get this out on time. But we will always make it a point to publish as soon as possible within the month we promised to publish in.

Two things have happened since last time: (1) we are now listed on *Poets and Writers*, and (2) we have decided to start publishing serial fiction. Our first serial fiction author is none other than the esteemed Dorian Dawes, so I hope you all enjoy his piece. I will change the guidelines some to match what we expect out of serial fiction, but you can all start submitting/pitching serial installments to us. And yes, we do want you to pitch it so we can have a general idea of where you plan to go with the installment.

Also, while the poetry editor has her teen writer, I do not. I did go through the teen submissions and send feedback and even chose one, but short stories often take longer to revise than poetry. They aren't any more difficult to revise, but teens are busy people (as are college students), so hopefully I will be able to get a teen writer soon in one of the future issues.

Amber Forbes
Founder and Fiction Editor

Letter From the Poetry Editor

Writers and Readers,

It's with great pleasure that we bring to you our fourth issue. We apologize for our tardiness in publishing this issue, but we think that you will enjoy our pieces. We've continued our initiative to include teen writers, and we hope that you appreciate this opportunity, as well have greatly appreciated the volume of submissions that we get to read and edit. As always, please continue to submit your work to our magazine and spread the word about our publication.

We are very excited to be included in *Poets and Writers* database of literary magazines, but we know that we have had great poets and fiction writers from our very beginning. Be sure to check our website regularly for any new contests or avenues to showcase your work. We'd like to hear about your other recent successes and triumphs in the tough business of writing. Happy writing!

Thank you,

Daphne D. Maysonet
Co-Founder and Poetry Editor

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Valentina Cano

Traitorous Parts

My heel steps out of line.
Above fragment with a will,
a perverse notion about you.
It calls your attention to
a slight twist of skin,
a bubble of dark blood growing,
gurgling like fountain water.
My heel is not one to cower,
it taunts your eyes
with a soft pad of salty skin,
a curtain of rough cells
moving to tangle around your waist.
To jingle, a belt made of scraped bones.
You will look.
You will want to reach out,
to peel back the sand paper layers
to hold the bursting redness
in your palm.

Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time either writing or reading. Her works have appeared in Exercise Bowler, Blinking Cursor, Theory Train, Magnolia's Press, Cartier Street Press, Berg Gasse 19, Precious Metals and will appear in the upcoming editions A Handful of Dust, The Scarlet Sound, The Adroit Journal, Perceptions Literary Magazine, Welcome to Wherever, The Corner Club Press, Death Rattle, Danse Macabre, Subliminal Interiors, Generations Literary Journal, Super Poetry Highway, Stream Press, Stone Telling and Perhaps I'm Wrong About the World. You can find her here: <http://coldbloodedlives.blogspot.com>

Peycho Kanev

Blue Impossibility

I prefer not to see the words that I am writing,
so I take a look through the window:
I see a dog walking outside, sniffing at the trees,
pissing in the bushes; white and brown dog,
and this is real enough to believe in it,
but I say:
Oh, brother this is not possible,
because I do not want to look at the words I am
writing right now,
or the words that I am not writing,
but the blue sky laughs,
this wide and grey sky tilts slowly upon my sheet;
this is impossible –
the fog and the brightness in me opens up,
memories of heavy rain or just my fantasies for rain?
The sounds of the approaching storm are crawling
towards me:
I close my eyes –
not wanting to see the words that I am writing,
and I open them up again to see through the win-
dow
only this dead dog.

Peycho Kanev is the Editor In Chief of Kanev Books. His poems have appeared in more than 400 literary magazines, such as: Poetry Quarterly, The Monongahela Review, Steam Ticket, Ann Arbor Review, Midwest Literary Review, and many others. He is nominated for the Pushcart Award and lives in Chicago. In 2009 his short story collection "Walking Through Walls" (Ciela), and in April 2010 his poetry collection "American Notebooks" (Ciela) both were published in Bulgaria. His new poetry collection "Bone Silence" was released in September 2010 by Desperanto, NY. <http://www.kanevbooks.com>

Ray Busler

Night Touch

Falling from her mother's arms, the acorn
Reclines upon a mossy bed,
And dreams of bird's nests in her hair.

The earth impales herself upon an oaken stake
Then rests from her labor
In a pool of darkening shade.

Riven from the precipice, the flint
Is bathed by the stream, softly, softly,
Until sharp wrath is smoothed away.

As if in a dream
I feel your hand on my brow
And as if dreaming, I sleep

Clinton Inman



Dressed Right

They said that you were dressed right
In your blues, your red and white,
The fresh cut flowers were neatly laid,
The flag was folded as the band had played.
We stood and watched with Sunday's best
In places not for playing you would rest,
Momma fell sick, said it was the heat
When they lowered you under our feet.

They said that you were dressed right
With your blues, your red and white,
But none of those names engraved in stone
Or those flags waving for some proud cause
That gives the grownups much applause,
Or even your medals matter—because you are gone

Clinton Inman is a high school teacher in Hillsborough County, Florida. I am 65 and a graduate of San Diego State University. I was born in Walton on Thames, England. Recent publications include The Warwick Journal, Poetry Magazine, One of Four, Down in the Dirt, May, June, July, The Inquisition, The Journal, the New Writing, The Hudson Review, Essence, Forge, Houston Literary Review, Greensilk Journal, BlackCatPoems, Munyari.com, and the forthcoming issue of Grasslimb in August. Hopefully, these will be published in a future book called, "Caliban." Thank you, Clint

Schofield Alan

I Am the Summer Night's Cocaine (And She is Mine)

She rolls up the sky and sucks me through it.

From the floor
I float up into the ceiling fan
on high. And I'm sugar.
I'm peanut brittle soaked in honey
spread thin, dried stale and shredded
into powder.

A granular ghost
straddling the thermals,
I'm out the window
into the night's lungs
before she screams in summer ecstasy.

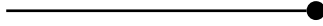
My truest love,
Let's never come down off each other
as long as the sun stays under us
as long as the stars are lonely.

Her lungs harden and she breathes me out
through her lips, reassembling me
through her teeth.

I'm back on the floor
until she's ready for another hit.
Soon I hope, for it won't be long
until the sun kicks the door in
and sentences me to 14 more hours
of waiting for her.

Schofield Alan resides in Omaha, NE, where he roams the city, stickering his poetry to whatever he can find. He also has a decorated theater and play-writing career. Schofield finds inspiration in jellyfish, pistachio pudding, and dancing is ok too

Schofield Alan



Squeaky Little Splatters

The mosquitoes in reverence
Hummed from their hymnals
Drifting dizzily around their alters

The bats were squeaky
Little splatters in the sky
Eating the stars before the clouds could.

We could roll into the lake
All aglow in moonlight luster
And let the water breathe us in.

We could chase the shadows
That haunt the surrounding forest
Like the imaginations that haunt our reasoning.

The sun stares back at us
In its rearview mirror, the moon
Like a driver not knowing where to go.

And if we wanted we could tell him
Exactly where to go
And we could discover anything.

Martin Burke

Lyric

Only what I know – star-bright words, and wounds – the fragile
facts of earth - various responsibilities

As if birds and insects were bringing them to my table or that
bells were ringing with sun-wave to instruct me *To Be*

While across the face of sundial, vine, and shire, the beauty
which is of God takes root offering its brilliance to the world
with snow, with fire, with breath

Yet I am questioned *what does this mean?* where whatever
answer I will give I will be accused of

As a child is of broken cups in a kitchen

Yet even in the debris there is beauty

Who can disbelieve this - or negate the sun's affirmation at
solstice?

In other words (speak carefully now) choose between the
wood-lice and the wood

As over table and page the poem casts a deepening shadow
- that debt it takes a lifetime to repay

Thus like a musician I touch the tightened strings

The world is my instrument for whose sake I sweep up broken

(Continued on page 16)

Martin Burke is an Irish poet/playwright living in Belgium who has published twelve books of poetry in the USA, UK, Ireland, & Belgium and in magazines worldwide.

pieces and spend my days reassembling them
Yet the earth is ashamed of our behavior

The arrogance of strutting bankers is enough to shame us
that they are of our kind yet they are

So how remedy such wrongs, or mend shattered porcelain,
or unloose a wet flag knotted
about a flagpole?

I only know what I know

The stars' constellations are beyond me yet the inherent
innocence of earth I accept at face-
value

I can add nothing to sterile disputes

I have no creed but this untamed joy I celebrate but do
not seek to propagate

What I wanted to achieve is no longer important - or is, but
differently so

I am here and seek no need no other elsewhere

Imperial cities are not my concern nor harvests prescribed
by calendars

The rose is no other than what it is - it is we who attribute a
history to it expecting it to fulfil
our obligations
So burn the old crops, clear the rough fields - I come with
two sparrows who were counted
as they fell

Not into scripts of decay but onto this table where fragile
facts gather

So as *To Be, To Be*

Kate Murphy

Starfall

Together beneath the trees you and I
once sat, waiting until the day grew cold;
We watched the crystalline sky turn clear and
clouds disappeared with a last good-bye.
Here we waited for the stars to fall;
from a new-born sky we watched the first stars bursting
out from a black velvet curtain. We watched
them scatter from one edge of infinity
to the other, and knew that nothing we could say would
make stars vanish from our view of the world.
When laying beneath the stars we thought we were
Invincible, unbroken, and transformed.

The door was open when you took me home.
The lights were on upstairs. My mother's lace
curtains hung with a sense of finality,
from the darkened windows hung desperate.
And picking my way upstairs, I paused
In front of her door: inside she breathed all quiet,
At home between the sheets and coverlet.

Kate Murphy was born in a small town in Northwest Arkansas, and spent my lazy summer afternoons reading in the woods. I have been writing seriously since high school. My love of literature stayed with me when I left home for the University of Arkansas.

Alexa Masi

The Blood in the Fly on the Lion in the Savannah

An ever expanding galaxy
gives me but a book
and a mountain
and tells me to
name the masterpiece
or suffer alone.

When the spiteful stare
of an elusive figure
blinds my eye of introspection,
it is hard to believe
that mortal devotion
is anything more than
educated guess work and
pride
at
best.

Who would want to be so proud?

Every pride of lions
returns at night to its den
and it is safe there.
Each lion is certain, too,
that it will someday die there.
To keep my eye
from lingering on the fire,
suppose I must be half
as certain

Alexa is a young writer who focuses primarily on writing free verse, realist and some experimental forms of poetry. She also enjoys participating in the local music scene. She also likes food, dogs and rivers. Alexa can be contacted at amasi72@aol.com, and welcomes all forms of comments or criticism.



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.

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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

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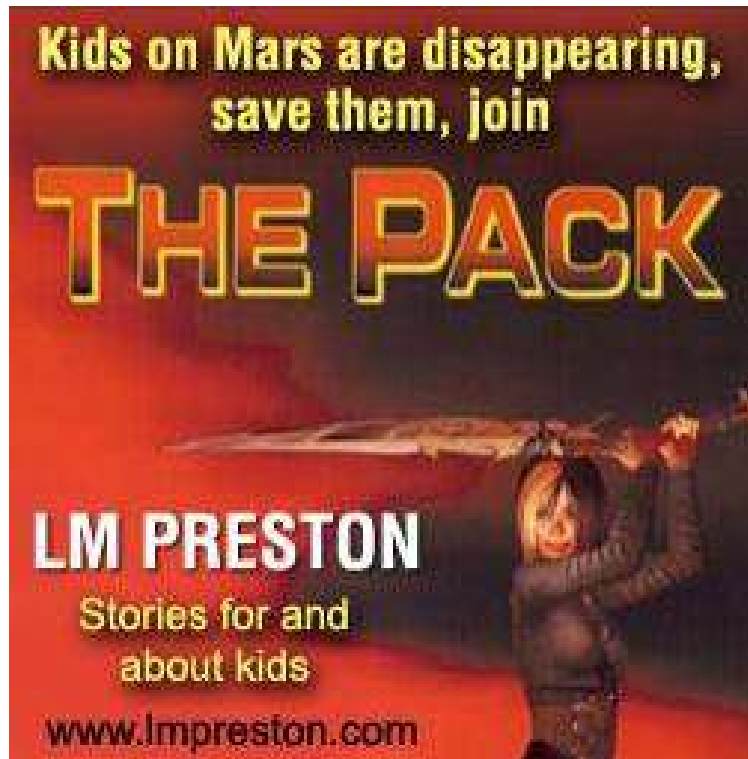
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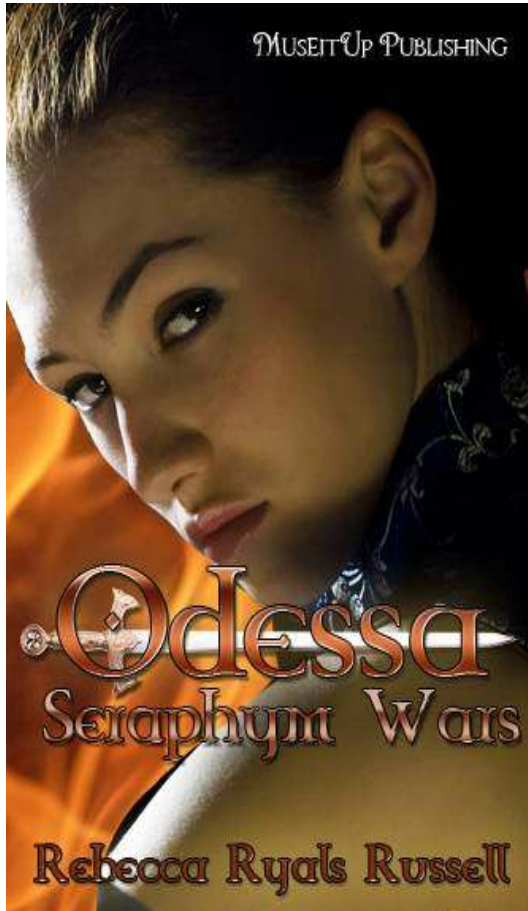
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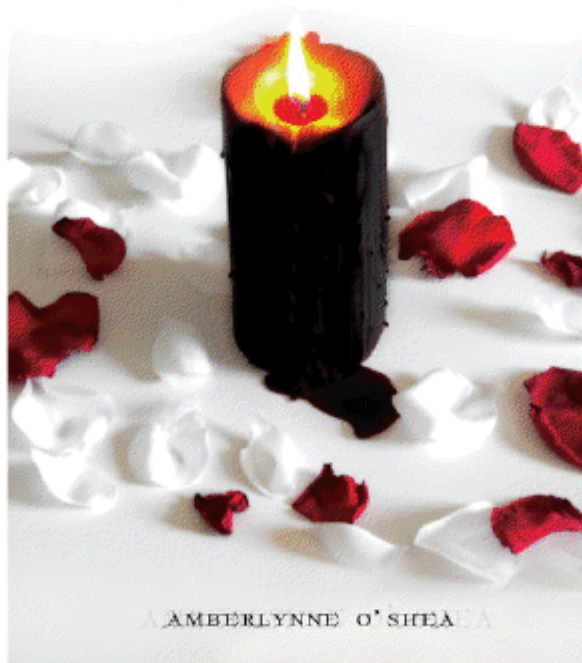
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Robyn Ritchie

Romance on Power Lines

Gretchen told Owen to go to Hell but going to Hell wasn't so easy, as Owen realized with a belt around his neck, and so after a few minutes of tugging and choking, his face red and moist, he finally released his grip on the leather belt and fell to the bedroom floor. He had wrapped his neck up so tight that a bright red strap stood out on his skin like a love bite from a Martian.

Staring out at the afternoon sun-drenched room, he caught his breath. He didn't need to die to go to Hell, really. In the strange clarity of his suicide attempt afterglow, he understood that he was already there. With bells and whistles, even. Yes, this leaning two-story packed tightly in the suburbs had become a stifling plain on which demons danced. Over the years, his marriage and Gretchen's begrudging participation in it had duly descended from Heaven to Limbo and then to this place which burned and scorched and gave him his eternal sentence for some wrong he had committed so long ago.

He felt a thud at his back as Gretchen banged on the door and he sighed.

"Owen, what are you doing in there? Are you moping? Come out!"

"Why?" he rasped.

"What? Did you say something?"

"Why?"

