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# THE ODDVILLE PRESS

A BREAK FROM THE NORM

## FICTION

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## POETRY

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ALAN MURPHY  
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ARTWORK  
CLARA NATOLI

# The Oddville Press

***The Oddville Press is a downloadable electronic non-profit magazine dedicated to bringing high quality Fiction, Poetry and Artwork to the forefront.***

It's staffed by committed volunteers with high standards of excellence whose mission is to promote today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

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**Artwork by Clara Natoli**

Visit the artist at <http://claranatoli.blogspot.com/>.

Dear Readers,

You might remember my mentioning a while back how vehemently opposed I am to writing an Editor's letter. I believed that, in my opinion, no one reads the Editor's letter, myself included. Scrap that letter, boys. Get on with it. WELCOME TO ODDVILLE, A BREAK FROM THE NORM.

The idea didn't catch on as well as I had hoped—obviously—because here I am, writing it again. It takes a certain kind of person to beat that same tired drum. I just happen to be that person. Besides, they told me I could write whatever I wanted. Of course, with that, away went my mind, imagining something like...

These Trying Economic Times

Due to these turbulent times and the state of the economy, we are going to charge you \$8,000 for this issue. Post dated, of course. (If you've read this far, you might want to check your bank balance). We know who you are. We have all your IP addresses, and we use a key stroke logger program, so we have all your bank account info. In order to simplify things, FOR YOU, we're just going to transfer the funds to an offshore account in the Cayman Islands. For both of you who don't online bank, three large men will be knocking on your door; these Porsches we bought aren't going to pay for themselves, you know. Oh, and we will be transferring out \$150 a week for groceries.

Of course, I won't write that (mainly because someone might think I'm serious). I will say how proud I am of the Oddville staff and of this issue. How I appreciate you (Dear Reader) and Oddville's talented contributors. How I consider each and every one of us card-carrying members of Oddville (Oddvillians, if you will). Now I want you to support me on scrapping the Editor's letter. We'll make posters.

Enjoy!

Patricia D. Hurst  
Managing Editor

PS: Due to circumstances beyond our control this issue is terribly late. For that, I can not apologize enough.

## **The Oddville Staff**

### **Managing Editor**

*Patricia Hurst* would like you to think she is a professional pudding wrestler. She would also like you to believe she makes movies with such actors as Harrison Ford, Russell Crowe, Robert Downey Jr. and Christopher Walken. But she doesn't. She's just a longtime writer and confirmed coffee/chocoholic. She also may or may not rob banks.

### **Senior Fiction Editor**

*Robert Callaci* is a 55 year old sales professional who seeks to know what can be known. He has written over 300 poems for his own amusement and has been published in various e-zines . For the past three years has been busy writing an epic fantasy titled *The Tangled Tapestry*. He resides in New York with the two loves of his life, his wife and dog.

### **Senior Copy Editor**

*S.D. McKeown* is a 25 year old plumber who writes action/adventure and techno-thrillers. He is currently pursuing a degree in humanities in his spare time. Twice a self-published author, S.D. has written four novels to date, and hopes to one day become a fully published author. Residing in South Armagh, Ireland, he has spent the last two years writing *Acts of Treason*, the fifth novel in a series of six.

### **Fiction Copy Editors**

*Rachel Johnson* is a 29 year-old English graduate, and lives in Brighton, England, with her partner of four years, Robert. She works as a croupier, spending her nights meeting interesting characters and her days writing about them. She is currently working on her first novel.

*Rebecca Tester*: Despite the often depraved fiction she writes, Rebecca is an excellent neighbor who delights in baking brownies and walking her Rottweiler, but not her Beagle (who jerks her arms from their sockets). She writes when her two-and-a-half young children, home, dogs, ever-so-demanding fish and fabulous husband allow.

*Stephanie Kraner* is a twenty-two year old who, unfortunately, claims to be a professional freelancer. While she writes predominately nonfiction in the form of stupid articles about debt consolidation and golf balls, occasionally the muse descends and she spouts fiction out of her ears. To date, she still finds it more exciting to have short stories published for no pay than to get \$10 per article for nonfiction. However, she believes \$20 per article might change her mind.

*Lindsay Dubler* lives in Olympia, Washington and has completed one YA novel, in the midst of writing two others, and has written a collection of short stories. She is passionate about writing that “makes you think” and is especially interested in edgy subject matter. She writes science fiction, young adult, and speculative fiction.

#### **Jr. Editors**

*Jordan Bowling* is an 18 year old Kentuckian who likes a good mystery, but will read just about anything. She is currently attending college, working towards a degree in business accounting.

*Jim Ryals* graduated from Columbia College (New York) in 1982 and from Loyola Law School (Los Angeles) in 1987. He recently abandoned his twenty year day job as a lawyer to pursue fiction writing full time. A refugee from Arnold Schwarzenegger’s socialist utopia, he relocated to Mandeville, Louisiana in 2007.

*Michael Rigby*, 18, is one of those people who doesn't quite fit into the label of student. Although school takes up most of his time, he is currently completing his Private Pilot's license and trying to complete one of the many short stories he's thought up in the air. In his free time he likes to train for marathons and run road races. He hopes to one day be able to publish a collection of his science fiction stories and fly around a few other published authors for a living.

*Miles McCoy*, 17, is a full-time student, part-time writer, part-time musician and hails from Pennsylvania.

#### **Poetry Editor**

*Ilasir Maroa*

#### **Poetry Copy Editors**

*Orla O D* is a self employed mum of two young daughters, and surrogate mum to two dogs (one stupid, one clever). Based outside of Dublin on the isle of Ireland, she is a published writer in both fiction and poetry, Orla has been a student of the the 'university of life' for a number of years and will continue in the hope of attaining a MA in something or other.

*Olly Buckle* is a younger child of pacifist intellectuals, started life working in a library but rejected it and has worked in a huge variety of jobs, many manual. Now 64 years old, came late in life to computers and struggles with the simplest systems, but takes delight in the many uses and forms of the written and spoken word.

*Jess Walker*

#### **Visual Editor**

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## **Candy and Catharsis**

*By: Anne Brooke*

Being a word isn't the easiest thing in the world. Especially when you live in a dictionary. People tend to look down on you, and you rarely, if ever, get read. Other words are just as bad; they see it as far better to be in a novel, a poem or a short story, an essay or an article, even if you're just a joining word or, less desirable but just as acceptable, to be a word floating around the dangerous fields of someone's mind. And it doesn't matter whether that someone intends to write down the word or not; it's still a living, pulsating creation with likes and dislikes of its own.

Maybe if people realised that, they might be less inclined to think some of the thoughts they do, but I don't want to get into philosophy. That's not my job.

I'm just a word in a dictionary and I know my place. Page 223, second column, a third of the way down, if you're interested. And the dictionary isn't any old ordinary dictionary, either. It's the New Concise Oxford English Dictionary, hardback, eleventh edition, hot off the press in 2004. Hurrah! What a day that was. A flurry of activity as whole book-loads of us tumbled out of the printer, into the distributor lorry and away into shops and offices, schools, universities and homes across the land. My, what a party *that* was. I remember ... well, hmm, let's not go into that right now. What was I saying? Ah yes, I know my place. And who I am. I'm Catharsis. Pleased to meet you. Possibly.

But hey, don't be frightened. This story isn't about me, not really. Or the whole lovable, irritating, warm-hearted, obstreperous plethora of words I share my life with. That would be a million stories and way too many books, not all of which I'd appear in, though the sentiments I embody well might. No, this story is about one word and the day I fell in love with her.

It happened like this: I'd only just woken up one golden autumnal morning and was stretching myself back into shape, whilst trying not to disturb Cathead, my neighbour below, who does tend to get rather bolshy if anything upsets him in his daily ablutions. At the third stretch, my home was suddenly picked up, removed from its dining room shelf, spun through the air and thumped - yes, thumped *is* the word - onto the mahogany veneered table.

Cathead fell through Cathectic and into Cathedral with a scream where he disappeared into the history note for a good three hours, whilst above me Cathar's prayers came to an abrupt end and Catgut started a long, high-pitched and *very annoying* whine, which was only stopped when Catflap - always marvellous in a crisis - swallowed her up until calm was restored. Honestly, why can't people learn to treat their dictionaries properly?

Around us there was a low muttering chant as our owner flicked through our skins trying to find whatever it was she wanted today. Cashmere, Cartage, Carom, Capote, Canyon, Cannonball, then a pause before "Aha! Candleberry! *Got it.*"

It was the pause that did for me. In that mystical, magical moment, I caught my first glorious glimpse of a girl as sweet as sugar, as smooth as silk, and as sexy as ... well, anything sexy you care to name. I'm sorry, words fail me when I remember my first sight of her. A shameful thing for a dictionary-dweller, but there you go. She was flaxen-haired and sapphire-eyed, all crinkly and charming with sleep and glowing in the morning light.

A second later and the page had turned over, the dictionary was closed and she vanished from view. But not before I'd read her name, a name carved on my heart forever, a name to strive to be worthy of, a name to die for.

Candy.

What a word. I had to see her again.

But how?

While our home was being replaced on the warm wooden shelf where we live, I gave it some thought. Soon I had devised a cunning but convoluted plan. When everything was still again and any words which had been shaken up and dislodged were crawling their way back to their places, I reached across to my nearest sideways neighbour, Categorical Imperative, and gave him a quick shake.

'Hey! Watch it, will you? Some of us are busy considering their unconditional and binding moral obligations.'

'You have to,' I pointed out. 'It's your job.'

'That doesn't mean ...'

'Yes, yes, I know. But I have a moral obligation of my own to ask you about.'

'Really?' Cat Imp (as he's known for short) opened his eyes and smiled for the first time since 1804. 'Ask on, *mein Freund*.'

'I've fallen in love with a wonderful word called Candy and I have to see her again.'

'Oh. *Love*.' He rolled his eyes and his smile disappeared. 'I don't have anything to do with *love*.'

'You do when it's an obligation, with no conditions.'

'I don't when it depends merely on your personal inclination, Catharsis.'

'It's more than that. It's an overarching principle. I have to release my pent-up emotions, or what I am will be unfulfilled and as a result I will cease to exist. You know what *that* might mean – if I vanish from use, then who's to say it won't happen to any of us in here? We have to keep the words alive, Imp. All of them if we can, or *Civilisation*, the very *Universe* itself may be destroyed.'

Silence passed between us. I wondered what she was doing so very far away from Page 1342, but of course had no way of asking.

When she was gone - thank goodness - Imp sighed. 'All right then, I suppose I'll have to help you, or I'll never hear the end of it. I have to say, Catharsis, I do hate the way you're always so dramatic about everything. You really should learn to be more logical.'

'I will, I will, as soon as I've seen Candy once more. Thank you so much.'

He held up one solid hand. 'No need. I haven't done anything yet. But before I do, you have to promise me one thing.'

'Anything, Imp, I'll do anything.'

'Good. Don't call me Imp.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

We formed a plan. It didn't take long, but the best words together always make time fly. It's a known fact.

Thirty seconds later, it was time to begin.

'Ready?' asked Categorical Imperative.

'Yes. As I'll ever be.'

'Then *go!*'

He gave me a logical but powerful shove in the direction of the Catchment Area, and I found myself flowing through streams of schoolchildren flanked by hospital patients, whilst beneath me a large reservoir sparkled. I dropped into the Catboat, avoided the Cat Burglar, and spun out again to the accompaniment of the mewling cry of the Catbird. From there I launched myself off the mighty arms of Catapult, and roared like a Cataract into north eastern Spain, spinning at high speed through a large fortified medieval building, turning Cartwheels above the monks of St Bruno, drinking copious amounts of alcohol at a funfair, carjacking a low-born Scot living in the Caribbean, buying Caramel from a Captive Cape Verdean chanting Canticles in a Canterbury before finally arriving like a Cannonball at the sweet-smelling toes of my loved one. My, what adventures we words have. Especially, I think, if you're a C word, but I accept I may be prejudiced.

'Candy!' I cried. 'At last, I'm with you, my love, my sweetheart, my own one.'

As the glorious vision of beauty leaned forward to greet me, I realised I was holding a Cane Rat in one hand and a Candenut in the other. I cast them aside in a hurry, whereupon the rat scuttled away and began chewing on the tree's oily seeds.

Putting a smile on my face was pointless; my features aren't made for that, but I smoothed down my hair and tried to look charming. My fingers came away sticky and golden and wet.

Candy shrieked, her orange-and-lemon hair crinkling in the soft breeze, and bit into her red-and-white striped fingernails. 'Urgh! What on earth are *you*?'

'I'm Catharsis,' I said, with all the dignity I could muster. 'I'm your purity and your purgation, your fate and your fulfilment. Love me, accept me, clasp me to your creamy and oh-so-lickable bosom, and the two of us will fly to realms as yet undescribed by any word. Together we will create a legend which will never die.'

A small Silence passed. Why *can't* that wretched woman ever control her children?

When she was gone, Candy shrieked again, 'But you're so ugly and dark, so foreboding and fierce. I couldn't possibly fall in love with you. Anyway, everybody falls in love with me all the time; it's the nature of me, though honestly it does get rather dull sometimes. You can't *imagine*.'

With a heavy thud, the bright red apple Candy was holding fell to the ground where it was snatched by a crooked old man who ran away chortling.

'Shall I ...?' I cried, determined to fight at whatever cost for my loved one's honour. And apple.

'No, don't worry. That's *always* happening,' she peered closer at me and a frown spread across her shining features. 'Yuck, what's that in your *hair*?'

'It's ...'

'... Caramel? Oh no! That ridiculous old softie. He's so feeble.'

'But, my darling, he's my present to you.'

She held up one chubby white hand and shook her beautiful head. 'Sorry. I hate him. A girl can't possibly go out with anyone quite so clingy. He ruins my style. If you thought you'd win me with *that*, then you thought wrong. Please leave. I have people to entice, lives to fulfil. In my *own* way.'

'But ...'

But already it was too late. A torrent of despair and misery, with a hopeful but very small light at its end, caught me up and pulled me back through Cankerworm and Cantankerous, Capitulate and Capricious, past Carbuncle and Cardiomegaly, Castrate and Catastrophic, gave me a most unwelcome tour through Catheter and Cathexis before finally depositing me, torn and bloody, in my appointed place between Cathar and Cathead.

Sometimes, in spite of the journey through doom and gloom towards acceptance and growth that some words just have to take, it's good to be home.

Only sometimes.

Because to my everlasting and deep dismay a familiar voice was the first to greet me.

'Ah,' it said. 'You're back. And alone. Time for your first lesson in logic, *mein Freund*.'

\*\*\*



**Eric Bennett lives in New York with his wife and four children. He loves fierce wounded things and beginning sentences with the word "and." His work appears or is forthcoming in *Why Vandalism?*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Smokebox*, *Apt*, *decomp* magazinE, *The Battered Suitcase*, *Dogmatika*, *Up the Staircase*, *Dogzplot blogspot*, *Foliate Oak* and *LITnIMAGE*.**

### **At the Sound of the Tone.**

*By: Eric Bennett*

T.R. is the maintenance man at the bank. He loves teller number four.

"My name is Alina. How may I help you?"

He likes the way she twists her legs around her stool. And the way her voice goes up at the end of every sentence.

"How would you like your bills?"

Bank employees are not allowed to use their cell phones during work hours. T.R. leaves Alina anonymous messages.

"If I got lost at sea, would you wait for me?"

*Click.*

T.R. mops the marble floors at three o'clock every day. He strikes subtle poses for Alina – boyfriend poses, husband poses, lift with the knees poses.

"She will love me," he whispers, like a prayer.

Sometimes T.R. pretends he and Alina are married and the bank is their home. He plunges the toilet. He kills window spiders. He moves the heavy furniture. He mows the lawn.

"If my plane was shot down, would you look for me?"

*Click.*

T.R. hates the bank manager.

"It has come to my attention that someone is using bank phones to make prank calls. The perpetrator will be prosecuted. Thank you for your attention. Mr. Covan, Bank Manager."

Mr. Covan is not short. He is not old. He is not fat. His personality and cologne fill the bank, even when he takes a day off.

T.R. hates the sound of Mr. Covan's voice.

"Have you heard the one about the fish who walks into a bar?"

T.R. has noticed Mr. Covan lingering at window four, often. He's striking poses – flirting poses, I'm rich and important poses, let's have sex poses.

Alina's leg's twist and her voice sounds high and full of giggles whenever Mr. Covan is around.

"When I die, will you visit my grave?"

*Click.*

T.R. hasn't cleaned Mr. Covan's office for more than a week; instead, he snoops. One day he finds Alina's phone number on a post-it-note. He put his hand on his chest, feeling his heart skipping.

This morning, T.R. overhears bank tellers two and three commenting about Alina and Mr. Covan's date the previous night. He draws a quick breath.

T.R. walks to his car, sits in the driver's seat. He listens to the radio. He smokes a cigarette. He grabs the shotgun.

Walking back into the bank, gun in one hand, cell phone in the other, T.R. dials Alina's cell phone.

Bank employees and customers are striking poses – oh my God poses, don't shoot me poses, find the nearest exit poses.

T.R. approaches window four and looks Alina in the eyes. Her cell phone beeps, he leaves a message:

"If I go to jail, will you visit me?"

*Click.*

Mr. Covan and the security guard enter the lobby at the same moment from opposite doors. T.R. aims his shotgun at Mr. Covan's face. The security guard aims his gun at the back of T.R.'s head.

Two shots are fired.

\*\*\*



**Jeremiah Ambrose is a 4th year student in IADT Dun Laoghaire and he is intending on doing a MA in Creative Writing next year.**

## **Chatroom**

*By: Jeremiah Ambrose*

He was gaunt, sweat was starting to make his eyes sting.  
She was excited, the curiosity stretching her brow.

Breathing heavier by the second, his fingers sprint across the keyboard.  
Eyes heavier by the second, she struggles to keep up the pace.

The screen's glare mirrors his pasty face, sparse strands on his greasy brow  
The screen's glare reflects her pretty face, lustrous silky hair..

Beads of sweat merge in folds of his flesh, his movements taut and jolty,  
Beads of fashion adorn her slender neck, looping fingers she awaits his reply.

He sits hoping his message will indicate his desire  
She would really like to meet him and is really keen on sleepovers.

It apparently did, she had responded positively to his question.  
She was sooo happy that he wanted to meet her.

Her thumbnail soon blurs as he vibrates in delight.  
She was looking forward to finally seeing what he looks like.

Brb... He writes in shorthand because it was easier with one hand.  
She squeals with delight, she couldn't wait to meet her like-minded friend.

