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Bartleby Snopes



A Literary Magazine of Fiction

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For more information about our contributors, please visit the Archive section of our website. If you would like to contact one of our authors, please let us know.

Editor's Note

Bartleby Snopes began at a computer in July of 2008, born out of the frustrations of a writer tired of waiting months for responses. With a goal of responding to all submissions within two weeks, we'd like to think we are doing something radical for the writing community. I'm very pleased with the quality of work that has been sent to the magazine in its first six months of operation. *Bartleby Snopes* is designed to be as contributor-friendly as possible. We do what we do for the writers, the readers, and a little bit for ourselves. Hopefully this is the first of many issues.

This issue represents a collection of our twenty favorite stories from July through December. Some were voted by the readers, some were chosen by me. Either way, we think this is a good collection of stories.

A Sure Thing by Joseph Grant

Ted had arisen early that morning to study the racing form and re-check his handicaps. Quietly, he had made coffee and ate a homemade *fritada* while he read the paper as his wife Kathy slept. He was careful not to make too much noise, allotting Kathy her all-important beauty sleep. This also allowed him to study the day's racing form in veritable peace and solitude.

Nothing pleased Ted more than working on his novel through the morning and into the early afternoon while Kathy paid the bills. In an era of two income houses, his not working was an unorthodox arrangement at best and an uncomfortable conversation stopper for most. In some circles it was met with the same reaction as if Kathy had said her husband had been a felon or an Elvis imitator, while in some other circles those could be one in the same.

Kathy had not cared; in fact, it had been her idea. Ted was reluctant to go along with the odd proposal at first, but with Kathy's law practice doing so well, she had practically begged him to take a year off and write the novel he had always wanted. Although in discussion this was sometimes met with the same confused look and blank stare as if he had admitted having come down with some incurable disease, Ted had grown comfortable with his new endeavor. He was doing what few had the *pelotas* to do and besides, if he kept his mind to the racing form spread out before him, they might be able to recoup some losses.

The phone rang. It was answered on the third ring. Ted knew who it was, but did not even bother to get up. He could hear the muffled sound of a one-sided conversation upstairs, but soon blocked it out with his focus on the races.

He did not so much as pay attention to the first two races, skipping them altogether. They were almost always *mierda*; a warm-up. The first was only for 350 yards and the least impressive mares ran in that one; the ones that had poor workouts and some of the older horses that had seen better days and better tracks. The second was worse, as it ran out at 220 yards and the third was the same as the first.

Not that Fairway Park was an inadequate track. Some of the finest ponies had galloped there and it had even seen some notoriety among Hollywood's elite back in the day. The track itself was kept up nicely, as an old museum is kept up nicely, after all of the old masters had been sold off years ago.

Such was the case with Fairway. It had been a superior park in decades past. If it had been a horse, rather than a racetrack, it would have been shot long ago, thought Ted with a smile. Not that Ted advocated the shooting of any animal, let alone the noble equine. He knew a few people who should have that fate befall them, especially those who continued to call his very married wife, he thought smugly.

As if on cue Kathy came trudging downstairs. She stomped one stair at a time in her slippers, her face contorted by a gaping yawn. She ambled sleepily to the bottom and

held onto the banister and yawned again. Ted glanced up from his paper and shook his head.

Only he would consider her “morning beautiful.” Some women woke up like train wrecks, a little worse for the wear, while some woke up looking refreshed. She bridged the gap, but in her own sensual way. He looked up again at her as she stood there, her curly brown hair disheveled, her Garfield t-shirt wrinkled from a typical restless sleep, her slippers ratty and torn but it was all in achieved total radiance. In that way, some women wore disheveled well. Kathy just happened to make poetry of it. If, as Ted thought, women were the most attractive when they first woke up in the morning, Kathy was their unparalleled queen.

“Who was that?” he asked as his head sank back down to the racing form.

“Nobody,” Kathy shrugged and turned to go into the kitchen. “Why?”

“Why? Because you had a nice long conversation with nobody,” he spat.

“Knock it off, Ted?” Kathy whined. “At least give me twenty minutes before you start in, huh? Have some compassion. I just woke up,” she griped and poured herself a black coffee to go with her mood.

Ted ignored the taunt and went back to his handicaps. At least there, his odds were better, he grumbled.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she said and disappeared upstairs once more. Ted was pleased with the silence that ensued.

It seemed to Ted that they were running in different circles these days, but it had always been like that, he recalled. While it was true they were both from New York, the difference was that she was from a wealthy family in the Hamptons and he was from 14th Street. Despite their completely different existences they clicked when they met for the first time. Characteristically, he met her one day at the track when she was there with some worthless guy and he overheard her saying how baffled she was at handicapping. When the guy offered no help, Ted politely stepped in. Taken by her natural beauty, he explained in a sociable manner how it worked and when the guy went to make the bet, Ted asked for her phone number. Many racing seasons had passed since that day.

Ted often thought of their relationship in racing terms. When they met, he had been running in many races, in and out of many stables, along many confusing and endless furlongs. Kathy came along and one by one began to beat all of the other contenders out of the gate. She possessed more grace, intelligence, more raw talent and was more driven than the others trying to keep up with her and she had always been a sure thing to him, a lock. She had the look of a winner, he thought. Currently, he wasn’t so sure of his handicap. She looked as though she was breaking far too freely from him these days, he thought.

He went back to his racing form. He had already warmed up his cold cup of coffee twice in the microwave and became frustrated. He worked on the eleven races until the horses started to sound like Peckinpaw titles. He was beat. He had capped all twelve races, the last sounding to him like the names of three a.m. hookers in Hunter

Thompson novels. The names came off the page in ludicrous fashion, names that read *Cherry Delight*, *Bonita Latina*, *Puss-n-Bootie*, *Pearl Necklace* and his perennial favorite, *Easy Does Her*. He smiled at this until he looked up. A freshly showered Kathy was standing in front of him.

“You ready, sport?” she asked.

“Wow,” he said with a nod. “You look great.” He smiled as his eyes ate her up. In the clinging, low-cut top and shorts, she would be the least underdressed there, if not the most stared at, he thought proudly. “You look beautiful.”

“I know,” she nodded.

“But, we’re not going to the Monster Truck Rally. We’re going to the Fairway, could you please dress more appropriately?”

Kathy stared at him, her mouth twitching. This either meant she would tell him to go to hell or was stung by his remark. “But I have the hat.” She shrugged and touched the brim of her oversized hat with a smile and a turn.

“Yes, very nice,” he acquiesced. “We’re going to be late. Can you secure a nicer outfit in the next fifteen minutes?” he reasoned.

Kathy stood for a moment, glaring at the racing form, then disappeared back up the stairs. When she returned, she stood before him in a summer dress, her breasts bulging out of her top. Ted said nothing, knowing full well that the battle had been won, even if the war was not. Maybe what had been his Christmas present to her of a year ago would not be too obvious with that garish hat, he mused.

“I feel like I’m going to a funeral,” Kathy joked in the bright sunlight as they walked across the Fairway towards the paddock. “Look, there are other girls dressed like I was before.”

“Yeah.” Ted looked down and peered over the top of his sunglasses. “But they’re white trash and I won’t have my wife dressed like white trash. You’re much better than that,” he remarked and turned to her. Typically, she was not paying attention. The little attention she paid to him was not enough to make up for all the time her concentration was elsewhere, he felt. Sometimes the attention she paid to him was the wrong kind and it grated on his nerves. Other times she paid no attention to him at all and when asked, would tell him she was too busy.

The horses were paraded around the paddock in a circle by their trainers. Ted paid close attention to their gait, to their excitability, the amount of sweat they were producing and the lather of white, if any, between their legs. All of this, accompanied by the handicapping, gave him a good edge on whether his hunch was right. He also looked for glazing of the eyes and any slight foam around the mouth, sure signs of drugging. There had been allegations of drugging at this Park in the past, hell, even nerving. He knew trainers drugged them all the time in the majors, despite the iron fist of the Racing Commission. He knew they drugged here as well. He had gone down to the stables and was friendly with some of the trainers to the extent of getting inside tips from time to time and would hear enough stories to know it was continuous.

“I think *That a Boy* looks good for this race. He’s a serious contender, having run three great starts at Canterbury. He ran third here on the 28th of last month, though I like *My Lil Mensa*.” He added, “He’s a class drop, too.” Kathy laughed, knowing what *mensa* meant in Spanish.

“I like number three,” she said. “She looks strong, has a good build and has a fiery temperament.”

“Kind of like you.”

“Please.” She elbowed him with a smile. “Plus I like her colors and look at the jockey’s outfit, it coordinates.”

Ted sighed. “Kathy, you can’t pick the horse on account of the colors matching. Pick it on his bay, maybe but because the colors match the jockey??”