"Why what? Look, just come out here. Are you trying to kill yourself again? You know it won't work. Come out. Let's talk about it."

Owen heaved another sigh and rose to his feet. He picked up the belt and snaked it through his pants. Opening the door, he saw her, frazzled and plump, as she saw him, haggard and bright-eyed. His eyes were always bright after he strangled himself and somehow bluer. And the Martian love-bite on his neck. She caressed it with a gaze he seldom received anymore.

"Owen," she said plainly.

"Gretty."

"There's no need to go off and tie a shoelace around your neck every time we have this conversation. It's really childish."

"No, it isn't. And it's a belt, not a shoelace."

She shook her head. "Whatever. Listen, you know why I got mad and you know why I keep getting madder and don't look at me like *that*, like I'm doing something wrong when you're clearly the one who needs help. I already set you up with Dr. Hubor three times, why won't you just go and tell him what's wrong?"

"I don't want to go to that guy." And he looked at her like *that*. "I just want you to try and understand-"

"Understand what? Why you're such a creep? Why you don't

talk to me the way you talk to them? Well, I don't want to understand, you hear? I don't want to understand a damn thing."

And it was there again, quicker than ever. Between them loomed a swinging chandelier that was sparkling and pure, easy and accessible, something they both thought of often but could never reach at once. And they looked at it. It was called divorce.

But, at least for now, it was too bright. And the glare forced Owen's eyes to close and it forced Gretchen to tears. She went lumbering down the hall, her sides grazing the paneled walls. And he turned back to his bedroom. His throat was still a little raw and he figured the Hell Gretchen thought of could wait another day.

* * *

Dr. Hubor was who Gretchen turned to when things got to be too much. When the phone bill skyrocketed, when the door to Owen's bedroom wasn't unlocked for days at a time, when she looked into the freezer while on her period and was moved to earth-shaking sobs.

That's when the good doctor came in.

He would swoop down like a superhero and save Gretchen – temporarily, only temporarily – from whatever ailed her. He would give her chants to recite like some Voodoo witch-doctor, he would look inside her and take hurt out like some OBGYN, he would be solemn when she needed solemnity, he would be lovely when she needed loveliness.

Once, Owen did go with her to a session and he met the good

doctor. Face to face, hand to hand, they looked at each other and Owen felt something strange, maybe inadequacy. Dr. Hubor was a tall man with blond hair and an air of perfection around his face that did not travel the length of his body. They all sat down together and somewhere in the course of Gretchen's crying, her requests of love and companionship, the good doctor said, "Owen, can you hear her? She needs you to be there for her, not locked up in that room of yours. Can you hear what she's saying?"

But of course, what he was really saying was, "Owen, can you hear her? She needs someone like me who will be what she wants me to be when she wants me to be it. Can you be what I am? Can you pretend?"

Owen looked at the man and said, over her sniffles next to him, "No, I can't. I'm a horrible actor."

* * *

It always stopped for a few days after the strangling. He would settle down, leave his door open, glance at her a little over breakfast, a limp offering of change. But she knew better than to accept it and she stared into the freezer sometimes. Finally, Owen retracted his offering and retreated to his room where the magic happened.

It was a quiet place where he could get solemnity when he needed it, where he could get loveliness. Just a small bed by the window, a dresser and a desk on which was a landline and an old com-

puter that suited his needs.

He came to sit at the desk and always pulled the phone to his ear as one would pull a lover into their arms. Exhaling, dialing, he found solace in the dial tone where none had ever been before. He found an Owen that did not come out in the daytime or in the living room or in the office. This Owen soaked in bravery and masculinity from the very buttons he touched and when he opened his mouth, he vomited silk and gold.

The ringing started.

* * *

Five years ago, soon after Gretchen put it in the freezer, Owen began to use the internet. He had not been a big advocate of technology before, only used the computers at work in a minimalist fashion, but for some reason, he bought a new computer and set it up in the little room he had started to occupy. Their old bedroom had split like an amoeba and had created these two little ones where Gretchen and Owen seldom came to contact.

He might not have even gone into the computer store that day except for the ad he saw. Riding home, there was a bright yellow billboard outside advertising the wonders of the chat room. Just before the billboard was out of sight, Owen caught the smaller print below that read *Meet Sexy Girls!*

And like a cicada in a child's net, he was caught.

He spent hours getting it together, and 3 AM swirled around him when he finally set up the internet service. But he found the website advertised, had written the name on his hand in Sharpie, and buzzed around the chat rooms for hours, days, and kept typing LOL at the end of each message.

That first *Sexy Girl* who talked to him was named BIGDICK123. Their relationship evolved from talking about big dicks to the weather and ball games, the Red Socks. BIGDICK123 watched MSNBC over coffee in the morning and read Stephen King in the bath at night. Owen thought he had found the love of his life. Screw Gretchen, screw the freezer, screw Dr. Hubor who Gretchen had just started seeing. This was what he wanted to do, always, just laze in the afternoons with a beer in one hand and the other typing to sweet BIGDICK123.

He asked her for her phone number.

I want to hear your voice. I think you'd sound very pretty. LOL.

BIGDICK123 has logged off.

And that was it. He never saw her handle again. He looked in other chat rooms, across the site, across the internet, popping in, asking for BIGDICK123, had anyone seen her, had anyone heard.

Depression overtook him. He spent his days at work in a stupor and spent his nights at home in the bathtub, reading *The Shining* and *Misery* in turn. Gretchen didn't seem to notice his despair.

One night, turning the page, surrounded by strawberry-scented

bubbles, something clicked for him: a memory. Not long after he and BIGDICK123 just met, she told him that she frequented not only chat rooms online but on the telephone. He had not realized there were such things but she insisted there were and that they were great places to meet the love of one's life. He resisted telling her that he had already met the love of his life.

He jumped out of the tub and ran out of the bathroom, into the hallway, past a mildly sniffing Gretchen. Into his sanctuary. He pulled the phone to his ear after finding the numbers of local chat lines on the internet. And forever was he hooked.

* * *

"So, baby, what're you wearing?"

Owen looked down at himself; slacks and a tie, his trusty suicide-belt. His shirt was thrown to the floor in a fit of passion after reaching the phone. He said, "Ass-less chaps."

"Really?"

He giggled. "No, no ... uh. Pants and a tie, really. I was, just... can I ask you something?"

"Sure, baby."

"Have you ever..." He glanced at the door and the lock. "Have you ever been on internet chat sites? Like, you know, Yahoo, AIM?"

"Uh huh. I guess so."

His heart got up from where it was sitting, did some jumping jacks.

He felt sweat at his temple. "Was your name ever BIGDICK123?"

There was laughter and it was all right, sweet and tinkling like a melody, better than any sound Gretchen ever let out. The woman on the line said, "No, you big silly! What kind of name is that for a woman? Sounds like a man's name. You know how obsessed you all are with your dicks, big or otherwise."

Owen's body heat rose and he loosened his tie. "T-That's not true," he said. "It could be a woman's name."

"How do you figure?"

"Women like big dicks, don't they?" He nodded to himself, calming his panicked heart. "It stands to reason that she would advertise being in need of a big dick. That's all it is. That's all."

"Whatever you say, baby. So're we going to get this thing going or what?"

Owen looked at the clock on his computer monitor. 1 AM. "I, uh. I better go to bed. Thanks for talking, Miss, uh.... Miss...?"

The line went dead.

* * *

Ten cents a minute, hours on end. When Owen was at work late, trying to wrangle in some overtime, he felt it was with purpose. He knew the chat lines weren't the cheapest ways to find BIGDICK123 but they were the only way he had. And with Gretchen not working, he was the only pillar of the household, the pillar of the power lines.

He came home at seven when the living room was drinking in sunset colors and Gretchen was watching Lifetime on the couch. Trudging by her, he said, "Good day?"

She said, "I want a dog, Owen."

Their eyes met.

"Huh?" he asked.

"A dog." Her voice was calm, as if she had not cried in a while. Something might be wrong, he thought. "You promised me a dog three years ago but we never got one. Why not?"

"I dunno. Rising costs of puppy chow? Chew toys losing thirty points on the DOW? Darfur? I dunno, Gretty, but we'll get you one, okay?"

"When?"

"This weekend. Okay?"

"Okay." She turned back for the television.

Owen watched her for a second and then continued his trudge to his bedroom. Every fiber of his being called out, *Sanctuary! Sanctuary!* He did not know how much longer he could have lasted in that living room. He shrugged off his work clothes and thought of Dr. Hubor. In his own way, he was a superhero, he thought. Shedding his costume of monotony and changing into something different at night. Maybe he wasn't who Gretchen needed – the good doctor had that front covered – but he was who BIGDICK123 needed. And he would find her.

Taking the phone up, he dialed the chat line number. It connected him and before he could say hello, there was a wild noise that raped his ear and forced him back from the receiver.

"Oh, oh, man. Sorry about that." A voice replaced the noise and reassured him. "Sorry, sorry. Had the radio up too loud."

Owen cleared his throat. "It's all right." But he could already tell he was going to have to hang up soon. It was a man's voice, although young, certainly not a woman's. It happened a lot, actually, more male voices than female greeting him, and he figured it was because men were a lot lonelier than women. They had to come here, each searching for his own BIGDICK123.

"So, what's up, man?" he asked.

Owen said, "Not much. Listen, sorry about this, but I'm looking for a girl so I ought to--"

"A girl?"

"Right, a girl."

"What girl?"

Owen blinked. "Uh. I guess, a girl I knew a while back. I'm trying to find her on these chat lines."

"Really?" And he sounded sincerely interested which was more than he ever got from any of the others. "What's her name?"

"I don't know her real name... just her chat room handle. We used to talk." He looked to the window across the room, the moon high

over jagged buildings. "A long time ago. But, now, you know, I can't find her. I've been looking."

"How long?"

"Uh. Four years. Or so."

A burst of snickers. "Wow. You're a mess over this girl, huh? Four years is too long for anything, if you ask me."

"She's the love of my life," Owen said. He said it strong and proud, just daring the eavesdropping Gretchen to say anything of it.

"I bet," said the voice. "So, what's her handle?"

"Uh. BIGDICK123."

There was a pause, as thick and torturous as the belt when it was around Owen's neck. He wanted to ask if this man knew her, had heard of her in his travels over the lines, but something held him back.

"Sorry," the voice said, "I got caught up in this part. Didn't hear you. What now?"

"Caught up in what?"

"I'm reading. Well, bathing. And reading. It's King's *Misery*. Hey, do you read?"

Owen felt slapped. He answered eagerly. "Of course, of course I read. And I love *Misery*, well, what..." He smiled. "What part are you on?"

"Just started part two. What part are you on?"

Owen rushed to get his book.

* * *

Bath time was the first thing to change. Owen sat in the bathtub surrounded by strawberry bubbles with *Misery* in hand, the phone pinched between shoulder and cheek. After ten minutes or so, one of them would ask, "Which part are you on?"

And they would talk about King's mastery of stream-of-consciousness and the subtle but great evolution in his writing since the time of *Carrie*.

Owen regrettably closed his book and sat it on the toilet seat. "Hey, I gotta go."

"What? It's only... it's only three! We haven't gotten to the climax yet-"

"Yeah, I know, but I have to get up early in the morning, my wife wants me to get her a dog. We're going to the pound."

"Oh, really? Well that sounds fun."

"It isn't. I don't want to go. We're only getting one because she's so damn lonely all the time." He watched a bubble float by. Dipping lower into the lukewarm water, he sighed. "And I know it's my fault. And she knows it's my fault. Hell, even Dr. Hubor knows."

"Dr. Hubor?"

"Her therapist. He's a prick."

"Don't tell me! Tall, blond, an ass like granite?"

"Uh. Maybe?"

"45 Fielding Avenue?"

Owen's eyes widened. "Yes!"

"Oh man, no way. He's my therapist too! What a small world."

And his laughter descended, settled to quiet. "You must live close by."

"Must," Owen said and reached for the toilet seat, picked up the book again.

* * *

It was a depressing place with ongoing barks echoing off of concrete walls and floors. Sad tails and eyes and ears, all on Gretchen and Owen as they walked around, looking for a puppy that wasn't too big nor too small nor too yappy nor too quiet. A litter of chow mixes caught Gretchen's eye and as she smiled down at them, a rare thing the puppies did not seem to waste, Owen stared off into space.

A volunteer came up to them, to Gretchen, and noticed the smile on her face as she held a black chow. The volunteer said, "His name is Alfred. He's very sweet. A little needy."

Owen said, "Ah! They'll get along fine then."

The volunteer and Gretchen ignored him.

"I'll take him," Gretchen said and let the little thing lick her on the face. She had never allowed Owen to do that, though he vaguely remembered asking in their Limbo years. They headed over to the registration desk like a Girl Scout troop, in a line. Once the papers were filled out, the free bag of chow given, the tearful goodbyes from the other volun-

teers, Alfred and Gretchen and Owen were out the door.

As Gretchen settled Alfred on a towel in the backseat of their Camaro, something caught Owen's eye. He held the passenger door open for his wife and saw that on the concrete steps of the Heart and Hope Animal Rescue, a blond young man stood, the wind blustering his hair about his cheeks, his eyes a glistening blue. For a fraction of a second, Owen thought it was Dr. Hubor, come all the way to the pound to tell Owen once again what a loser he was. But that fraction was lost and he looked at the young man again. He did not have the good doctor's height nor his blazer and wingtips.

The man held out a hand and waved him over.

"Owen? Who is that?" Gretchen asked.

"No one. Hold on, I'll be right back."

He left her in the car and jogged up the steps. Standing before the man, he saw how young he was, could not have been older than mid-twenties. He was the Fountain of Youth and Owen a pitiful explorer coming to him on bended knee.

"Wait," Owen said, his breath leaving him. "I know who you are."

"That's right," he said and that voice was so familiar, the way it was over strawberry bubbles, over King's mastery. "So, did you get the puppy?"

"Sure did." He smiled and motioned for him to follow. When they approached the car, he got into the backseat with Alfred who desperately needed some petting and Owen started the car.

Gretchen looked back at him then at Owen then back at him then at the radio, which she cranked up to brain bleed. Brian McKnight. They set off home.

* * *

When they arrived, Gretchen ran into her room with Alfred tucked under her arm. She shut the door and locked it which was Owen's one and only cue that the good doctor was about to be called. He was on speed dial, numero uno.

"What's her problem?" asked the young man. He looked at Owen.

"I never know," said Owen. "Come on, come see my room."

They went to his cathedral, his Notre Dame, his bell tower. He locked the door and spread his arms wide. "This is it, this is where the magic happens."

The young man whistled. He gravitated to the computer desk where Owen's little black book was opened. He peered at the long lists of names – Sherry, Jessica, Amy – and winked over his shoulder.

"Playboy?"

Owen laughed. "No! Those are the people I've met on the lines. I write the names down so I don't have to talk to the same people again. I'm on a mission, you know." But at the very mention of it, he realized that he had been on less of a mission in the last week. His endless search for BIGDICK123 had come to a screeching halt with the arrival of this boy.

He needed to find her – what good was a man without the love of his life? – but where could he fit in the same vigorous search when it was Misery and bath time? And then after *Misery*, they had scheduled *Needful Things*. It was a doorstopper. Where would he find the time?

He stared down at his feet in a stupor of overwhelming worry.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh,” he breathed, “not much. I just realized... since we met, I haven’t been looking for that girl much.”

“Maybe it’s because you don’t need her anymore?”

Owen looked up, scandalized. “What’re you saying? Of course I need her!”

The boy scoffed. “But what for? To have sex with? Is that what you wanted?”

“No... no. Well, not all the time. I mean, she was just so... interesting. I liked her. I can’t forget her. And I tried... I did. I got really frustrated about a year ago and tried to forget her but, it’s just, useless.” He looked down again not at his feet but his belt. “It’s all useless.”

There was a knock at the door and both turned to look. Owen shrugged and opened the door to Gretchen who stood as she had more than a week ago when the love-bite on Owen’s neck was still vibrant. Now it was ugly and purple.

“You’ve gone too far,” she said.

Owen looked down, saw Alfred toddling behind her. “What do

you mean?" he asked.

"I thought you were in here having phone-sex with women," she snapped. "And now I come to find out you're a big old fairy! What the fuck, Owen?"