\*\*\*

**Paul Eckert lives in Houston, TX. His fiction has previously appeared in *Nano Fiction*, *Word Riot*, and *The Houston Literary Review*, and is upcoming in *The Emerson Review*, the *Darc Karnivale* anthology, *New Voices in Horror - Volume 2*, and *NVF Magazine*. He is also one-half of the musical duo *Balloonist Sleepy* ([www.freewebs.com/balloonistsleepy](http://www.freewebs.com/balloonistsleepy)). Paul is frightened of clowns and birds of flight. One day he hopes to open his own circus. Fall in love with him at [www.pauleckert.net](http://www.pauleckert.net).**

## **The Difference between Harry and Christopher**

*By: Paul Eckert*

When Harry looked into a mirror, he saw the reflection of his brother, Christopher. And Christopher saw Harry as his reflection. The identical twins did not have a freckle, mole, or scar to distinguish one from the other. For all they knew, one could have started out Harry and the other Christopher. Their mother wouldn't admit that she couldn't tell the boys apart, but she made Harry part his hair on the right while Christopher parted his hair on the left. One could easily become the other if they wished, but they were confused for each other so much that the joke would've been lost on everyone.

Tuesday morning Harry walked from his bedroom to the bathroom, his eyes half closed and his vision blurry. Christopher walked right beside him and yawned. They noticed each other and groaned. Christopher had set his alarm clock for 6:15, and Harry had set his for 6:30. But just like every other morning, they both woke up at exactly 6:45.

The two boys shuffled into the bathroom. They reached for their toothbrushes at the same time and their hands collided. They sighed. Harry said, "You go first." Christopher snatched his blue toothbrush from the holder and brushed his teeth in a circular motion. Harry brushed his teeth in the same circular motion with the same number of strokes for the same length of time, also with a blue toothbrush. Their toothbrushes were the same color because it made them sick to imagine any other color in their mouth. To tell them apart, they had to buy different brands. Of

course, they both liked the same brand, so every time they got new toothbrushes they had to switch brands.

On the bus to school, Harry sat down in the seat with their favorite number, 27, and scooted in next to the window.

Christopher said, "You got to sit by the window yesterday. It's my turn."

"Hell no," Harry said. "Last week you got to sit here twice in a row. Just sit somewhere else."

"The other seats suck. And last week doesn't count because you missed the bus."

Harry shook his head. "That doesn't count because I missed the bus on purpose. It was a favor to both of us."

Christopher groaned and plopped in the seat. "How about you do us another favor and jump out the window?"

Harry said, "No way. I'm not giving up the window seat."

Christopher muttered under his breath and leaned forward to peer around his brother's head and see out the window.

When they got to school, Harry and Christopher went to the bathroom. They liked to relieve themselves before going to class. They walked to their first class together. The school made efforts to separate siblings, but every year Harry and Christopher received the same class schedule.

In algebra class, the teacher handed back their test papers. Harry looked back at Christopher. Christopher said, "Ninety-three."

Harry cursed under his breath and laid his head over his own test paper with a ninety-three scrawled in red pen. Christopher heard him mutter, "Why don't I stay home while you just fill out two of everything? Seriously, what would be the difference?"

Christopher said, "You wouldn't learn."

Harry said, "Maybe I don't want to know anything."

Christopher said, "That's stupid."

"I just wish I didn't think so," Harry said.

Biology was the boys' favorite class. They didn't know the difference between cytoplasm and chloroplast. And they hated animal dissections because the exposed organs made them think of the food that bore the most immediate resemblance, and from that point they would never eat that food again. Their area of concentration was a girl whose appearance was a perfect consummation of all that they were not learning. Her name was Aurori, and she sat next to Christopher, which meant that Christopher couldn't enjoy her appearance without being obvious. But Harry sat behind Christopher and was able to stare for glorious, undisturbed minutes at Aurori's almond-skinned arms and the veil of dark curls cascading around her head like spiral staircases. Harry imagined being three inches tall and climbing up her curls to the top of her head where he would rappel down her nose and stare into her blue eyes like crystals in a mountainside.

Harry and Christopher never talked about their feelings for Aurori with each other, and they didn't need to. They felt like Aurori was too beautiful for the likes of either one of them. They passed many classes lost in daydreams about Aurori. They would never know, but even their daydreams were the same, sometimes fantastical, sometimes brutishly simple, but always devolving into the simple scene of sitting alone with her in a white room and just talking.

Many class periods had been spent in these thoughts, but on this day Aurori turned to Christopher and said, "I never understand this stuff."

Christopher was stunned. He looked into her eyes and stuttered. "Uh...yeah...ha...me too..."

Harry was as stunned as Christopher, but since Aurori hadn't spoken to him, he had time to process the event and react. Harry thought for a moment and said, "Hey, Aurori, I'm pretty good at this stuff, you know, so uh, I could help you study."

Aurori chuckled and both boys shivered with delight at the musical sound.

"Oh yeah?" Aurori said. "What's the definition of 'mitosis'?"

Harry was lost in her eyes. "Well...uh...let's see..." He flipped open his textbook and turned to the back.

"Yeah, nice try," Aurori said. She turned to Christopher. "Do you know what 'mitosis' means?"

Christopher shook his head. "Uh...no."

Aurori grinned. "Okay." She tore a piece of paper from her notebook and wrote her phone number. "Call me. We can study some time and figure it out."

Harry said, "How would he help you study any better than me?"

Aurori said, "Because he knows the difference between what he knows and what he doesn't."

~

Harry plugged his ears and wished for a plane to crash outside, or a thousand car alarms to wail at the same time, just anything to block the sound of Christopher playing his violin. The melody he played was lighthearted and skipped from one bright note to another, like a child skipping through a playground while jumping rope. Aurori was coming over, and Christopher's heart sang through the instrument.

The doorbell rang and Christopher bounded down the stairs. The door opened and closed. Harry heard his mother and father's voices greeting their guest, and then he heard the angelic voice respond. Two sets of feet thumped up the stairs. Harry's heart beat faster.

*She's here,* he thought. *The angel is in my house.*

Harry put a cup to the wall and listened into Christopher's room. The voices and unzipping backpacks came in low and hollow and surrounded with white noise, like hearing the ocean in a conch shell.

Aurori said, "I heard someone playing the violin. Was it you?"

"Yes," Christopher said.

"It was beautiful," Aurori said. "Would you play something for me?"

"Uh, sure." Christopher played a simple tune, soft and sweet, all rounded out and ending with such a predictable *ta-da!* cadence. Harry was disgusted with his brother's choice. *So easy. So cliché. All nice and tidy and wrapped up.* But Harry knew Christopher had thought of this, and he also knew why Christopher had chosen the song: it was easy. A more difficult song may have caused him to slip, and nothing would be a worse memory than having beautiful Aurori in his room and watching her face sour at a wrong note.

Harry grabbed his violin and played one of his favorite pieces. The song was eerie with a touch of angry melancholy, but every ear could empathize with the sounds. It reminded Harry of crawling down a dark, cramped pipe, and the tunnel became darker the farther he crawled, a light behind him slowly faded with each note. There were several false transitions in the song that made the audience think it was going to turn brighter, only to return to its melancholy theme with more gloom.

When he finished the song someone knocked on his door. Aurori and Christopher stood in the hallway.

"That was amazing!" Aurori said.

"Oh, hi Aurori. Didn't know you were here."

She smiled. "Yeah, Christopher and I are going to study." She turned to face Christopher. "Speaking of which, I think we should actually start." Aurori grabbed Christopher's hand, and Harry couldn't help but stare. "Come on, let's go back to your room." Before she disappeared from Harry's doorway, Aurori stopped and said, "And I hate to ask you this, but do you mind keeping it down for just a little bit? We really do need to study, and it would make it so much easier. Thanks!"

Harry gripped the violin around the neck and fought the urge to slam it against the wall. He tossed the instrument onto his bed and resumed listening to their muffled voices through the wall. He caught individual words now and then that meant nothing when heard out of context. Every few minutes he heard Aurori laugh, an adorable sound that rippled with genuine joy, a sound that made

Harry's insides simultaneously melt and simmer. It wasn't fair. Christopher was just a copy of Harry, and though they were identical there were differences the world couldn't see, differences that Harry and Christopher felt but couldn't enumerate. Harry figured that Aurori had seen something in Christopher that she thought she liked, something that was stronger in Harry.

Aurori came to their house for more study dates, which eventually became romantic dates. Aurori and Christopher went to movies, parties, museums, and concerts at the park. Sometimes Christopher brought his violin, and the two of them would walk the streets, find a random spot, and Christopher played songs while Aurori listened and watched him in rapture as if she could see the notes rising from the bow and drifting through the dead, twisted branches of slumping trees, making the bums sleeping on sidewalk benches perk up their heads. Harry often followed the pair and watched, always looking for the secret to beautiful Aurori's heart.

One day after school, Harry combed his hair on the left. He hurried to the spot where Christopher and Aurori met after school every day. Christopher was always at least five minutes late because he went to the bathroom right after his last class was finished, as did Harry. But instead of going to the restroom, Harry hustled through the halls and arrived at the meeting spot, the fountain in front of school that squirted arched beams of water from a stone sculpture of the earth. When Aurori approached, Harry laid into the violin which sung a melody he'd heard Christopher play for her. Aurori watched in silence.

*It's working! It's working!*

He returned the violin to the case. Aurori clapped.

"Very good. By the way, have you seen Christopher?"

Harry's chest felt an invisible punch to the gut but he maintained his posture. "Who do you think I am?" he said.

Aurori smirked. "That's weird. I thought you two weren't into the whole 'identity swap' thing."

Harry's shoulders slumped. "Oh, you mean the hair? Is it not parted on the right? Stupid me. I must have gotten mixed up. I

don't know where Christopher is, but if you want to go to the park or something, that would be cool."

"I think I'll wait for Christopher."

Another time, Harry found Aurori's phone number in Christopher's room. Harry had listened to many hours of conversation between Aurori and Christopher. He absorbed the rhythms of their speech, how they gave each other turns to speak. They asked each other lots of questions. Aurori would ask, "What would be your dream vacation?" and Christopher would ask, "If you could cure one disease forever, what would it be?" They did this for hours. Harry was mesmerized with Aurori's answers. Her mind conjured imagery he had never dreamed about. He wanted to crawl inside her mind and look at all the wonderful sights and sounds. Sometimes Harry would answer Aurori's questions in his head, and then Christopher would tell Aurori what Harry had just been thinking.

Harry's fingers shook as he dialed the numbers on the telephone.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey, what's going on?" he said, trying to sound casual and not too excited.

"Who is this?" The voice sounded exasperated, maybe even upset.

"It's Christopher...duh..." Harry hadn't prepared himself for an escape strategy. If Aurori didn't think he was Christopher, he would just do what he could to keep her on the line, to hear her sweet voice. Maybe he could show her who she really loved.

"Oh. This is Maya."

"Who?" Harry said. The question escaped his lips before he could stop it.

The girl on the other end of the line gasped. "Don't even play with me, Chrissy boy. Just because I'm Aurori's sister doesn't mean I won't kick your ass."

"Sorry," Harry said. "Can I speak to Aurori?"

"God, hold your horses. Here she is."

"Hey, baby..." Aurori's voice was to Harry like church bells on Sunday morning, a beacon of hope for the wistful beggar of Security and Love. Harry let her voice soak into his mind.

"Hey, what's up?"

The static of electronic silence filled the earpiece. "Are you okay?" Aurori said. "You sound different."

"No, I'm fine. So I have a question for you: if you could have one superpower, what would it be?" Harry held his breath. He awaited an answer that would open undiscovered parts of his mind, for her imagination to expand his own.

"Seriously, who is this?" Aurori said. "Is this Harry?"

"No. How could you say that? It's Christopher."

More silence from the other end. Harry felt his forehead become sticky with sweat. Even if he could just keep her on the line for another five minutes, Harry would consider this an accomplishment. If only he could get her to answer his question, he would consider it a victory.

"Okay..." Aurori said. Harry could hear the smile in her voice. "But before I answer your question, you have to answer my question."

Harry breathed in quick staccato rhythms that matched his pounding heart. "Yeah, anything," he said.

"Where was our first kiss?"

Harry quickly hung up the phone and tried to console himself by replaying their conversation over and over. He imagined her answering his question, but he knew that his imagination would be no match for intimate details her mind was capable of producing.

Something else bothered him as well. The image of Christopher kissing Aurori's lips made him feel like the burn of a giant cigarette had been snuffed out on his guts.

Harry buried his head in his pillow and cried.

~

Harry heard the open and shut of the front door when Christopher returned home from Aurori's house. The soft thumps of his footfalls on the carpeted stairs pounded in his conscience like the beating of a war drum. Harry prayed that the next sounds he heard would be the creak of the door into Christopher's room. Instead there was a knock on his own door, the same four taps that Christopher used to knock on anyone's door: *tap...ta-tap tap*.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"It's me," Christopher said.

"Come in."

Christopher entered the room and closed the door behind him. There was no malice in his eyes, his shoulders were not hunched protectively around his neck like when he was upset. Christopher sat on the edge of the bed where Harry lay propped against a pillow, his arms crossed over his chest.

Christopher glanced at his brother and then at the ground. "I'm not mad," Christopher said.

Harry sat up a little straighter. "Why not?"

"I understand how you feel about Aurori."

Harry looked away. "Yeah, I guess you would."

"Hell," said Christopher, "I've wondered what it would be like if you had sat in my seat in class. Would our roles be reversed? I don't know. But knowing how I feel about Aurori, I can only imagine how you feel."

Harry nodded.

"That being said, I want to help you. I believe there is a solution."

"What's that?" Harry said.

"I heard that when you called Aurori you spoke to her sister, Maya."

"Yeah. She sounds a lot like Aurori."

Christopher smiled. "Let me rephrase that. You spoke to Maya, Aurori's twin sister."

~

Harry, fresh off his date with Maya, ran up to his room and curled into a ball on his bed.

Harry had met Maya at her house. When she opened the door, Harry thought he was looking at Aurori. The same dark, wavy hair, almond skin, and glistening ivory smile. Then she introduced herself as Maya.

They walked to the mall and played video games at the arcade. They shared a large ice cream and talked. They talked about movies, music, school, colleges, and jobs. It was no surprise that they had a lot in common. Maya listened as Harry talked about his dream of composing movie scores, and Harry couldn't take his eyes off Maya as she told him about visiting Africa on a church mission trip.

The pair went to a movie where they sat in the back of the theater. Harry took a good look at Maya in the movie screen's white glow, and that was all he needed to get the courage up to reach for Maya's hand. She received his hand without the slightest flinch, and after a moment she flipped up the armrest that separated them. Over the next few minutes they scooted closer to each other. At the same moment in the movie they leaned over to kiss each other, their lips meeting in perfect and unintentional harmony.

Harry's initial fear of making the move to kiss was quickly replaced by the excitement of the act's mutuality, the senses tingling and the hormones firing. After more kissing, however, the sensations quickly dulled.

*What's happening?* Harry thought.

He tried to regain the excitement, but his brain had leapt out of the moment. The chemicals dried up. The intense, intimate moment now felt like trying to eat a bowl of Jell-O with his lips.

Harry tried to end the moment with a couple of quick pecks to Maya's lips, but this act didn't quell her passion. She pulled Harry closer and stuck her tongue in his mouth yet again. He shivered with disgust as her saliva spread over his mouth and chilled in the theater's air conditioning. Harry decided to endure the act for as long as he could. She eventually stopped and turned back to the movie, her arms around him. Her body suffocated him like a jacket in summer. After what felt like seconds, Maya planted kisses on Harry's cheek again. She turned his face to hers and started again with the kissing.

Harry was a good sport. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, and he certainly didn't feel that he was attractive enough to blow off a beautiful girl like Maya. Harry thought about biology class. He thought about the way, when she was bored, Aurori pulled her hair into a ponytail. He thought about how, when she was nervous during a test, Aurori played with the lobe of her right ear. He tried not to think about how this tongue in his mouth was not the same tongue that inadvertently stuck out during moments of picture doodling, how the eyelashes brushing against his cheek were not the ones that he stole glances at when Aurori took an in-class nap, or how the breasts that pressed against him now were not the same breasts he waited patiently for glimpses of during class. The voice that moaned slightly in his ear was not the voice he'd listened to in rapture during Christopher's telephone calls.

He had played the part on the rest of the date, trying to convince himself during moments of intimacy that Maya was Aurori. She wrote down her phone number on a slip of notebook paper and gave it to Harry before he left. Her smile beamed as she disappeared into her house at the end of the date, maybe in anticipation of telling her sister how well the date went.

Harry clutched his pillow as he lay in bed. Now he knew why Aurori had been able to tell the difference over the phone, why a simple change in the part of his hair hadn't fooled her.

He took Maya's number, the same number as Aurori, and crumpled it up. He tossed the little ball into the garbage.

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## **The Bicycle**

*By: Tom Mahony*

My wife stood on the porch as I pulled into the driveway.

"Did you get it?" she asked.

I wrestled the box from the car. "Right here."

She smiled. "Perfect." Then she frowned. "Why is it in a box?"

"I didn't want to pay the assembly fee. It's a scam."

"You sure you can put it together?"

"Do you think I'm an imbecile?"

She nodded. "Sometimes."

"Well, not this time."

I lugged the box into the living room, opened a beer, started a fire, and turned on some music. A festive ambience. My son was asleep. He'd wake on his birthday with his new bicycle assembled and could ride it straight out the door if so chosen. I opened the box and dumped the contents onto the rug.

"Here," she said, handing me the directions.

"No thanks."

"You don't want them?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "The principle."

"What principle?"

"Self-sufficiency." I crumpled the directions and tossed them into the fire. "It's a guy thing."

I went to work. The parts were more numerous than expected. And more mysterious: all manner of rubber, metal, and plastic. Strange cabling. Two bags full of screws and bolts.

I managed to get the frame together. But from there things went south. I struggled and cursed, finished my beer and cracked another.

What kind of bicycle was this? I hadn't ridden one in at least a decade, maybe two. Things had changed. The new math.

But I forged ahead. Some of the parts required tools I neither owned nor had ever heard of. After two hours, I managed to cobble most of it together, but couldn't get the seat or the handlebars to fit. My wife watched from the couch.

"There's a part missing," I said.

She shook her head. "I doubt it. Maybe you just put one in the wrong place."

"No. A part's missing." I looked around the floor. Empty.

"Too bad you burned the directions."

I grunted in irritation and stared at the bicycle.

~

The hour grew late and the case of beer emptier. I pressed on in frustration. I took to muttering.

Certain tests must be passed. The world threatened chaos and entropy. The sun could explode at any moment. I controlled little, my bunker under constant assault. Not much to brag about, but it was mine.

I claimed fifty percent of household power, and toy assembly was a key pillar of strength, the linchpin of my sovereignty. Any change in the established order would upset the balance. I might have to start cooking meals, or, god forbid, cleaning urine off the bathroom floor. Elected governments have been overthrown for less.

I took the bicycle apart and tried to reassemble it from scratch. But this time I could only get half of it together.

"There's a part missing," I growled.

She didn't respond.