“I can pick my horse anyway I want to,” she pouted. “You stick to your handicaps and you pick them how you want to, I go by instinct.”

“Instinct?” he asked. “But you’re taking all of the beauty out of the sport.”

“So you say,” she gestured wildly. “It’s fashion that makes the sport,” she joked. “You’ve heard of a clotheshorse, haven’t you?” she chuckled. “Besides, the jockey’s outfit is cute. It would fit me.”

“I really can’t see you wearing something so shiny and bright with the green checkerboard design, Kath.”

“Silly Teddy Boy,” she cooed. “It’s all about accessorizing, too, you must know.”

Ted chose to say nothing but rolled his eyes all the same.

“All horses to the starting gate,” the overhead speakers intoned.

‘Come on, we’d better get a move on. It’s almost post time. The betting windows close in five minutes,’ he said and grabbed her arm.

“Twenty quinella on two and seven,” he said to the guy at the window.

“A quinella?” Kathy questioned him. “What happened to number two to win?” she chided him.

“Easy, huh?” He smiled. “I couldn’t make up my mind, so I took both. Number seven has real possibilities, I think. Look at his stats.”

“Uh-huh,” Kathy said as they danced around each other and Kathy now placed her bet. “Three dollars to win on number three?”

“Wow,” Ted kidded her in return. “You must feel pretty confident about number three to triple your usual bet. Is there a science to it? Did the horse give you the tip?” he teased.

“Remember?” she smiled seductively. “It’s all about what they’re wearing this year in Southern California. I like the name, *Nothing But Speed*.”

“Yes, I remember.” He shook his head as they went up the ramp from the betting area to the track.

The trumpeter was playing scales from my “My Old Kentucky Home”, then ridiculously launched into movie songs and then suddenly began to play “Olympic Spirit”, the song traditionally played before every horse race. Ted was glad to hear it, as

the other songs, save for “My Old Kentucky Home” annoyed him. It ruined the solemnity of the sport. Racing was still the sport of kings, if polo was not, and deserved absolute respect. Look at what had happened to baseball, for crissakes. As soon as they added major league mascots it lost all the dignity of the Golden Era. You’d never see Ruth or DiMaggio playing second banana to some overgrown purple ball playing possum.

“Annnnnnd...” the announcer slowly rattled. “*They’re off!*” Words of pure magic to his ears. Ted sighed. He was home again. The only thing that would complement the short race, after all it was only going to be six furlongs, would have been a Scotch. The getting of the drink would take longer than the actual race, he knew. He stayed put and watched the horses gallop past him. Numbers blurred as they passed but soon *That A Boy* and *My Lil Mensa* ran side by side out in front, kicking up a lot of firm slop. By contrast, Kathy’s horse, *Nothing But Speed* lagged behind in a distant fifth place behind number nine, *A Lazy Day*, hardly lazy at all, thought Ted.

As they rounded the back stretch, *That A Boy* and *My Lil Mensa* kept pace with the other horses with *A Lazy Day* giving good stead as a potential threat. As the horses galloped towards the backstretch, Ted started to beat his program against the rail. “Come on! Come on!” he yelled before his voice was drowned out by the excited crescendo of the crowd.

My Lil Mensa began to be overtaken by *A Lazy Day* as *That A Boy* began to gain. Out of nowhere as the horses rounded the final turn, number three, *Nothing But Speed* came from the outside, her legs attacking the soil like mad. It was almost with a machine-like precision, thought Ted. The horse ran all out and looked as though it had gone into overdrive.

“Come on, come on, three!” Kathy screamed at the top of her lungs. “Come on!” Her voice escalated. “Look at her go!”



Nothing But Speed overtook *A Lazy Day*, *My Lil Mensa* and finally ran neck and neck with *That A Boy*, as they both reached the post, it was a classic dead-heat, photo finish. Ted could hardly believe it. When the results became official, with *Nothing But Speed* declared the winner, Ted was incredulous. A real closer, he thought.

Not only was his horse robbed, he thought, he was also shit out of luck with the twenty dollar quinella. If Kathy’s horse had stayed where it had been most of the race, he would have won enough to keep them betting comfortably all day. Now that Kathy’s horse had taken the race, they only stood to win as good as three times

whatever odds the horse had been placed. He looked at the board. 10:1, shit, he thought. A whole thirty dollars. Kathy jumped up and down and screamed, "I won! I won!"

He nodded and smiled and gave his little happy wife a hug. "Congrats, hon."

"I'm going to cash in," she exclaimed excitedly.

"Okay, meet me at the paddock."

"Don't you want to come with me?" she moped.

"Not really." He shook his head.

"Oh, lighten up, Ted. It's only the first race we've bet on," she countered. "Fine, then. Go to the paddocks. I'll be busy collecting my money, sour puss."

Ted walked off into the milling crowd. He was too upset to correct her use of the plural paddocks, when it was singular. He couldn't get over how her horse had won. He needed a drink.

As he stood in line, an attractive blonde tapped him on the shoulder.

"My name's Lynn."

"Oh."

"So are you going to buy me a drink?"

"No."

"I'll tell you more if you buy me a drink."

"Can you tell me you play the ponies by handicapping them or by the jockey's cute outfits?" he griped at her and turned back around. He got his Scotch off a lovely Latina and stormed off towards the paddock.

Again, he looked at his scratch sheet and played it against his latest handicaps and program tips. He took of the cheap, watered down Scotch and waited for the buzz.

It was cheap liquor so it boarded the last car of the slowest train before finally arriving.

"So?" Kathy entered his consciousness, destroying a current handicapping thought.

"Hold on," he said and wrote a number, scratched it and then looked up. "Oh, the hell with it, you broke my concentration."

"Sorry," she said. "Look!" She smiled and held up her winnings. She had the most perfect smile.

"Great...wonderful."

"Okay." She leaned in and looked at his program. "Who do we like this race?"

"Well, I'm betting number four, *Sharp-eyed Lady*." He pointed with his pencil. "She's got pretty nice odds and believe me, I won't waste another twenty. I'll put her on the nose," he reasoned. "She had a good blow-out at Del Mar two weeks ago and ran second in a eight hundred seventy yard race against the Quarter Horses here a week before that. The racing program says she is certainly a solid, a contender."

"Well, I like *Ain't She a Beaute*. She's got a good physique and is very excited, look at her, you can tell. She's got a nervous energy and I like that. Plus, the white and red outfit."

Ted threw his hands up. "Why don't you just pick them by their outfits?"

Kathy looked at him. "That would be silly, that's why."

Kathy's phone rang in her purse. She pulled out the cell and looked at it and then at Ted. Her face flushed.

"Get it," he mocked. "You know it's him. That's his number." he said, looking at the ID.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said nervously.

"Pick it up," he taunted. "It's his number."

"Ted, please." She shook her head. "I'd better pick it up, it could be work."

"On a Saturday?" he berated her and watched her turn and answer the call. He could not believe she took the call just like that in front of him.

"Yeah." She said and put up a finger. "Could you just...hold on...Ted?"

Ted looked at her.

"Could you place a bet for me on number six? Yes, six," she said and confirmed the number. "Here's ten dollars to win, huh?" She handed him a crumbled ten dollar bill and turned back around.

The balls on this woman, he cursed. Not only was she taking a calls from the guy she always said was a wrong number, but now he was running bets for her! As he stormed off he had no idea why he was doing this, but there he was, heading across the scuffed black and white floor tile towards the betting window.

Aggravated beyond cohesive thinking, he placed both of their bets and wandered back to where they had been standing moments ago. Kathy came along right before the next race started and was slightly sweaty and nervous.

"Here," Ted said and shoved a betting slip towards her.

"Thanks," she said and looked down at the track and then the ticket. "Oh, wait! I wanted number six to *win*, hon."

"Don't *hon* me," he muttered. "No you said *to place*."

"Ted, I asked for him to *win*." She stressed the last word. "If you can't place a bet right, I might as well do it myself."

"No, you said to place," Ted griped. "If you weren't so busy with your boyfriend."

"Stop, okay?" He's not my boyfriend," she corrected him. "He's my, he's just my, uh, friend. We're friends, okay?"

"Uh-huh," Ted said and took another swig of his drink. "He works fast. The guy goes from being a wrong number yesterday to being a friend. Smooth."

"Look, I said stop it," she snapped. "I don't ask you about your friends, I know you have some. I know you've thought of them."

"Are we here to watch the race or are we here to argue?" he retorted. "Cos, if we're here to gamble, that's fifty-fifty, but if we're here to argue, that's a sure thing."

"Quit it! Now you're being an ass," she sniffed. "Let's have fun today, okay? Have another drink while you're at it. How many is that, by the way?"

“Oh, here we go...it’s my first and I haven’t even finished it. Calm the fuck down,” he barked at her. “The race is about to start. Watch, okay?”