"I'm not a fairy," Owen said, too shocked to shout. He stared at her then looked over his shoulder at the boy who seemed wholly uncomfortable. "What in the world is wrong with you? We have a guest."

"A guest," she murmured and they both turned to look at the boy. He stood in the small room and made it look much bigger. He stared back at them both and looked away, touching his cheek. "That's it," Gretchen said. "Owen, if you want to save this marriage, you'll come with me to Dr. Hubor's tomorrow morning. That's the only way."

Owen could think of a thousand other ways – the top of the list being lighting the house on fire, collecting the insurance, moving to Tahiti, spending their days on the sand, just Owen, Gretchen, Alfred and this boy. They would sit in a circle under moonlight and discuss King's newest book and wonder where his ideas came from. Was it a dark place inside him? Was it a lit-up ballroom in his wife's eyes? And in the morning, when the sun rose over reflective waters, they would sip coconut milk out of each other's navels.

"Owen? Owen, did you hear me?"

He nodded.

* * *

The boy slept over. He did not want to go out at night and walk all the way to his apartment and Owen did not want to drive him. They slept, foot to head on their sides in the small twin bed of Owen's bedroom. The wind blew outside and if they had spoken any softer their words would not have been heard.

"You know, I did hear you that day."

"What?"

"That day when you said who you were looking for. BIGDICK123, right?"

"Oh... well... why did you pretend not to?"

"I dunno."

"Do you know her? Have you ever met her on the lines?"

"Yeah. She's young. And immature. But most importantly, she's young. Too young for you, I'm sorry to say."

"That's all right. I don't care about her age."

"But what about prison?"

"I don't care about prison either. I just want to lay with her, to keep her safe in my bed. We could be happy here."

"Could you?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it."

"Well, maybe you're right then. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

* * *

Owen woke up alone. He looked around and heard the far-off sound of the television in the living room and smelled something he had not in a long time. He got up, tiptoed through the house and found the boy sitting in Owen's boxers on the couch. MSNBC was on, reporting the news of the day. And two steaming mugs of coffee sat on the table.

The boy said, "Good morning, Owen."

Owen stared at the cups as if he had not seen the likes of them before. His lower lip trembled, something tickled at the back of his mind, but he ignored it. Tried to. The boy smiled up at him and patted a seat on the couch.

"Come on," he said, "it's getting cold. Hey, did you know chew toys lost thirty points on the DOW?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, man. Crazy stuff."

Owen sat beside him dutifully. He took his cup and sipped from it, chugged from it, sucked it all down and heard the boy's lyrical laughter. He set it down and tapped a finger on his knee. "So," he said, "you know my name but I don't know yours."

He sipped his coffee daintily like a lady at a garden party. "I don't think names are all that important, especially at this point."

"This point?"

Suddenly Gretchen was in the room, Alfred at her heels. She was dressed as she always was on appointment day, like a God-fearing

woman at service. Her big blue hat was set at an angle on her head.

Both men rose.

* * *

Dr. Hubor's office was as Owen remembered it; pretentious and pretty. Owen did not know how the man could pull it off so flawlessly. The Mona Lisa replica on the wall in the waiting room and the miniature Venus de Milo on his desk. Owen imagined that piano music floated through the sunlit room and that flowers bloomed on the rug. It was no surprise that Gretchen spent so much time here. It was the next best thing to Tahiti.

And Dr. Hubor's handsome stoicism that said, *Yes, I am what you want me to be but no, I cannot be that forever. For that, you must count on your husband.*

Owen snorted as he sat down, between Gretchen and the boy.

Dr. Hubor eyed them kindly. He gave a double-take to the boy and said in soothing good doctor tones, "Landon, what are you doing here? Our session isn't until Saturday."

"Landon," Owen gasped, looking at his side.

The boy – Landon – giggled. "Yeah, doctor, that's right but I'm here for support, moral support, you know?"

"Well... be that as it may." He glanced at Gretchen, her pinched face. "I don't think it's such a good idea. This is private and-"

"No, no," Gretchen said. "He should be here. He's the root of all

our problems. He should stay."

"He's not the root of any problem." Owen looked at her.

"Actually, there are no roots to our problems. Our problems are above-ground. Landon... Landon doesn't have a thing to do with us. He's just a friend."

"A guy you met on those sex chat lines." She pointed to Landon violently and looked at the good doctor as if he should take her side.

"Yes," Owen said. He looked at the good doctor as well. "But I've never had sex with him. We're friends who appreciate good literature. We have more in common than Gretchen and I... why, than we've had in years."

"Five years," Gretchen said, her voice giving out. "Five years. What we have in common is still in our house."

"Because you keep it there," Owen murmured.

"What am I supposed to do, Owen? Throw it away?"

"Yes. Dammit, yes. Gretty, I can't even go in the freezer to get my goddamn schnapps. You know how long I've wanted a drink? I don't want to touch the damn freezer. I don't know how you could *stare* at it all day. You're morbid is what you are."

She abandoned him to stare at Dr. Hubor who had been listening quietly. "I don't have a husband any more. He's either on the phone or trying to hang himself. I don't know what to do. I had to go to the pound to get a companion, doctor. The pound."

"I had to go there too," Owen said and looked at Landon.

Landon gave the ghost of a smile.

Turning to Gretchen, Owen said, "I've lost things, Gretty. But you don't see me crying and looking in the freezer and acting nuts."

"Nuts," she cried.

To the good doctor, Owen said, "I had an affair a while back. An emotional affair..." He glanced at Gretchen who didn't seem fazed.

"With a *Sexy Girl*. I've been looking for her for years but with no luck.

While Gretchen was companionless, so was I. Then I found Landon. And now I don't want to hang myself anymore. I don't feel like I'm alone anymore. And even though Gretty's a big pain, I don't want her to be alone anymore either. I want us to live together, to be friends, all of us and Alfred, and I'll burn the house and we can move to Tahiti. And we'll live happily ever after. Forever. And that's what you can count on me for. The only thing."

Gretchen gaped at him and Landon smiled and Dr. Hubor nodded and wrote something down. And before Gretchen had a chance to rebound and force some sort of reply, something magical lowered from the ceiling. Behold, the chandelier, that shining star in the sky that was sweet, sweet divorce and everyone in the room could see it.

Gretchen looked up at it through misty eyes as would an old woman who had seen a mermaid's tail flicker on the sea.

Landon thought it was a strange thing and yet needed and

practical and in its shimmering reflection, he saw himself as he once was, as he was then, and as he would be someday.

Owen came to realize it was not a far-off star but a shooting star, one that rocketed towards him, one that burned him up in the force of its glow, one that could no longer be denied. It was Truth, as Truth comes, so daring and bright.

Dr. Hubor knew it would show up sooner or later.

* * *

A few days later, Gretchen had walked out of the door with nothing but the clothes on her back. She did not return. Alfred was whining at the door, barking, his mother had gone away. Finally, Owen swept the puppy up in an awkward embrace and gave him a piece of chicken.

Landon had taken to staying over every night, waking up at 8 AM to prepare coffee. Owen thought of asking him where he lived but was distracted when Alfred peed on the carpet and never remembered again.

In the late afternoon, Landon went to the kitchen and called out, "What do you want for dinner?"

"I'm not sure. What do we have?"

"Uh. Not much... some old taco meat. And..." Landon opened the freezer and paused. He reached in and took out a half-empty bottle of peach schnapps and a Ziploc-bag with a package inside. He came out into the living room and held up both items.

Owen looked up and sighed. "Guess she forgot."

"What is it?"

"Miscarriage. Five years ago," Owen said and glanced at the package. He offered a sad smile. "I guess we both had a lot of hang-ups."

"Still do if you ask me," Landon said and wiggled the bottle of schnapps.

* * *

12 AM and Alfred snoozed on his back on the bathroom floor. His paws twitched and Landon laughed and said he thought he was dreaming about rabbits. Owen said he didn't think Alfred had ever seen a rabbit. And bubbles floated between them, out of the bath that they were covered in, head to toe.

Two copies of *Needful Things* were half wet in their hands and they were as pink as the bubbles around them from the now empty bottle of schnapps.

Page 26 was wet and Owen could barely read the words. But damn, he said, King sure had a way with the words he couldn't read.

Landon told him to slow down, that he was reading too fast.

Owen asked what part he was on.

Walter Giersbach

Big Biz @ the Mall

OMG, its been such a crazy day w/ my kids Jason and Arabella. They think its funny to throw things out the car window. I didnt know stuffed bunny rabbits could fly. Im headed to the mall to get a new phone and make them take back the one that doesnt work. Then I see my kids wrote nasty things in the dirt on the window. Like "bite me hard" and "honk if ur gay." These are just the pg rated things. I leave the rest to ur imagination. Im so mad but I have to laugh too.

Im a phone freak. Also the b#%&h who needs that phone to sell my funky art jewelry. And now Im waiting like half an hour in the mall for the AT&T guy to stop yakking. Finally he sez can I help u?

I give him my best smile and say u can help me get a new phone. This doesnt work anymore. He asks whats wrong?

I give my shoulders the shrug. It just stopped. Actually I dropped my phone in the toilet if u want to know. But first I tell him ur phone spell check has a dirty mind. I texted r u a beiber believer and it came out r u a beaver believer. I was in pizza hut and the soda just shot out my nose when I saw that.

The phone man sez well spell check is a feature we can disable if u like. So what else is wrong?

Im startin to like this dude with his hair falling in his eyes. But dont get any ideas cuz Im married w/ kids and dont fool around. I say okay Ill confess. I peed on the phone. I thought there was a pregnancy app.

Yow he sez and his eyes get big. He gives back the phone like its too hot to handle. Theres no way Im gonna give u a phone for that reason.

I tell him why not? Im due for an upgrade. I want one that takes

good pics. Flash too. And no data plan.

Mommy!! – Jason shouts and yanks my jeans. We gotta hurry for the test.

See, his friends texted me hes in love w/ a girl <sniff sniff> and shes trying out for field hockey. I love that his friends trust me. More sniffs. I can see their Facebooks but I have a filter so they cant see mine. Is that cool or creepy?

What kinda test the AT&T man sez. Oh now hes interested.

Im gonna play this guy cuz I really need that phone. I let my mouth silently spell out

C A N C E R and he gets all concerned. I see the emotions going on in his head like socks doing the spin cycle.

Arabella yanks on me and shouts whats cancer?

He sez Oh! Maybe I can let u have a new phone for 30 bucks.

See? I knew there was a deal. And I tell him u gotta save all my data for me.

He sez I can save it but Im not touching that phone cause u peed on it. Ill show u to do it.

So I got my new phone for 30 bucks. We got to field hockey try-outs on time. And my Jason got a little kiss from the girlfriend. Woot!

Then one more win. I order my son to wipe the dirt off the van. Same time I dropped my packages in the driveway. I bent over and my undies peeked out of my way too low jeans. Jason was grossed out. I threatened to do it again if he didn't mind me.

Im so lucky I got a good hubby and loving kids and a crazy ass new phone. Screw the judgy among us. Life is short. Live it to the max. Smile and lol as much as possible all the time. All the time. Xoxo.

Walt Giersbach's fiction has appeared in Bewildering Stories, Big Pulp, Corner Club Press, Every Day Fiction, Everyday Weirdness, and many others. He was 6th place winner of the Writer's Digest writing competition in October 2011. Two volumes of short stories, Cruising the Green of Second Avenue, have been published by Wild Child(www.wildchildpublishing.com).

Linda Lyons

Good Neighbors

If Joshua lived on another street, or in another neighborhood, I might've thought he was a cute kid. I had to have him in my backyard to dislike him. He was the first kid to run when the baseball crashed through the window, or the dog was set loose. He taught our boys how to use a screwdriver and carve FUK and SUNUVABITS into the cedar supports of my deck. It was his idea to play down by the river, to throw rocks at the owl's nest.

If Joshua appeared, Charlie's mom, Joan, was the only one to drag her protesting six-year-old home. The rest of the neighborhood moms, Carol, Brenda and I, stood watch from our kitchen windows.

Joshua's mother, Ruth, was pretty like a TV commercial mom: short, wavy hair, trim figure and generous smile. The day after they moved in, I trotted over some zucchini loaf, still warm from the oven. "Hi. I'm Pat. I live across the street," I said, turning my head and sweeping my arm vaguely at the row of split-level homes on the other side of the gravel road. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

"Why thank you. That's so sweet. I'm Ruth. I'd invite you in, but we're still getting settled."

From what I could see from the front door - kitchen counters gleaming, nary a box or garbage bag in sight - someone had done a Herculean job of settling already: no TV or radio sounds, no children's voices or mess. "Not a problem. I understand completely. Just wanted you to know if there's anything I can do, just ask."

"Oh, that's so nice of you. We're really looking forward to living here," she said.

"It's a great place to raise kids. Don't worry about the river. No kid

would dare go down there. You have kids?"

"Yes, we do. Joshua's seven and Naomi is four."

"You've come to the right place." I turned and pointed again.

"Those four houses each have a girl and a boy. No fences over there. The kids have the run of the backyards. When you get settled, bring yours over."

"I'll send Joshua over later. He's being punished right now. Thanks very much for the cake," she said, taking it into her left hand, reaching for the wooden door with her right. "Have you found Christ?"

"Pardon?"

"Christ. Our Lord and Savior. Have you found him?"

"Ummmm, sure." I shifted, paused. "One of my earliest memories is Sunday School."

"That's nice," she said and closed the door.

Brenda took over fresh raspberries, Carol some cut flowers, and Joan (before she found Charlie snotty, bawling and tied to a tree) her amazing cheesecake. Always the smile, the door half open, and the question about religion, but never an invitation.

It was devious Joshua who told me Naomi had "seeball pawzy" and never left her room, and "my mom prays with Naomi all day until Daddy comes home." When he begged to stay for lunch because "Mommy is busy with Naomi and God" my gut wrenched and I always agreed.

I never saw Joshua take off his shirt to run through the sprinkler, or pull down his shorts for the forbidden peeing contest against Carol's garden shed. Some days he wouldn't remove his Power Ranger sunglasses, even to watch cartoons in my dark basement.

After six weeks, just before school started, they were gone. No warning. No 'For Sale' sign. No moving truck. Just gone. Joan's Charlie was freed to run with the gang. Brenda lined up a part-time job. Carol

started a housecleaning business.

And I wondered.

Linda Lyons is currently studying English and Creative Writing at the University of Arizona. She is currently working on her second novel and a collection of memoir.

Spear Fishing for Crawfish

I squirted soap into my goggles and cleaned the lenses with my fingers. I rinsed them over the edge of the boat and let the soap bubbles run away in a little white line. I pulled my flippers on, attached my goggles, grabbed my spear, smiled at the Caribbean sky, and fell backwards into the water: silence.

I found the dark form of my brother's body kicking away ahead of me, already scanning the landscape below for any sign of crawfish. Our spears were long thin metal shafts in a wood handle, drawn back with a bungee and released like a slingshot. Crawfish hide during the day, so we were looking for two long antennae protruding from the underside of a rock, betrayed by their anatomy.

A barracuda materialized out of the darkness next to me, long and thin. His narrow teeth grinned over his lower jaw and he swam in a perfectly straight line. I turned and swam parallel to him, very quietly, very gently, so as not to get in his way. On his path now, we continued on, away from my brother. A stingray moved below us, gliding very softly along the sand, and a small fish swam right above it, wriggling its little tail-- the unlikely companions.

We came to a grouping of rock and coral, the perfect hiding spot for a crawfish. I gathered air and dove down, swam along the rocks, tried to move smoothly like a fish along the canyons of underwater buildings. Continually losing air too quickly, I forced myself farther down, peered under shadowy overhangs, scared little schools of fish, and came up for air. During all of this the barracuda waited for me. He was a little bit ahead but he didn't seem to be swimming on, just grinning and

watching, as though he could tell what my mission was about. I kept searching but found nothing. There was only one rock left, a little bit out from the others, and I made for it slowly. I saw them right away, two little antennae, swaying by the hollow darkness beneath the rock. The barracuda followed.