~

When the clock struck midnight, I was hammered. I lurched around the living room, cursing and flailing. My wife had long since gone to sleep.

For perhaps the fiftieth time I scoured the box for the missing part. Nothing. I tossed it into the fire. It lit ablaze, a major inferno. Flaming bits of cardboard floated through the room and burned holes in the carpet. I swatted at them like a lunatic.

Then I passed out.

~

I awoke on the living room floor with a blistering headache. Drool crusted on my chin. My son jumped on my chest.

"Wake up daddy. It's my birthday."

My mind was foggy, but last night slowly came into focus.

The bicycle.

When the boy saw it partially assembled, the repercussions would kick in. Things would never be the same.

"A bike," he said.

I rubbed my eyes and glanced over. The bicycle was fully assembled next to the fireplace. He got on and rode across the carpet, burned out like some post-apocalyptic landscape.

"Hold on there, partner," I said, struggling to my feet. "Let's take it outside."

My wife stood in the hallway, smirking. She must have crept down last night and finished the deed over my comatose body. My brief joy was overshadowed by the new world order. My stomach churned.

We took the bicycle outside and the boy rode up a hill, turned around at the top, and started descending. My wife kept smirking, reveling in her bloodless coup, fingering the contours of her new fiefdom. I would be exiled into the bathroom with a mop and bucket.

The boy rode down the hill and within seconds the handlebars fell off and he slammed to the ground. Hard. His screams echoed through the morning neighborhood.

Her smirk vanished. There was a moment of chaos, a power vacuum. Then a subtle shift back to the old order. I felt a horrible guilt about the relief and satisfaction that washed over me, even as my boy lay sobbing.

We ran over to him. He was not seriously hurt. As I reached to comfort him I paused to reclaim my share. Not pretty, but it had to be done.

Because the world verged on constant chaos. The sun could explode at any moment. And I controlled almost nothing.

I turned to my wife. "I told you a part was missing."

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**Roy Pickering is a freelance writer living in Maplewood, New Jersey. Among his published works is *Feeding the Squirrels*, a novella that SynergEbooks produces as an ebook. He maintains the website RoyPickering.net to showcase some of his fiction online, post editorial style pieces to his blog - <http://www.lineaday.blogspot.com>, and he's one of the most widely read authors on TextOnPhone. His debut novel, *Patches of Grey*, is set for publication by M.U.D. House Books in 2009, and while promoting it he is also hard at work on a second novel as well as a series of children's books that his wife is illustrating. Anthologies featuring his writing include *Proverbs for the People* (Kensington Books), *Role Call* (Third World Press), *The Game: Short Stories About the Life* (Triple Crown Publications), and *Prose to be Read Aloud, Volume One*.**

## **Lucky Day**

*By Roy L. Pickering Jr.*

*Some days you can just do no wrong*, thought Dan as he headed towards his girlfriend's apartment. And for him, today happened to be one of them.

His lucky streak started off first thing in the morning. The radio station he listened to as he dressed for work was giving away concert tickets to see his idol, Bruce Springsteen. All he needed to do was be caller number ninety-five. He had a better shot at parting the Red Sea.

The D.J. picked up on the first ring. Dan would be sitting front row center. He had never even tried to win anything from the radio before, but since it was the Boss, he figured it certainly wouldn't hurt to try. That figuring had turned out to be extremely understated.

The day whisked by as Dan basked in the glow of his good fortune. Plus it was an abbreviated one, because he needed to leave work early to make an appointment with his doctor. Before going to the subway station, he went into the supermarket around the corner from his job. Dan had a ritual to perform.

Every day after work, Dan would come here and head straight towards the gumball machine. It was filled with miniature replicas of

NFL football helmets. Dan had been putting quarters into it for the last six months, but to no avail. He never got the helmet of his favorite team, the Green Bay Packers.

Dan stood before his mechanical nemesis and fished through his pockets. He knew he shouldn't be doing this. He would have to borrow five dollars to be considered broke, yet he spent every day squandering precious coins. He promised himself that this would be the last time.

One quarter was all that Dan found in his pocket. It no doubt could have been put to better use, such as helping to reduce his growing pile of dirty laundry at home, but nevertheless he kissed it to God just as he used to do with dropped candy when he was a boy. Then he placed George Washington's profile into the allotted slot. One twist of his wrist and out came the plastic bubble.

Unbelievable! The helmet of the Green Bay Packers. There was no denying it now. This was definitely his lucky day.

A short while later, Dan got off the train and headed towards his doctor's office. He repeatedly tossed his prize into the air, alternating between his two hands. Toss it with the right, catch it with the left. Toss it with the left, catch it with the right. A block away from his destination, he misjudged a toss and the plastic bubble rolled under a parked car. As he bent down to pick it up, his eye noticed a green piece of paper.

A fifty dollar bill! Lady luck definitely had the hots for him today.

Dan was a man unaccustomed to such favorable fortune. Not that he considered life to have given him less than he deserved, but it certainly had not given him more. Not like his old friend Rick, who must have been born under the right star or something.

Over the years, everything from good grades to beautiful women to financial riches to inexplicable talent at a variety of vocations was afforded to Rick. He excelled at everything he attempted, no matter how little effort he exerted or concern he held for the task. Rick was always in the right place, it was always the right time for him. He was adored by all whose paths he crossed, as if they sensed that they were in the presence of someone who had been touched by divinity. As much as Dan admired the feats and triumphs of his

friend, he would have loved to beat Rick in something just once, to do a single thing better, longer, faster, or first.

Two hours later, Dan was confronted with his least favorite aspect of living in New York City - rush hour on the subway. Dan could think of preferable places to be. War torn Iraq, for example. Attica would suffice. As long as he wasn't in a hurry and his destination was less than thirty blocks away, he usually walked. But there were ninety blocks between the starting line of his doctor's office and finish line of his girlfriend's apartment.

He did have fifty dollars in his pocket, so he could have taken a cab. But those guys often did not have change for a big bill, and Dan didn't want to squander any of his new found cash just yet. He decided to be frugal and endure the subway at the unholy hour of 5:00 in the afternoon.

A train pulled in just as Dan arrived on the platform. The doors opened and the masses squeezed into the already filled car like a nostalgic, beer bellied, forty-year-old man trying to fit into his high school baseball uniform. Dan was exhausted. The doctor had put him through quite a work-out. He would have given anything to be seated, instead of hanging from a straphanger like a side of beef in an over-packed meat locker.

Then a miracle happened. For whatever reason, the person seated directly in front of him chose to get up. There were no senior citizens or pregnant women in sight to guilt Dan out of it. So he swiftly dropped into the seat, pleased as a baby drawing milk from his mother.

When he arrived at his girlfriend's door, Dan reached into his pocket and retrieved the spare key she had recently given him. This was as sure a sign as could be given that a relationship was getting serious. Dan couldn't have been any happier about it. He was crazy about Sharon.

She wasn't expecting him. Dan usually called before he came over, especially since her home doubled as her place of business, but today he hadn't. He had something important to tell her, and wanted to do all talking face to face. Besides, he didn't have any change on him to place the call. One day he would have to invest in a cell phone. But only out of absolute necessity, not because it was the trendy thing to do as he suspected was the reason why more

than half of them were purchased. He certainly saw no purpose to buying one that also served as a camera, stereo, television, fax machine, and massager. There was such a thing as being too inventive in Dan's opinion. Alexander Graham Bell pretty much nailed it when he created the first telephone. Push buttons were a nice improvement over rotary dialing. Beyond that, the bombardment of additional features over the years was pure overkill. Not everything needed to be elaborate. Mankind had lost its ability to appreciate the fine art of simplicity.

Dan entered his girlfriend's apartment and gave his plastic bubble a pleased gaze. Sharon knew all about the crusade he had been undertaking to get it. She would be happy for him. Maybe he would celebrate by taking her out to dinner. He could certainly afford it now.

She was not in the living room or the kitchen, and the open bathroom door revealed that it was also empty. Either she had run out to take care of an errand, or else perhaps she was taking a nap. Lately it seemed she was always tired. Well, not always. Just when he was in the mood to make love.

The dual sounds reached his ears just as his hand touched the doorknob to her bedroom. Seconds later, his eyes confirmed what he thought he had heard and desperately hoped he had not. Sharon was moaning as she did only during the heights of passion, in this case, courtesy of Rick.

Dan's first impulse was to rush in and beat his friend to a pulp. How could he do this to him? How could she do this to him? How could they do this to each other? And what was the name of that position they were in?

The mighty charge that Dan made consisted of one step. It took that long for him to remember that Rick spent hours in the gym building up an impressive grouping of muscles, so therefore could twist him like a pretzel if the occasion called for it.

Dan closed the door, leaving his former best friend and best girl to do their business. His heart felt leaden, his tear ducts threatened to erupt. What a shame that something as pretty as love could turn out to be so shabby and cruel.

Unable to think of anything else to do, Dan walked away. With each step, his sense of betrayal grew stronger. He had confided in Rick many times about how much he cared for Sharon. Rick already had a gorgeous girlfriend of his own who was no less than a runway model. And if he wanted to be with someone else, plenty of other women were more than willing to volunteer their services. He should have considered Sharon off limits. Granted, he was unfamiliar with the concept of limitations on his actions and achievements. Still, there was no excuse for what Rick had done.

Maybe he could come to forgive Sharon, though. It seemed ridiculous to be considering such a thing, but Dan couldn't help it. He was so madly in love with her that not even the sight of her in carnal embrace with another man was enough to convince him that it was over. It couldn't be over.

After all, he had cheated on her too. His indiscretion had taken place one month earlier and he had been beating himself up over it ever since. The woman had been so drunk, the opportunity given to Dan with such little effort on his part that he was regretfully unable to resist. He had not been brave enough to confess his sin to Sharon, but he'd done everything he could since then to make it up to her. Maybe he was now receiving his just desserts. Maybe he and Sharon could start over again with a clean slate. Yes, perhaps he would forgive her.

But not Rick. Not Mr. Physical Fitness, Mr. Casanova, Mr. Perfect. No matter how much he possessed, he always wanted more. And he always got it.

Dan took a moment to rein his resentment in. It had not been easy to play the part of Rick's best friend for these many years without being consumed by envy. Dan had been forced to master the art of not begrudging or coveting the many bounties that came Rick's way. He learned to seek out the bright side of his own far less impressive set of circumstances. And after he hooked up with Sharon, there was no more reason to be jealous of anyone.

So Dan managed to convince himself, just as he had done on many prior occasions that he was dwelling too much on the negative. He reminded himself to recognize that things could certainly be worse for him. He did after all have a pair of tickets to Bruce Springsteen coming his way, and fifty extra bucks were in his pocket, along with his treasured Packers' helmet.

To top things off, there was the important news he had to share with Sharon, the secret he had been about to reveal before finding her in such a compromising position. Sooner or later, she and Rick would both find out. Dan's doctor had confirmed his suspicions. He had contracted herpes. He should have known there would be a price to pay for his single night of no strings attached and no protection worn passion. No doubt he had already given his burden to Sharon, which meant that it was being transferred to Rick at this very moment. Rick's run of perfection would be coming to an end. From now on, at least in one department, Rick would be no better off than Dan.

Some would call it poetic justice, others an eye for an eye, and there were those who would place it under the category of God's mysterious sense of humor. Dan applied none of these labels, for he knew full well what the reason was for this latest turn of events.

This was his lucky day.

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## **Life In Bean Field Country**

*By: William Bryant*

There’s no way to explain exactly what it’s like, being a teenager working on a farm. At least that’s true for the farm I worked. I may have some difficulty explaining, but I have no problem at all remembering. The memories are so thick in my mind that at times it feels like my brain is wading through a tar pit in order to make it back to the here and now.

First thing I remember is calluses.

When you’re sixteen, something about earning work-callused hands is very appealing. It’s been twenty years since my hands have even whiffed real work, much less a callus, but that was not always true. I remember when I had them. And I wore them as proudly as if they were twin Olympic gold medals slung at the ends of my wrists. I liked shaking hands with the “sissy” boys. I liked the feel of their creamy, soft, white hands in mine. I wondered if they could tell. I hoped they could feel the hard ridges, knots and burrs. If they could, I’d instantly have their respect in some small way. They’d know that I had tolerated something they never had, and I had the scars to prove it.

I remember how I got those calluses too. It was a variety of things: a rough hoe handle - working on white hot, rusty tractor parts - loading and unloading irrigation pipe and sixty pound seed bags. But mainly, it was the vines.

The bean fields were full of vines, mostly morning glory and sweet potato vines. I’d spend the better part of twelve hours a day, mid-June through mid-August, dragging an eight row cultivator across

those hell-spawned creepers. Problem was vines don’t cut or tear, they just drag along behind, hooked to the plow, tearing down beans along the way. You couldn’t travel thirty feet without having to lift the cultivator, climb down off the tractor in the ninety-plus degree heat and pull the vines off the plow sweeps. Pull is not the right word. Tear, claw, rip, shred are all much more accurate. Those vines would wrap so tight around the sweeps and get so tangled up in the row guards that there was just no other way to do it. I’d try to cut them out with a pocket knife, but the spaces those vines would cram their little evil selves into were too cramped to use a knife. You had to dig in with your hands and fingers. Sometimes I thought I couldn’t have dug any harder if I was trying to pry a gold nugget out of a hunk of granite. It took about five minutes each morning to knock the scabs off the backs of your knuckles that had sprouted up from the day before. I can still feel the sensation of the wet dirt driving up under my fingernails. It was actually painful with a sort of dull, pressure kind of pain. Within the first hour, my hands would be black with dirt, spotted with blood and I could feel blisters and calluses forming on top of the ones I already had.

I guarantee – if you don’t know how to cuss and want to learn – come ride the tractor with me and be my vine puller for a day. You’ll learn. I hadn’t plowed beans for more than two days before I could cuss like a MAN. You know you’re cussing right when you’re kicking dirt, punching metal and cussing out loud...and there isn’t a soul within five miles to hear or see you. I made up my own favorite cultivator/vine cussing phrases. They were beautiful, colorful things – well-wrought and polished to a brilliant luster. I won’t share them with you. They’re kind of special to me – so I guard them, kind of like Colonel Sanders and his fried chicken.

But anyway, by the end of summer, my hands were not only callused, they were somehow bigger...thicker. They looked wider and somehow more thickly padded. My thin “winter fingers” would turn dark; and even though they were no shorter, they looked stumpy and gnarled – a little like an old man’s hands stuck on a kid’s arms. Once I was watching TV and there was a program on about the mountain gorillas. One of them was sitting up and you could see the soles of his feet. Immediately, I thought, “Dang, that’s what my hands look like” And it was true.

My dad’s hands were different. They were callused, but his were old calluses. There was a distinct difference. My hands were red,

inflamed looking. His were a deep, rich brown. His calluses were what I would call *seasoned*, and he didn't even really work hard anymore. His hands were simply permanently thickened. I believe if he were to stick his hands in a pair of gloves, put his hands in his pockets, keep them there for a hundred years and never work with them again, he could pull them out and remove the gloves and they would look just the same.

I remember thinking how mean my Dad was. He had the reddest face you ever saw and a mustache so wooly it covered his lower lip. It made him look like a sunburned walrus. He smoked three and a half packs of cigarettes a day...no kidding. He drank at least six beers every day. To him it was a beverage, and I can remember seeing beer foam stick to that huge mustache when he sat outside with his buddies drinking beer and watching the bug zapper. You could barely see his eyes. They were all squinty from being out in the sun his whole life – first in the cotton fields – and later with the sweet corn and soybeans. When you combined the "sun squints" and greasy-billed seed cap pulled over his face, I can't even be sure he had eyes at all. I don't remember them. But I remember his hands.

I plowed beans all day, every day, leaning on my right arm, staring at a row of soybeans for thirteen hours. Those were very long, uncomfortable, boring days. As I'd drive back and forth, back and forth, I'd think about my friends. I envied them some, but I also felt a bit superior. "They're still in their beds at home and I've been at work for half a day already. I'm toughening up." I'd think to myself as I spit a stream of tobacco juice into a motor oil can. I'd cut the top off one with my pocket knife and stick it in the corner of the tractor's floorboard...instant portable spittoon. I guess that was one perk about working on the farm. It didn't matter if you were sixteen – probably wouldn't matter if you were thirteen – you could chew tobacco. And no one ever said a word to you about it.

I think Mr. Dodge was the first person I ever saw chew tobacco. Mr. Dodge was somewhere between seventy-five and a hundred thirty years old. He was skinny as a knife blade and he smelled like...well he smelled like tobacco...and maybe dusty leather. I remember that I never knew his first name, that I was afraid of him, and that he had lost two fingers working on our farm. Later, when I had earned a stripe or two and felt comfortable talking, I asked him how he lost his fingers.

"First 'un got hung in a grain auger," he said. "Your daddy tore off the other 'un."

I thought he meant what he said. I mean literally that my father had actually torn his finger off. I think he could see the look of surprise in my face and decided to explain.

"I was hooking his pick-up to a water trailer. I poked my finger down through the holes in the hitches to clean out some dirt so I could put the pin in when he drove off. There wasn't nuthin' connecting that trailer to his truck but my finger, and it popped clean off at the knuckle...didn't hardly bleed."

Looking back, his lack of fingers, and the way he lost them impressed me, but the thing that impressed me the most was his chewing tobacco.

It made him look "tough". I wanted to be tough too, but I didn't think I could beat people up or ride bulls or walk on coals or anything like that – but chewing tobacco seemed possible. Lots of men chewed tobacco, and it was definitely a badge of honor. So I went out badge hunting.

I learned early on that there was a definite hierarchy in the tobacco chewing culture – kind of like hot peppers or liquor. You'd start with a jalapeno or a fuzzy navel and work your way up to a habanero and a shot of Wild Turkey. When it came to tobacco Beechnut was for beginners with Levi Garrett being just a tad up the scale. Chewing beechnut would hardly buy you any clout at all – unless you were fourteen and trying to impress eleven year olds. Red Man was the gold standard of manhood. The stuff in that green pouch with the Indian head was revered. I remember thinking that if I tried Red Man I'd immediately be stricken with some tobacco seizure and turn into a puking invalid. They'd find me lying on the ground unconscious, and before the paramedics could start CPR they'd have to untangle the strands of tobacco from my braces. For a long time, I treated those Red Man pouches like they were radioactive.

Until I started looking into entering the society of chewers, I thought the tobacco chain ended there with Red Man perched at the top. But up 'til then I had only seen "town" tobacco. The farm was way down at the southern tip of the county where Missouri

pushes as far out into the Mississippi River as it can – acting like it wants to be part of Kentucky. Down there the tobacco was different. I don't even think smokeless tobacco was invented yet, but down there they had snuff. I remember Garrett and Rooster and I was amazed to learn that these were actually preferred by women. It was rumored that Mrs. Callhorn, cook and owner of the local barbecue restaurant, dipped Garrett and that she would spit on the griddle to keep meat from sticking. If she did, it didn't seem to hurt business.