The bell clanged and the horses broke quickly. The caller delivered the standard monotone soliloquy and was mercifully drowned out by the surge of the crowd noise. The race was for 1 1/16 miles and again was a tight one. Ted beat the outside rail with his program the way he did every run as Kathy’s horse did not win, but placed. He couldn’t even spot his horse. He wondered if the horse had somehow caught a ride with the ambulance that always followed behind.

Kathy jumped up and down as she had won again. The odds were better this time at 30:1. Ted could not believe his luck or lack thereof. “So much for Mister Handicap,” she snipped when he did not congratulate her.

“You’re killing me,” he sputtered dejectedly into his seat. “Whoever heard of picking races based on the color coordination between the jockeys and their horses?”

“I’m winning, aren’t I?” Kathy gloated. “You’re just mad.”

“Don’t you have money to collect or a phone call to make?” he said without looking at her.

“You’re an ass,” she snapped and stormed off.

“And you’re just some ‘wrong number’s’ piece of one.” He smiled and raised his glass as Kathy glanced back at him through the crowd. She changed her demeanor and semi-smiled at him and waved. She hadn’t heard a word.

In the races that followed that afternoon, Kathy had picked more winners than he, much to his frustration. He began to do something dangerous to one who would strategize the art of the race. With each new win and phone call she received, he began to doubt himself. He started to wonder if he was now out of the race and had backed the wrong horse.

Editor’s Note

A Sure Thing was voted the story of the month during the month of July.

Photograph © Nathaniel Tower

This is not a love story. It's not a story about a first date, about walking her home the sky opening up and all hell breaking loose so that she has to wear my sweater and I'm soaked to the skin. It's not a story about falling in love, her moving in and planning our life together. It's not a story about breaking up because of her new boss, because he was ambitious, because he was going to make money and I wasn't and because she slept with him. This isn't a story about all that, even if it did happen.

This is a story about an old man, an old man who was related to me, and how he taught me to write songs. It's about the hours I spent in his living room, where he made me his apprentice. It's a story about the days he invested in me, about the nights he talked to me until I fell asleep, telling me of who I could be, if only I let myself. It's about believing that he believed in me, and letting myself be the songs he taught me to write. It's about how the old man taught me to write songs, to play instruments the way I wanted them to play, and to play my own world accordingly. This is a story about all that, even if it didn't happen.

He taught me to play guitar, one chord at a time, and he taught me to play piano, tracing his fingers over mine as they sprang up and down the keys of the grand piano he kept in his living room. "Your fingers, their movements, your actions, do not make music," he told me. "When you pluck the string, when you play the key, you're only releasing the sound that was within that key, within that string, waiting to be set free. A musician is not a creator," he said, "but a liberator."

He taught me how to write songs, how to lace words with music and play them as one accordingly. "When it comes to songwriting there are some unspoken rules you should know about," he said as he paced around me sitting on the piano stool. He leaned forward, close to me, holding his hand out in front of his face as if every word he was about to speak were a gift. "If you want to write a sad song," he said, "write it in a minor key, make it a slow tempo, let your fingers thread your sadness throughout every word."

He continued, "If you want to write a song about being young, about being youthful and free, beaches and girls, write it in the major key. G-major works well for this, there's something about it that's solid and reassuring, energizing and explosive. A song in E-major is usually about life, it can even be dark, strung out with minor chords evolving around your major chord— it's rather simple really." He smiled at me and shook his head knowingly. "And a love song," he said, "if you want to write a love song, write it in the key of C-major. There's just something about that C chord, something about that key, that coordinates with love so well—it's almost easy to express love," he raised his eyebrows and added, "which is impossible to do."

He told me all this while we sat in his living room, next to his grand piano, or on his couch with his guitar on one of our knees. He told me all this and then he looked me in the eye and said to me, "But Mathieu, if you want to write *songs*," he emphasized this

word, clenching his fists and breathing through the syllables, “not just words and melodies, if you want to write songs Mathieu, songs with meaning, spirit and emotion, songs that can rescue darkened spirits and enlighten ignorant ones,” he placed a hand on my shoulder, “if you want to write songs like that, then you break every rule I just gave you.” I remember looking at him, and I must have looked confused, but I don’t think he noticed. “You see,” he said. “Just like notes, every song that’s ever been written, it’s always been. Songs aren’t written, they’re not made, songs are discovered, they’re liberated and set free from the bondage of silence. As a musician, as a songwriter, you set songs free. And if you break the rules you’ll discover the best songs.”

The old man told me this while he taught me about music. He told me these things while he tried to teach me about life. He told me this but he died. He died when a drunk driver hit his car after he told me he could never talk to me again.

I was sleeping in bed with my arms around her when the phone rang that night. I turned on the light and glanced at the clock; it was four in the morning, and I had just fallen asleep.

I remember the drive to the hospital, because I had to drive alone, she wouldn’t go with me. He was barely alive when I saw him for the last time, sitting in a hospital bed with wires and tubes pulling every second of life out of him. I took his hand and stood beside him, and he kept his promise and didn’t say a word to me. It was criminal, not the accident, not the drunk driver, those things happen. People drink, people drive, people die. It was just criminal that he should die that way. A man so verbal in a room of silence, a man so musical in a bed where the only music that reached his ears was the beeping of his own heart monitor.

He kept his promise and didn’t say a word to me right up until the beeping stopped and people came to take him away. I drove back home around lunchtime and she was up waiting for me, leaning against the counter in the sweater I had bought her for Christmas. She said she was sorry without lifting her eyes off the magazine. I told her I was quitting my job, I told her I couldn’t live this life anymore.

She looked up from the magazine. “What life Mat? You can’t live this life where you’re making money?” She threw her hands up above her head. “You’re successful, you’re on the verge of a promotion, and you’re going to walk away from it?” she said.

I just nodded.

“You have a gift Mathieu,” he told me. “Everybody has a certain gift, but yours is unique.”

I looked up at him from his piano.

“You have the ability to put emotions into words, and to put those words to music Mathieu. And I’m proud of you.” He paused, the way old men do, like processing their wisdom. “Develop it, don’t let it die. You can help people you may never meet, you can affect people, you can shine, but you have to work for it.”

It all sounded great when I was young. It was easy to do. I wrote songs. For hours I slaved over my songs, the words didn't fit, the melody was off. I re-wrote and wrote, endlessly.

I learned to believe in the old man, believe that he believed in me. I grew to believe that I had a gift and that I had a responsibility to that gift. I learned to love music, love songwriting, learned to need it as much as the old man said it needed me. I learned to let the songs set me free as I wrote them. I learned to be a liberator while being liberated and I fell in love with it.

I practiced my music, and saved my money. I bought my own guitars, my own piano, my own voice lessons. I did everything, everything he wanted me to because I believed he believed in me and we all need to be believed in.

“You're not supposed to be like everyone else, and they aren't meant to be like everyone else either. The difference is not in who we are but who we let ourselves be.” I was confused. “You have a gift Mathieu, so does everyone else. But they let themselves be like everyone else, they follow the rules. They don't understand what I want you to understand. Life's about breaking rules, not all the rules, but breaking the right rules. Breaking through our life's expectations to be more of what was expected from us. Don't follow the wrong rules Mathieu, don't settle for your expectations, don't settle for anyone else's.”

It was easy through college, and on the rare occasion he could visit me I could see it in his eyes, he was proud. He was proud when he stood in that tiny crowded apartment of mine, in which there was little more than a backpack, guitar and mattress where I slept. I could see it in his eyes; he was proud.

I played around in bars and nightclubs, just me and my guitar, singing the songs he had taught me to discover. When I wasn't singing, I was studying, and when I wasn't studying I was working—waiting tables to pay for everything. Did I manage? he would ask. Oh I managed fine. I was a smart kid, he had always told me that. But he had always told me that I was more than just a smart kid, he always told me how I was more than just a talented kid and I had always believed him.

He came to visit me as often as he could. He would sit in my apartment and listen to me play my new songs, critiquing them and giving me advice. Occasionally he would talk about things other than music, but for the most part he just wanted to hear me play. And I could see it every time he looked me in the eye as he shook my hand before leaving; he was proud of me and happy for me. I made money, paid for college and got A's. But he didn't care about any of that, I could see it when I talked to him. He just cared that I still played in bars, singing to tired people with happy faces, he cared that I still wrote my own songs and didn't let go of the dream he had planted in me.

Then I met her. She was at a college bar one night while I was playing. I noticed her in the middle of my second song, walking across the back of the bar in high heels and a red dress. She came up to me afterwards, in her always-professional manner, and asked me my name. She said she loved my songs, said I had a perfect voice. We got

something to eat and talked, then as we were walking back to my apartment it began to rain, not just rain, I mean really pour down like hell. She was wearing a white sweatshirt, and she was so embarrassed that I gave her my sweatshirt. We ran to my apartment laughing, soaking wet, and when we got inside she kissed with her hand gripping my collar.