I swam directly in front of them, gathered air, and dove down. The two antennae were attached to an armored head with two little eyes sticking from the top, staring at me, while the infantry of legs lay curled behind it against the vault of the rock. I thought of my brother and wondered whether he had found anything yet. Neither of us had killed before. This was our first voyage into the water with spears after we had practiced on soda cans in front of the steps by the old island house in the small bay. I wanted to be the first.

I pulled back the spear. The crawfish lunged out at me, shaking his antennae in a helpless gesture of defense. He had nothing to protect himself with, nothing to hurt me with. He was not endowed, like his brother lobster, with big pinchers.

I pulled the spear taut, looked at his slug's eyes, his waving antenna spears, his thin shell armor, while the barracuda grinned next to me, urging me to join him in the pantheon of hunters. I thought of all of the meat I had eaten in my life, all the animals killed, but none of them by me. I wavered for a moment, then brought the spear up directly in front of his rocky face, impossible to miss, and I let it go.

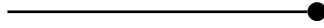
It shot into the sand next to his head and stuck there. It was so close but didn't hit. I was shocked, looked at it standing crookedly in the sand. I hadn't realized how strongly the act of killing depends on intent. There must have been a small part of me that balked at the sight of the barracuda, the sharp teeth descended over his jaw, the grinning face waiting for me to become like him. I stared at the crawfish. He looked almost surprised but vindicated. He tried to clack his antennae at me, to

scuttle out from the hole. But he was afraid of open ground.

I dove down and grabbed my spear, a nervous initiate to life, my hands thin and white through the goggles. The ocean was a giant swaying mass of blue in which I was contained. I could feel its muscular spread against the islands and over the dark and endless miles of underground topography. I felt the barracuda next to me, pleasantly ensconced in the food chain, holding something I wanted to know. I slipped the spear into its holster, accepted responsibility for what I was about to do, pulled back, and let fly.

Matthew Zanoni Müller was born in Bochum, Germany and grew up in Eugene, Oregon and Upstate New York. He received his MFA from Warren Wilson's MFA Program for Writers and teaches at his local Community College. His work has appeared in various magazines and journals. To learn more about his writing, please visit: www.matthewzanonimuller.com

Judith Kelly Quaempts



Born Again

The movie's been over for hours. The ticket booth is dark, and they are alone on the deserted street except for a wild-eyed man with newspaper hanging from his ragged coat, who keeps screaming, "Demons! Demons want my soul."

Alec, the boy's little brother, moans, his small body vibrating with terror. The last time the crazy man stumbled toward them, wetness spread across the front of his ratty jeans.

Mom will be mad, the boy thinks. She'll spank Alec again because she says five is too old to pee in your pants.

The boy looks up and down the dark street. Where is she? She said she'd pick them up after the movie. She looked so pretty when she let them off, her yellow hair all curly, her best earrings sparkling, the sequins on her new blue dress shining like stars when they caught the light. He had tried to touch them, but she had slapped his hand away.

"Mom has a hot date, sweetie. Don't muss me."

He got the scary feeling then because she was talking in her funny voice – high and hurried, like she can't catch her breath, like she sounded the night she put him on the roller coaster at the fair and forgot to come back for him.

A car! She's here. He grabs Alec's hand and moves toward the curb.

The car speeds past.

Please, please, don't let her forget us again. The last time she was gone for three days. He'd been scared then, too, but at least he and Alec were home – not standing in the dark with a crazy man and having to pee with no place to go.

The pain in his stomach is back. Mom promised them hamburgers after the movie, with fries and chocolate shakes. He knows it's too late now.

"Hey!"

Mom! She didn't forget! The pain in his stomach disappears like magic. The boy puts his hand on Alec's shoulder and guides him toward the car, but when they get close, his stomach lurches, and the pain comes back, only worse this time.

There's a man in the car.

"Goddammit, hurry up you two," his mother hisses.

Swallowing hard, the boy herds Alec into the back seat, touches his lips with a gentle finger, then places his arm around his narrow shoulders for the ride home.

Alec, wet, tired and hungry, slumps against him, asleep before the car pulls away from the curb.

At home, his mother and the stranger stagger, laughing, into the house, leaving him in the car with the sleeping Alec. The boy half-carries, half-drags Alec up the walk, through the front door, and down the hall to their bedroom. His mother and the man are in the kitchen. Her fevered laugh sounds like breaking glass.

Undressing Alec, the boy throws the damp and smelly jeans into the back of the closet. By the time mom finds them, he hopes they will be dry.

A wave of fury shakes him. Alec can't help wetting his pants.

What's a little guy supposed to do when he's hungry and scared and has to pee and no one comes to get him?

He strips down to his underwear and climbs under the covers. Tomorrow, Mom won't remember forgetting them, or not feeding them. She won't remember much of anything. The boy hopes the man is gone by then.

Before he turns out the light, he glances at Alec. He's such a good little kid. He hardly ever cries. The boy thinks Alec learned early on that tears helped nothing.

He was the same age, five, when Mom brought Alec home. He remembers Alec's baby fingers closing tightly over his own, remembers the fierce love that gripped him at that moment.

For as long as he can remember, his mom has been two people. One of them sometimes stays in bed for hours – days, even, and doesn't recognize them when they try to wake her. When that happens, the boy makes breakfasts and packs lunches for two before going to school; otherwise, his little brother will go unfed until the boy returns in the afternoon.

The other mom, the happy one, makes pancakes for breakfast, with chocolate chips in them, and oatmeal cookies with M & M's instead of raisins because Alec likes the pretty colors. When she's not sick, she reads to them at bedtime, and hugs them tight and says, "Don't let the bedbugs bite." She even sings a lullaby the boy knows by heart, and during the bad times, when they have no pancakes, no cookies, no song, Alec begs, "Sing me, please, sing me," and the boy sings, "Hush little baby don't you cry, brother's gonna sing you a lullaby..."

The boy is drifting off to sleep when Alec wakes and whines. "I'm thirsty."

"Better not Alec, Mom has company. You know we can't leave the room when she has company."

"I be quiet," Alec promises, his voice small. "I get it in the bathroom. Mommy won't hear."

For the rest of his life he is haunted by the sound of Alec's small feet padding over the bedroom's bare floor, the sliver of light that sneaked into the room when he opened the door, and moments later, the shrill cry, so quickly cut off, the thud against a wall.

The front door slammed before his mother's frantic screams brought the boy running. He finds her on the floor, Alec in her arms. Alec is limp, his eyes open, but unseeing. Blood pumps from his head, running down his face and over their mother. Her screams raise goose bumps on the boy's skin. He sees that one of her earrings has fallen from her ear and lies on the floor. He reaches for it, folds it tightly in his palm, oblivious to the sharp points piercing his skin.

Sirens. Men in white, men in blue. The boy watches Alec being wheeled from the house on a stretcher. An ambulance waits at the curb, its spinning red light slicing the air into crimson shards, coloring the faces of neighbors drawn outside by the noise. Two policemen escort his mother, wrapped in a blanket, to a waiting patrol car. A stern-looking woman with liquid brown eyes explains that his brother and mother have to go away for a while but he's going to stay with a nice family until everything gets better.

He opens his mouth to ask when, finds he forgot how to talk.

"Wuh...wuh...when will ma...ma...mom and...ah... ah...Alec cuh...come?"

She hesitates, biting her lip. "I'm not sure," she finally answers.

He never sees Alec again.

* * *

Alec. No one spoke of him or of their mother after that terrible

night, after he became a ward of the state.

Ron and Kayla Ross became his foster parents. Good people. They opened their arms to a scared, guilt-ridden child and loved him unconditionally. Within weeks, his stutter all but disappeared. He stopped crying himself to sleep every night.

Then Ron died in a freak accident at his construction site and Kayla, dazed by grief, became a walking zombie, unable to cope with her own two children, let alone him and their other foster child, Glenda.

He went to the Blewitts: George, a tall, beady-eyed and balding man with a heavy hand, Amelia, his short, fat, merry-eyed wife. Her eyes grew far merrier when George found it necessary to punish one of the children.

They treated their cat better than their charges.

One night the boy caught the cat outside and bashed its head against a wall. He'd been sick to his stomach afterwards but lighter, too, as though some of his rage and loneliness died with the small creature.

The feeling didn't last.

Not when the Blewitts went after Billy.

Five years old, a little slow, Billy reminded him of Alec. He had the same trusting, puppy-dog look in his eyes, the same hopeful smile.

That brought out the worst in the Blewitts.

His last day in their household began with a loud screech from Amelia. "Goddam little brat, you did it on purpose."

Billy, once again, wet his bed.

The kids were forced to watch Billy being dragged from the bedroom, naked and shivering.

George took his time loosening his belt. Amelia's eyes moistened in anticipation.

When the police arrived, summoned by a hysterical Amelia, George Blewitt stood bent over the kitchen sink, an icepack held to his broken nose. The bite mark on Amelia's cheek required a trip to the emergency room, several stitches, antibiotics and a tetanus shot.

The children, except for him, were transferred to other foster families. Even though his violence was considered justified, the Court ruled he needed a more disciplined setting.

The boy was sent to the Schofield Home for Boys – a summer camp compared to the Blewitt's.

* * *

At eighteen he entered the world. He worked his way through college, got a job and after years of searching, found his mother.

She lived with someone. Surprise, surprise. A grizzle-faced, droopy-eyed loser with a mean curl to his mouth, a carbon copy of all the men she paraded through their childhood.

No longer beautiful but a fat, drunken slob who burst into sloppy tears the moment she opened the pockmarked door and saw him standing in the vile-smelling hallway. She pulled him inside a two-room apartment dim as a church – wall paper, stained and peeling, windows painted shut, torn brown shades on rickety rollers – a place in perpetual twilight no matter the time or weather.

She sat him down in an ancient easy chair marked with years of cigarette burns, took a seat in a sagging armchair, and reached for a bottle on the scarred table between them. She took a drink before offering the bottle: cheap blackberry wine. Mad Dog.

He shook his head. He wanted to know what became of Alec.

She stared at him through bleary eyes, wiped a snail trail of snot above her mouth, and took a long pull on the bottle before answering.

“Gone,” she said. “Alec’s gone.” Her mouth twisted. Saliva sprayed from her lips when she added, “Your fault, you little shit. You were supposed to watch him.”

The exact same words she had snarled that night before two policemen led her away.

Her eyes rolled, then closed. Her head lolled forward. Hoarse snores followed. Her breath added to the stench of the already befouled air.

He looked at the thing that was his mother, and in a moment of supreme clarity, knew what must be done.

He glanced toward the kitchenette. The creep is cracking eggs into a smoking skillet.

Reaching across the table, he covered his mother’s nose and mouth with the palm of his hand.

He startled when her eyes, so like Alec’s, so like his own, snapped open and fixed on his. Was it gratitude he saw there?

When it was done, he rose from his chair.

His erection was huge, unexpected.

The man felt hollow, light as a paper husk, like the windfall apples he once came across scattered beneath a tree. They seemed ordinary, lying there; rosy-skinned, a few worm holes pocking their skin, but when he bent to pick one up, it was like holding a ball of air. Through a rent in the skin he saw cannibalized flesh. Five or six nasty looking wasps still crawled inside.

Disgusted, he had dropped the apple to the ground and crushed it beneath his foot.

Something far more dangerous than wasps crawled inside him

now.

On his way out the door, he looked over his shoulder.

The creep was hunched over his burned eggs, mumbling.

* * *

Six months later, on a fishing trip to the western part of the state, he met a woman in a bar. He bought her a drink. They talked. Turned out she was a single mother enjoying a night out.

He invited her to his motel room for a drink.

She hesitated when they reached the door to his room.

“What's wrong, change of heart?”

She shook her head. “No. I should call home, though, and tell my sons I'll be late.”

“No problem. While you make your call I'll pour us a drink.”

He opened the door, placed his hand on the small of her back, and guided her inside.

* * *

Sweat, sex, and cheap perfume. The odors coated the back of his throat like rancid butter. He lifted his head from the crook of her neck and stared into her wide blue eyes.

Her blonde hair, ephemeral as a cloud earlier, looked like dry straw. A delicate chain of bruises darkened her neck. He studied her parted lips, lips he kissed, sucked, and chewed until no trace of bright lipstick remained. A ruby bead glistened where his teeth nipped the tiniest bit too hard. Mascara had bled into the parched skin around her eyes.

She looked like a surprised raccoon, a surprised and very dead,

raccoon.

He barked out a rueful laugh. "You should have gone home to your kids, Darlene – Noreen, whatever the hell your name is...was. A good mother would have."

He gathered her clothes and put them into his overnight bag, his movements unhurried, meticulous. Before he wrapped her purse and body in the tarp from his pickup, he removed one of her earrings.

He made two trips, carrying her out first, sliding her into the pickup bed under the canopy, then returning to the room for one last look around before he grabbed his overnight bag.

His stomach growled as he drove from the parking lot. After he dumped her in the river he'd stop at Denny's for the Grand Slam before hitting the freeway for home.

In a few months he'd take another fishing trip; different river, different area.

When it got too dark to fish, he'd find a friendly bar, have a few drinks. No doubt he'd find someone to keep him company.

He reached into his pocket, closed his hand around the earring, and squeezed until the points pierced his skin.

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Dorian Dawes



The Downers: Episode I

In books it is possible to find quite a few wonderful little towns where boys can have many adventures right in their own backyard, places where bubble-gum cards are collected, Hollywood celebrities stop by to dazzle the streets with their glitter and fame, ice cream parlors on every corner, and in the end, the heroes of the story always manage to defeat whatever calamity has beset these otherwise happy people and save the day, and by the end there is singing and dancing, and everyone is pleased.

Merry Oaks, despite the chipper nature of its name is no such town. There are no ice cream parlors for miles, no clowns to entertain children on the sidewalk--just a bunch of overpopulated homes all bunched up close to each other, too many telephone wires all criss-crossed and wrong from a botched job paid cheaply for by the corrupt city council, a local shopping mall that threatens once every couple of Tuesdays to go out of business until a weekend sale brings in the droves of greedy shoppers from out of town, and a school that has shoved all the grades from kindergarten to senior high schoolers into one dilapidated brick-building. The factories on the outskirts of town create a dense atmosphere, smoke like angry black clouds continually looming on the horizon, perpetually blotting the sun from view. Merry Oaks is also a very poor town, with revenue from taxes filling the city council's and mayor's pockets, but hardly any leaking from the treasury to fix the broken roads and holes in the sidewalks. Some years ago, a bill was put through that would have allowed the construction of a new playground in the park for the children, but mysteriously nothing came of it, though

the Mayor was seen that week driving a brand new Cadillac throughout the streets.

Nantucket Tucker, nicknamed Nancy by his peers, had lived in this charming place of ruin all his young life. His hobbies included watching dinosaur shows on the cable network on Saturdays, reading his growing collection of 'borrowed' books, and staring out his window pretending and wishing that he was somewhere else.

When his mother would catch him in these moments, she'd pause to ask with a smile, "And where are you, Nantucket Tucker?"

His reply, almost-automatic, and always the same, "Anywhere but here."

His mother, Katrina Tucker's only concern for her son was that he hardly made any friends, or if he did, he certainly wouldn't tell her about them. The only things he brought home from school besides homework and books were bruises along his arms, and once around his left eye. He told her he fell. For weeks after, she kept a watch on him to see if he might fall at home. He never did. School was the only place where these accidents and mishaps would ever occur.

At the dinner table one night she asked him, "Nantucket Tucker, your birthday's coming up."

He made a half-hearted grunt in reply, and continued to chase a lima bean around on a greasy paper-plate with his plastic fork.

"Have you thought about which friends you're gonna invite to your party?"

"Do I have to have a party?"

"Well, I thought you might like one," Katrina tried again. "Not every day you turn 11. That's a special day, you know."

He didn't even look at her when he said, "Birthdays are only

dates that mark another year that your body has been on this earth. Why would you celebrate them? They only remind you how many more that you've got left before you die."

"Don't be such a Negative-Nancy," Katrina said, trying to chuckle.

The fork fell from her son's fingers. "That's what they call me at school."

She almost choked on her own gravy. "Wh-what?"

"Negative Nancy. Even the teachers. Can I be excused? My dinosaur show is on."