Right next to the snuff there were "plugs". I had never seen them before. I remember they looked like dark brown bars of soap with light brown wrappers. I asked Mrs. Dubin, the owner's wife, how you chewed it. She just laughed.

I later learned that Mr. Dodge had nothing to do with any of this tobacco. He chewed "twist". I remember the first time I saw him do it. He pulled out an old Barlow pocket knife, the blade scooped out a little in the center from years of cutting just about everything, and produced a cellophane wrapper from his pants pocket and squeezed what looked like a giant, dry, black, turd from the wrapper. He cut a piece off with his knife, and it was obvious he had to put some effort into it. That stuff wouldn't just cut...he virtually had to saw it off. At the time, I still wasn't sure what it was, and I was a little surprised when he put it in his mouth and started chewing. It wasn't until he spit that I was certain. A few days later, I saw it for the first time in the store. I think it was called "Days O' Work", but I'm not sure. I thought it was the coolest thing I had ever seen.

I remember calluses. I remember tobacco. And I remember all of the men. I've already told you all there really is to know about Mr. Dodge. He was old, kinda mean, he chewed twist tobacco, and my dad had gruesomely – and probably unintentionally – separated him from one of his fingers. But there were others, and they're what I remember most.

I had a bunch of relatives that worked there: my dad, uncles, cousins and brother, but they were boring. But there was another group that was definitely not boring. I don't know what you'd call them. I don't know where they came from. They were *the hands*. They were the salt of the earth, honest and hard-working. And every last one of them was absolutely as unique – or maybe eccentric, peculiar or just plain weird – as he could be.

First, there was Luther. His mama was the woman who ran the barbecue restaurant...the snuff woman. Luther was as black as the underside of a rock at the bottom of a cave at midnight, and he always wore a light blue shirt that had a white patch with his name on it sewed above the left chest pocket. Just like the kind you used to see employees wear at filling stations. But it didn't make any sense. Nobody ever saw him that didn't already know his name anyway.

Luther was some sort of a mechanic, or glorified repair man. He always stayed around the shop and worked on equipment, fixed tires, loafed, and talked to me...non-stop.

When I first started working, I was fourteen - didn't yet know how to drive a tractor. So they stuck me in the shop with Luther. I remember two things about Luther particularly well. First, he had killed his wife several years ago and somehow had only spent four years in prison. I remember him saying, "Sugar," (that's what he called her), "Sugar was mean. And one night she got drunk and broke a bottle over the zinc (country for "sink") and told me she was gonna kill me. So naturally I shot her."

*Naturally*, I thought.

But even more intriguing than Luther being a murderer - or "manslaughterer" or whatever you call it when you shoot someone named Sugar who is trying to kill you with a broken bottle of Grape Crush – was his craving for women. Haitian women.

Every year, about the time the sweet corn was ready, the Haitian migrant workers would show up. It was very easy to know when they had arrived. One day you'd look up and see two or three jet-black women walking down the road toward the river with towels wrapped around their waists...naked from the waist up. They were headed to the river to bathe. I never saw any of the men with them. I guess they didn't worry so much about hygiene.

As soon as the Haitians would appear, Luther would go wild. Two or three – sometimes more – Haitian women would come around the shop every day, usually to get water, sometimes to see Luther. When they came for water they wouldn't even ask. They'd just wander right up, walk right past us, turn on the spigot and take whatever they wanted. We never tried to stop them. But, it was a



little disconcerting to note that they would carry the water off in empty herbicide jugs. Me and Luther would try to stop them. "Poison!" we would say real loud and slow, like people do when they are talking to someone who doesn't speak English and believe that volume and careful pronunciation will help. "Deadly Poison!" we'd say again. But they couldn't understand. They'd just jabber back in that weird, funky sounding French they speak. And they looked mean. In the end, we'd let them take the poison water and go on their way. As far as I know, none of them ever died from it.

They may not have understood us when it came to safety warnings, but somehow Luther had no problem communicating with them when it came to matters of a more physical nature. He'd come to work in the morning and tell me – fourteen-year-old me – about his previous night's exploits. I'd listen with my mouth wide open and I wouldn't breathe for about a half an hour.

"Ten dollars!" he'd say. "They only want ten dollars! Ten dollars and you can have whatever you want. I tell you, I wish I could move to Haiti today!"

Even though I was only fourteen, I could read, and I did have ears and a television set, and I was pretty sure that having "relations" with a Haitian was at least as risky as trying to do the same with a rhinoceros. I don't know if Luther's days of lasciviousness ever caught up with him or not. But I do know that he's dead.

There was "Brahma", like the bull. I don't know his real name. Maybe that was his real name. Brahma lived alone with his "daughter" – only thing was Brahma was seventy or so and the girl was about seventeen. Brahma loved whiskey. He used to tell me that he couldn't wait for Friday night so he could "sit at the kitchen table and get drunk". I remember when he got a satellite dish in his yard. The thing was bigger than his house and with the way he carried on about it, you would have thought he'd been crowned Prince of Persia.

Brahma had a problem with falling asleep on the tractor, and to remedy it he had developed a novel procedure. Usually after lunch, when he'd be the sleepest, if we happened to be working the same field, I'd see him stop and jump down off the tractor. He'd start dancing and waving his hat. He'd holler, jump up and down and spin around like one of those Turkish or Russian dancers you see on the History channel. Then he'd pretend to have a

conversation with someone. He'd stand right there in the middle of the bean field and talk...to no one. He'd gesture with his arms and laugh just like he was conversing with his best buddy. After a while, he'd climb back on the tractor and resume plowing.

Brahma also was a little bit of a local celebrity by virtue of the fact that he had once found a dead man floating down the river. He was "jug fishing". If you don't know what that is you'll have to look it up. It's too complicated to explain. But anyway, he was pulling in his jugs and he noticed something really big was hooked on to one of them.

"At first, I thought I had hooked a giant catfish!" I had heard him tell the same forty or fifty people ten thousand times. "And then, the closer I got to it, it started looking like a big ol' black trash bag. But then it rolled over and I seen them eyes!! His face was all swole up and white as a carp." (I don't know why he would say that. I don't consider carp to be particularly white). "I threw down my line, got in my pick-up and drove right to the sheriff."

He told me that the county paid him \$125 for finding the body. That never made sense to me. If the county pays you for finding bodies, I'm surprised you don't have people killing each other right and left, just so they can get paid when they find your body.

But more than calluses, tobacco or these other fellows, I remember the small feud between Bobby and "Booger". Bobby's real name was, in fact, Bobby. Booger's real name was Guy. It takes no imagination to figure how he got his nickname.

Bobby was about 6'-6" tall, spoke with a voice about as high-pitched as screaming teakettle, and he was the first homophobe I ever knew. He was scared to death of homosexuals. I doubt he even knew one, but he was petrified of them anyway. "Dan Blevins," he used to say. "Didn't I see you with Dan Blevins last week?" He'd say that to just about anybody. I would just wrinkle up my eyebrows and look at him like he was from another planet. I think maybe he had heard that Dan Blevins had died of AIDS, which meant to Bobby that he had to have been gay. And somehow, he thought that if he could ever find someone who had spent time with him – even though the man was presently dead – that he would have successfully ferreted out a gay man.

But homophobia had nothing to do with the feud. The feud was multifactorial, but largely culinary. Booger had two distinguishing characteristics. First of all, he couldn't read – not a lick. But even though he couldn't read, he always had an impressive array of pens and pencils bristling out of the top of the bib pocket of his overalls. Bobby just couldn't resist. "What you got them pencils for Booger?" he'd jeer. "You gonna draw us a picture?" Bobby would drop to his knees and laugh hysterically while Booger looked at him with contempt. Bobby also loved to point out to Booger the fact that most tractors have a rabbit and a turtle painted near the throttle. Obviously, if you push the throttle toward the rabbit, the tractor speeds up, and toward the turtle, vice-versa. Bobby loved to say, "Booger, you know it's awful nice of that tractor company to paint those pictures on here just so you can drive."

Booger's second outstanding feature was his ability to eat anything. The talent had actually brought him a little money now and then. Every once in a while, someone would wager Booger that he wouldn't eat something or other, and as far as the legend goes, Booger never lost. The most famous story involves the fifty dollars Booger won for eating an axle grease sandwich. Cool hand Luke ought to be embarrassed. What are a few eggs compared to an industrial lubricant?

Booger was quiet and friendly and we all liked him. Bobby...well not so much.

One day in the late fall, Booger invited a bunch of us over for a "squirrel fry". Squirrel fries weren't too uncommon back then. And if you've never tried squirrel, you should. Believe it or not, they taste a lot like chicken. Well one Saturday evening Booger had us all over – Luther, Mr. Dodge, Brahma, Bobby, me and my dad were all there. I don't remember any women except for Booger's wife who stuck her gray, beehive topped head out of the kitchen every now and then to check on us. We had baked beans, salad, and mashed potatoes, and right in the middle of each of our plates sat a whole fried squirrel, all cut up into proper portions. We all dug in and enjoyed ourselves. There wasn't much conversation, since our mouths were mostly full, and before long the meal was done. "Mrs. Booger" had made peach cobbler and as we were finishing that, Booger took a big breath, patted his belly in a satisfied way and leaned back in his chair. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a tiny gleam in his eye.

"How was the food boys?" he asked.

"Good," we said. "Thanks Booger."

"Bobby, how was yours?" Booger asked.

"It was fine," he replied.

Booger grinned. Bobby got a little nervous. You could see it in his face.

"I'm glad you liked it," Booger said. "It makes sense. After all, yours were corn fed."

"Corn fed?" Bobby said, puzzled.

"Why yes. You know, I didn't have enough squirrels to feed everybody and I didn't know what to do." He grinned again. "As you know Bobby, I can't read. So, I couldn't tell from the conservation code if it was still squirrel season. I didn't want to cancel our supper, but I didn't want to break the law either. Then I had a great idea. My barn is full of rats, and they've been eating the heck out of my feed corn. And really, a rat is no different than a squirrel – don't you think? So I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone. I could get rid of a few rats and feed you at the same time. I didn't think you'd mind. I'm pretty sure none of them were gay, and just to be fair, I ate them too. But of course, that kind of thing doesn't bother me."

Booger could see the rest of us looked a bit pale.

"Oh no," he said. "You boys had squirrel – don't worry."

Booger just smiled down at Bobby.

"I don't believe you!" Bobby seethed. "You're lying! Who'd feed somebody barn rats?"

Booger just continued to smile as he reached behind the counter to his left and pulled out a plastic bag and tossed it to Bobby. Lying inside were the hides and heads of two, large, barn rats.

I don't remember exactly what happened next, but I know it wasn't pretty. Booger and Bobby never mended their feud, but

oddly enough, Bobby never did give Booger anymore trouble about literacy.

Now my calluses are gone – and so are Mr. Dodge, Brahma, Booger, Luther, the Haitians and even my dad. I heard Bobby is still alive, but he got some kind of a head injury during a fight in a gay bar somewhere and now he lives in a nursing home.

And every time I see a squirrel or an old store with twist tobacco, or a bean field – or every time I get on my lawn mower and see that little rabbit and turtle alongside the throttle, I'm reminded of those wonderful characters that gave my growing up years such richness. I gained my calluses, but they didn't make *me callus*. The farm was my Middle Earth. The bean fields were my looking glass.

God bless Booger.



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## **George and the Singing Sesors**

*By: Vivian Ngwerume*

George always felt awkward around girls. He had always been too self conscious; it did not help when the girls were actually looking at him, as they were now, three pairs of eyes scanning him and facial expressions he could not interpret followed closely by a blend of giggles and whispers. Walking past the bevy became more difficult and lengthier than it need have been. Suddenly it mattered to George how he walked and how he looked. He handled the situation the usual way: dropped his head and watched his feet.

Maybe if his attention was not on the girls, their attention would not be on him; perhaps *that's* why he was trying not to pay attention to them and walking down Sunny-Side street with his head down. The rest of the street was in a bustle, each resident going about their own business. A busking elf sat by the roadside playing a dreamy tune on his flute and the three ogres of the aptly named Three Ogres Workshop were busy at work, hammering on some strange metal contraption which they seemed to be trying to fix—or destroy, apparently.

George looked back at the girls who seemed to have taken a keen interest in him. As expected, they were still watching him. This might have been a good sign; he was dressed particularly well today, befitting the day's impending mission: to tell Penelope, his crush of many years how he felt about her. It was an absurd thing to do—he was a nothing; she was the prettiest and most popular girl at school. That simply added up to projected humiliation and time well wasted. George, however, was determined. He had it all planned out.

Penelope would be in the park this afternoon reading, as always, or so he had been very well informed by a mutual friend. She was a keen reader and she was a fool for lovely flowers; George was well aware of this as he passed his greeting to a gnome perched

on one of the branches of a lovely Blue-leaf tree in full bloom, its golden flowers gleaming in the sun next to the entrance of Regis, the florist elf's flower shop. All of the best flowers were sold here in all their magnificence—the flowers in this place made *all* the girls swoon.

It was a flurry of colour—the yellow Sun-shines, the fiery red Flame-flowers, the blue Coo-coo roses; they looked amazing, but none captured George's attention as avidly as the incredible, multi-coloured Singing Sesors. It was said they could sing your life to the world and could put up a spectacular show in themselves whenever they saw fit.

"Yes, the Singing Sesors are wonderful," Regis informed George, "but after three days they certainly will not sing and will wither away. They only have a lifespan of three days, you know. It would be incredible if they sang today, so I have no need for them in the flower shop for much longer."

George considered his options. He didn't have much money, or very much at all to his name. The Sesors were beautiful, but costly. "Regis, may I have the ones you wish to throw out for a bit less?"

"Dear boy, they are no good, for in merely hours they will wither away and will not sing to the lass you wish to woo", Regis responded, his elfish ears twitching and his gnome assistants standing around him.

"I will take them nonetheless", said George paying the little silver he had to the elf florist. Soon he was off, the brilliant Singing Sesors in hand and an empty pocket. For the Singing Sesors to sing, he needed to speak his plea to them so that they could sing his heart.

"Her name is Penelope and she... she makes my heart dance and makes my blood to boil! She is the most beautiful thing in all of this land," George said to the Sesors as he walked briskly on his way to the Great Delight Park where he would have to confront his love.

"And so today you have chosen to speak your heart?" The magnificent bouquet responded in chorus, as if interviewing him before they could take up his offer. "Yes, yes! Today is the day,"

George cried out at the flowers causing a group of women and female goblins gossiping by the corner of Helen street to stare.

"Lovely flowers, dear! Beautiful, absolutely beautiful," cried one woman, the rest of the group waving at him in unison. "Are those for a girl? So romantic," one female goblin called to him smiling pleasantly—female goblins were short, but remarkably pretty in contrast to their male counterparts. George looked down; he was embarrassed at the attention he was getting, more so at the glaringly obvious fact that the Sesors were destined for a girl.

"Lift your head, don't be ashamed," the Sesors sang loudly in discord as he approached the crowded Market Square, dragging more unwanted attention to him.

"George," a familiar voice yelled over the noise and he looked over his shoulder to see Hayden and Scott, a Peratchial.

Peratchials were very proud stone-like people from the underground. Both Hayden and his Peratchial companion were George's classmates in his Creaturing class at school, where they studied the art of bringing miniature clay models of various creatures to life—it was a hugely demanding subject to take. Hayden and Scott, however, knew Penelope and thus they would know all too well she was surely way out of his league and would probably discourage his attempts; George had decided beforehand he would tell neither of his mission.

"How are you?" boomed Scott's voice as it echoed from his stone-like body.

"He is fine and very much in love," the Singing Sesors cried in chorus, much to George's disgruntlement.

"Wow! Singing Sesors! But aren't they supposed to be singing stuff? Yours sound like their just chanting. Let me guess, they're almost withered, hey? Thank goodness they still look good until the very moment they wither away... and what's this about being in love? What—"

"Er... I'd really love to chat but I... I'm in a bit of a rush... talk to you later, hey," George said as he scurried off, cursing at the flowers for almost selling him out. The flowers responded to this by wiggling around violently until he apologized to them. "Good

luck, George," Hayden called out from behind him to which George briskly waved him down and continued along, but the words sprouted uncertainty in his mind: Was good luck really on his side today? He needed it, and there, a few feet from where he stood was a source for answers—Gillian the fortune teller.

Gillian was a witch of the more reputable and scandal-free Moon Circle order. Witches of the Moon Circle order had long been in conflict with a dark union of exiled witches, wizards and necromancers known as the Wolfdrummon. The Wolfdrummon had long caused her and other Moon Circle magicians many a trouble until the Moon Circle had formed its own union with the larger magician's body, the Whirlwind order, and taken control of the situation. That's why she felt free to perform her fortune telling activities by the open street corner where she sat now. George was surprised to find she was not surrounded by a mob of people wishing to ascertain their tomorrows, as was the norm.

"Hello, love," she said lazily tossing her pitch-black hair backwards and piercing him with an intense blue eyed gaze. "Those are lovely flowers you've got there."

"Thanks... er, can I look into the, er, crystal ball," George said, rather sceptical about the whole idea of seeing into the future; it never struck him as being authentic. He got the explanation as to why she wasn't very busy today.

"Oh, I'm sorry love. A darned Plotcher knocked it right off this here table just yesterday... Its darned tentacles were flapping around when it came; seemed uneasy about some future endeavours, I suppose, so it came to me... ended up knocking my dear ball off the table," Gillian said, sounding very emotional. "The flowers tell me you're here about a girl... Just go for it, love. Take a chance," she said winking.

"Thanks," George responded. He bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement, turned around and continued towards the park feeling rather annoyed. She was a *fortune teller*—if she *could* see into the future, why had she not seen the Plotcher accident coming and saved her "dear" crystal ball? He was now even more sceptical towards fortune tellers more than ever before.

George walked a short distance before he found himself upon the large bold golden lettering which read: GREAT DELIGHT PARK,

suspended by unseen forces in the air. This was it. It did not take a great deal of effort to locate Penelope—she was in clear view seated alone (thank goodness) on one of the green park benches not much further from where he now stood, apparently lost somewhere deep within the pages of the book she was reading.

He took a deep breath. His knees were trembling.

"Please sing for her... make this special," George implored the flowers held in his hand.

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I guess," George replied to the flowers.

"Is *she* ready to hear what you have to say," the Singing Sesors asked in chorus.

George hesitated for a bit. "Well, I wrote her... letters. I suppose she does know it's coming..."

He felt really ashamed of himself at this point. She had not responded to any of his letters and just yesterday at school, an elf friend of hers had burst out laughing at the sight of him for no apparent reason. He sighed. George was now seriously contemplating the thought of bailing ship; at least he would keep his dignity if he chose not to try and approach her.