She loved my guitar, and she loved my apartment. Said there was something romantic about the way I lived, just a student with a guitar barely scraping by. She liked to hear my songs and always smiled when I told her I was writing a new song. Days passed and I continued in my manner, but now she was part of it. I would play in the bars and afterwards take her back to my apartment and sing to her in our own separate way, on the mattress on my floor because I couldn't afford a bed.

We were in love and cliché.

She was going into business and every once in a while I would meet her after an interview and she would be dressed up in her business suit, high heels, blouse, hair done up and lipstick on. I would tell her she looked good, and it seemed interesting. She would tell me that I should do this, be in business. Not in high heels I would say.

She would laugh and then take a serious tone and tell me she loved my music but I could make money in business. You're smart, she would tell me, you could do really well. I would consider it for a little while, then change the topic, and she would smile at me again. Then we would go back to my apartment where she would take off her business clothes and I would sing to her in my own separate way.

He visited shortly after she convinced me to change majors. He frowned when I showed him my new suit.

"What's wrong with the music major?" he asked. He didn't understand. Music was fine, it was great, I told him. I loved it, but I wasn't a kid anymore and I needed to make money. I couldn't wait tables my entire life.

The old man frowned "I never expected you too Mathieu, haven't you learned a thing from me? You can write songs, you can sing, you have a gift!"

I tried to comfort him, I assured him I was still going to, I would still sing in bars, I would still write my songs. I knew enough I told him, studying is pointless now. I'll just study business on the side, I told him.

He seemed reassured. "As long as you don't forget about your gift, don't lose it in the rules of adulthood."

She was happy that I had changed majors, said she was so proud of me and that I was going to be amazing. She also came to every show I played, sitting on the barstool smiling at me. She jumped up and down and hugged me when I told her an agent from Nashville had talked to me, but she didn't ask any questions later on when I didn't hear from him.

I graduated and he showed more pain when I told him after graduation I had taken a job with a business firm outside of Chicago.

“What about music?” he said, concern shining through the wrinkles I had noticed developing on his face.

Music is still going, I told him smiling. Chicago had so many places where I can play and get noticed. More than here.

He nodded and talked happily about it, convinced that Chicago was a good place for my music.

He met her for the first time when she moved in with me. He shook her hand, smiling and told her how much he had heard about her and how nice she looked. Later when he was leaving he shook my hand and told me he wanted to hear the new songs when I wrote them. Then he left and I didn't see him for another two years, when I saw him for the last time.

My days progressed happily. My job at the firm was making me money and I was paying off college loans consistently. She got a job in a business downtown, where her competitive edge and determination earned almost as much as I did.

We were in love. I woke up every morning and wrapped a towel around my waist then picked her clothes up off the floor. I showered and sometimes she joined me, then we went to our separate jobs and when I came home in the evening she was cooking dinner for me.

My guitar sat in the corner, on a stand behind an old couch, and every once in a while I played it. At the start I would go down to bars at least once a month and play the songs I had played in college, people would clap and smile, and she would be sitting on a barstool watching me.

Eventually I got promoted and began to make more money. But I had to work later and came home exhausted every night. She didn't mind, she said she understood and appreciated I was paying the bills. She still cooked me meals and later she would climb on top of me in bed to sing our song.

But I didn't like it, and one day when I got a letter from the old man I looked over in the corner and saw the guitar behind the new couch we had just bought. I reached behind the couch and pulled the guitar upwards, setting it in my lap. The dust left a white strip on my suit and when I plucked the strings

I noticed it was severely out of tune. When she walked into to the room and asked what I was doing I told her I just realized how long it had been since I had played, and how much I missed it.

“Yea,” she said, “I know, but you have a job now.”

I paused, a job? A job wasn't what I wanted.

She laughed a nervous laugh and when she didn't see me smiling said, “C'mon sweetie, it was great when we were in college.” She sat down on the couch next to me. “And you were quite the romantic playing in bars, but we all have to grow up eventually, and we both know playing the guitar and singing doesn't pay the bills, no matter how



sexy it makes you.” She stroked my cheek with her last sentence and gave me a teasing smile.

I looked at her and nodded then told her I was going to try and play this week in the pub down the street, on Thursday for “Open Mic” night.

She frowned. “Honey don’t you have a meeting?”

I told her it was just another meeting, this was more important.

She placed her hand on the neck of the guitar and took it out of my lap. “It’s not more important.” She said. “Now I know you love to play, and baby I love to hear you play guitar, but there are bills to be paid, and if we ever want to get married, you can’t just skip out on work to go play at a bar. You’re an adult now.”

She got off the couch with my guitar and began to walk away. I stood up. I told her to come back and bring me back my guitar.

“No Mat,” she said to me sternly as she turned around, like a mother would after taking a toy away from a misbehaving child. “You have got to let go of this dream...this idea that you have. You’re an adult now.”

I stood up, frustrated, confused. The old man, I objected, he told me I could do this, he believed in me, and I believe him. This is something I have to do, I can still make money, I did it all through...

She interrupted me. “Old man? Old man? What old man? The one who gave you music lessons when you were a kid. The one who lives all alone in an apartment in a dirty old town? The one who barely makes enough to support himself? *That* old man?” She was in my face now. “*He* told you he believed in you? *He* told you to play music? What does *he* know that I don’t?”

I didn’t say anything.

“What about me Mat?” she said, softer than before. “What about us? I love you, but I can’t sit around while you play songs and dwell on the past and dreams and what could have been while passing up a perfectly good position in an up and coming company!”

Still I didn’t say anything, I just looked down, the old man in my head.

She continued. “I want to marry you, and I want to have a family with you. But you have got to earn money, and I’m sorry but playing songs in bars and living on a dream isn’t going to do that.”

She turned around and I watched her walk away with my guitar before grabbing my briefcase and walking out the front door. I went to my office where I stayed till late at night though I didn’t get any work done. Nonetheless when I came home and saw that the guitar wasn’t behind the couch, and wasn’t anywhere in sight, I didn’t say anything. She was right, I thought, it had been a nice dream when I was young, but it was always just a dream.

Sometime later the old man wrote a letter that said he would be in the Chicago area the next week and he would love to see me. I told him sure, I wanted to see him too, and I really did.

He walked into the house and seemed surprised when he saw the new furniture and fresh paint.

“It looks like you're doing really well for yourself,” he said smiling though not really.

I nodded and told him business was good, told him about my promotion, later hours but more pay.

“How's she doing?” he asked as I led him through the foyer into the kitchen for some coffee. I told him she was fine, how we planned on getting married after I had made enough to be financially secure. He nodded at this as if he understood the situation more than I would until years later.

He sat down and I made him coffee while asking him about how life had been treating him. He said things were fine, I didn't get much else nor did I expect it. There was a certain way about him, he didn't enjoy talking about himself. Eventually he brought up the topic I knew he would which I had been dreading the entire time.

“Mathieu where's your new music? I kept expecting to hear it from you and never did.”

I shrugged and tried to play it off. I've been really busy at the office, I told him, I still play a lot, but I just haven't had the time I used to.

“You were busy in college,” he said, “but you made time.”

I nodded, but this is different now, I have responsibilities.

“You're right Mathieu, because you have a gift, your responsible to use that gift. Not make money...”

I nodded.

He looked around. “Well where's your guitar? Could you play for me? For old time's sake.” He got up and started towards the room where the guitar had been kept behind the couch.

I didn't have to tell him it wasn't there for he saw soon enough.

“Where is it?” he asked.

I told him I wasn't sure, maybe she had put it in storage. We needed more space.

When I said that I saw, for the first time in the many years I had known the old man, a look of fury on his face. “*Space!?*” he said. “Space for what?” He looked around the house. “Space for what? More *stuff?*”

I tried to calm him down, told him it wasn't a big deal.

“Not a big deal!?” he said, the look turned now to one of fright. “When did this happen? When did you change?”

I told him I hadn't.

He nodded his head sarcastically. “Okay then. How long has it been since you even played?”

I told him I wasn't sure, a few months, maybe a year.

When these words left my mouth, something in the old man changed. His face no longer showed anger, or frustration, but disappointment, complete disappointment,

“You haven’t played in almost a year?” he said. “It’s because of her, isn’t it?”

Of course not, I told him, and it wasn’t that big of a deal, it was just a dream; I had to grow up, make money. I tried to explain it to him like she had explained it to me.

He just looked and shook his head. “No you don’t. You don’t have to grow up. You don’t have to make money.” I looked in his eyes, and saw nothing but disappointment and sadness. “You’re just following the rules now, just following the rules,” he repeated.

I tried to convince him it was fine, but he just kept shaking his head as he walked away from me. He took his coat off the back of the chair that was sitting in front of the cup of coffee he had never touched. He walked down my foyer and out the front door, turning around as I came behind me.