Having no words to say, and feeling a tremendous amount of guilt and other strange awkward feelings commonly associated with sadness, such as the ones you get when you disappoint someone you love deeply, Katrina nodded her silent approval. She sat at the table for some time after, staring forlorn at a soggy piece of Salisbury steak that she eventually chose not to eat, but instead to wrap in plastic with the remaining dinner leftovers. She heard the droning voice of the British narrator from the TV in the living room, calling out the scientific names of strange, ancient reptiles, and she allowed herself a drink from a bottle she kept in a paper bag that Nantucket had explicit instructions never to touch. This was Mommy's bag. It was made to make her feel better when she was sad.

* * *

The very next morning brought an official end to the forgetfulness of weekends, and it was time once more for Nancy to return to that dreaded institution parents used to provide a brief reprieve from their children in the name of public education. He hated every second of it. The hallways were always crammed with nearly a hundred students at once of different ages and sizes, pushing and shoving, and laughing and

screaming, and crying. If a particular student were to find himself shoved into his own locker, or have his head shoved into a toilet full of urine, it'd be very difficult for the school administrators to find the culprit, much less enforce any sort of discipline for bullying. So whenever Nancy found himself crowded by a group of high-school age seniors who found it amusing to torment boys much younger than themselves, there was nothing that could be done but to resign himself to yet another daily beating between the cafeteria, classes, and recess.

All of his subjects were taught to his particular grade in one room, with one teacher, a Miss Beasley Grimloche, nicknamed Grim or Grimlock by students who'd graduated from her class, thus escaping her talons. She was a gaunt, pallid character who towered over her students, a looming specter who's age defied classification, but she seemed to have been teaching the same grade as far as anyone could tell. She'd taught the parents of the kids who sat before her now, and their parents, and maybe even their grandparents, no one could say. Grimlock had always remained there, unchanging, ever frightful and bitter with that mess of tangled white hair sitting atop her age-spotted, skull-like visage, and those long red fingernails that she made a habit of drawing along the chalkboard at random intervals, just to make sure every one was paying attention.

The room itself Nancy had heard had not changed much since the older generation of students had sat under her hawklike stare, only that it had furthered along its natural course of decay and eventual ruin. There was but one working lamp overhead, and it had this annoying habit of flickering on and off, often leading to long intervals of them working in the darkness. Cracks appeared all along the faded yellow wallpaper and the ceiling, and there was the faintest smell of mold coming from beneath a particular corner of the room that no one dared touch, and though the school had a paid janitorial staff, there really was-

n't a lot to be done about the daily collection of dust that would come in through the air vents, which were at least a decade overdue for a cleaning.

Nancy had been sitting quietly in the back, trying to pass the time by doodling strange monsters and dinosaurs in his notebook, when a familiar grating noise filled his ears and caused every student to cringe as the Grimlock dug her fingernails gleefully up the sides of the chalkboard. She had a manic expression of mirth over her face as she curled those same talons around the bony shoulder of a young boy with close-cropped black hair, pale skin, freckles and glasses that stood in the front of the classroom. His face was stoic, seemingly ignorant of the frightful figure in black looming behind him.

"Classs," her voice came out in a gnarled hiss, "I'd like to introduce you to a new student. This is Danny. Danny Downer."

There was an eruption of laughter at hearing this poor boy's name, save for of course from Nancy, who didn't find it funny at all. There was another shrieking of nails along the chalkboard and laughter was turned to quiet whimpers as all the students, save for Danny, quickly covered their ears. The Grimlock turned a smile down towards Danny, and Nancy felt in his heart a sympathetic terror for the boy; that smile was not without cruelty, but none of the Grimlock's smiles ever were. There was a genuine meanness about her that was undeniable, and it was no secret that her sole source of mirth came at the expense of her pupils, whether it was through humiliation, or other forms of torment that her sick and twisted brain had devised.

"Danny," she said to him, "tell the class about yourself."

"I like aliens," he said simply, again without a change of expression.

There were chuckles from the classroom, subdued if only for fear

of hearing the dreaded noise of the chalkboard again. When there was none, they allowed themselves a louder laugh, and a few mocking grins in Danny's direction. The Grimlock mirrored their smiles, and she allowed herself her own quiet cackle.

"What is it that you like about aliens?" she said.

"I like aliens for the same reason that someone else might prefer to keep the company of cats, or collect stamps as opposed to enjoying the fellowship of others, because I don't enjoy being around other people. People always seem like they're just going to hurt each other all the time, so I don't like people. I like aliens, they keep to their own planets and don't bother anyone. People just like to take things that don't belong to them."

The Grimlock stared at him. "You're awful young to be so disillusioned. That's supposed to be a slow process of this institution draining all wonder and magic and hope from your being until you become a slave to society working a minimum wage job you hate."

He looked back at her, and met her cold, unfeeling eyes unflinchingly. "Maybe by starting early, I can save myself that disappointment. And forgive me for asking, is that what happened to you?"

The Grimlock's eyes narrowed. "Take your seat."

"Yes ma'am."

As Danny moved towards an empty desk, Nancy heard the whispers begin almost immediately.

"What a freak, he should go sit with Negative Nancy."

"Ha, Negative Nancy and Danny Downer. Perfect!"

"*Classsss!*" came the hissing shriek from the front, shushing all whispers. "Now, who can tell me what was the Holy Inquisition?"

* * *

With the horrors of medieval torture and execution methods fresh within his young mind, Nancy sought out Danny on the playground during recess. He was sitting by himself on the edge of the sandbox with his head lowered, kicking his feet idly in the sand. As Nancy approached, Danny acknowledged his presence with a silent nod, and then resumed staring at his own lap.

Nancy sat down beside him. "I like dinosaurs."

"I like aliens."

"I heard. That's pretty cool."

"What's your favorite dinosaur?"

Nancy shrugged. "Most kids like the T-Rex, but I'm fonder of the smaller, weirder ones."

"Like what?"

"The little theropods that scurried around during the Jurassic period. They were tiny, but kind of dangerous."

Danny actually smiled. "Like us. We're tiny and dangerous."

Nancy found that odd, and he laughed at that, causing Danny's smile to fade ever so slightly. "Nobody would ever find me dangerous."

"You're dangerous in a different kind of way, because you're not like them," Danny tried explaining. "People are threatened by anything that's different. That's why they beat you up and pick on you. They're scared of you."

Nancy thought this was all very silly, but it was nice to imagine, and he liked Danny's odd way of speaking. There was something innately likeable about the strangeness of it, soothing in a way that was hard to describe. Without thinking he locked hands with Danny. This sur-

prised the other boy for only a moment, but he smiled and squeezed tighter. Allies had been made this day. They were strange, and they were lonely, and the world seemed to hate them, but now there were two.

Moments of peace, genuine happiness, and tranquility are almost always fleeting, and what is more they are few and far between, for as soon as one comes along, there rises someone or something that is genuinely offended at seeing a source of true happiness in this world, and they take it upon themselves that this grievance against the natural order of pain and sorrow in this universe is quickly righted. They truly seem to want everyone to be as miserable as they themselves are. In fact, it might very well be that the universe has ordained itself a strict set of people whose sole purpose is to inflict misery and sorrow and end all manner of joy where it might have the audacity to spring up, as there are those who spend their entire lives pursuing acts of senseless harm towards others for no apparent reason than the fact that they can and that it suits them to do so. Because such is the way of life, endless waves of pain and suffering with rare moments of reprieve between, which are only worse for the shock and ache that is created when they are gone and torment begins anew.

One of these people approached them on the playground, a beefy kid named Zander, and he was more than just some silly high school prankster, he was worse, for he was born with a general indifference for anyone and anything besides himself, and what was more, he had a peculiar sense of justice. It genuinely bothered him inside when he saw those drift away from a societal norm, even if it was only a classroom of ten and eleven year-olds. His father's heavy preaching about dissidents and anarchists lurking in the neighborhood had a profound effect upon him, and he felt that it was his duty to keep the weird ones in line, and whatever treatment they received was fully deserved. It was their

fault for choosing to make everyone uncomfortable with their freakishness. Zander didn't like that they were smiling and holding hands and happy. To see the freaks having an enjoyable moment felt very wrong to him, and so he marched over their place of refuge with his freckled meaty hands clenched into tight little fists.

Nancy was prepared to run the minute he saw Zander approaching them from across the playground. The roughness of the high school kids really was nothing compared to the brutality and harsh violence inflicted upon him by this hateful child. This creature was the cause of most of his bruises. Danny had no idea what either of them were in for, and Nancy had no intention of letting his newfound ally suffer the same beatings he himself endured on a daily basis. He made a move of trying to run with Danny, but the other boy would only allow himself to stand. They looked each other in the eyes, one said panic and the other said strength. Danny squeezed his hand, and though everything in Nancy screamed to run, something about Danny's stoic confidence made him stay by his side, if only for curiosity's sake.

"Aw, the little freak made a friend, that's cute," Zander chided almost immediately. "Negative Nancy, I'm sure you must really love your new creepy friend. He's just like you. Finally, you can have someone weird enough to relate to."

"Leave him alone, Zander," Nancy said, though he found his voice cracking. "It's his first day here, think you could ease off."

"Nobody gets off the hook," Zander sneered getting close enough to Nancy's face so that Nancy could smell the bully's breakfast, and it was more than obvious he'd neglected to brush his teeth. "You're weird, okay? My dad says people like that are delinquents. Anyone weird is subject to immediate investigation."

"We haven't done anything to you." Nancy tried again. "We

haven't hurt anyone."

"Not yet, but someone's gotta make sure that you don't, and that somebody is me."

Zander curled a fist and was just about to press it deep into Nancy's gut when he pulled back with a yelp, and it was here that Nancy realized that in this short amount of time that Danny had let go of his hand. He was in fact holding a burning match that he'd held up to Zander's hand while the boy had been distracted. Zander shoved his fingers into his mouth and stared at Danny with a look of newfound fear.

"What is wrong with you?"

Danny closed his own fingers over the edge of the match and smiled. "Nothing really. Aside from my usual bouts of extreme sadness and loneliness, I'm in a well-balanced mental state. You're the one I'm worried about, feeling the need to beat up on boys smaller than yourself in order to satiate some deep-seeded inferiority complex. You mentioned your father. He probably has some harsh expectations on you, huh? It'd be nice if he hugged you once in a while, wouldn't he?"

Zander began slowly backing away from the two of them, his eyes wide in a newfound state of revelatory horror. The influx of sudden tears proved that something Danny had said hit him in a deep vulnerable place. He held his slightly singed fingers all the while muttering, "freaks" repeatedly under his breath, before he finally turned and ran in the opposite end of the playground.

Nancy gave Danny an odd look, despite his relief.

"You're insane," he whispered.

"The world is insane," Danny retorted. "Fire holds an interest for me lately, and it got him off our back."

Nancy laughed. "True, I don't think he'll be bothering us ever again."

Danny pocketed his match book and the two of them enjoyed the remainder of their recess together.

* * *

The both of them made plans for Nancy to ask his mother permission to go home with Danny after school the next day, and for once Nancy regretted the ringing of the bell, as for the first time in his life, he actually enjoyed the company of another human being at school. They rode the bus together and enjoyed many discussions regarding paleontology, UFO sightings, and of course, the inevitable destruction of all mankind. Other kids on the rickety bus that bounced and turned and throttled them through every bumpy second of the trip continued to stare like they always stared, but both boys were too deeply wrapped within the complexities of their current conversation to take notice. Nancy's house came into view all too soon, and they wished each other goodbye. The skies above seemed just a little less gray today, and Nancy was certain that if he looked hard enough, he could see a faint trace of blue on the horizon, but that might have been mere hopeful imagination.

He opened the creaking rusted gate of cheap wire into an overgrown yard that was a cemetery for forgotten lawn ornaments; flamingos that were now antiques, broken fragments of ancient and faded lawn gnomes, a discarded tricycle now covered in rust. Katrina was sitting on the steps of the front porch with a cigarette hanging between her two fingers. She smiled weakly as he drew near.

"Nantucket Tucker, how was school today?" she said, though there was something in her eyes that was waiting for another story about him falling.

It never came. "There was a new kid in school today. He invited me to go home with him after school tomorrow, is that okay?"

This had been the first time that her son had ever mentioned a friend or even an acquaintance since he'd begun attending school. Katrina's mouth dropped open, and the cigarette shook between her fingers as she slowly raised it to her mouth. Her eyes were lowered. She'd hoped he'd find friends eventually, so why was there an air of shock and disappointment about her? Why wasn't she happy?

"Yeah, if that's all right with his parents."

"It will be, I'm going to do my homework, okay?"

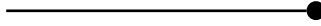
"Yeah, good. Go do that. What'd you learn about today?"

As Nancy was rushing past her, he stopped just underneath the doorway to quickly turn around and answer her question. "Torture and execution methods devised by the Spanish during the Holy Inquisition. They used to rip people's toenails off."

Katrina made a grimace and returned to her cigarette, her hands shaking all the while. "I don't remember them teaching me about that when I was his age."

Dorian Dawes is the Asst. Creative Director as well as blogger and columnist for the online alternative-culture magazine The Catalyst. He is currently working on future installments of The Downers as well as revising his supernatural horror novel When the Lights Go Out. When not writing, he enjoys devising ways to stir up a general ruckus and disrupt corporate tyranny.

Michael English



Finnegan's Night Out

Terry bounced up and down in the line and rubbed his hands together. Condensation wafted out of his mouth as he spoke. "We're gonna get you laid tonight!"

The woman standing in front of he and Finnegan rolled her eyes. Finnegan gave his friend a pained expression. "Maybe you want to say it louder so everyone can hear."

"My bad. I'm just ready to get inside. What took you so long to get here?"

"The wife was at her sister's a lot longer than expected. I had to wait for her to get home to watch the kid."

"For serious? How's that work? She can hang out as long as she wants but whenever you're trying to have a little fun she starts blowing up your phone and interrogating you."

On cue, Lauryn Hill's "Ex-Factor" began playing from Finnegan's coat pocket. His wife insisted that the song be her distinctive ringtone, which Finnegan thought was a little strange since the song was about a bad break-up. Finnegan freed the phone from his pocket and answered.

"I'm not really sure what time I'll be home." Finnegan sighed. "Okay fine. I'll be home before two." He hung up and stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

"You should just turn off the ringer," said Terry.

"I don't think that's a good idea. She'll go ape-shit if she calls and it goes straight to voice mail."

"So what? Tell her the battery died."

Finnegan gave a short, rough laugh and shook his head. "No thanks."

"I don't know why you even bother worrying about what she thinks. You two hate each other."

"I care what she thinks because divorces are expensive. Besides, we don't hate each other. You've never been married, so you wouldn't understand."

Terry shrugged. "Tonight, you're not married either. We're going to get you some strange."

"You make it sound so easy, but I haven't had to pick up a woman in almost ten years. I don't think I'm quite ready for that."

Terry sucked the cold wind through his teeth. "Whatever, man. You can't think like that. If you believe it, then it can happen. We'll meet up with my boy Yusef, then hook you up."

"Who's Yusef?" asked Finnegan.

"He's the guy I told you was interested in doing some promotional parties at a few different clubs. He wanted to meet here so we can check the place out. I think you'd like him. We've hung out a few times and he's a pretty cool cat."

"Is that the guy who took the stripper home a couple of weekends ago?"

Terry cackled and slapped his hands together. "Yeah, that's him. You should've been there. That was some night."

"I wanted to come, but the wife was having a fit because I couldn't find the cable bill."

Terry shook his head. "I don't think you would've been going out whether you lost that bill or not."

"What do you mean?"

"Your wife doesn't let you do anything."

Finnegan noticed a couple of people in line turn their heads and smirk. "Hey, I can do what I want. It's just that sometimes I don't want to deal with the drama."

The two men went through a pat down, paid their cover charges, and entered the bar. A low-lying mist hung in the air from an unseen fog machine. Sauna-like compared to the frigid temperatures outside, sweat broke out in Finnegan's armpits after only a few seconds. He removed his coat and followed Terry towards the dance floor where the music grew to ear-splitting proportions. It sounded as though it came from inside his head, and the bass sent tiny vibrations through the fillings in his teeth. Terry moved fast through the crowd of undulating bodies and Finnegan had difficulty keeping up. Carrying his goose down winter coat through the throng of people made it nearly impossible to avoid collisions, and he found himself muttering "sorry" and "excuse me" until he made out an area of the bar with a smattering of tables.