"The letters first, and now you will have us sing on your behalf. Are you afraid to speak your own heart for yourself? We will not sing for we are aged, and our final moment is close," the Singing Sesors chanted, almost in half-song. The Sesors had a point; why could he not approach as himself? The Sesors obviously weren't going to sing—he was hanging on a thread, vulnerable and alone, as was she. He decided there was no point in keeping his feelings to himself. He took another deep breath. His arms and legs felt like lead as he began his approach.

George's heart was pounding as he drew nearer, not thinking straight. His right hand in which he held the Sesors was already outstretched before he reached her; he almost tripped himself over as he drew closer, much to his embarrassment. He was breathing hard.

"Penelope," he began. She looked stunning, her face glowing, her lovely brown hair flowing gloriously. George's heart stopped as she looked up from her book—Penelope's beauty was striking.

"Hey. Er, did you get my, um, my—"

"Yeah, I got your letters. They were really... sweet," Penelope said, her voice sounding angelic in George's ears. He almost melted at these words. Penelope was looking at the Sesors, unsure whether to accept them.

"I really like you," George blurted out rather suddenly as though he had been struggling to keep the words on his chest. Penelope's eyebrows were raised in bewilderment. George flushed red and an uncomfortable silence ensued.

Penelope quietly opened one of the rear pages of the book she had been reading and pulled out the three neatly folded letters George had since written her. They looked special, at the least, with hand illustrations on them that George had added. It was obvious George was trying really hard to impress her. The amount of time and effort he had put into those letters was admirable; perhaps the Sesors had taken note of this too for they suddenly burst out in song—it was the most beautiful melody George or Penelope had ever heard:

"This young man, he's in love  
Can't you see?  
It's meant to be  
You and he  
He's tried too hard  
To win your heart  
And so let it be  
Take a chance, Penelope  
LET THERE BE LOVE!"

As the singing from the flowers ended, a group of very well groomed gnomes emerged from the surrounding bushes and trees, playing a beautiful tune on their flutes and harps, dancing and clapping their hands. Fairies emerged from somewhere within the bouquet of Singing Sesors and danced around in the air. Magnificent glittering fairy-dust fell upon them and birds of the air joined in on the song—it was beautiful! The fairies fluttered away

like colourful butterflies and the gnomes retreated as the song of the Singing Sesors faded out into the wind.

George stood stunned, his mouth agape; Penelope was almost in tears, her right hand clasped to her chest.

"Oh George, that was so... it was beautiful! I don't know what to say."

At this point, George didn't know what to say either; the Singing Sesors had come through for him, much to his delight and amazement. There was an awkward silence, until Penelope held out the letters she was holding to George, who hesitated before he took them from her.

Penelope stood up and stepped closer to George, taking his hands and looking into his eyes. "George, you are a great person and I really appreciate everything you're doing but you're coming on a little strong... Please just slow it down a bit. I'm so sorry. I can't keep your letters and I'd feel really bad if I accepted the flowers... Please don't feel bad. Maybe let's be friends, if it's OK with you?"

George's cheeks flushed a deep red now. He felt humiliated and he wished he would sink into the earth beneath him. "Yeah, thanks. Er, friends then," he said nervously. She smiled and sat back down as George said good bye and walked away with the Singing Sesors and his letters in hand. He felt weird... He wasn't sure which emotion he was feeling; self-pity, embarrassment, sadness, a broken heart, or even happiness. He could feel a bit of everything, but as he walked now, he did not have his head down. He had done it.

"You came through for me," George said to the Singing Sesors in delight. "Why?"

"Because we could see you tried so hard, good man. You came through for yourself," the Sesors chanted in reply and with that they withered away.

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**Grady McShane, 32, is a headhunter for the maritime industry. He was born in sunny West Palm Beach, Florida. His family, friends and neighbors have graciously declared him to be “an exceedingly odd individual.” He has been a wrestler, writer and musician all his life. Rejecting anything having to do with the mainstream, he now lives in Cleveland, Texas in a tiny log cabin with Ona Kizis (his true love) and three very strange little dogs.. He has not been published because he has not really tried. He enjoys old Punk and Outlaw Country Music, old books, old Sci Fi and Western movies, and anything considered strange or frightening by ‘normal folk.’ He plays guitar poorly, sings well, gardens all sorts of plants and veggies, reads anything from the mayonnaise jar to mythological tales, drinks too much coffee and has a strange fixation with making his own soap. He wants his writing of poetry and stories to spark an awkward conversation with the world.**

### **Brianna’s Beliefs**

*By: Grady McShane*

#### **I**

An overdone pastor is aggressively defining sin on an angry stage. I am wondering if this hard angular church pew is a remnant of the torture devices used in the Spanish Inquisition. Brianna is holding my hand, and listening intently to every word this guy yells. You’d think J.C. himself was up there casting out demons by the way her blue eyes shimmer. I look down at her pale and gentle hand, but I can’t get past the ring she wears. They call it a ‘Promise Ring.’ Yeah, it’s a promise that I can’t touch her the way I want. A promise that I will be jerking off in the shadows like some sort of pervert until she and I get married. Married? I wonder how long that might be. She looks over and smiles like an ivory statue of unwelcome purity. Her golden halo of hair dances around her head like a damn KEEP OUT sign. I guess it’s easier for her because she’s never had sex. It’s like that old cliché about quitting drugs and not starting in the first place. Well, I’m a fiend, and she is my drug of choice. Ecstasy, always waiting just beyond the reach of my touch and taste. I’m pretty pissed off because these people have made the whole thing dirty even in my mind.

#### **II**

Brianna is swimming in the pool in my neighborhood. Her wet bikini clinging to her body. I wish I could get that close to her just once. She kisses me underwater and I just want to sink in the deep end, and never rise back to the real world. Just Brianna and I floating in the refreshing cool water, gently brushing in this fluid motion. Damn! I wonder if it’s wrong to pray for one’s penis. Does God understand how badly this aches? He designed me to want it, then tells me not to have it. It’s like some fucked up joke! Brianna whispers in my ear, and every part of me goes hot. I can’t handle this. I grab her and pull her close, my mouth heavy on hers. My hips grinding and rubbing against her. She reciprocates. Hallelujah! I’m rounding purgatory and stealing Heaven. Her hand is tugging at my trunks like she’s as hungry as I am. I feel her hand wrap around my ache and it feels so nice, except for that cold piece of steel around her ring finger.

#### **III**

She pulls her mouth from mine. She says, “What about God?” Now, this would be much less awkward if she wasn’t still feverishly pumping her hand up and down on my shaft. I’m lost here. I try to ignore the question and resume our time of glory, but she dodges. “I’m serious,” she says, still pumping. It’s like her mouth is with the angels, but the demons have her hand. I can’t speak. She begins quoting some scripture at me. I’m spraying my wicked seed all over her leg. Brianna is angrily ranting about sin as I fall into a seated position with glazed eyes and a goofy smile on my face. I can’t even process a word she’s saying. I do notice that she’s wiping my mess from her leg like it’s burning her. I apologize, but I’m not sure why.

#### **IV**

Brianna called today, but I was with Sarah. Sarah’s not nearly as wonderful, but she doesn’t believe that sex belongs to the devil. I decided that Brianna’s beliefs are too strong to be overcome by any passion. My passion is too strong to be overcome by any belief. We are driven by different forces. If God wants her, then He can have her. Brianna’s beliefs are the wall between us. I refuse to be crucified on that wall. Besides, Sarah may be just the demon I need.



**Michael Calva has been writing fiction for his own devices since he got his first word processor, and since then he has developed his curiosity into a full-fledged passion. It has enabled him to follow up on his other passions as well, as he has been writing for an online video gaming magazine for over a year and a half. When working on his longer pieces wears him down, Michael resorts to writing short stories and flash fiction.**

## **Kill Me, I'm Sweating**

*By: Michael Calva*

They won't do it. I can already tell. Dude on the left's strapping my legs down, but I can see in his eyes that the chewing gum he's slapping about with his tongue is more important than his task. Rightie might as well be taking a shit, 'cause the face he's got on as he tapes my fingers to cold metal is the blank forefront of a man pulling sheets of toilet paper off the roll.

I'm not surprised at their lack of sincerity.

The duo was yelling at someone named "Pete" over the intercom not five minutes ago, talking about how Pete's gotta smoke some grass with them over the holiday and Pete's gonna take them out for a beer when this is over with. 'Course, this *won't* be over with. They don't know it, but I do. So does Pete. I could hear it in his laughter when he said Rightie and Leftie better use something other than tinfoil the next time they smoke "the shit". 'Course, Pete's already smoking some "shit".

Me.

"Puff up, buddy!" I yell, and Rightie slaps me across the face.

"Come on, man, shut it!" He looks at Leftie and there's a hidden deflation in that look, like Rightie's going *Is this really the thirteen-millionth time I've done this?* and *Where's the balloons to pop, the candles to blow out, already?*. Not that Rightie *could* blow anything out with those lungs of his. And his teeth. Calling them rotten would be like calling Jesus a nice dude. I'm glad he don't know what's really going on. I'm glad Pete ain't telling them.

I want to tell them.

"Kill me, I'm sweating!"

Rightie's eyes go wide. Leftie backs away from where I'm lying, the penknife still held before him with both hands.

Rightie: "Shut him up, man!"

Leftie: "I can't! He's fucking sweating! Pete!"

But Pete is gone, like I knew he would be. Leftie starts to be gone, too. I count twenty seconds and then the penknife falls through nothing and hits the floor.

Rightie bends in front of me then, eyes still wide like motherfucking UFOs, and covers my mouth. "Come on, man." He looks like he's sweating now, too, but I know it's tears. "You gotta stop saying shit. Come on." The grimy fingernails on his hands make their way into my mouth and I start to chew them up. He leans closer. Spittle flies onto my already wet face as he shouts; his rotten teeth rattle and reek. "I can't feel that you numb fuck! I can't feel it and you know why? *YOU KNOW WHY?*"

There's a thump somewhere below my resting place and the crumbling fingers in my mouth turn into pockets of air. I exhale them and lick my lips.

There's another thump and Forty-Seven comes on the intercom, following a sharp burst of static. "Forty-Seven here, Sixty-Two. Transmission was successful up until you started fucking with them. How many autopsy teleports can you possibly bulldoze in one day?"

I count five.

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**Gregory G. Allen is an author, award winning composer and playwright living in New Jersey. His work has been seen in *Loch Raven Review*, *Rancor'd Type*, *Word Catalyst Magazine*, and has had several musicals produced on stage. He is a member of the Dramatist Guild, ASCAP and working on his first novel, *It is Well with My Soul*. He is the Managing Director of the Westminster Arts Center in Bloomfield, NJ. [www.ggallen.net](http://www.ggallen.net)**

## **Father to Son**

*By: Gregory G. Allen*

I stared at the convict through the six-inch glass panel that kept us separated in the cold, gray room. I was completely unsure of what to say. What words can be spoken to someone who doesn't really know you?

The man looking back at me was a sperm donor, not a father. A father is there to raise you. Witness those first steps. Teach you to maneuver a bike and spike a football. Cheer as you accept your graduation diploma. This man had done none of those things. No, this man was a thief. He simply signed the papers to relinquish any rights to seeing me ever again and in one swipe of the pen had stolen my adolescence.

"What's it like in here?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know, but needing something to say.

"I've been in for so long, it's all I know. It's home," the man answered.

*Odd choice of word*, I thought. Yet I had never known what a true home was either. I spent much of my life being caught up in the foster care system. Even when my dad finally signed the papers, no one wanted to adopt a ten-year-old kid.

"These guys are like family," the man continued. "They have to be though, right? Not like I have anyone else coming around."

*Whose fault was that?* The woman who gave birth to me had run off long before this one had gone to prison. I was sure the rest of his family wanted nothing to do with him.

"Family is whatever we make it to be," I finally said.

"What has your family been like?" he asked.

I didn't want this kind of exchange, discussing the past with this man. And my own wife and child were completely off limits.

"I had a few foster families that I got very close to," I answered.

"Were they good to you?"

*No, jackass. They were evil people who tied me up in a closet and left me to fend for myself.* "Yes," I said. "They treated me like their own."

"That's good. You deserved that."

*How the hell does this guy know what I deserved? He doesn't even know who I am. What my favorite food is. My favorite TV show.*

"Everyone should get a break in their life," I begrudgingly said.

"Maybe you could get me one and break me outta here," the man joked.

I gave a polite laugh to his lame attempt at humor. I looked at the penetrating lines on the man's face; the way his cheeks sunk in above the jaw line and how his eyes were off centered above his nose. In some respect, it was as if I were looking into a futuristic mirror.

*I guess we really are products of our natural parents after all, I thought to myself. I knew the inside makeup was one in the same as that was what had brought me to this prison today.*

"It's been hard having no one to discuss medical issues with," I said.

"I told em when I signed the papers they could ask me anything," the man responded.

*Oh, that was very big of you. Very big indeed. Take my son, raise him as a ward of the state, but come back if the warranty on him runs out.* I chose different words to actually come out of my mouth. "Guess no one thought about this."

I was beginning to wonder if I even wanted a kidney from this man. I'm sure there was another perfect match out there somewhere. What if this kidney were tainted? What if it brought with it the blood and cells that caused him to do what he did to end up in this place?

"Seems like the least I can do for ya now," the man said.

*You think? The very least. I don't want my child to grow up without a father either.* "I love how people can get by with only one," I said. "Yet both of mine are so bad."

"Do you drink a lot?" the man asked.

*Like that is any of your business. I'm sure you were a huge alcoholic before you came here.* "Nope," I said. "Don't care for the stuff."

"I miss it," the man said.

*Great. Give me an alcoholic kidney.*

The man noticed the look in my eyes.

"Don't worry," he said. "They said my kidney is fine. Good thing you're not looking for a liver."

*Again with the jokes. The man was a walking Dane Cook. No change that. More like Don Rickles.*

We stared in silence for a while. I really didn't want to be here, but my wife had talked me into it. She had done all the investigating to get his information in prison. The endless phone calls with the state and with doctors. Writing a pleading letter to the man. But after all of that, I still didn't want to have anything to do with him. This man gave up all rights to his son when he let me go. I wanted to take my chances and wait for another kidney. I could stay on the donor list. But it was those eyes, those young eyes of my own son, looking at me when I left for work in the

morning. My son deserves a dad that can do things with him now while he's young...not somewhere down the road. And what if I didn't live long enough to make it down that road? No. I had to thank my wife and take my father's offer of his kidney.

"Have they told you anything about the procedure?" I said, finally thinking of a question.

"I told them the less I know, the better," he responded.

I noticed the guard looking at the clock on the wall. Others that were seated down the row from me were saying their goodbyes and standing to leave. Good. This is almost over. By the end of the week, we will be in rooms right next door in a hospital approved by the prison. The deed would be done and I could go back to my normal life. Of course, this man would be handcuffed and removed by guards from the hospital to return back to this place.

"Guess I'll see you at the hospital. I'll be the one in the bright orange gown," the man said. The comedian was standing to leave.

"My son thanks you for doing this," I said.

*Shit.* I hadn't meant to share this with the man, but it just came out. The man stopped.

"Some fathers do the right thing for their sons," he said.

I watched him turn and walk back into his concrete labyrinth. I'm sure he had never thought about his lineage going on. But I had and I knew this was the right thing for my son. I would have a fighting chance to witness him growing up, getting married, moving on with his life. And as much as I don't want to admit it, I know this man was doing the right thing for me. He may have missed all the other chances he ever had while I was growing up, but what he was doing now would change my life forever.

"And for that, I am truly grateful, dad," I said as I walked out the prison doors into the fresh air.

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## **The Pit**

*By: Miguel de Leon*

Blood.

I should have anticipated the force of the impact. Run. Run before they realize what's happening. Don't look at the cuts on your arms. Escape.

For the love of God, run.

Broken glass everywhere. Barefoot. Naked.

Don't think about the shards splintering at your feet.

How did I come to this? How did I get here?

The Pit.

That's where we first met...

It was a cool, breezy night. The crowd was starting to pick up. Smells of cheap food, drinks. Music everywhere. In your pores, in your head. Taking over the little that's left of your senses. Help me. Let me disappear. Pick me up off the floor, let me feel loved.

I danced. I was already naked. They watched. They stared. The usual trash that stumbled in off the street. Let them stare, I didn't care. For a few bucks I would've humored any one of them. Say what you want to me, I'll even pretend I like it.

Then they walked in.

Innocent looking couple. White picket fence, shiny shoes, the whole nine yards. The quarterback and the homecoming queen, slumming it up on a Thursday night. I've seen it before, these types. They watch, but they never get their hands dirty.

They eyed me from across the room. The man was the first to start towards me. Transfixed. Confident. He must've been in his late twenties, blond, muscular. He looked up at me and grinned. I danced. I twisted. Just say the word hotshot. Any way you like it.

"Hey there," he said in a warm, deep voice. Be aloof, guys like this like the chase. Just then, the woman he walked in with was at his side. She looked at me with a flash and a smile. The little princess. She must have been the same age as him. Silky blond hair down past her shoulders, firm, taut body. Legs onto forever. I licked my lips as I looked down at both of them. You two want me? Go for it.

Before I knew it, I was in their car.

"God you're adorable," she said, as she ran her hand over my chest. It was humiliating. It was exhilarating. The man drove quickly and excitedly.

The bastards. They start gentle. That's how they start.

That was three months ago.

Three months of pleading and begging. Drugged. They keep me drugged, caged. Bruised from their fingers.

Run! Don't think, RUN!

"Hey! STOP!"

They heard me. Already I feel them rushing towards me. I'm suddenly tackled. Warm flesh wrestling my own. Their fingers digging into me. I scream out, "AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

"Honey," says the man in a sneering voice, "It's Cuddles again! How the hell does this hamster keep breaking out of his cage?"

"Awww," says the woman, mockingly. They pass me back and forth like a piece of meat. "Look, he hurt his little paws, poor little Cuddle-udles. Looks like you're gonna have to sleep in the shoe box again, little guy."

No! Not the box! ANYTHING BUT THE BOX!!!

The bastards.

The sick bastards.

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**Jeremiah Ambrose is 22 years post-birth. Writing fiction has always played an integral part in his deciphering of reality. He tends to use it to harness the chaos that occurs in life in an attempt to condense it into a readable form. To him though this is more about the representation and depiction, than the control, as in most cases the action has already occurred and in reality is impossible to predetermine. To expose what most people have a tendency to disregard and mould it into something that lies outside the confines of its original existence is something he enjoys playing with in his work. His talent lies in digging out the macabre nature in the mundane and fictionalising it into the realm that ferments between disgust and delicacy.**

## **Meat Club**

*By: Jeremiah Ambrose*

A long labyrinthine corridor leads us down into the club. Thumping music causes the many meat hooks to spin and glisten. The chains cause a rhythmic clanking as the bass levels cause them to beat off the bloodied walls. The stench of 'retired' carcasses prod at your senses leaving you feeling like someone has been playing with an open wound. Entering the turnstile of terror, I found that upon offering up my pound of flesh, a glowing cattle icon is branded carefully onto my skin. I am now part of the herd.