I thought I saw tears in his eyes, I tried to reassure him it was fine, he was making a big deal out of nothing and he didn’t have to go, why was he going? I want to catch up with you, I told him.

He just looked at me and shook his head. “I believed in you,” he said. “You had a gift and I failed you.” He just kept shaking his head. “I’m sorry Mathieu, but I can never talk to you again.” He turned and walked to his car. I called his name asking him to come back, but he just drove away.

I walked back inside and closed the door. It was getting late, and I wondered where he would stay, he had planned on staying here. Did he have a hotel? Was he going to drive all the way home tonight?

I walked upstairs and found her sleeping face down on the bed wearing only one of my work shirts. I undressed and climbed in next to her. She woke up and asked me where he was. I told him he had left, he was mad that I quit music. She didn’t seem to care much, she just told me he would get over it, and she was glad. She had never seemed to like him.

She fell back asleep but I just stared at the ceiling thinking about the old man, thinking about music, thinking about how he believed in me, believed in my gift, and what exactly that meant. I thought about my life, and the moments when I saw my dreams colliding with reality in a battle over my existence and purpose. I kept thinking until I fell asleep fifteen minutes before I got the phone call that told me he had been in an accident, and he really never would talk to me again.

She still didn’t seem to believe me when I told her I was quitting. Nonetheless when I walked in the door the next day, and told her it was done, my two week’s notice was in, she just nodded and walked up stairs. That night she was out late, and when she came back home she slept curled up on her side of the bed, as if I wasn’t even in the room.

Two weeks passed and I began to write music again. I got her to tell me where the guitar was, and I took it to a music shop to be refurbished. I sold some of the new couches we had bought and replaced them with a Grand Piano, just like the one the old man had kept in his house.

At first she didn't seem to mind, she worked during the day and when she came home she just looked at me, sitting at my piano, and sighed.

I began to play in bars again, as often as I could, sometimes every night of the week. She was supportive at first; at least on the surface, she would come and sit with a soft smile on her face, and afterwards tell me I sounded great. One night though she said she couldn't make it because she had a meeting, and she never came to another of my shows.

I kept getting asked to play in more places, people wanted to hear my music, and I even got paid a couple times. Money was running low, but all the money I had saved up was enough to get me by. Nonetheless I found my way to a family restaurant downtown and began waiting tables again, just like I had when I was in college.

She kept staying out later and later, I would come home from shows and she wouldn't be home. I wasn't even surprised when she finally told me.

"I think we should start seeing other people," she said.

I knew it was coming, so I nodded, and told her I agreed.

"I've cheated on you," she said.

I nodded again, and she started crying. She told me about her new boss, and about their affair, and I just nodded, it had been inevitable for a while now. This seemed to upset her all the more. Finally she yelled, "It all started when you quit your job. Look at what you've become, you wait tables and write music."

I just shook my head and smiled at her, told her I was sorry but I didn't love her any more, we were two different people.

"What are you going to do with yourself?" she asked, screaming at me through her tears.

I told her I was going to do what I should have done all along, and turned away from her.

I heard her packing her things, and I heard her walk out of the house, get in the car, and drive away and I never heard from her again.

I smiled to myself when I heard the car pull out of the driveway. That old man had been right all along, I thought. I went to my sofa in the family room, and sat down.

I pushed aside some envelopes that could contain bills I had to pay or letters from agents who wanted to work with me. Whatever they were, I didn't really care.

Life happens as it happens, I thought to myself, and the old man was right all along. It seemed I had broken a lot of rules in the past, but never the right ones, and finally I was breaking all the right rules. I sat down on my old sofa, picked up my guitar and placed it on my lap. I started writing, started discovering, a song about the old man, and I started in the key of C.

Editor's Note

The Key of C was voted the Story of the Month during August. It was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Photograph © Margaret Mendel.

Agaue's First Hunt by Trevor Doherty

The damp morning forest reached up into the dusky dawn sky, the various woodland creatures began rooting in the soft leafy topsoil, and Agaue stealthily followed his Grandfather down an invisible trail otherwise unknown to the civilized world. Needling vines would catch the pimples strewn across his pustule scarred face, and would occasionally get dragged open by an errant burr, but the perspiration coolly flowing over his skin allowed him to escape the worst of the prickly hang-ups. The pressure of the first hunt of the spring was tantalizing, it was also Agaue's first trip with his grandfather, a special privilege awarded to the young men of the family when they first crossed the cusp of manhood. Every older male in the clan had gone hunting only once with Grandfather in their lifetime, the lesson need only to be seen once, Uncle Charles explained. The hunt was cause for deep personal reflection, and a celebration concurring with the first full moon after a young man's circumcision. At the rite, Grandfather retold the antediluvian story of Avram; his voice steady like a train, travelling the ancient tracks of the tale, his corn cob pipe, a crown jutting from his face, channeling up hot embers with the exuberant iron puffs. Agaue could not hear the story; his ears were clogged with slippery fear of the physician's scalpel. For a few brief moments, Agaue would halt and scratch the itchy bulbs on his face, newly revealed to the world. Wet dew streaked his vest and evenly coated over his tense sweaty hands, firmly gripping the hard wooden shaft of the rifle pressed firmly against his chest. His consciousness was tacking the line with adrenaline, but the disorientating clang of the morning iron triangle still rung between the ears of the burgeoning young man, the tip of his penis still raw and successfully healing beneath hand-me-down fatigues, hanging loosely on his gaunt bony frame. Every step was deliberate and without debate. Without prompting, Agaue knew when to halt and look around by following the subtle twitch of Grandfather's wrinkled old tawny ears. If just the right lobe perked, Agaue learned that the old sinewy bull of a man would quickly jerk his head to the left, and that if neither ear was buzzed with the crunch of antler or claw in the low knotty pines, Agaue knew to slowly breathe in through his nose, tasting the rich deciduous air on the back of his tongue as it whooshed silently down and illuminated his lungs with the fertile aroma of the woods.

Before coming on this trip, many pains had been taken to instruct Agaue on the nature of hunting and the sacred right of the slaughter, but Agaue was easily distracted by the looming reminders of the encroaching blade. The days leading up to his circumcision had been tense and waterlogged with the benign teasing of the teenage boys, now married, and some even with child. Not that this was uncommon among the fraternal members of the clan, but Agaue would have preferred to skip the whole show and continue helping his mother and aunts picking blueberries and hoeing the elaborate vegetable garden, activities closer to his heart than gutting carcasses and rifle

maintenance. His age, and the offering of the foreskin became a signifiers of the new responsibilities he must take for the health and sustainment of the clan, but some of the work was flat out awful, carrying heavy buckets of reeking excrement filled entrails to be tossed into the forest, his Uncle Charles threatening the lash should Agaue not be prudent and quick footed when transporting his duties. He was explicitly told shoot to kill, the lesson hammered into his aching face. Always dress the beast with respect, and never feel remorse for the beauty of the creature slain at your feet. Many hours had been spent, rookie duties really, skinning and beheading the kills of his uncles and cousins, dragged back to the clearing of the farm on the heels of a small foot powered tractor. They always looked proud when they returned from hunting, but it was different from the pride found in game or sport. Instead it was a feeling mixed with something special, as they described it, the real knowledge they said was folded in with grandfather, not the banalities of waking up early to prey on the errant beasts of the wilderness. When Agaue closed his eyes, he could see the awful mounts of bear and elk hanging above the long oaken kitchen table, each one testament to the instinctual knowledge of Grandfather, and the importance of tradition in the cold isolated Yukon village. Every creature, Grandfather said, had the spirit of ancient gods within, and that every fresh kill stole the pride of the spirit, bolstering the heart of man when eaten at the table. The circumcision simply prepared the heart for the offering of the pieces. It sounded trite to the intelligent ears of Agaue, but the shameful crusty mask of pimples prohibited his courage from leaping into his mouth. He suspected it was the constant exposure to bear bile that caused such maledictions of the skin, his throat often clogged by the inward leaching of reluctant slime.

To put the noticeably distraught Agaue at ease about his forthcoming rite, Grandfather, the night before his circumcision, had taken him to the shed where the fresh kills were prepared. The long wooden shed sat silently at the edge of the compound, near the forest so that the rotting intestines and acrimonious pancreatic sludge could be easily tossed into the gorge bordering the ravine, the place on hot days stinking of discarded viscera, the various woodland creatures fought over the tripe. Exposing the underside of a massive black bear laying on the center table, the thick mangy hair clotted with encrusted blood, Grandfather aphonically massaged the titanic oblong penis out from within its hairy sheath. The putrid stink of murdered flesh cooked the air with its rotting intensity. It looked cold and limpid in the hand of Grandfather, the veins and arteries drained of their precious fluids, but still robustly protruding from the side of the shaft. The glinting steel knife, expertly wielded, cut the grey foreskin away easily, revealing the pale purple crown of the bear, the sword of many a proud legend in the clan. Here, Grandfather instructed, lay the spirit of the masculine, and that to reveal the true nature of man, it was ancient custom, even older than the legend of Avram, to remove the motherly swaddling sheath, and allow the hilt to explore the bosom of the forest, the earth, and the female womb. The first hunt went hand in hand with the public unveiling of the crown, a threshold that every young man must experience. It was

perfectly acceptable to cry, to scream, to fear, be proud or defiant during the ritual, these were all things that were part of being an adult male, waiting to be emotionally unsheathed and physically wielded for the health and sustainment of the clan.