Terry stood at a table where a large man sat bobbing his head next to a curvaceous woman. He shouted over the music to the man. "This is my boy Finn. Finn, this is Yusef."

Yusef nodded and shook Finnegan's hand. He pointed to the woman and said, "This is Bianca."

Finnegan shook Yusef's hand, but Bianca seemed uninterested in meeting anyone new. She had a sheet of paper in each hand that she

used to fan herself off. The edges of her hair line lay plastered against her skin with sweat.

"You can sit down." Bianca used one of the papers in her hand to point to an open seat at the table.

Finnegan placed his coat on the back of the chair and took a seat. "Thanks."

Terry sat down beside Finnegan. "What time did you get here?"

"About an hour ago," said Yusef. "Bianca's been dancing the whole time." He had one meaty arm resting on the back of Bianca's chair.

"Are you two a couple?" asked Finnegan.

Bianca's faced scrunched up into a frown. "This is my cousin. I'm single."

"You aren't single," said Yusef.

Bianca sucked her teeth. "I might as well be."

"Excuse her," said Yusef. "Her husband has been out of town and Bianca's pissed because she hasn't been getting any."

"Damn Yusef. I didn't ask you to tell all my business. I'm gonna go get a drink." Bianca stood up and wobbled a bit before making her way towards the bar.

Terry watched her behind switch and her body sway as she walked away. "She looks like she's been doing more than just dancing."

"Four shots before we left the house." Yusef pointed to the empty glasses on the table. "Another four since we've been here. I should've left her at home."

"Does she always drink this much?" asked Finnegan.

Yusef shook his head. "Not really, but when she does she acts like an idiot. At least her man won't be home when she gets there. They fight when they drink. One time the neighbors called the cops on them." Yusef saw the look of horror on Finnegan and Terry's faces. "Nothing like that," he said. "I don't think either one of them has the stomach for violence. It was two o'clock in the morning and they were so loud the neighbor called the cops to shut them up."

Finnegan knew that story well. He wondered if his neighbors were just a bit closer if the cops would've come knocking on his door during one of their epic shouting matches.

Bianca arrived back at the table with a rum and diet, and a shot of tequila. She sat and downed the shot before sipping on her drink. "Am I the only one drinking tonight? Y'all some squares."

Terry laughed. "I'm gonna get a little something in a minute, but I have to talk business first."

Bianca sucked her teeth. "Who talks business at a club?"

"I told you before we got here me and Terry got some big things planned," said Yusef. "This is research. Maybe you would've remembered that if you hadn't gotten drunk before we got here. Next time I'm leaving you at home."

"Whatever Yusef." Bianca downed the rest of her rum and Coke. "I'm hitting the dance floor. Hey Frank, do you want to dance?"

"Damn Bianca, at least call the man by his name. His name is Ben," said Yusef.

"Actually, it's Finn," said Finnegan.

Bianca rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Do you want to dance or not?"

Finnegan looked at Terry. Terry gave Bianca's body a cursory

glance, lingering just a bit at her hips and breasts, and gave Finnegan an enthusiastic nod.

Finnegan followed Bianca to the dance floor. She plowed through the crowd with a slight tilt to one-side. A few people gave her angry looks as she forced her way to the middle of the dance floor. Finnegan hurried behind her, partly to keep up, but also because he feared that the angry looks from the fellow club patrons would turn into something more serious.

The limited space on the dance floor forced Finnegan and Bianca close to one another. Bianca didn't seem to mind. Her forehead sat inches from Finnegan's lips and her breasts moved up and down his torso as she gyrated to the music. Finnegan performed a simple two-step in time to the beat with his hands hovering in the air. Then Bianca turned around and put her butt in his crotch and began grinding away. Finnegan tried to prevent it, but soon his excitement grew. Bianca turned her head and smiled at him before backing in a little closer.

They danced that way for two songs before Finnegan began to worry about the expanding sweat mark on the back of Bianca's shirt. From what Finnegan could tell, she had a lot to drink that night, and with the club doing double time as a sauna, he worried that she might fall out on the dance floor. He backed away and Bianca turned around. Finnegan gestured towards the bar. Bianca nodded and grasped his hand. Finnegan navigated from the crowd on the dance floor to the crowd at the bar. Two bartenders scurried back and forth between customers, taking money and filling glasses. Finnegan and Bianca inched their way towards the front.

"I'm sorry I called you by the wrong name. I'm so bad with names and the music is so loud in here. It's Finn?"

"Finnegan actually, but my friends call me Finn." Everyone with

the exception of Finnegan's wife called him Finn. She thought Finn sounded "ghetto."

Finnegan reached the bar, and after a few passes, he caught the bartender's attention. He ordered a glass of water for Bianca and a beer for himself. He paid and handed the water to Bianca.

She accepted the glass and took a drink. Then pursed her lips together and stuck out her tongue as though she had just drunk lighter fluid. "What is this?"

"It's water. Do you need a lemon?"

"No. I need some alcohol."

"I thought you might need some water. I was worried about you getting dehydrated."

Bianca put the water on the bar. "Thanks Finn, but I'm a big girl. I can handle myself." She pushed up to the front of the bar until she got the bartender's attention. Finnegan sipped his beer and tried to get a view of the table where he and Bianca had left Terry and Yusef. A few people blocked his view, but from what Finnegan could see, no one remained at the table to guard his coat.

Bianca elbowed him in the back. He turned around and saw she had her hands full with four shot glasses. "I need some help with these."

Finnegan held two of the shot glasses and his bottle of beer. He gestured with a nod of his head towards the table. "I think we should go back. I don't see Terry or your cousin there."

Bianca nodded and Finnegan led them back through the crowd to the table. When they reached the table, Finnegan sat the drinks down and immediately checked his coat pockets to make sure his phone and car keys were still present. He noticed he had a missed call from his wife. Bianca sat down and drank both shots she held and put

the glasses on the table with the rest of the empties.

"I thought you got shots for everyone," said Finnegan.

"Nope. Just me and you. If the businessmen want a drink they can get their own. Are you going to take your shots?"

Finnegan hadn't bothered to ask about the contents of the shot glass, but as he brought it to his mouth he could smell tequila. He hated tequila but he drank the shot anyway and did his best to keep his face from squirming. He passed the second one to Bianca, which she drank without hesitation.

Finnegan looked around the club. "Where do you think they went?"

Bianca shrugged. Her shot glass tower crashed to the table. "I don't know and I don't care. I think I'm ready to go home. You think you could give me a ride?"

Finnegan's head swiveled around the club and his eyes searched for any sign of Yusef and Terry. "I don't know. Didn't you come here with your cousin?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't want me riding in his car."

"Why not?"

"Because I've been drinking. He thinks I'm going to throw-up. He's such an asshole. That only happened once."

"Let me just give Terry a call. Wait here." He went to the men's room where the only person present was a bathroom attendant who gave Finnegan a polite nod. Finnegan nodded back and pulled out his cell phone. He saw two more missed calls from his wife.

Terry answered Finnegan's call after a few rings. The low hum and relative silence gave Finnegan the impression that Terry was in a car.

"Where are you?"

"Me and Yusef finished up so we're on our way to the strip club near my house to relax. He's going to drop me off after."

"You're not coming back?"

"Nope. I'll holla at you tomorrow."

"You're ditching me? I thought you were supposed to be hooking me up."

"I'm not ditching you," said Terry. "You're there with Bianca, and from what I could tell, you don't need me to hook you up. I saw you grinding on her."

"That was just dancing. She wants me to give her a ride home."

"Then give it to her. That's code for come on over and sex me up."

"I don't think it's code for anything. I think she just knew her cousin was going to ditch her."

"I'm telling you, she wants to hook up." Terry's voice became a bit more distant. Finnegan could hear him talking to someone in the background. "Yusef said she just sent him a text message saying she wanted you to tap that."

"Stop lying."

"I'm for real. Look Finn, this chick is ripe. Yusef said she hasn't had sex in months, just like you. Plus, you're both married so that means there's no strings attached. This is the perfect opportunity. Even her cousin says so. Just drive her home, bang it out a few times, pop a mint, and go home to your bitch of a wife. You might not get another opportunity this good for awhile."

"You really think I should?"

"Of course I think you should. That was the whole point of you coming out tonight. Now I'm about to go look at some naked ladies. You go have fun." Terry hung up the phone.

Finnegan left the restroom and returned to Bianca. Her hung head over the table. She looked more willing to take a nap than have sex.

"Terry and your cousin left."

"Figures. So, can you take me home?"

"Sure," said Finnegan. "Let's go."

They walked outside to Finnegan's old Honda Accord where a forward facing car seat reigned in the back. Finnegan started the ignition and caught a glimpse of the car seat in his rear view mirror. He hesitated before putting the car in gear.

"Bianca, I need to tell you something. I know you want to have sex with me, and to be honest I'm definitely down with that, but I think it's only fair that I let you know that I'm married."

Bianca stared at Finnegan with her mouth hanging open. "What makes you think I want to have sex with you?"

"Terry told me that you sent your cousin a text telling him so."

"I didn't say anything to anyone about having sex with you. I think your boy was messing with you."

"Oh." Finnegan put the car in gear and promised himself he'd figure out a way to punish Terry for causing him so much embarrassment. Beyond a few simple directions, they road in silence, until Finnegan pulled to a stop in front of Bianca's apartment building.

"Thank you for the ride home," she said.

"No problem," said Finnegan. "Sorry about the misunderstand-

ing.”

“It’s okay. You are an attractive man, so it’s not like I would be totally against it.”

“Really?” said Finnegan.

Bianca unbuckled her seat-belt and leaned over to give Finnegan a hug. When they separated, Bianca gave him a long gaze before leaning back in. Bianca’s lips brushed his, then she began to kiss him more passionately, her tongue slipping in his mouth and twirling around. When she stopped, she opened her mouth and Finnegan thought maybe he was on the verge of receiving an invitation to come inside. However, instead of an invitation, the alcoholic contents of a long drunken night came spewing from Bianca’s mouth and spraying Finnegan’s coat, pants, the dashboard, gear shift, seats, and floor.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.”

Finnegan plugged his nostrils with the tips of his fingers. “It’s okay. Accidents hap-“ Lauryn Hill’s “Ex-Factor” began playing from Finnegan’s coat pocket. Sitting in car filled with vomit immediately following a kiss with another woman made the song seem much more appropriate than it had been in the past. It teetered on the edge of being prophetic.

Finnegan answered the phone. “Hey. No, I’m outside right now.”

Bianca sat in the passenger seat holding her head and muttering apologies.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” said Finnegan. “Just some people walking by outside the club.” The smell of used tequila began to fill the car. Finnegan rolled down the windows to let some air in and he turned on the interior lights to survey the damage. A bomb full of brownish liquid seemed to have exploded in his front seat. It would certainly take more than club soda and a damp towel to clean up the mess.

"I might be getting home late. I have to drop Terry off. Yeah, I did meet him here, but his car won't start so I'm going to have to take him home. You know, it's pretty late and I've been drinking. I could just crash over there." Finnegan gave a nervous laugh. "I'm not up to anything. I'm just being cautious."

Bianca began gagging and tried to escape the car, but Finnegan had forgotten to unlock the doors. She threw up again and vomit coated the passenger window. Then she turned and gave the dashboard another spray for good measure.

"Oh shit. I gotta go," said Finnegan. "No, there's no one with me. I know you hear a bunch of moaning, but I swear that doesn't have anything to do with me." Finnegan hung up on his wife and unlocked the car doors just in time for Bianca to stick her head out and throw-up in the parking lot.

Bianca unbuckled her seat-belt. "Thanks for the ride home," she said. "Sorry about your car." She got up and closed the door behind her without making eye contact with Finnegan.

The phone rang again, this time the caller ID indicated that it was Terry. Finnegan let the call go to voice mail. He had no desire to talk to the man who had him convinced he would have fun and maybe get a little action, but instead ditched him with a vomit-spewing drunkard. A plan began to formulate in his head. He would tell his wife that Terry got sick, let the car air out overnight, and get it cleaned in the morning. She would be angry that Finnegan got home past two and that the car reeked, but at least it couldn't get any worse.

Finnegan felt a little better after he had the lie grounded in his mind, complete with the inevitable follow-up answers he would need to give his wife. He checked his voice mail to see what Terry had to say.

"Hey man I just wanted to give you a heads up. I got a call from

your wife a minute ago. She was asking for you and I told her you had a lot to drink and that you've been asleep on my couch for the past half hour. I told her it probably wouldn't be safe for you to drive home, so enjoy your night homey. I got your back."

Finnegan erased the message and hung up. As he stared at his phone in horror, another call came in playing the all too familiar tune of Lauryn Hill's "Ex-Factor."

I have an English degree from Morehouse College and, unlike Finnegan, I'm happily married with two kids.

Caroline Taylor

TEA WITH NELSON EDDY

Of course, it was a dumb idea. But just see how far you get trying to tell grownups they're doing something really lame. Christmas is supposed to be cold and, with any luck, snowy. It's supposed to be full of the heady scents of fir and pine, hot spiced cider, and wet mittens. Instead, because *they* wanted to "try something different," we're standing on the beach outside the Fort George Hotel in Belize, British Honduras, watching the waves roll ashore under azure skies and wishing somebody (that would be you, Mom) had remembered to pack our swim suits.

Well, maybe I'm the only one thinking that. Dad and Mom are deep into a heated, whispered argument. It's obvious they don't want me to listen, even though I'm standing right there. I put on my good-girl act and wander off down the shoreline, supposedly looking for seashells. Anyway, who cares what has them going at it?

On the horizon, piles of clouds are building puffy towers. I can see an occasional flash of lightning. Is the storm going farther out to sea, or is it headed our way? If I turn my back, I won't have to think about rain. Because what I really want is snow, which is not going to happen.

The spacious hotel where we're staying is practically the only nice thing about this place. It's got these old-fashioned louvered windows running, ceiling to floor, across the width of the lobby and dining room and all across the sea-facing walls of our rooms. It reminds me of the plantation shutters at home, only these aren't for show, I have quickly learned. It's because our hotel is not air conditioned—unless you think a

damp ocean breeze does the trick. But the patio rimmed with red and pink bougainvillea is sort of pretty—if you like tropical stuff. It reminds me of one of those postcards from Bermuda. Only we're much farther south, and the water here isn't turquoise like you see in postcards. The beach is a bit tarry too, which may explain why there aren't any people enjoying it. Or maybe it's a private beach, and the other hotel guests have better things to do.

"We're going in," says Mom, jerking her head toward the hotel. "You can stay if you like."

What's to like since you didn't think to bring my swim suit? With a sigh, I trudge across the sand, wondering how I'm going to fill up the rest of the afternoon. There's a large grand piano in the corner of the dining room but no sheet music. For three whole days, I've only been able to play the few songs I've managed to memorize, like "They Call the Wind Mariah" and "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing." I'm getting tired of hearing the same old tunes, and I wonder if any of the shops downtown have sheet music. Or swim suits. I pick up my pace, dashing across the patio to ask Mom if we can go shopping.

In the corner of the lobby, they've put up a tall, scraggly evergreen. This morning it was bare, but now it's festooned with a bedraggled chain of ancient lights, most of which are so scratched, you can't tell what color they're supposed to be. It needs tinsel, which probably doesn't exist here at the end of the Earth.

Margo, the desk clerk on the day shift, is the only spot of color in this otherwise drab place. Her loosely curled hair is a rainbow of shades from dark brown to yellow, and she wears vividly colored clothes in pink and purple and orange. She's talking to Mom, and when I get there, I hear her saying, "...fine things in the shops on Main Street. I'm sure you'll find something quite lovely." Her voice has a sing-song lilt that makes me smile.

“Can we—I mean, do they have swimwear?”

Margo scratches her copper skin with an inch-long nail, curved like a claw and coated in purple polish. “Actually, I don’t shop there myself.” She smiles at Mom. “It’s not far. If you want to take a look ...”

We head off to the shops, only to discover that “fine” means expensive—by way of being imported from England. On the other hand, inexpensive means cheap. Those items, we’re told, are sold in another part of town which, Mom explains in a whisper she hopes the sales clerk can’t overhear, “is not for people like us.”