Looking down from our pedestal, we view a gender fucked individual lighting the level below. Shoddy lipstick marks out a coloring book attitude that the figure has towards its own performance. Stubble grates at our expectations of womanly velour. We begin to lose ourselves as we view a malformed and malleable interpretation of gender identity. Thousands of spinning mirrors catch this body's desperate dancing. Make-up begins to spit violently from its face as the sweat from drug induced fantasy causes outbursts of perspiration. Monroe obsession drips from the various masks being worn. Nurse latex, holds its plastic skin, whilst also suggesting a day-walking profession.

Salty-blooded teenagers sit by the bar sucking down any type of beverage that is given to them, in the hope that their inhibitions are reduced to the point where they will no longer think about their financial violation. As the perpetual feeding continues, many

of the monstrous beings buzzing around the bar begin to transform into beautiful beetles. More bearable to the eye and the fact that they are equipped for nuclear survival takes away the risk of them immediately following you to the "deathbed" when you refuse to wake to the apocalyptic world of the 'morning after'.

At the far side of the room the calming figure of a "PIG HEADED" woman, ponders vagrantly as she sits protected by a magic ribbon that makes her a VIP (very important pig). Her derelict expressions of movement are secured somewhat, by her bestial head. Sitting across from her is a skinny pseudo-sexual who hides his face behind a military issue gas mask in an attempt at nuclear survival. His constant shaking predicates the heavy breathing that causes the mask to fog up. As his body begins to convulse and he joins the dance floor with agonising outbursts, it becomes evident that he has become contaminated. As my eyes fly along his limbs, the root of his infection becomes apparent, as out of the clouds of sulphur I see that the "PIG HEADED" woman is now firmly suckered on to the end of his hand. In my last moments fear caught hold as I realised that in all my spectating I accidentally made eye contact.

My skinned corpse spun on the kebab stick as the drunken delinquents filled the narrow confines of the take-away outlet. The shop clerk shaved my stubbly speckled flesh and began loading the mulchy meat into their sporadic orders. My meat tasted the inside of their mouths and then found itself befriending the contents of their stomachs, as it lay discarded and sticky along the corners of the streets.

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## **A Direction**

*By: Jeremiah Ambrose*

He opened the rusty door of the taxi with youthful vigor. He reached in and pulled out the corpse of what appeared to be a newborn baby. No sooner than tossing it to the gutter he had his hand back in the air ushering me into the back seat of the taxi. I lay stretched out across the seat thinking of those beautiful women who held similar posture as they pushed grape after grape down their decorated food holes. I sat up somewhat as the silent stench of the streets started to rise upwards from the rusty wrinkles on the floor. The squeak of struggling springs started sounding as the driver's seat was tightened by a heavy weight that bared resemblance to a human being. Somewhere amidst the tongues of fat there lay a man who had resorted to chewing these curls, thus the weight hid behind a mass of greasy gaping wounds. He seemed so confident for a man in such a position, his confidence seemed so sure I decided to not even say where I wanted to go. All I said was "I'm looking for certainty". This was followed by a distinct nod that conveyed that he knew his directions. Grubby street corners whipped past as the vehicle hurtled down derelict streets. The blank expression of a woman sifting through trash was the channel selected for me as the taxi driver grinded to a halt. As he shuffled in the front I focused on the woman, who was now sitting, chewing on a piece of maggot-infested meat. Her smiling face suggested a deep understanding of the situation. Splash, the sound of freshly excreted urine hitting the pavement. The driver pulled his hand back in through the window, holding a sparkling bottle. It swiftly disappeared out of sight, folded into oblivion somewhere in the depths of his bulging stomach. He coughed when the safety belt wrenched on his torso as he took off in a hurry. The streets meshed together as each corner looked the same as the last, as if in an eternal circle. Somewhere amidst minutes, hours, days... the taxi finally came to a halt. The driver began totting up his payment on his little machine. The figure was finally given to me and I began sifting through my masses of currency in a bid to find the correct amount. When this had been recovered I decided to add a healthy tip in the hope that he had brought me where I was looking to go. Upon folding the money away deep inside of himself he clicked open his orange speckled door and rolled out onto the street. An arm amidst the mass opened my door slowly for me. Now outside, looking into his glossy eyes, I asked, "where is certainty?" in a

complacent manner. His left arm flapped up towards me, slightly angled, pointing towards the dirty gutter. The hollow tunnel still had a hold on the lifeless baby.

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## **A Secret Picnic**

*By: Jeremiah Ambrose*

Standing outside before entry, butterflies stirred up a storm in my stomach. That muscle that some call a heart strained itself to pump life through my flabby flapping body. Approaching that door I felt fear take hold of my small and fragile wings. Clipped and cut from the clouds, my angel was waiting for me inside that house. All I had to do was fly in and meet him. The door opened and we were welcomed into the house by a small woman dressed in a white uniform. Her forced delight towards visitors is evident in her face. The four of us followed the woman into the house. Along the hall hung numerous pictures. As we entered the sitting room, Shayne turned to me. He spoke in a comical and brash tone, "Did you notice the picture outside?" I responded with yes even though I hadn't because my powers of perception were clearly focused on my ability to comprehend this new situation, or maybe it was that stronger growing smell coming from the sitting room. Entering the room, the root of the smell became clear. Smudged on the couch were human excretions. In the corner of the room there was a TV inside of a cage. The rest of the room was stripped bare. The lady leading us had an embarrassed look upon her face and with a strange calmness spoke indirectly to us all, "I apologise for the mess. Laura had an accident just before you came in. It will be cleaned up as soon as we have her sorted out".

The nurse then opened the door that led into the living room. Sitting at the table was a little old man, hunched staring into space. That picturesque painting of a moment, that tasted of the suffering of time and emotion. Our silly lives of snakes and ladders, chance chooses the roll of the dice and chance chose his. A pregnant mother contracting rubella with her first child. Born to this world eternally beautiful in his difference. I find it easy to see the innocence inside of him as I looked through his thinning hair and pleasant papery skin. The art of origami always introduced enticement to me.

Anita and Ann swiftly moved their sweets into the kitchen so as to not attract his attention. His food and gifts had to be rationed to him like a soldier of war. I remember being told once that life is just a great battle, whether you're wearing a Kevlar helmet or just a simple tweed cap, your life is still just as fragile on a long enough timescale. Anita and Ann put everything away except for a

yoghurt carton and a carton of apple juice. Myself and Shayne stood in the living room quietly observing him. The silence broke when he sporadically jumped from his chair and with a roguish smile began disjointedly leaping around the room. Rooting through bag after bag, not fully understanding the concept of emptiness. Shayne let out an uncomfortable laugh and its silent echoes found both Anita and Ann reappearing from the kitchen with some of their treats in hand. "You are such a rogue", Anita said lovingly. "Come here with me and you can have a little treat", putting her arm around him and guiding him back to his seat she then opened the carton of apple juice and slowly poured a cup for him.

Standing there, looking at him staring at that cup, I felt the emotion of those past fifty-seven years. Looking into those eyes, I saw him conversing with the masters who teach us how to live. He takes his first sip from the glass of juice that Anita poured for him. He spills the contents all over his face. Not wearing his bib, it drops slowly onto his new shirt that he had a tender tugging affection towards. Such an innocent beautiful thing, meeting him for the first time. The spontaneous nature of my eventual arrival in this place of suburban surprise. Flying through me all the memories of that meeting. The fear of something being forged in reality between the imagined image and the sheer unknown.

"Mmmmm, isn't it really nice? You're a great boy", said Anita to her gawming brother.

"Don't give him too much now Anita, we don't want him getting greedy", spluttered Ann mid dragging desperately on a cigarette. As he sipped away on his juice Anita began opening a small yoghurt carton.

"Now, would you like a little yoghurt, pet?", Anita caringly asked not expecting an answer.

She placed one hand gently on the back of his head to hold it still. With her other hand she held the spoon gently dropping the yoghurt into the toothless chasm that was his mouth. I remember that stabbing glass in my heart as I watched her spoon-feeding him from the yoghurt container. That slimy white mass washed down with the forbidden fruit meant more to him than any joyous epiphany I could ever have and for that I envied him. His stout proud jaw shook as he began to smile. Shayne sat in the corner lying with ease against the uniformly painted walls, struggling to hold onto his strong image that he had wrestled to keep since his father's sudden death. His emotional blockade showed through

that thick paint. The great woman that is my grandmother stood there with a cigarette, holding her hand.

After he had his feed and all the treats were gone Anita began to converse with him, "Who's that over there?", pointing towards Ann. Liam shakingly responded, "amfjvjejcikfdnciencndicndi."  
"Yes that's your mommy".

With the situation stripped bare, all I could see was the innocence that was hiding under his colour coordinated tweed cap. Indulged innocence is indestructible. Ann came closer to Liam and began to rub his fragile little face, "You enjoyed those treats, didn't ya, you poor auld divil, ya". As he quivered under her words, tears began to bubble under my eyes, I started to realise why she never cries. All her tears had already dropped and with that her emotions chopped. With her sentence complete, she moved back to being a spectator in the audience. Soon after Liam leaped up out of his chair and ran over to Shayne in the corner. He began flicking and poking him, his childish grin eradicating any malicious nature in his acts. He truly appeared like a child trapped in a man's body.

"Go on out of that, you lunatic. Don't be doing that to your little brother". Everyone took to giggling as Shayne led him back to his chair. Soon after his reseating, he began to make gestures of pouring and drinking. "He is looking for some more juice! Can you please run into the kitchen and get some more, Jeremy?". Ann looked at me with those eyes that don't even give you a chance to answer. I swiftly made my way out of the room and towards the kitchen. Between the kitchen and the living room was the yard door. My attention was caught mid route by activities outside. Staring out the window I could see the inhabitants of the institution out in instability. Men who I should be using as templates were wandering in endless circles. Their minds twisting and turning in different directions. A very odd, gaunt man noticed my observations and began a twisting performance for my viewing 'pleasure'. From inside it looked as if the world had gone mad. It discomfited and excited me simultaneously. I turned my attention back to the kitchen and the world switched form again, a world where beauty and innocence are within arm's reach, but not always coherent. A form of happiness that shifts on itself if not watched carefully. A place where the unbalanced are always walking the rope, a place where purity is looked after, so as not to become a stagnant poison. I looked around, constantly observing everyone. Elements I never saw came drifting from the shadows

towards the light of the room. As calm content conversing continued, I realised in this sit among strangers I felt safe.

Walking into the kitchen, I instantaneously spotted the carton of apple juice sitting on the counter top. The screams of the clean-up job upstairs shimmered silently for a few seconds in the air but quickly disappeared. It's strange how such queer things can float under the surface, in our perfect little world where we can stay happy in our ignorance. With the chore complete, Liam was soon found quietly drinking the apple juice that I had brought him. Everyone stood around him. The mood seemed to have loosened itself and everyone seemed to be a little happier.

"I think it's about time now that we leave", whispered Ann's voice, re-tightening our tensions. Obediently following suit Anita pulled things together by saying, "Yeah ok, we'll just say our goodbyes now then". Anita and Ann walked up to him and planted kisses on his cheeks. Looking into his distant eyes Ann spoke again, "Now we shall see you soon you poor little thing"

"Give us an auld hug, old man", Shayne walked over to Liam and gave him a gentle hug. Looking on at their brotherly embrace I felt upset at the sheer opposite nature of a bear bodied brother, hugging his handicapped sibling. A likeness stood in both of their polished heads. Finally I gave him a hug and a kiss. We left him and made our way out through the hall. Looking at the picture I ignored on the way in I realised it was just an empty frame, no picture to be seen. Like his life, the secret picnic, we just wrapped up our things and left. Coming again someday soon to fill the frame again with a new imagined image. Just at the point of exit we all turned around to have one last glance towards the kitchen. To our surprise we saw Liam sitting up on the kitchen counter perched like a proud peacock. Only this peacock's feathers where not easily seen. Plucked bare still standing proud against the world. His forecast was for that of a short span in this realm. Outliving this over tenfold, he sat content in his simple kitchen, his innocence changing the world each day he wakes.

"Look, he is sitting up on the counter to see us off". With one final wave, the door is slowly closed, through the crack we saw the nurse trying to get him down. We left with that image of him saying goodbye that we most likely created in our minds.

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## **Stray**

*By: Jeremiah Ambrose*

Should we have talked about how their beliefs fall under the tattered wings of a flying cult? Should we realise that these men have been brainwashed to the point where these gusts have carried them to a realm of non compliance with reality? That night these questions were raised through the guise of the importance of the family unit. As this socially lubricated speech continued, the man twisted and turned in his seat. His stomach gurgling with the strain of excess. No wonder he comes crawling out of the rain and onto our front porch. Like a depraved dog, ravenous with the hunger, the stench of his moist bristles linger with him. His so called family place shrapnel in his dusty pockets. They allocate money for cigarettes if you smoke. The only needs that are not met are the emotional ones. Conditioned to a point where what is natural is rejected. The conversation in the household was naturally rejected and was soon followed with the man's departure. As he left our family unit, I realised that an institution that frowns upon an aging man returning home for longer periods to visit his mother who has entered the final stages in her personal decay, is not a religious institution. It uses religion as a wall to hide behind, as a shock tactic in mass manipulation. These thoughts are what where flashing through my mind as I strained to see the dotted line on the road as I drove through the blurry lines of rain. The glowing eyes of a stray cat dragged me out of this mental flow. I suppose that the cat's skull being crushed by my front bumper might have also had a role to play in my sudden shift in thoughts. By the time I had exited the car and reached the place where the cat had been catapulted to, its gentle twitches had turned into sporadic bursts of movement. Upon examining the situation, I decided that the prime reason for these convulsions was probably due to the fact that half of the cat's brains were spread out across the road. Before I had a chance to produce my butter knife, I heard the squelch of footsteps emerging from the distance. As they grew in number, a familiar smell drifted up into my left nostril and began twisting and tugging the nostril hairs, this jungle-gym treatment leapt to the point where water began to seep from my eyes. The glistening whispers of a strained stomach transferred a name and a face to the shadowy figure. The speckled blackheads sat rigid on his sweaty brow. Masticated food fell from his yellow teeth with the quiet decadence of gentle snowfall. His patchy stubble caught onto these speckles like dry tarmac in

winter. His eyes danced deliriously, caught in the excitement of his face's sudden change in weather. This moment lingered on for quite some time, until I eventually re-entered my car. In the rear-view mirror I could see him standing over the now stagnant cat, his worn face lay slumped to the ground. The roles of fat curled upwards from his chin hiding any determinable expression. The road ended there, he no longer had anything to chase.

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**Jessie Carty's work has appeared in journals such as *Margie* and *Iodine Poetry Journal*. Her first chapbook will be published by Puddinghouse Publications in 2009. Jessie is also the Editor of *Shape of a Box*.**

## **The Graveyard Grannies**

*By: Jessie Carty*

creak as they shuffle through the grass,  
bending at their wasting waists to plant  
plastic flowers in stone vases.

Once in a while, they linger and trace  
the tombstone teeth—a year, a Beloved  
Mother, a dash—before moving on

with a hint of red creeping  
into their thinning cheeks.

\*\*\*

**Tai Dong Huai was born in Taizhou, China. *Home Sick?* is from her collection in progress, *I Come From Where I've Never Been*. Other selections have appeared, or are scheduled, in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *elimae*, *Word Riot*, *Hobart*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Cause & Effect*, *Underground Voices*, *Wigleaf*, *The Rose & Thorn*, and other terrific places.**

## **Home Sick**

*By: Tai Dong Huai*

When my temperature reaches 102 sometime close to midnight, my adoptive father tells me he has no choice. He's called the doctor's office where we'd been the day before, and the nurse practitioner on call tells him to follow orders: Tamiflu, stay in bed, stay hydrated. "If her temp rises any higher," she says, "call back."

My adoptive mom is in Chicago, half a country away, at the American Booksellers Association tradeshow. My dad is scrambling around, trying to put together a comparative literature final to give his three classes before they break for summer. I'm home sick, knowing that my eighth grade friends are actually enjoying their last few days at the penitentiary also known as Our Lady of Sorrows. By tomorrow they'll be planning parties, signing yearbooks, a bold few making-out publicly.

"I'm calling Helena," my father says. "Have her take a cab over in the morning."

"Why can't you stay?" I beg.

"Because I have to be at the college," he says. "Three classes, four hours. Five at the most." He's already called around. It's June, and there's not a single available babysitter without a prison record.

Helena is my dad's mother. As far as I know, he's always called her by her first name. As for me, I'm more than a little frightened of this woman. She's bitter and unsmiling and she insists that I call her by the coldest name a grandmother can have – Grandmother. Divorced, she lives alone in a dark apartment that smells like those free mints by restaurant cash registers. She works part-time

for the town zoning department, collects social security, and sings barbershop quartet with a group called "The Sweet Adelines." By car it's a half-hour between her front door and ours, and I've always felt the distance is inadequate.

"You should ask Helena to move in with us," I once heard my mother say after a few glasses of wine.

"Not in this life," my dad answered.

"Why not?"

"She's my mother," he shrugged, "and I love her." And then he added, "But I've never really *liked* her."

~

Generally my dad will go over on Sunday afternoon to visit. Alone. The few times he's taken me, I'm talked about as if I'm not even on planet earth. "Does she always stare like that?" she'll ask her son. "She'd look more human if she got her hair cut." Or, "She slumps. She'll feel that in her lower back in a few years."

Nor does my grandmother try to mask the opinion that she and she alone, is my salvation from a personality where disrespect and rudeness rule. "Give me two weeks alone with her," she always tells my father on our way out, "and I'll hand you back a totally new kid."

~

Maybe it's the high temperature, maybe it's my father rummaging around and pulling out drawers looking for old class outlines in the middle of the night, maybe it's my mom missing in action. Most likely it's the thought of Grandmother and me being alone in this house. Whatever it is, it makes sleep close to impossible.

~

"So what's wrong with her?" Grandmother asks my dad as he removes the thermometer – still at 102 – from my mouth.

"Flu," he says. He blows me a kiss from the bedroom doorway. "I'd try and keep my distance," he tells Grandmother. From the

hallway he yells, "Give me a call if you need anything!" Bang. He's on the stairs, out the door, down the driveway.

Illness has its perks, including my mom and dad's TV rolled into my room. I'm wired for cable, so all it takes is a few quick twists, a plug in the wall, and I'm in business. Cartoons, the soaps, and especially Animal Planet which is showing a test for dog aggression by jamming a rubber hand on a pole into some poor creature's food bowl as it tries to eat.

~

I smell it before I even see it. I'm a picky eater to begin with – I survive primarily on Campbell's' Chicken Noodle Soup and Skippy Peanut Butter – but certain foods – eggs being Public Enemy #1 – send me over the side.