Grandfather patted Agaue's sandy brown hair, winking a promise to the confidence of the boy, bolstering the dim spark of adulthood chained beneath the abhorrent pimply mask. Agaue shuddered as grandfather returned the freshly cut staff of the bear to its fleshy pocket, telling him that even though he may not fully understand what may happen to him in the coming days, that all would be revealed when he and Agaue would partake in their first hunt together.

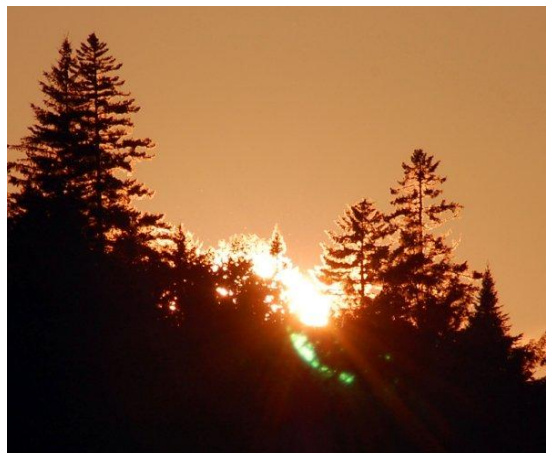
It was paramount in the eyes of Grandfather that every kill was sacred, and that no ammunition should be wasted on sloppy shooting or whimsical gunplay, which the teenage boys were prone to exercise in fits of boredom or curiosity. Agaue picked at the scabby acne that marred his visage, while listening to the old bull speak, often the brunt of jokes due to his jovial severity, but his silent authority was never questioned by the younger full men now wresting the reins of the clan, with quiet dignity shuffling the old man into a peaceful retirement. The cresting yellow summits on his face would often erupt with an exultant ejaculation of pus onto a book or some hard earned meal. It would pass, Grandfather had said in comforting paternal tones, and now, alone in the woods, Agaue welcomed the quiet of the forest to the daily jibes and incessant taunts of the fresh faced girls and taught skinned men. A long heavy knife bounced on the belt of Agaue, the same knife that had performed his rite just a week prior, a gift from his uncle Charles, a bear of a man, a great hunter and a flamboyant devourer of meat, but still kind and supportive of his many children, pulling down his jeans with every tromping step. Charles had taken dictatorial charge of the boy, forcing him to clean and sort the flesh of slain beasts since Agaue's father, many years ago, had wandered into the woods one spring morning and never returned, a cause for much gossip among the clan, and doubly stoking the cold fire of emotional vacancy in Agaue's heart, reflected in the blotches and scabs of his acrimoniously scarred face, the subject of many a remedy, but triumphant over all. He was exhausted from the treacherously long hike into the ravine, having eschewed breakfast in light of the awesome excitement of this fateful morning, his stomach broiling with silent curdling resentment for what the physician had done to his penis, it had bled, and Agaue was ashamed for having wept furiously during the dressing. But now, in the woods, a deep hallucinatory sleep was crawling up the back his neck, curdling the skin, entering through the rear of his skull and pulling his eyelids shut from within.

Grandfather could sense, without looking around, the ebbing energy of his vernal hunting partner. His kind black eyes, nestled in leathery sockets, grinned at the strained enthusiasm of the novice hunter. Grandfather tread on silent rails of energy, his hide moccasins silently caressing the earth with every step. The same eyes had welled with teary affection when Agaue was brought before the clan physician to be initiated. A great fire had been lit, and Agaue, the sole initiate this year, had trembled with nervous

shame, picking at the irritated red stumps on his face, as the physician undressed and mutilated him in front of his entire family and clan. Grandfather stopped and turned to Agaue, kneeling at the root clump of a massive overturned tree, forming a moist sweaty haven amidst the cool dank air of the morning dew, small spotty mushrooms and odiferous fungus growing plentifully amid the bedraggled earth. Kaleidoscopic caps and stems feeding furiously on the black unearthed roots, transmitting their unseen offspring into the dewy air, carried aloft in a breeze complicit with the cursed diaspora. Rest Agaue, Grandfather said, I will continue up the edge of the ridge dividing this ravine in two, once on the high ground, any prey will naturally flow downwards, like water, towards the inlets of the grassy ravine leading to the next range of mountains. Agaue nodded and with a great yawn, nestled into the humid spore laden earth, with instructions that resting was acceptable for now, but that should a great animal come within scope of Agaue's gun, he would not hesitate to shoot. From this vantage point, Grandfather instructed, Agaue would have a clear and relaxed shot at anything that would travel down this half of the ridge. All he had to do was to wait patiently for the sound of the prey, save his strength, and the family would be grateful for the great bounty of meat and hides that he and Grandfather would soon deliver. It would be proof that the ritual had not been in vain, that the customs of Avram still flowed virulently in the hearts of the young. The hot faced self loathing feeling that Agaue felt the morning the physician cut back the tender bleeding foreskin was only superficially assuaged by the confidence that Grandfather instilled in him with this responsibility. With that, Grandfather stood, sniffed the air, caught some ephemeral spectral odor, and silently disappeared upwards into the forest, the sun just peaking over the ridge. Nestled in the dark humidity of the overturned root bulb, the decomposing fungal odor of the spores perfuming the air with a surprisingly pleasant acidic stench, the sun would have to expand great energy to disturb the restful sleepy haven now giving sanctuary to the young man.

A fitful sleep swept over Agaue like the rain that tripped in the heavens and fell to earth, fertilizing the tubers and corn that fed the clan. Opening his eyes, and realizing he was now standing alone in the forest, naked, the sun gleaming hot rays through the canopy and reflecting off his pale white skin. Looking down, it was though his circumcision had been performed in a most awesomely monstrous way, the penis cleft in twain, each half a writhing adder hissing and snapping at the inside of his thighs, their green purple diamond scales clicking and gliding when they caressed one another. Agaue did not flinch, nor give any indication he was frightened of the furious reptiles dripping acidic venom onto the prismatic leafy ground lazily swirling about his feet. He slowly breathed, and stretched in the warming rays of the sun. The adders seemed to take a cue from trembling Agaue, momentarily halting their fussing and looking up to warm their scaly necks in the bright orange light. Revelation, suddenly Agaue felt complete, whole, and in total awareness of the forest around him. He could hear the vibrations of large beasts from far away, violently trampling through the forest through

the sensitive ducts of the snakes. The song of birds became a symphonically inspired masterpiece echoing among the creaking arthritic bark of the sentinel trees, reverberating with perfect resonance in all of Agaue's tissues and bones. Looking into a golden liquid stream, suddenly flowing next to him, he saw his reflection, a mimetic masterpiece of nature's grand illusion. His pupils were wildly dilated; the abyssal black recesses of his eyes lapping up frenetic streams of light reflecting off the ebullient stream. There was not an itch or any perturbation of the skin, his muscles tensely relaxed, idling with the great flamboyant energy flowing equally from him into the forest, and the earth responding by conducting ancient sacred jubilant juice into the soles of his feet where it excitedly coursed upwards to his furiously beating heart. He looked upwards, and the golden river turned to lavender silky blood then disappeared, quickly ambuscading beneath a shattered chunk of brilliant grey granite. His tongue darted from out of his mouth, tasting the igneous heat and rimy dew in the thrilling air. It was also divided in half, each moist leathery segment mimicking the adders now easily gliding on the downy breeze. Agaue was pure electricity, a living flash of brilliance in harmony with the singing forest. He felt no shame at his nakedness, nor did the whereabouts of his fatigues bother him in the least bit. Raising his arms upward, the weight of the gun in his left hand seemed negligible in lieu of this awesome experience.