Since quite a number of the shops we’ve been into seem to be selling heavy, thick English wool, it’s pretty obvious that only “people like us” would be stupid enough to buy stuff like that in this heat.

God must be listening, for almost immediately the weather turns cold and damp. Sheets of rain hang like a curtain blocking our view of the ocean—which we can’t see anyway because we’ve had to close the louvers on our windows to keep the cold ocean breeze out.

Mom’s reading a novel while Dad tries to find the BBC on the radio. I’ve brought an Agatha Christie along to read, but I’m not in the mood. We can’t go Christmas shopping and it’s not cold enough to snow and all of my friends back home are shopping and pigging out on sugar cookies and sneaking kisses under the mistletoe. Why *me*? What did I do to deserve this dismal fate?

At dinner, we’re joined by a loud, jolly man who seems to know a lot about what’s happening back home. “I don’t know about that Kennedy fellow,” he says as soon as the grownups’ drinks are served. “He just might call Khrushchev’s bluff, and *then* where’ll we be?”

Mom takes a last drag on her cigarette, stubbing it out in the crystal ashtray. “I voted for him.”

"Yeah, well so did a whole lot of other people. Otherwise, we'd be dealing with Tricky Dick, wouldn't we." He laughs at his own joke, revealing crooked front teeth stained yellow from tobacco.

I can't remember his name. Bronson? Bradson? He's wearing a white open-necked shirt under a plaid sport coat—something that seems to irk Mom although naturally she doesn't say anything. (Dad always wears a suit and tie.)

"Lucky you've got your family here," he says to Dad. "'Cause when the bombs start falling, you'll all escape the fallout."

Dad takes a sip of scotch. "And how would you know that?"

"The westerlies, my friend. Only time the wind blows in from the east down here is during hurricane season."

Great. All my friends will be nuked (or maybe one or two will survive in the bomb shelters their dads built, but eventually they'll run out of food and water and then they'll probably wish they'd been vaporized anyway). Meanwhile, I, the last surviving seventeen-year-old American girl on Earth, will be stuck in this wretched British colony with my parents.

Mom, I suddenly notice, is staring at the man, one eyebrow arched in disbelief—or maybe she just doesn't like him. Nodding at me, she places her napkin on the table and excuses herself, saying she has a headache. *I'm* certainly not sticking around. Swallowing the last of my fish (fish for dinner, fish for lunch, even fish for breakfast), I scoot my chair back.

If we had a television, we could see just how scary things are back home. But there's only the tiny radio, and Mom won't let me borrow it, saying the noise will make her headache worse. I stare at the pathetic small potted plant that we've decorated with Mom's earrings and a string of pearls. "Can we call Lisa?"

"It's too expensive," she tells me. "Your father and I— well, it's costing us more to stay here than we'd figured, so right now funds are a bit tight ..." She pauses in front of the door to my room. "Let's see in the morning, okay, sweetie?"

I pace the confines of my room, shivering inside the fine English wool sweater that Mom bought for me at one of the English stores we'd visited on our so-called Christmas shopping spree. She'd had the funds for that, didn't she? Why don't we go to a cheaper hotel if we can't afford this one? Already, I can hear her saying, "People like us ... Those less expensive places aren't ..."

Yeah. I get it. I'm not stupid. But I *am* bored out of my gourd.

In the morning, I pay a visit to Margo. "There's nothing to do!" I wail.

"What? How about some of those lovely songs you've been playing on the piano?"

"I'm *tired* of them." I pause, biting my cuticle. "If I had some sheet music, maybe then ..."

"I know what we can do. You can help me wrap presents for under the tree." A long, orange and yellow-clad arm gestures at the feeble excuse for Christmas crouched in the corner of the lobby.

"Okay. But who are they for?"

Margo grins, laying her index finger across her lips. "It's just empty boxes. To make things look a bit more like Christmas, you know?"

These last two words come out pitched way higher than the others, and I can't help grinning.

Margo is one of those tall, skinny women who are so ugly they wind up being attractive—in a witchy sort of way. Her clothes and the plucked eyebrows, rouged cheeks, and carefully lipsticked mouth re-

mind me of tales of gypsy life. She seems always to decorate herself in long, dangling earrings, multiple jangling bracelets, and endless strings of brightly colored beads and chains that swing side to side across a not very well-endowed bosom. I wonder how old she is while I watch her teeter toward me as she crosses the lobby in three-inch spike heels. She's carrying a collection of empty boxes and some sheets of wrapping paper. Or am I looking at wallpaper remnants?

After we finish, the tree does wind up looking a bit more Christmassy. Still, I just can't seem to summon those feelings of excitement and anticipation that have, up to now, meant I was finally getting into the spirit. Instead, I wander back and forth in the dining room, watching the waiters toss white cloths over the tables and set the cutlery out for lunch. What I would give for a hamburger. Even a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

I can't finish my lunch—not that the fish isn't delicious. But I've just been informed that Mom and Dad are going to Miami for a quick in-and-out consultation designed to free up some of those sorely needed funds. I can tell they're not happy to leave me behind. Mom especially seems upset. But Dad says, "No point in buying another round-trip fare for such a short trip." Anyway, nothing's going to happen to a well brought up young lady in a very proper British hotel, even if she's by herself for a couple of days.

I'm thrilled. While they're away, I'll transform myself into an enchanting woman of mystery. The hotel manager's son (tall and handsome, of course) will discover me strolling about the grounds looking elusive and irresistible. He'll invite me to join him in a cocktail. We'll dine on lobster and champagne, and then he'll drive me in his Jaguar convertible up into the foothills to a lavish hacienda on the outskirts of Belize where the annual Christmas ball for "people like us" will be in full swing. We'll waltz in each other's arms until the midnight hour when my fairy

godmother will yank me back to the lonely reality of an evening spent with the BBC World Service and Agatha Christie.

With nothing more pressing to do the next morning than to show up for breakfast before ten, I spend more time than usual getting dressed. Instead of a convenient, but childish braid, I let my hair hang loose, using some of Mom's combs to hold it off my face. Alluring women wear dresses. I borrow one of Mom's. Some of her makeup, too—including mascara and rouge to give my apple cheeks that hollow definition that separates the women from the girls. A dash of her perfume and a dab of Clearasil on the one offending pimple, and I'm ready. If I manage to look the part, everything might just fall into place.

The hotel seems deserted under a slate sky. The sea looks angry and choppy, and there's a stiff breeze raising goose bumps on my arms. Strolling back and forth along the shoreline gets me nothing but a strong appetite. I seem to have the dining room all to myself, and the waiter's compliments on my appearance make me blush. Have I overdone it with the makeup? Is the new me too much of a change from the old?

I dash upstairs and wipe the rouge off with a tissue. Staring out at the gray, rain-pocked ocean, I realize there are five long hours stretching ahead until dinner. Tears well up at the thought of having to spend the whole afternoon by myself. This is supposed to be an adventure. But, instead of lolling on a hot sunny beach in mid-December—the envy of all my friends—I am holed up in this miserable hotel on a cold, raw afternoon, staring at a droopy potted plant pathetically festooned with costume jewelry, unable to face another long evening with only Agatha Christie for company.

Maybe I'll call Mom and Dad. Only that will cost money we don't seem to have. Plus, it'll make them really worry—and with no way to get here any sooner than they've already arranged. They'll think I'm being childish or even homesick. Anyway, enchanting women of mystery don't

cry their hearts out alone in hotel rooms. I take a deep breath, vowing to return to the lobby as soon as I can figure out how to get rid of the mascara staining my cheeks.

Margo, as usual, is painting her nails. This time, they're going to be a bright tomato shade of red. A radio somewhere out of sight is playing a lilting calypso tune sung in a language that occasionally sounds like English. She's humming tunelessly along, tapping her foot on the floor.

I lean my chin on my hands. "How many people are staying here?"

"My, you look pretty. Are you going somewhere?"

I roll my eyes. "Not by myself. They would *never*—"

"Of course not. But you're all dressed up, you know?"

I shrug it off, stifling a grin at the upward inflection of the last two words. "I'm not a tomboy."

She raises one brow. "A what?"

"You know," I try to explain. "A girl who acts like a boy."

"Oh." She examines the fingers of her right hand. "Your parents will be back tomorrow morning, right?"

"Noon, I think."

"Do you suppose they would mind if I invited you to have tea with me this afternoon—when my shift ends?"

Tea with Margo? What a lovely English thing to do—and certainly better than the alternative. "Oh, yes!" I cry. "That is, if you're asking."

"For sure," she laughs.

Margo's place turns out to be a one-room walk-up on the second floor of a seedy, rundown building. The stairs leading up to her flat

are scratched and stained and smell like dirty socks. It makes me wonder how much money she earns as the front desk clerk at Belize's most ritzy hotel.

Her room is a riot of color, crammed full of large, heavy rattan furniture. A mound of brightly patterned scarves spills out of a half-open dresser drawer. Bottles and jars of every size and description litter the top of the dresser. Ropes and chains of beads drape themselves over a corner of the mirror's frame, and postcards of exotic island resorts are jammed between the mirror and frame, leaving only a small circle of glass into which Margo peers intently, running a bright red finger beneath her eyes to remove some smudged mascara.

"Won't you sit down?" She gestures toward the sofa and, seeing me hesitate, sweeps a pile of magazines off the end into a large brass tub that seems to be a catch-all for books, magazines, clothing, shoes, and several well-worn record albums.

I settle myself and then jump up to offer her help.

"It's nothing, really," she assures me. "I'll just put the pot on. Do you take cream? Of course, you do. You're probably not used to tea as strong as I like it." She laughs, disappearing into the bathroom to fill a metal kettle with water. A hotplate appears from a shelf beneath the basin, and cream emerges from a tiny refrigerator that's wedged between the basin and bathtub.

I wind up pouring most of the cream into my tea before I can swallow without choking, but Margo seems not to notice. She offers me a tin of shortbread cookies. "Shall we listen to records?"

"Sure. Do you have any Christmas carols?"

Margo hesitates. "Actually, no. Shall I play my favorite then?" She rummages through the albums in the brass tub, selecting one that is especially dog-eared.

It seems like forever, but it's only a little less than an hour as we listen in silence to the scratchy but soulful voices of Nelson Eddy and Jeannette MacDonald, singing of dreams fashioned of starlight, perfumed of roses and dew, dreams they'll remember forever, though they may be parted.

They—Mom and Dad, that is—usually make fun of this kind of music. I think the tunes are lovely, but the words are kind of sappy—the sort of songs that old people like. Margo's eyes are moist and distant. It's like she's no longer in the room with me but somewhere magical, perhaps enfolded in Nelson Eddy's arms. A half smile lingers about her lips as she silently mouths the lyrics.

Maybe it's the gloomy weather or the treacly music. Maybe Margo really is a witch. Because I can't seem to fight off the wave of sadness that suddenly engulfs me, suffocating in its heavy embrace. Christmas is supposed to be *happy*.

She's still blissfully lost in her pathetic fantasy as my feet clatter down the creaky steps and out onto the street. It's rude, I know. But I have to escape.

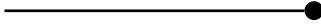
Back in the comfort of a bed changed daily in a room twice the size of Margo's flat, I toss and turn, unable to sleep—frightened that, if I do succumb, the spell she put me under will work, transforming me into “one of them”—a waitress or a desk clerk or a shopkeeper, doomed to live out my days in a world as circumscribed as hers, bounded on one side by the sea and, on the other, by a dense tropical forest.

My feelings swing like a pendulum between two extremes: giddy gratitude that I am fortunate to be among “people like us” and shame-faced guilt for harboring such thoughts—for realizing that people like us can escape whenever we want to, but Margo will still be here, day after

endless day, registering guests, painting her nails, listening to the radio—
and going home to tea with Nelson Eddy.

My short stories have appeared in A FLY IN AMBER, THE FIRST LINE, THE GREENSILK JOURNAL, A LONG STORY SHORT, THE ODDVILLE PRESS, and THE DAN RIVER ANTHOLOGY 2009. My mystery novel, WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?, has been published by Five Star/Cengage.

Barbara Donnelly Lane



Toasting Poodles

I sip wine and wait for the only friend I have left in the city. It feels strange to be back in Manhattan, a once glorious beacon of promise. Like a moth I almost beat myself to death here once, tried to break through a glass ceiling to bask in the light of fame. It took me half a decade to finally come to my dazed senses, knock it the hell off, and move my battered self in a yellow U-Haul to a new life in New Jersey.

I swirl my drink and study my glass. I can't remember what the streaks that look like rain running in rivulets down a window mean about the quality of my wine, but I know they mean *something*, so I give them a good deal of attention. This is better than thinking about what I learned in the doctor's office, the real reason I bothered to come to New York on the train.

At exactly two o'clock, I see a familiar face at the hostess stand. Mary-Snow Stafford's blonde hair is paler than butter and has been cropped short since our last luncheon. The new cut looks good on her, accentuates her high cheekbones. The pearl choker shows off a long neck. A Gucci bag proclaims her status as a successful woman, the president of her own travel agency.

On the other hand, my loose sack dress and clogs scream I am a failed actress turned drama teacher in the suburbs. What with all those medical bills piling up, I bought my last purse at a thrift shop. The hostess scans her reservations book. It has not occurred to her yet that this stylish newcomer is connected with me... the dumpy lady.

In truth, it's amusing to watch this version of Mary-Snow from a distance, this Mary-Snow in the patent leather Imbroglia pumps. After all, I've seen the oval ashtray stamped "Mabel's Whore House: Where The Customer Always Comes First" displayed in her office. I was with her when she tightly wrapped that little piece of Americana *tat* in bubble-paper as if it was the finest piece of crystal after a girls' weekend in Vegas. When she finally looks in my direction, I smile broadly and wave. She points me out to the hostess, who looks confused, and then she strides over to my table. The restaurant is fairly empty after the main rush, and our waitress is Miss Jenny-on-the-Spot for the drink order.

"I'll have what *she's* having," Mary-Snow says as she settles into a chair.

"She means we want to order a *bottle* of what I'm having, please," I correct, and the waitress slashes something off her ticket with a chewed, yellow pencil.

"You know, Jeannie," Mary-Snow says, shrugging off her fur coat, "we should be popping a cork and drinking champagne! Ordering fireworks! This is a celebration."

"Yeah?" I raise an eyebrow. "Is the Concorde back in business?"

"Better." Mary-Snow leans conspiratorially across the table. She turns her perfectly manicured fingers into scissors. "John finally went through with the *snip-snip!* No more little white pills for me!"

"Really?" A comical picture pops into my mind of Mary-Snow's stately attorney husband with boxer shorts bunched around his ankles.... a giant pair of gardening sheers pointed towards his crotch. "But you're so young, Mary-Snow. What if you want to have kids later?"

"I'm thirty-six, but my husband is sixty-three. Before you know it, John will be the one in diapers. Why would he want a baby?"

"I'm not talking about *him*." A familiar lump forms in my throat. A familiar stone settles in my stomach. "How reversible is a vasectomy anyway? I mean, *snip-snip*? Isn't that a bit cavalierly permanent?"

"That's the hope!" Mary-Snow laughs. She has a cocktail party laughter, as light and tinkling as a slot machine, as carefree as talks of the weather, shoes bought on sale, and vacations in Hawaii. "If I'm ever feeling extra maternal, I'll get another dog."

"Sure." I push my bangs off my forehead, feeling hot. "*That's* the same thing." Mary-Snow smirks and pulls a small book from her purse. She pushes it across the table to me. It's a black leather album filled with pictures of poodles.

"See the tan one?" Mary-Snow asks, flipping the pages, tapping an image with a long, red fingernail. "That's Tallulah. All five of them are show dogs, but Tallulah's got the best pedigree, the most ribbons. She's my favorite rescue."

"Rescue?" I glance at the snapshot.

"I got her from a pound on the Upper East Side. Like a woman, when a show dog gets to a certain age, it's easy to discard her. It's not uncommon to find great girls like this one abandoned," Mary-Snow laments. "That's why I married an older man like John, you know. He'll be embalmed before I'm wrinkled."

I hand her back the photo book. "What does that have to do with whether or not you start a family?"