"Here," Grandmother announces as she enters with a tray. "Breakfast."

"I don't eat eggs," I tell her.

She challenges. "Don't or won't?"

"I'm allergic," I lie.

"Thanks, Andrew," she says looking toward the ceiling and addressing my absentee father. "You couldn't leave me a list?!"

She takes the tray to the wooden chair next to my bed and sets the tray on the seat. "You can at least drink the juice," she says.

"I prefer 7-Up," I tell her.

"Well prefer away," she snaps back.

I don't bother to respond. Instead I stare silently toward the television where someone is cleaning a pug's facial wrinkles with a Q-Tip.

"I thought you were going to read," Grandmother says.

"My eyes hurt," I tell her.

"If they hurt too much for books," she says, "they hurt too much for this."

She goes to the TV, unplugs it, pulls the cable free from the back of the set.

"Hey!" I yell.

But all I hear is, "Drink your juice!" as she wheels the television out of my room and back into my parents'.

I realize that I'm too sick to retrieve the TV and set it up by myself. But I'm well enough to take this plate of eggs, march into the bathroom, and defiantly flush them down the toilet.

I slide from under the cover and let my feet touch the floor. Which is when I notice. This is not just a plate of eggs. This is a single egg, its yolk unbroken, set in a perfect hole in the center of a slice of wheat toast. The bread that had once occupied the hole has itself been toasted and placed on the plate like a small, full moon.

Half-an-hour later, I hear the oven timer go off. Grandmother tromps back up, walks into the bathroom, comes out with a glass of water and my prescription bottle of Tamiflu. "Isn't this the stuff that killed the twelve kids in Japan?" she asks.

"I like the egg," I say.

"How could you like it?" she says. "You didn't even touch it."

"I like the way it looks," I tell her. I take the Tamiflu and ask, "Does it have a name?" When she doesn't answer, I say, "That kind of egg. Does it have a name?"

"Everything has a name," she says.

"I bet it's something nice," I say. "Like 'Bunny-in-a-Basket,' or 'Bird's Nest.'"

"Actually," she says as she jabs the thermometer toward my face, it's called an 'Egyptian One-Eye.'"

My temperature is down to just under 100.

~

Sometime around noon, while I'm playing 'Animal Crossing' on my Nintendo DS, I vomit. It comes over me out of nowhere, not even giving enough warning for me to clear the bed. I don't have anything in my stomach except the orange juice, the circle of toast, and the Tamiflu, but up they all come. The bed, my pajamas, my pure white Nintendo DS – no survivors.

"Grandmother!" I call.

"Terrific," she says, out of breath and standing in my doorway. "Now this."

I'm humiliated and helpless and close to tears. All I can think of to say is, "I'm sorry."

Grandmother stares at me a second and then says, "You feel good enough to get in the shower?"

"I don't know," I tell her

"Well get a whiff of yourself and make a decision based on that."

Actually, the shower helps. When I get back to my room, clean pajamas are laid out on a freshly made bed. Grandmother's spraying Windex on the DS and wiping it down with a paper towel. "What is this thing?" she wants to know.

"Handheld game," I say, trying to avoid explanation.

"Whatever happened to that book?"

I squeeze in between clean sheets. "I'm not much of a reader," I say. "More of a listener."

"Does your dad read to you?" she asks.

"More my mom. My dad makes up his own stories."

"Only stories I know," Grandmother says, "involve the a-holes who come into the zoning department every week looking for building variances."

"You must remember stories from when you were my age," I say. "*Black Beauty*."

"Black who?" she asks.

I take a deep breath. "It's about a horse that misses the meadow he knew as a young colt."

Grandmother sits on the edge of the bed. "You're not going to barf again, are you?" she asks.

When I finish the saga of *Black Beauty*, Grandmother says, "Actually, I do know a story. It's about this girl who thought she'd grow up to be an Olympic gymnast, except she got fat and couldn't even get up on the parallel bars without two people helping her, so she married a roofer and they had a boy, but both the husband and the son left her and now she just sits in her apartment waiting for somebody to come by and wondering how big the dust-bunnies under the bed are."

"That's so sad," I say.

"Sad except for one thing," she says. "This girl, who's now an old woman, has so much time on her hands that she has become perhaps the world's leading expert on decoupage."

"What is that?" I ask.

"What is *that*?" she says incredulously. "It's taking something old and crappy and turning into a goddamn piece of art."

"Maybe you can show me when I'm better," I say.

She shakes her head. "You're young," she says. "Do young stuff. Drive around in a convertible with the sun shinning on the back of your neck."

"I'm thirteen," I remind her.

"Better yet," she says. "Give yourself something to look forward to."

~

By one, I feel well enough to eat some toast and peanut butter, and it stays down. Grandmother takes my temperature and reports that it's just a little over ninety-nine. After she clears the dishes, she comes back into my room with two juice glasses, each with about an inch of amber-colored liquid.

"Drink this," she tells me as she hands me one of the glasses.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Cure-all," she says as she takes a seat on the bedside chair.

I think for a second that maybe it's poison, but I think that about almost everything people – including my parents – serve me. It smells terrible, like a combination of Listerine and Lemon Pledge furniture polish.

"Why two?" I ask.

She shrugs, then says, "Because drinking this stuff alone can get a person in trouble."

I sip at it, make a face, lower the glass.

"Like this," Grandmother says, and she flings back the contents of her glass in one smooth motion. When I still hesitate, she says, "Nothing but a little honey, some lemon juice, and a bit of Irish whiskey. It'll help you get some shut-eye."

I hold my nose and drain the glass. My entire body feels the heat, the electricity, the sweet and the bitter wrestling one another while the whiskey watches. And I do grow sleepy, almost immediately. Grandmother continues to sit by the side of the bed, and brushes some stray hair away from my eyes.

"I think we're alike you and me," she says. "Two outsiders."

She smiles, and for the first time – in my eyes, anyway – she looks younger and prettier and not all that scary. I can pick out the young girl that was once there, unblunted by disappointment, filled with future possibility.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"I think," I tell her as I begin to drift, "that for two people who don't really like one another, we're doing pretty good."

She laughs at this, loud and throaty, and when I wake up two hours later, she's gone.

~

"Did Grandmother say anything when she left?" I ask my dad as I sit at the kitchen table in my pajamas and watch him heat up Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup.

"You know Grandmother," he says. "Always reading from the same script. 'Give me two weeks alone with that kid...'"

And I think to myself, it would probably take twice that much time, but after a month I could give him back a totally new mother.

\*\*\*

**Alan Murphy is the best-selling author of nothing whatsoever. This is something he hopes to remedy in the coming decades, if not sooner. He has been known to occasionally lapse and try his hand at sombre, weighty scribblings, but mostly he knows his place and sticks to humour. He recently placed runner-up in the Fish Publishing 2008 One Pager prize, and will shortly be hawking his debut novel to anyone with a printing press.**

### The Grifter

*By: Alan Murphy*

By trade I'm an oily flimflammer,  
come to part you from your wealth.  
I'll feather my nest with plumage that's yours,  
bamboozling you with my stealth.  
I'll tell you water is wine my friend,  
sell you raisins as Turkish dates.  
Hell if I thought you'd pay to read this poem,  
I'd convince you it was Yeats.

**Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and one fat cat (his in-house critic). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, poems, an occasional play, and novels (that are hiding in his closet, awaiting editing). Since 2005, his short stories have been accepted by more than 80 literary and commercial journals, magazines, and anthologies (both print and online) including the *Houston Literary Review*, *Storyteller*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, and *Underground Voices*. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.**

## **Radio Free Mississippi**

*By: Terry Sanville*

### **I. Meridian**

Louise blames it on “those damn radios.” She complains about how their teenage son holes up in the guest cottage at the edge of the Kudzu-choked woods and wastes nights and weekends closeted with his short wave sets. She figures the radio beams have fried Jerry’s brain, sort of like her microwave cooks TV dinners. Or maybe it’s the toxic fumes he breathes in while soldering his electronic wizardry. There’s nothing else to explain it.

But then, Jerry is “one weird homey,” according to Jamal, a clerk at the stop-and-rob not far from the boy’s Meridian home. Like clockwork, Jerry ambles in with a spaced-out look freezing his freckled face, as if he’s struggling to answer a question he can’t quite remember. He buys a 20-ounce coffee, black with four sugars.

Sometimes Jamal and the boy hang out. “So Jer, who you been talkin’ to on dat radio?”

“Some babe in Rio. Couldn’t get voice and she has a lousy hand, doesn’t know code for shit.”

“Yeah, dem foreign bitches are somethin’.” Jamal tugs on his dreadlocks and dreams of making it with a hot Brazilian, on a white beach with the sea rolling in.

Jer continues muttering. “It makes me wonda, ya know, what it’s like away from this backwata. I get so wound up—”

“I hear ya. Ya gotta teach me how to use one of dem radios so I’s cun hook up with—”

“Yeah sure. Come over any time.”

Jamal always figured the boy for one of them dudes with a sawed-off shotgun under his jacket, who’d someday make the evening news for blowing away his classmates. That never happens cut ... but what does is no surprise to Jamal.

Stan hates surprises. He knows what Jerry is up to; at least he thinks he does. When his son was fourteen he’d bought him his first transceiver and helped him erect the antenna. Stan hoped that talking on the radio would cure his son’s terminal shyness. But it just turned Jer into a short wave junkie, spending hours listening to conversations from around the world, mumbling his call sign and waiting for answers.

“CQ, CQ, CQ...this is WA6YHG...wide awake sex, yesterday’s hot garbage.”

One night, Stan creeps to the cottage’s window and listens to the crackling radio. He makes out voices with thick accents, one of them sounds Russian. His boy greets them as if they are friends. Stan barges in and demands: “What in God’s name’s goin’ on? You in some kinda spy ring or somethin’?”

“Nah, Pop. I’m jus listenin’ to people out there, ya know. Sometimes I talk back. There’s this guy in Korea that –”

“Christ, it’s bad enough the niggas have taken the White House. But it’s the Chinks that are stealin’ our jobs and—”

“Yeah, Pop, it’s them damn Chinks.”

After that, Jerry mostly uses Morse code and taps away into the early morning hours, saying God knows what to whomever. Stan

tells him he can use their Internet connection to contact his overseas buddies.

Jer scowls. "The feds kin trace them connections. Harder ta do with short-wave, 'specially coded stuff."

"But I...I don' like y'll talkin' with all those—"

"It's all right, Pop. I ain't gonna overthrow anythin'. Not yet anyway."

~

Louise is overcome with relief when her son enlists in the Army after graduating high school. It seems Jerry has no interest in college, working for his father, or much of anything except radios.

"It'll get 'm outta the house, give 'm discipline," she tells Stan, "and later they'll pay for school."

"Servin' his country is—is an honor. But goin' to Iraq? I don' know if that boy got's enough smarts to keep his butt down. Those rag heads are sneaky sons-of-bitches."

She remembers her first nine years with Stan, including his stint in Desert Storm. She had finally threatened to leave him if he didn't quit the Army, being fed up with cockroach-infested base housing. She'd refused to consider having more children while Stan was still in uniform. "I ain't draggin' a brood of kids around just to live in the slums."

Ironically, Jerry is her only child, and now she's glad that he enlisted. She hopes the Army will get him interested in something other than global gossiping. But her real worry is that Jer has never had a girlfriend—never dated. Her Meridian Women's Club friends tell her she's lucky he isn't messing around with white trash or drugs. They tell her that he'll get interested soon enough when he leaves the house. Every Sunday at the First Baptist, she sizes up eligible members in the congregation and prays that her son will find someone. She forgets that nobody controls how prayers are answered.

## **II. Kabul**

From her family's mud brick house, high on a rocky slope above the city, Adila watches the morning sun burn through haze hanging over the plain. It's early. Crusty snow covers the path that runs along the ravine. Adjusting her sky-blue burqa, she grabs a knapsack and hurries downslope. It's three kilometers to the school where she teaches 25 girls. She has never been late and isn't about to evoke the wrath of Mrs. Poyanda.

Once out of sight of her house, she unfastens the screen that hides her face and sucks in crisp air. Ever since the U.N. soldiers occupied the city, more women bare their faces, although Adila never does when leaving home nor in the marketplace where Taliban sympathizers lurk. At a sharp bend in the trail she stops, retrieves a small mirror and inspects her face, smiling back at the pretty image with smooth skin, dark eyes and full lips. She wants to set a good example for her students and believes that all women, no matter what age, should nurture self-confidence and beauty. Hurrying as fast as her confining garment allows, she passes the abandoned ruins of Soviet-built apartments. The trail angles sharply downward. Adila slows and moves sideways. Her shoe catches in the hem of her burqa. She falls, landing hard on her hip, and slides. The rocky slope cuts her hands. Screaming, she rolls over the ravine's edge and disappears.

~

Jerry is four months into a second overseas tour, this one in Afghanistan. Much to his mother's disappointment, he's become a radio repairman in the Electronic Maintenance Branch. But his father is proud that his boy stayed out of harm's way, and is skilled enough to get promoted to sergeant.

"McBride, I want you to check the main ridgeline transmitter." The warrant officer points to a rocky crest that borders Kabul. "We've got reports the locals have been messin' with it. You'll go with Sergeant Johnson's squad—and be careful."

Jerry nods at Johnson. "Yes, sir, we're on it."

They pile into two humvees and leave the compound, heading for the phalanx of barren hills half covered with mud houses. Stopping

a short way upslope, they park the vehicles under guard and hustle single file along a narrow trek toward the ridgeline. The frigid air burns Jerry's lungs. He drains his canteen quickly. Black dots swim before his eyes. As they pass clusters of houses, the locals come outside to watch; some wave, others stare, unsmiling. The trail is slippery with snow. Their curses and labored breathing fill the quiet morning.

Half way to the ridgeline they take a break. Jerry sits with head between knees, trying to ease the headache beating his temples. Off to his left, he catches sight of a flutter of blue at the bottom of a ravine. Wiping his eyes, he tries to focus. The wind whips the blue cloth; a bloody bare foot peaks out from one edge.

"Hey, Johnson, get over here." Jerry winces, the sound of his voice causing his head to pound.

"Yeah, what is it? You already sick? We're not even half way— "

Jerry points into the ravine.

Johnson frowns. "Shit man, that's—that's a woman."

"She ain't movin'. We gotta check 'er out."

"Yeah, yeah, just lemme think."

Before the staff sergeant can decide, Jerry eases his way down the side of the gully, wedging his feet between rocks to gain footholds. At the bottom he stands over the woman who is fully covered, apparently lying on her stomach. He reaches forward and touches her shoulder. A moan sounds from beneath the blue shroud. She moves.

"Easy, easy, don't hurt yourself—"

She rolls onto her back, her scream ripping the silence. Between gasps, a barrage of her strange words overwhelms him.

"I...I'm sorry, I don't know what you're sayin'," Jerry says.

"Help me," the woman wheezes.

"You speak English?"

"A little...please...the pain."

Wisps of dark hair fall across her eyes. Jerry pushes them back gently. He removes his Kevlar vest and slides it under her head. She has a pretty face and looks to be in her late twenties, but it's hard to tell with Afghan women.

"How'd y'all get down here?" He immediately feels stupid for asking.

She rolls her eyes. "I fell...please...help me get—"

She makes a move to sit up but shrieks and clutches a hip.

"No mo' movin'. We'll getcha outta here."

The woman stares at him with tear-filled eyes and tries to smile. Pebbles rain on them as Johnson and a couple others shimmy down. The woman pulls the screen over her lower face and shudders.

"Can she get up?" Johnson asks.

"Nah, probably broke a leg or hip or somethin'."

"Well, we can't haul her outta here."

"Call in a medevac," Jerry says. "Have 'em take her to CSH."

"No. We'll drop her at Malalai and – "

"That place is a joke. Fly her to the CSH." Jerry's voice has hardened.

"All right, all right. But take three men and get your butt up the ridge. Checking that transmitter's more important than this babe. You need to – "

"I am not, what you call, a babe," the woman interrupts, glowering.

Johnson stares, open-mouthed.



Jerry grins. "You tell 'em, ma'am. Take good care of ma vest. I'll come get it later."

Remembering the look on Johnson's face, Jerry laughs to himself as he crests the ridge. Below, a red-crossed helicopter hovers above the ravine, a basket filled with bright blue dangles beneath it. Jerry watches them pull the woman through its open door. The chopper noses down and flies across the vast city, becoming a dot in the yellow sky. *Not a babe, huh*, he thinks. *Hard ta tell covered up with that burqa. Still, the way she looked at me...*

### **III. Dearborn**

Adila stares out the window of Delta Flight 821, at the incredibly green countryside sliding up to meet them. An airport materializes from the textured landscape. The plane's tires chirp as their morning commercial flight from Atlanta to Meridian touches down. The jet engines reverse, tightening the seatbelt around her slender waist. She squeezes Jerry's hand, feels the trembling in her new husband's body, not unlike the delicious tremor that runs through him when they make love.

Removing a compact from her purse, she checks her makeup, wanting to be perfect. She wears a modest western dress and closed shoes, trying not to attract attention, yet celebrating her escape from the anonymity of burqas.

The plane continues to roll, finally slowing near the end of the runway and turns onto a taxi strip. Passengers stand and begin removing baggage from the overhead compartments. Jerry and Adila remain seated.

"Are you sure we can do this?" she asks.

"No. Ma folks are gonna freak—even though they're expectin' us."

"Certainly no more than my father. I feared he would have me stoned when you—"

Jerry laughs. "Yeah, that was a bit tricky. But you were right...as soon as I –"

The onboard PA sounds, advising passengers to check their seats before deplaning. Jerry stands and lets Adila enter the aisle. He kisses her lightly on the lips. She feels her face flush.

"I must get used to such public displays," she says, chuckling.

"And I gotta remember we're in the heart of Dixie. People are gonna think y'all are colored."

"I thought America had moved beyond such feelings."

"Not around here."

"Then why are *you* different?"

"Long story...somethin' about radios and a lotta late night talkin'."

The plane comes to rest outside a low building labeled "Key Field." Mobile stairs are wheeled into place. The couple is the last to leave the plane. The humid air hits Adila like a wet towel. She struggles to calm herself. Ahead, a tall man with cropped hair and a heavy-boned woman wait at the edge of the tarmac. A black man stands near them, pulling on his dreadlocks. Adila cuts a sideways glance at Jerry. His mouth has that nervous twitch; his hand crushes hers in its grasp.

"Mom, Pop, it's good to be..."

The man extends a huge hand and shakes Jerry's. The woman encircles him in an embrace, all the while giving Adila a close inspection.

"Adila, I'd like y'all to meet my folks, Stan and Louise."

Louise nods, as does Stan.

"And this is ma ole radio buddy, Jamal."