A fantastic bone cracking sound alerted Agaue to the clearing immediately to his right. The adders cocked their lithe bodies in the direction from which the sound had come. Suddenly on the bifidous tongues, the funky stench of a large brutish beast lathered Agaue's brain in murderous salival chemicals, tensing his frame and directing his now open eyes to the direction of the clearing. The only sound was the silent flicking of the three forked tongues flogging the air into submission for evidence. The agrestal current that had been flowing steadily was now a furious grey ball spastically throbbing in the acidic pit of Agaue's belly. With a silent flourish, a magnificent stag stepped into the clearing, its proud velvet fur eclipsing the tawny foliage with its deep purple black tones. Gazing upward, Agaue noticed that the left antler had been broken off; the muscles on the huge neck were ostentatiously straining to keep the head from tilting like a damaged flower. The right antler was a thorny exposition of pride, each point sharply commanding the authority of this beast's kingdom like a bluestocking crown forged from the rarest of metals, now hideously fractured. As the stag took a step forward, its curious ebony sad eyes looking directly into the eyes and heart of Agaue, now firmly

rooted to this spot. Hyperventilating, the great beast was fighting for air, each breath gurgling with great effort to escape the lungs, now mutedly filling with chunk ridden black blood. The commanding stench was erotic, full of musk, sweat, and the charred sexual aroma of muscles aching for rest. The stag bowed his lopsided head to Agaue, collapsing in exhaustion on the ground at the foot of the silent boy, not fearing the venomous reptiles looming above his streaked velvet head, the distal end of the broken antler digging troughs in the earth. Agaue realized he had not breathed since first eyeing the stag. In his rapidly perspiring hand, the rifle began to feel heavy, the muscles of his fingers twitching with unrestrained activity. With a sheer strained effort, the stag shifted its head upward and spoke in rich paternal tones, like the blasting horn of a train pulsating through the dark Yukon jungle:

"I am here, Agaue!"

The rifle fired from Agaue's hand, almost by accident, but it had been without a doubt his nervous hand that had squeezed off the shot. The stag stretched and stopped breathing, the greased mucus slug being the last thought to travel through its weary old brain. The adders hissed and writhed furiously, biting into Agaue's legs, into each other, injecting cursed poison into the self hating river of Agaue, but looking down at the embroiled mess, Agaue realized that he had woken up from his tremulous sleep, and no reptilian appendages existed where they had been so curiously natural. The staccato report of the gun dropped Agaue like a sheaf of wheat into a swiftly flowing brook, swept up in the intensity of wakefulness Agaue looked up at the sky, now darkening with the setting sun. How long he had been here was mystery that only served to rattle his already disheveled confidence. He felt cold, his body shivering as though plunged into an icy bath. The gun dropped from his hand and landed with a dull thud on the scarred floor of the darkening forest. Looking down where the gun had fallen, Agaue's heart stopped again, for there at the foot of the young man lay prostrate the freshly killed body of his grandfather, the left arm acutely mangled and fractured by some hideous accident, the splintered humorous protruding through the torn fatigues, as though a terrific rabid beast had torn into the old sinewy arm of the man, his eyes now staring in opposite directions, his tongue lazily spilling out from his mouth, the bullet hole behind his ear leaking a libidinous white discharge, giving off a cholesterol infused smack to the singed hairs of Agaue's nostrils. Silently crouching next to the slain man, Agaue nervously petted the grey sweaty tufts of hair on his head, and lovingly caressed the old grey beard. Tears erupted from his clear watery eyes, spilling into the splenic aqueducts and scabby recesses of his face. Realizing that when there had been time, as he pulled the long dull shank from his belt, he had not known him.

Editor's Note

Agaue's First Hunt was voted Story of the Month during September.

Photograph © Tom Bergeron

Sharon sat with her back resting against a scrubby pine tree. She closed her eyes. The heat from the afternoon sun dulled her mind like a drug. The end of summer had been unseasonably warm this year on the Kenai Peninsula. And the Alaskan fireweed had finished blooming weeks ago, which meant the first snowfall could happen any time now, and Sharon wondered where she'd go once it turned cold.

Ned and Bill, two guys she worked with, were throwing horseshoes not far from where she sat. She liked the thud the heavy metal shoes made as they hit the ground. It gave the game an earthy sound.

Sharon had just dozed off when a pick-up loaded to the top of the truck bed with salmon drove passed her on the dirt road that led up from the Kenai River. There were two ways to get to the weigh station where she worked. Most folks used the exit off the main highway while some fishermen drove straight up from the river's bank on the road that Willie, her boss, had constructed a few years ago. She watched as the rusted pick-up loaded down with fish made its way over the ruts and then pulled into the open doors of her boss's weigh station.

"Sharon!" Willie called. He didn't need to shout. She knew her job. But he was a white man and he thought all Natives were lazy, stupid, shiftless, and she'd begun to think by the way he hollered for her, that he also thought they were all hard of hearing, too.

She stood up, stretched, yawned, then walked down to the weigh station and waited beside the truck while Willie's son, Herb, the only person allowed to operate the forklift, positioned a large wooden crate just below the tailgate of the pick-up. When everything was in place, Sharon climbed onto the bed of the truck and made her way across the mound of slippery fish. Willie unlatched the tailgate and called up to Sharon, "All right, let'm go," and he backed off.

Open net fishing season, a short run of excess salmon, every year put into play a frenzy of underemployed men and women scrambling for the mother lode of Sock Eye and Reds that swam close to shore. Willie owned a stretch of the bluff above a bend in the Kenai River and each summer he turned an old shed on his property into a weighing station and became a middleman for the fish canneries.

Sharon's job was to kick, push and shove the fish off the bed of the trucks into the waiting crates. Her official job title was fish kicker, and she'd gotten pretty good at it. She had stout, muscular legs that gave her an advantage as she walked atop a pile of salmon. A taller person would have had difficulty balancing as she made her way across a slippery mess of fish, but Sharon quickly got the cargo moving.

When most of the salmon had been removed from the bed of the truck, and there was no longer the natural slime of other dead fish to move the creatures smoothly,

Sharon resorted to kicking individual fish into the crate. The fish were no worse off for this treatment. Most salmon had already seen a lot of damage from their ocean voyage and the Beluga had usually taken bites out of a good many fish by the time they'd



reached this far.

Sharon had just jumped out of the empty pick-up when the local sheriff's car pulled in next to the weigh station. She didn't know his name, but she had seen his face enough times to recognize him. And no matter what the weather, he always wore those ridiculous sunglasses, the kind with rainbow mirror lenses. Sharon never trusted people who lived with their eyes hidden.

"How you doing, Willie?" the Sheriff asked as he stepped into the doorway of the weigh station.

"Can't complain," Willie replied. "What's going on, Allen? You come by to get some fish?"

"No. Just checking with the places along the river to see if they saw anything out of the ordinary." Sheriff Allen peered into the crate of salmon that sat at the entrance to the weigh station. "Fishy smelling place, ain't it?" he commented, and then looked at Sharon. "You this year's fish kicker?"

"Yep," Sharon replied. It sounded more like she had taken a bite out of the air, than actually made a comment.

"Where you from?" he asked. Sharon heard the suspicion in his voice.

"Up north," she replied.

"How far?"

"The North Pole," she said and walked away.

"What's going on, Allen?" Willie asked.

"One of the fish nets came up with more than just fish last night. Someone caught a dead guy. A few seals had gotten to him before he was snagged, but it was the bullet hole that made us take notice. Know anything about it?" Sheriff Allen sniffed noisily, cleared his throat, took out a hanky and blew his nose. "The cotton wood's driving me nuts this year. Nothing I take for my allergies seems to work anymore." He wiped the yellowed rag across his nose several times then shoved it into his back pocket.

"Fish kicker," the sheriff called out to Sharon. "You see anything out of the ordinary in the last week?"

"If I did, you'd be the first one I'd tell," Sharon said.

“You got a feisty fish kicker on your hands, Willie. Well, if you hear anything let me know.” Sheriff Allen turned and headed out the door.

When the sheriff was out of hearing range, Willie said, “Don’t be such a smart ass, Sharon. It’s bad for business.”

“You want me to be polite to the local Dick, pay me more. Six bucks a truck doesn’t give you anything but my stubby old legs to do some kicking, and that’s all.”

Willie grunted. Then he began to work the adding machine tallying the last haul. “Herb,” he called as he punched the keys. “Where’s that lazy son of mine?”

Several minutes later Herb stepped into the weigh station. “Where’d you run off to?” Willie snapped. “Take that crate off the scale.”

“All right, all right, don’t have a coronary,” Herb replied, then he jumped into the forklift and moved the box of salmon to a corner of the weigh station.

“What’d the sheriff want?” Herb asked as he jumped out of the vehicle.

“Looking for someone, I suspect,” Willie replied, more occupied with his figures than with the sheriff’s business.

“He say who?” Herb asked.

“Sheriff Allen doesn’t say much of anything. But it looks like he’s on the trail of a murderer.”

Herb turned and was about to leave when Willie said, “Hose-down the driveway out front.”

“I’m busy,” Herb replied. “Have the fish kicker do it. She’s not doing anything now.”

Willie gave his son an angry look then nodded to Sharon, and returned to his bookkeeping.