"Do you know how long it takes to housebreak a *human*, Jeannie?" she asks incredulously. "It's simply shocking. I'll stick with canines, thank-you-very-much. I'll buy a male nurse when I need help with my own bedpan."

I sip from my glass, speechless. Mary-Snow normally fills me up

with a renewed sense of fun as if she herself is a fizzy drink: ebullient and warming. But the lack of desire to hold an infant close to her---to pass on her Cupid's bow mouth or her peaches and cream complexion---saddens me in that moment. And I don't even like dogs.

Still, she chatters on about how her husband has just commissioned an artist to do portraits of each four-legged member of her "family" in oil, which prompts my mind to wander to the hallway in my mother's house in Rochester. For as long as I can remember, it's been wallpapered from top to bottom with framed pictures of me and my siblings: pasty-faced children grinning through every stage of life. In contrast, my own hallway back in Jersey is a barren alley of magnolia paint and black-and-white prints bought on sale from Pier One.

Finally the waitress returns with our wine, and we order manicotti with garlic bread and salad. After my morning, I don't care what I put inside my body. What does it matter if I get fat? If I pickle my insides with salt? I decide I'll probably get the triple chocolate cake for dessert. Anything loaded down with sugar and butter.

"So how's Henry?" Mary-Snow asks, pulling out a compact and touching up her lipstick. "Is it love or hate this week?"

"More like disdainful indifference."

"Why so?" Mary-Snow crinkles her nose and sticks her chin into the palm of her hand, elbow on the table. Whatever else I can say about her, she has a way of being very attentive, of hanging onto words like whatever you're saying matters. Her eyes can feel like flashlights probing for what's wrong.

Uncomfortable, I wave my hand as if to wave away the discussion, but she waits. She'd be a good policeman, staring at people in an interrogation room until they cracked under the spotlight of her eyes. I want to spill my guts in less than two minutes.

"It's kind of ironic," I finally admit, "the reason for my discontent. I mean, here we are celebrating your divorce from birth control, yet I have never needed it."

"What do you mean by that?" Mary-Snow blinks, and I realize it is a reaction to the bitter edge I had not meant to slip into my tone.

I shrug and trace the rim of my wineglass with the tip of my finger. It makes the tiniest squeak like a weak note blown on a flute. "Three strikes and I'm out, I guess. Isn't that how it goes? The IVF won't take. I'm completely barren, and all my darling husband can say is our bank account is too drained for further measures. He wouldn't even go see the new specialist with me this morning to get another opinion."

"Oh, honey," Mary-Snow grabs my hand. "I knew you were trying to have a baby, but I didn't know it's been a problem! And here I am going on and on about John's *snip-snip*! I'm such a bitch! You should have stopped me!"

"It's not *your* fault." I look down at her long fingers closed over my hand, covering my simple wedding band. "Anyway, Henry acts as if it's fine, as if he doesn't even care I can't have children. I know I shouldn't, but I hate him for not feeling like I do, for not pumping his fist in the air and screaming." I pull my hand back, not wanting human touch, pick up the wine bottle to pour myself another glass. "When I left New York I felt like I'd finally figured out I didn't need to be on Broadway to feel like a successful person. I'd be *fine* teaching kids drama in the hinterlands. And I was right. There are more important things to life than a career in theatre."

She nods. "A *lot* more important things."

"Like raising a family!" I say fervently. "I mean, how can anyone not want to have children? I don't understand it. They give the whole thing *meaning*. What's wrong with you?"

Mary-Snow blushes and shifts in her seat. "I've just never had any

of those nurturing impulses, I guess. Children are... squirmy and expensive."

"How can you say that? You carry around photographs of your poodles!"

"Oh, I love *them*," she laughs. "They don't talk back when they hit adolescence, and puppies are consistently cuter than newborns."

"But they're dogs, Mary-Snow. Not babies." Heat is rushing into my cheeks. Frustration is lashing out of me like whips looking for anybody. "Don't you think commissioning portraits for animals is a bit silly?"

"Could be." She looks at me calmly, completely unfazed, and I think she would be perfectly capable of putting any teenager giving her lip firmly in his place. "But why does it matter to you what I commission to put in my house?"

We stare at each other for a hard moment as if trying to understand abstract pieces of art hanging in the MET, and the tears start streaming down my face.

"It doesn't," I admit, practically *wail*, tears dripping off my chin. "It's just so unfair. I mean I *want* to cut the crusts off PB&J sandwiches, sing lullabies, finger-paint with toddlers..." My voice cracks. "And there you are sitting over there, probably as fertile as a rabbit, getting your husband *snip-snipped*, wanting none of it."

"Oh, Jeannie," she grabs for my hand again, her voice soothing, her eyes softening. "I have six brothers and a sister because my mother was a Catholic. She felt obligated to carry each unwanted pregnancy to term though she and Daddy couldn't afford half of us. I've made my own way in this world, and now I'm getting crap because I don't want to be a part of the 'uterus club'? For saying, yes! I'm selfish! I *like* traveling to China and London and Paris on a whim. If I had a child, I know I'd treat him like a pet---use a nanny like a kennel---and what would be the

good of that? Does not wanting a baby to change my lifestyle make me less of a person?"

"Of course not." I am suddenly ashamed, looking down into my drink.

"Anyway, I've known you for a long time, Jeannie." Mary-Snow reaches for the wine bottle. "I remember when you first left New York, and you weren't quite as blasé about the stage-right exit as you're pretending to be. As I recall, you were pretty bummed out until you met and married Henry and realized a new dream. So now you find out you can't have kids with him the old-fashioned way. Does that mean you can't have a legitimate family? That you'll never be a parent?"

"If you say one word about how I should adopt... or rescue dogs... I'm going to stab you with my butter knife," I snap. "I swear I won't be able to control myself."

She puts her hands in the air in a gesture of surrender, and I wipe my nose on my sleeve, not even caring about the snot, overwhelmed by the empty space within me. I stare at her until her eyes are like mine: brimming with tears enough to fill up all the oceans she's crossed in her travels. I can see she wants to kiss away this hurt for me as if I was a little girl, to gather me in her arms and comfort me.

"Say something," I sniff, grabbing a cloth napkin to use as a handkerchief.

Looking desperate, Mary-Snow glances at our two empty glasses and evenly drains the last of the bottle into them. "We need more wine."

Blessedly, the waitress comes out with our manicotti. As she puts my plate in front of me, I look at her carefully for the first time. She is pretty: a typical actress-slash-model type with long, brown hair and big boobs. If I ask her, I know she will tell me she's marking time at the res-

restaurant---waiting for her big break---earning money between auditions because this is not the life she plans to lead forever. I wonder if she'll ever find an accountant to marry instead like I did. I wonder if she'll ever have baby girls to carpool to tap class. I wonder if she'll feel like a complete failure if she can't have the career she wanted or the children, and I almost start to cry again.

Mary-Snow calls her secretary on her cell phone and cancels all her afternoon meetings. I drink. The conversation moves to the quality of our wine, to the dry taste, the nice color, and I ask Mary-Snow what legs on a glass of Chardonnay mean as I swirl my drink in my glass. She tells me because this mother of dogs knows everything there is to know about civilized living. Then she asks me if I'm okay, and I say I've been better, so she makes a new toast.

"Here's to the things in life we really choose," she says. "Good husbands and good friends."

"And," I tap her glass, "good poodles."

"Here, here," she murmurs softly, and I study her, wishing to be more like her: this woman who doesn't need children, this quirky friend who flits within the brightest city on Earth without self-destructing. But there is no acting the part of content. I feel too much as if my wings have caught on fire. As if my whole heart is burning.

I know I can hail a cab when lunch is finished.

I can take a train away from the city's madness, roll away from the place where I've felt so much disappointment.

I can ride a poodle bareback all the way home to the Garden State.

But there will be no escaping the limits of medical science.

I will still have an empty womb.

I will still have to learn how to refill an empty heart.

I will still have to make new choices.

To let you know a little bit about me, I've had work appear in a variety of publications including The Palo Alto Review, Sport Literate, Reader's Break, Small Spiral Notebook, On the Line Magazine, Characters, SHINE Brightly, Beyond Centauri, The Amethyst Review (Canada) and others. My play, I Left the Dead Man in a Bathtub in England, was produced in May 2003 during the FMPAT New Plays Festival in Dallas, Texas. I've had creative non-fiction essays chosen as finalist entries in 2009 and 2010 in the Faulkner-Wisdom competition in New Orleans. I've lived in twelve states, Germany, and England, but I am happy to be in Atlanta now because I have always been a Southerner at heart. I have a BA in English from Georgia Southern University and MAT in English Education from Georgia State University.

Submission Guidelines

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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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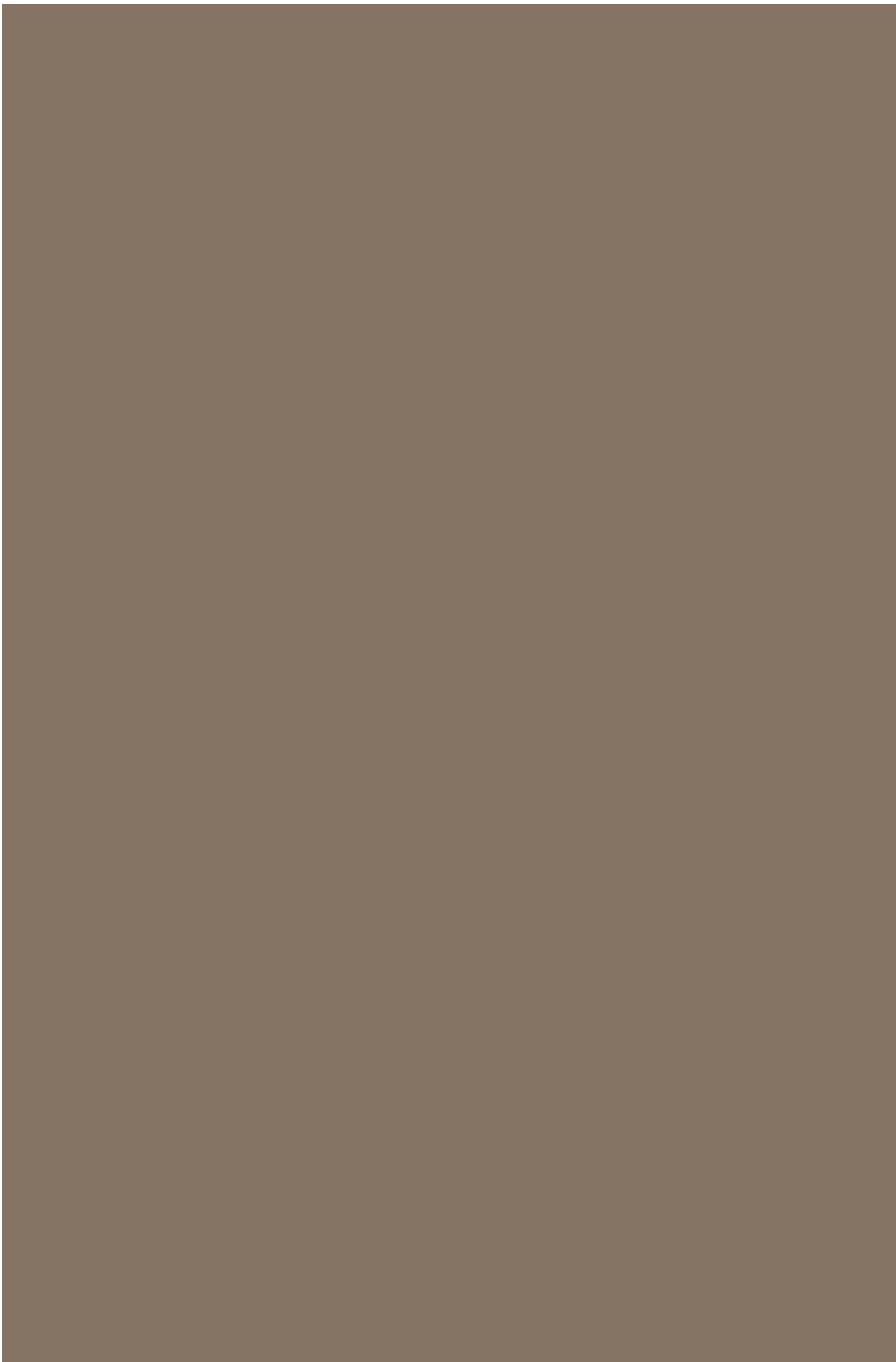
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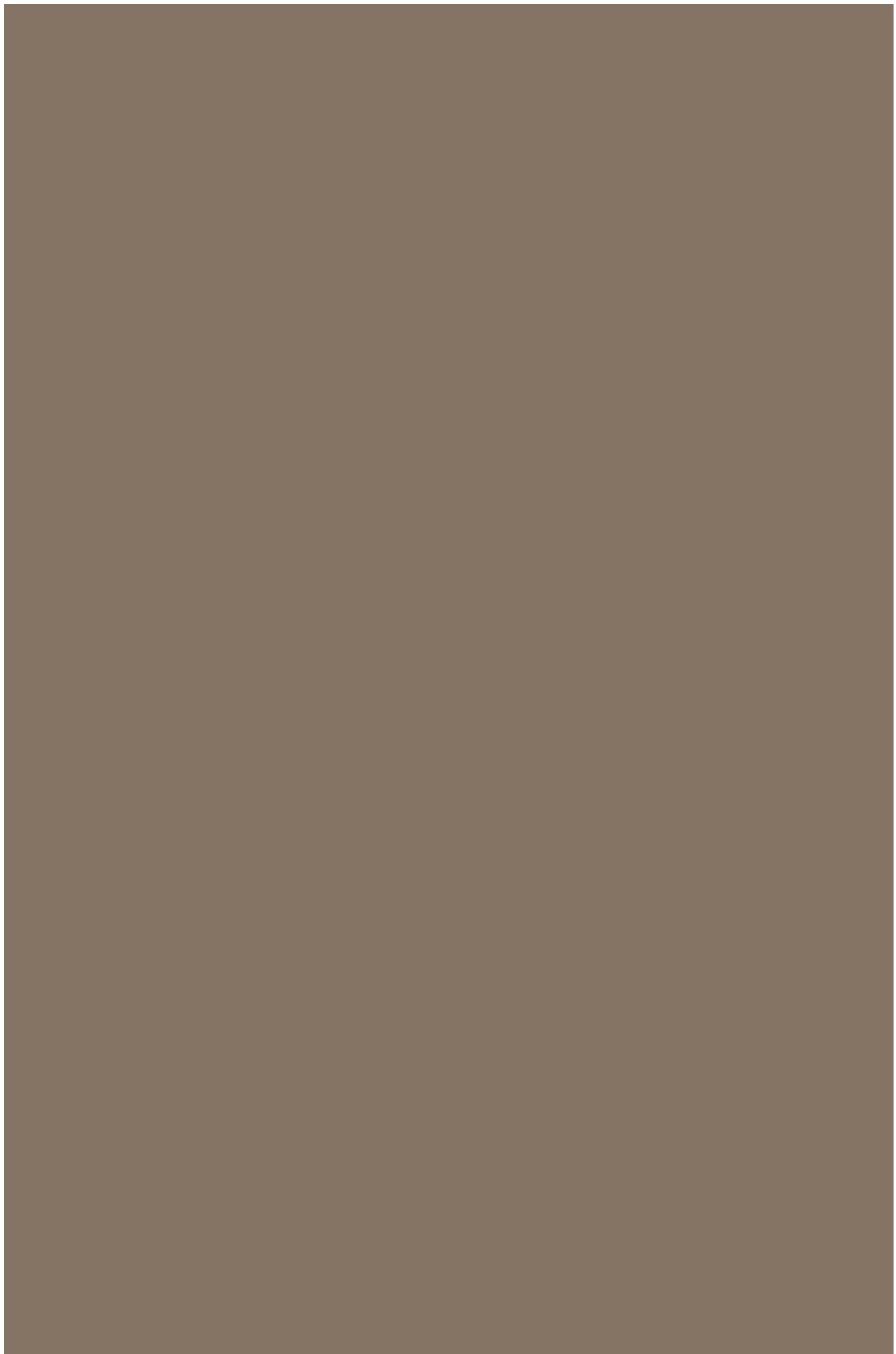
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