"You dog, you," Jamal says, grinning. "Neva thought you'd get anywhere near such a fine lookin' woman as –"

"Easy, Jamal. You're talkin' about ma wife."

"I am much pleased to meet all of you," Adila says, feeling exposed and missing her burqa. "You must have so many questions. I know my own parents did when your son—"

"Why don't we go inside and find a quiet place to talk?" Jerry suggests.

"I've already got a barbeque going back at the house," Stan says. "Thought a few beers and ribs would be a good way of welcoming —"

"Thanks Pop...but...but we can't stay."

"Wha...I thought you two could hole up in the guest cottage 'til—"

"We gotta talk," Jerry says.

They enter the quiet terminal. The couple's lonely luggage rests in the otherwise empty carousel. They sit on long benches and stare at each other.

Jamal begins: "Ya know, this is y'all's family stuff and I don't need..."

"Nah, it's all right," Jerry says, "you're my friend."

Adila sucks in a deep breath and looks directly at Louise. "Mr. and Mrs. McBride, let me tell you about myself. I am thirty-two years old. I was married once before, when I was very young. My first husband was killed by the Soviets. I have no children. I received a degree from the University in Kabul before the Taliban closed it. That is where I learned English. I teach girls in what you would call elementary school."

Adila stops talking. The silence lengthens. She lowers her head. "I did not plan on stealing your son's heart. But he...he saved my life and...well...love grows in the strangest of places...between the most different of people."

"Jesus peaches, I get all that," Stan says. "But why can't y'all stay? Where ya going in such a hurry?"

"Dearborn," Jerry says.

"Where?" Louise asks, her mouth staying open.

"Dearborn, Michigan."

"What the hell's in Dearborn?" Stan mutters. "Christ, it snows up there and..."

"I've been accepted to the school of electrical engineering at the University. I start in five days."

Louise's face brightens. "Didn't I tell ya Stan that he'd get a good education? I knew he was no Army lifer."

Stan continues scowling. Louise gives her daughter-in-law another appraising look that makes Adila fidget.

"I know all this is happening so fast," Jerry continues, "but...but my wife has relatives in Dearborn. They'll help us get settled."

Adila hurriedly adds: "I have an aunt and uncle that own a shop that sells goods to the Muslim community."

Stan's scowl deepens: "So there's a lotta rag... er, Muslims up there?"

"Yes, it is a large community."

"I just wish y'all could stay a few days," Louise sighs. "I'd love to take ya to the First Baptist and show you off to my friends. You sure have a pretty wife, Jerald."

Jerry looks at Adila and sucks in a deep breath. "Well, that's the other thing y'all should know. Before we got married, I converted to Islam."

"You—you what?" Louise's eyes turn glassy.

Adila reaches forward and takes her limp hand. "Before Jerry and I could be married, he was required to convert. It is testament to the strength of his love for me."

"But...but..."

"It's all right, Ma. We all pray to the same God, and—"

Louise pulls her hand from Adila's grasp and sits back, frowning.

"Ah, come on," Jamal brakes in. "There's lotsa brothers that'er Muslim and they're jus' as American as—"

"Yes, I'm sure that's fine for your people," Louise says curtly. "We brought Jerry up to be a proper Christian." She turns her head away. Tears streak her cheeks and she dabs at her eyes with a tissue. Stan sits stone-faced.

"I was afraid this was gonna happen," Jerry mutters. "There's always somethin'."

"What the hell does that mean?" Stan demands.

"Nothin', Pop. Nothin'."

When the silence becomes unbearable, Stan and Louise leave, promising to stay in touch. Jamal stands.

"Sorry 'bout your folks."

"Yeah...I'm sorry for draggin' ya down here. I'll radio from Dearborn once I get ma rig set up."

"But what about all the gear at your folk's house?"

"Do me a favor, Jamal. Teach ma Pop how to use it. Maybe if he gets his head free of this place... Say, rememba, that hot Brazilian babe from Rio?" Adila glares at Jerry who grins sheepishly.

The couple waits for their connecting flight on a shaded bench outside the terminal. After lunch, Adila dons a burqa. Jerry unrolls their prayer rugs. She feels they are on a pilgrimage to a special life, linked to her past yet chasing a grand new adventure. They kneel and slowly touch their palms and foreheads to the cool concrete, facing the same direction that the thunderheads sail, eastward to Atlanta, Mecca, and Kabul's rocky slopes beyond.

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**Tom Sheehan's latest books are *Brief Cases, Short Spans*, November 2008 from Press 53 of NC; *From the Quickening*, January 2009 from Pocol Press of VA; a proposal for a collection of cowboy stories, *Where Cowboys Ride Forever*, in the hands of a western publisher. His work is currently in or coming in *Ocean Magazine, Perigee, Rope and Wire Magazine, Qarrtsiluni, Green Silk Journal, Halfway down the Stairs, Ad Hoc Monadnock, Hawk & Whippoorwill, Eden Waters Press, Milspeak Memo, Milspeak Mentoring, Ensorcelled, Canopic Jar, SFWP, Eskimo Pie, Lock Raven Review, Indite Circle, Northville Review, Pine Tree Mysteries*, and in the book coming from Press 53, *Home of the Brave, Stories in Uniform*. He has 10 Pushcart nominations, a Noted Story of 2007 nomination, the Georges Simenon Award, and will be included in the Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009.**

## **V for Victor**

*By: Tom Sheehan*

I saw it all from the very beginning; heard it all too, every word rising on the air. In our first classroom, in church, everywhere it happened—you name the place and I was there. Unannounced it came. From the heavens it must have come, taking over his soul, his body, his mind for a few bare minutes of magic. Once and once only, every five years like clockwork, it came on him, as if grabbed by the heavenly spheres or ignition itself lighting up his lungs from the inside. My pal Victor, classmate for 16 years of schooling, teammate for 8 years, inseparable companion, fifth year custodian of miracles that made him, for the nonce, an extraordinary singer without explanation, an indescribable tenor so gifted I have to place the cause on an element beyond us mere men.

*V for Victor, dit dit dit dah, dit dit dit dah, dit dit dit dah.*

I never saw the miracle coming, in any of the situations. Neither did he, but it took hold of him and wouldn't let go until the last word fell from his lips, from his throat, from his lungs, and to depart then forever from him. No song was ever repeated, making the miracle even more mysterious, as he could not even recall the scenario within a half hour of its happening.

I often thought that I hoped I'd be there when it was over. Or maybe I didn't hope so. It'd be sad enough to hear the last of it, knowing at that moment that he'd be gone before another five years had passed.

You think I'm off my rocker, I'll bet, but I'll tell you I have not missed a word. Not that I was clued in on the moment of coming (I rarely knew it was coming until I was out of college and back home for good) and then the math of it hit me. So, because he was my best friend, because he was so loyal in his own right, a trusted teammate, a productive teammate, a leader, I started keeping a journal, plotting the next revelation, the next miracle.

His musical renditions were all glorious, out of this world, infused with so much talent it shook me. Perhaps it was a part of his emotional and physical make-up that brought up a message from within, carried it off so it could be shared. There just had to be something in the air, surrounding him, waiting for his hand or eye or lung to breathe it in so it could be let loose.

The time it happened when he was 15 years old, and not the first time I had been a witness, was the first time I thought his surroundings or the company he shared dictated his revelation, his sharing, his improbable gift. It was as though it was needed, not by Victor but by those around him.

I tried to trace that import from the third incident.

We were sophomores in high school, and every Wednesday evening, five of us, all teammates and classmates, would gather at Paul Barbanti's house where his mother fed us the ultimate in Italian meals. She and her daughters loved to cook, to feed us and her son during the football season. The good old smells of rich sauce were deep and delicious and flooded the house, all the rooms, the hallways, the bathrooms, probably the cellar and the attic, calling on the appetites, not letting go until cake or pie hit the table.

Mr. Barbanti sat at the head of the huge table partly in the kitchen and partly in the dining room where it was extended to accommodate us weekly guests, with a jug of wine, an old cider jug, in place beside his chair ... a deep, delicious *Dago Red* he called it, made in his own garage from his own grapes off his own backyard vines, a recipe from Italy come by boat fifty years

earlier. That Dago Red, barreled in the garage, was often a target for theft of a pint or so, late at night, Barbanti house lights all dimmed or shut off, the four of us pals mischievously out on Saugus town.

Heavy, Buhda'd in his chair, the classic icon of the East Saugus Italian community, stonemason, violinist of sorts, warm as sin, Mr. Barbanti, by habit, often by choice, talked to his wife in beautiful Italian, almost musical, as if it had come directly from La Scala. I loved to hear him speak, sonorous at some moments, secretive another, yet a tenor's carry in his voice. I dreamt about learning Italian, but did not follow through with my intent. I think the result is the way I listen to opera now, putting in my own words for those being sung, making my own dreamscapes, composing my interpretation of an aria.

When Mr. Barbanti spoke all commotion in the kitchen stopped, kettles stopped singing, pans stopped banging and clanging, glasses and plates stopped clattering. Sentences stopped in mid-statement as if a gavel had smashed down on the countertop. "Angelina, that sausage will be the best ever served in this room, I am sure of it," as interpreted by his son in a low whisper, and the order it indefinably contained, would be understood, the tone set for the evening, the feast ready for us princes.

So it was on that night, the table cleared, a hum in Mr. Barbanti's throat coming musically across the room, a tune from old Italy most likely, that the ignition started in Victor's chest. The younger people in the house that evening were in the hallway to the upstairs, set off to the side of the kitchen, some sitting on steps, a couple standing, all gabbing, comrades at ease, sated, our mouths in a sweet and sour taste after being curried by meatballs and gravy and the inevitably delicious strawberry shortcake. That's when Victor stood up at the foot of the stairs, at attention to an invisible order, unsaid direction, with no outward sign, no outward expression, no full giveaway on his part. Alertness told me I was again to be witness to the miracle only he could accommodate. It was likely a moment, I was sure, that Victor did not know was coming, from wherever it was loosed, from what housing or crucible or dais where it was issued, as if on demand to be a living moment of time.

It came in Italian, rich as Naples I'd guess, abruptly, suddenly, rising from he who could not speak Italian, who could not read

music, who had not sung a song, unknown to him but a few seconds before, for the previous five years. Instantly I remembered the last time, when he was ten, when I was once again at his side in such a situation, and here I was once more, right there in front of him as the unmusical Victor, grabbed by an unknown power, unknown force, unknown capability, unknown talent, broke into a song I had heard a hundred times but never from Victor ... never before from him and, as time would prove, never to come from him again.

He sang about *what a wonderful, beautiful day it was*: but it came in the Mother Tongue, La Scala-powered, as beautiful if no more beautiful than Caruso himself:

*Che bella cosa è na jurnata 'e sole*, he sang, sonorous, rising up the hallway and through the whole house, *n'aria serena doppo na tempesta!* It was majestic, soaring, tilted the whole house on an edge. *Pe' ll'aria fresca para gia' na festa...Che bella cosa na jurnata 'e sole.* Eyes opened wide at *'o sole mio*. Mouths agape at a boy singing in Italian who knew no real Italian other than a few curses, how to greet the day, say hello or goodbye, say supper was late. *Ma n'atu sole cchiu' bello, oi ne', 'o sole mio sta nfronte a te! 'o sole, 'o sole mio sta nfronte a te! sta nfronte a te!*

A glorious song it was from the first note to the last note, a glorious sound loosed in the house, probably the first time ever the words rose in such incredible beauty within that brick house now set with fantasy or mystery. I had no name for it.

And heavy, chair-bound, stunned by beauty, Mr. Barbanti rose from his seat, his eyes also wide in amazement, a huge smile beginning on his face. "Mama mia," he said a number of times, and again as the song was finished, as Victor turned slowly, shaking his head in his own sense of wonderment, wondering again where this power had come from, this sweep of energy that came up out of him, this talent beyond measurement, this music and these words he had never known, and him also suddenly knowing he would never sing this song again as long as he lived. That knowledge must have also come to him from some distant place, must have been understood.

"You've been holding out on us, Victor?" Mr. Barbanti said. "All these times at dinner you never sang such a song, such a beauty of a song, and in a voice only the Maestro would own. I never knew you could sing. My God, son, do you know what this house has heard tonight? What I have not heard since I left Italy and my one night in La Scala, night of forever, Caruso out there in the light by himself, and that glorious voice raising the very heavens. What else do you have hidden? What songs hide there? Do you know *la Donna e mobile*? *The Barber of Seville*? *Turondo*? *Sorrento*?" He must have known something else, been aware of some secret of the ages, because he blurted out, "Quick, son, before it is gone. Before the words go away." Had he been witness himself to such an outburst before? Had such a dream been realized in his presence, or by him, in that old Italy of his, the Italy rich with the glorious tenors, for now he had been in the presence of another magnificent voice?

And I knew exactly what was going to happen, as it happened before, five years before and five years before that ... Victor fled. Out the door of the Barbanti house he flew, down the street we saw him go, as if he was at Manning Bowl and the goal line was all of 80 yards away. Flew, he did, into a kind of reclusion where the upstart evening might somehow be put in a proper place of mind, if such a place existed for him. I doubt that it ever did, for on the following day he'd have no memory of the happening. There would be no note left hanging for him to hear (being tone deaf to begin with), no single article of his delivery, no reception remembered. A song would come and go, and every five years of his lifetime, as I had come to measure them.

It was his destiny, his fate, his mystery. I was the chosen observer.

The huge smile slowly leaving his face, wonder beset by awe and deepest curiosity, Mr. Barbanti said, "What happened here? Did I really hear what I just heard? Tell me what I heard. Please, somebody, explain it to me. My God, where did Victor go? Why did he go? Something is terribly wrong here or terribly right, but it's all amazing. What have we seen, or heard? I am not alone in this, am I? Did you not all hear it?" He stood beside his deep, comfortable chair, a man up from his throne, caught up in wonder a young man had freed in his house. "Mama mia," he said again, "Blessed Mother."

He seemed happier than he might have ever been in his whole life.

His wife and daughters were still speechless in the kitchen. Not a glass tinkled during the whole song, or yet. Not a clatter of a pan, though Angelina, the 14-year old, said boldly in her eyes she had fallen in love at the moment. "Yes, Papa," she said, "like *The Gloria*."

Still standing, amazement yet written all over his expression, he pointed at me and said, "He's your closest pal, Tom, right? What do you know?" Unwavering, steady as a post, he waited an answer, his eyes beginning to get red, and a story on his face.

I tried to explain it to him, and to all the others, though mysteries like this, or miracles, were things I did not handle well myself. "I first saw it happen in kindergarten. Victor, never having joined in a song that I can remember, suddenly one day stood up from a circle of little green chairs we sat in and began to sing a song called, I think, *My Dog Blue*. It was beautiful, so beautiful, that for three or four weeks the teacher, inviting the principal and the music director into her classroom, tried to get Victor to sing the song again. It never came back to him. He never knew a word of the song, even though he tried. It just would not come back to him from wherever it had come from in the first place." I paused, trying to remember some feeling I had back then. "They pushed hard at it, all of them. One of them finally must have said, 'Maybe we push him too hard. Let's sit back and see what happens.' It just went away after a while."

From the kitchen, a dish towel still in her hands, Angelina said, "Nothing ever happened after that? Once I heard about a boy in the Armitage School, in West Cliftondale, who sang a song at recess that brought the neighbors right out of their houses, and the teachers from inside the school all tumbled into the schoolyard to hear the boy sing one song. I don't know what that song was, or the boy's name, but I'll bet it was Victor." Her eyes flashed their new-found joys again, as if she was laying claim on Victor for evermore.

"Were you there, Tom?" Mr. Barbanti said. Did you hear that one too? What was it, the name of the song he sang that time? Do you know what's going on with him?"

"I was there," I said. "That time he sang a troubadour's song, in the old Irish I guess. I don't think anybody in the schoolyard knew any of the words, but later on I heard that Mr. Dineen, the retired mailman sitting on his porch across the street from the schoolyard, was crying all the time, sitting in his old chair, his chin resting on his hands on the porch railing, just crying his eyes out. And they said he had been here for more than fifty years."

Mr. Barbanti said, "That's his piece of the miracle of this young man of ours, Tom. I wish I could have been there to hear that one. So, the Maestro doesn't own him outright, does he? What a pity. Nor La Scala herself. What comes after this? How will you know where to be, if you go to different schools, take jobs in a different places, how will you be at his side? You are fated, I assume, to be the only one to be in all his outbreaks, if I can call them that." The weight of him was deep into his chair, but he was uncomfortable once more, his face still shining with glistening curiosity, searching out causes and explanations.

He stood again, preparing to put a demand into the air. "You keep me advised on what happens to that pal of yours. Make sure you tell me. If you ever get a clue on the next time, tell me." The king had spoken beside his throne, the echoes undoubtedly ringing yet in his ears.

Thus, I departed under oath that night to keep him informed of his personal La Scala tenor, if and when I would still be privy to such an undertaking, my calendar marked for five years hence.

We left his house that night, the season over on the weekend, and never went back; Paul hurt his back in an accident a few months later and never played ball again. We drifted apart after that, except for Victor and me. And five years to the day, in church one Sunday morning, at the altar the priest said, "Please be advised that Peggy has had a bad cold and is just recovering. Help her out if you can." His eyebrows were part of the announcement.

The procession started down the main aisle, Peggy singing. Obviously her recovery was not complete. She sang terribly, a dissonance creating a stir in the church, not approaching a sense of music. The priest flinched at the altar at her feeble attempts. And Peggy, unable to let go, tried to continue.

"Oh, what is this?" Victor said to himself, as he sat beside me and something happened in his gut, at the back of his head, coming like an incomplete statement. He didn't know what it was, something breaking loose, coming apart, gaining its own force.

Again, I knew.

Then, in a crowning moment of some distant demand, he was jump-started like an old Ford or Chevie rescued from inertness; loose wires connected, a nerve touched into reality, a collection of breath taken in, and a stampede of energy loosed. One vein must have leaped across another vein. A nerve, twisted in the mix, lost its old harmony of things, its natural order, and found another setting. The new torrent came from a place he did not know in his body or in his psyche.

Victor stood up to help Peggy through the song. It was a revered hymn, one usually solemn and suddenly brought to heavenly acceptance, as Victor, my old pal Victor, began to sing, a most remarkable tenor, sonorous and golden-toned, operatic, like Pavarotti or Domingo or Carreras or blind Andrea Bocelli, a tenor the church had never heard. The priest cried at the beauty of the song. Peggy's mouth stuck open, an "Oh" caught up in awe. Every person in the church turned to look at Victor in the back row singing in that glorious tenor voice, everything freed from the fateful ignition, the magnificent torrent loosed from him.

It is five years later as I write this. I am in the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington. Victor and I joined the army two years ago. I went to Afghanistan, Victor to Iraq.

Accidentally, the pain in my legs determining my mindset, I just looked at the calendar. It's been five years and a day since my dear friend sang one of his songs.

The silence is deafening.

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