Sharon picked up the garden hose, turned on the water faucet and watched Herb walk across the driveway to where he had parked his motorcycle earlier that day.

As long as the daylight held, which this late in the summer was another nine hours, Sharon would sit near the weigh station and wait for trucks loaded down with fish. When the last truck had finally driven away Willie locked the bay doors for the night.

“We’ll start about seven tomorrow morning,” Willie told Sharon, and he gave the padlock a yank.

“O.K.,” Sharon said, and she made her way up the road. Willie knew she didn’t own a car and that she walked from wherever it was that she lived. But no matter how late they worked he never asked her how far she had to walk or offered her a ride. She wouldn’t have told him where she lived if he had asked, and she certainly wouldn’t have taken a ride.

At the end of the driveway, Sharon turned left the way she always did and walked in the ditch that ran alongside the highway. Herb roared passed her on his Harley Davidson. The shiny bike was Herb’s pride and joy and he polished and fixed something on it every spare minute he got.

Sharon walked until she came to a small cut-off that led into the underbrush. She’d stumbled across an abandoned hunter’s shelter on the bluff about a mile from Willie’s

weigh station, and that's where she went every night. She'd rigged a cooler with a rope and pulley system to keep the wild dogs in the area from getting into her provisions. Nothing she ate needed refrigerating, but the cooler kept the bugs and spiders from messing with her food.

She'd made a home out of not much more than a pile of boards, a couple peeling sheets of plywood, and a piece of rusty corrugated metal for the roof. Since the structure sat not too far from the bluff, with the beach and river right below, the wind could get pretty fierce up there some nights. When a squall blew across the bay, the shelter usually needed a bit of anchoring the next day, but the place had kept her comfortable all summer.

The winter though would be another story. She didn't think she was tough enough to make it through the cold weather living up there. She had no idea where she'd end up. As long as she stayed away from the bottle, she'd be all right. Maybe she'd head back up north to her mother, see if she could get her daughter out of foster care. Or maybe she'd just keep heading south. Who knew where she'd end up? Fate would tell her where to go, she thought, as she crawled into her shack. Too tired to eat tonight she pulled a ragged blanket over her shoulders and closed her eyes.

The wind howled through the cracks in the walls, a lonely sound that made the ground feel harder than usual. Several hours later the pack of dogs that came by every night on its hunting foray whined and barked at her shanty's door. She kicked at the makeshift entrance to her shelter. "Beat it," she shouted. They didn't frighten her, just annoyed her. She knew that later that night she'd hear the mother moose and her calf walk past her place, chomping at the underbrush as they worked their way along the well worn trail.

The visit today from the sheriff had been upsetting. She'd never tell him, but she had seen something several nights ago. She'd been sitting on the edge of the bluff drinking a cup of tea, looking out at the northern lights, when she'd heard two men shouting on the beach below. There was no way that Sharon could have made out who the men were, but they got into a fist fight and were going at each other pretty good. One of the men fired a gun. From the sharp, cracking sound she thought it was probably a 38 pistol. One man had fallen to the ground and the other guy ran away.

A short time later she watched as someone came hustling up the beach, picked up the guy she thought had been shot, threw him over his shoulder and staggered away. She had no way of knowing if either one of these guys had ended up in the fish net. And she didn't see any reason why she should get mixed up in more trouble than she could handle. Let the law to figure it out, she thought.

Fewer loads of salmon were coming into the weigh station each day, but Sharon kept showing up to work. Sheriff Allen came by regularly and even when the sky hung thick with low, dark clouds, he still wore his shades. Sharon wondered if he wanted to look like a tough guy. The only thing they did, as far as she was concerned, was to intimidate a few weak-minded locals and make the Sheriff look stupid.

“So, where do you live?” Sheriff Allen asked Sharon.

“Up the road.”

“Yeah? Now, isn’t that a coincidence. I live up the road, too.”

Sharon ignored his comment and pulled on her rubber boots. She turned her back to the sheriff and signed her name in the worker’s book.

“I took a walk along the beach last night,” the sheriff said. “Not far from where we suspect this body might have been dragged into the water. It’s about a mile from here. I thought I saw a little fire glowing up on the bluff. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about hunters sitting up there in the night?” He took out a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket, offered one to Sharon.

“Don’t smoke,” she said.

“So, you know about anyone living up there? You living up the road and all.”

“Don’t know a thing,” Sharon said.

Just then a pick-up truck loaded with fish pulled into Willie’s weigh station. “Got’a get kicking,” Sharon said, and headed for the truck.

Sheriff Allen walked away and began to talk with Bill and Ned. Sharon stood by the pickup and watched as Herb tried to jockey the wooden crate into place with the forklift. A grubby full bearded man climbed out of the truck. Two small children, a boy and girl, tumbled out of the front seat and ran close behind the man.

“How’s it going?” the bearded man asked Willie.

“Same’ol, same’ol,” Willie responded.

“You hear about the guy they found in Pete Clauson’s net?”

“I heard. Anyone you know?”

“Don’t think so. He wasn’t in the water long enough to change him much, but the wildlife down there did a number on his mug. Who knows who he was.”

Herb had a dickens of a time getting the crate lined up with the truck. He kept backing up and then coming forward again. Sharon thought he looked a bit out of sorts today. Big, dark circles hung under his eyes and she recognized the drunkard in this young man. She’d been there plenty times herself.

While Sharon waited for Herb to get it together, she watched the little boy and girl as they made their way to the horseshoe pit. The girl looked over at their father. He paid no attention to what the children were doing, and she picked up a horseshoe then tossed it at the metal stake. Then the little boy tried his luck at the game. Neither one of them hit a ringer. The horseshoes fell into the dust with hardly a sound.

Sharon thought about her own little girl, not much older than these children, and wondered if her daughter would ever forgive her for deserting the family. Sharon’s mother had been furious when she heard that social services had taken the little girl away. That all seemed like such a long time ago.

The sun had broken through the thick clouds and its light played in the little girl’s hair as she lifted the horseshoe once again. Fish scales dotted the child’s long, dark,

straight hair, and as the sunlight hit the scales, they sparkled as if she were draped in jewels.

Then she heard Willie shout, “What the heck’s the matter with you, Herb. Get that box in place.”

“I’m trying,” Herb bellowed. Then with one more backward and forward motion the crate was finally aligned with the bed of the truck.

“You’re hanging out too late at night,” Willie said. “If you can’t do the job right, I’ll get someone who can.”

“Forget it,” Herb growled.

“Not with all the money you owe me for that bike of yours.”

Sharon had heard the father and son squabbling for weeks. She knew that if Herb had a choice, he wouldn’t have been living with his parents. As far as Sharon could figure out, Herb had tried to make it on his own in Anchorage, but something had happened and he came home this summer, his tail between his legs. Willie had raised a cocky son, and there was nothing he could do about it now.

Sharon jumped into the back of the truck and sloshed around atop the mound of fish until finally she’d emptied the load of salmon into the crate. She’d just kicked the last fish off the truck when Sheriff Allen walked over toward her. “Why the heck doesn’t he leave me alone?” she mumbled.

“So, you in a better mood to talk now?” he asked.

“I smell the same don’t I?” she said as she jumped off the back of the truck.

“Probably,” Allen replied.

“Well, then my mood’s about the same as my smell.”

Herb slipped the tongs of the forklift under the crate that was now filled with fish. He must have done something wrong because the wooden box toppled sideways and scattered half of the contents across the concrete floor.

“Shit,” Willie shouted. “What’s wrong with you boy? Can’t you do anything right?”

Herb jumped off the forklift. “Go to hell,” he shouted and stomped off to his Harley, revved up the engine, and within a few seconds he raced down the gravel road heading for the highway, leaving the mess for someone else to clear up.

“That boy giving you trouble, Willie?” the sheriff asked.

“Since he came back from Anchorage, I haven’t had a moment’s peace. If it’s not his loud music, it’s his Harley. He’s out all night and he can’t do a thing right. He’s a hopeless case, I’m afraid. His mother gives him money behind my back, and won’t hear a word of criticism about her son. Too bad we can’t lock his ass up in your jail house and see if that would put some sense into his thick skull.”

“Sorry, Willie, I don’t get involved with domestic situations unless one of you happens to beat on the other.” Sheriff Allen removed his glasses and wiped off a bit of slime that had splashed on his face from the spilled fish.

“It might come to that,” Willie grunted.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, Willie,” Sheriff Allen said with a warning tone in his voice.

“What about my fish?” the bearded man grumbled. “I can’t wait around all day to get my load weighed.”

“Sharon get Ned and Bill to help with this mess,” Willie said. She didn’t hear anger in his voice, but she heard the exasperation, loud and clear.

When Sharon returned with Ned and Bill, Willie had righted the crate and the little girl and her brother were lifting a salmon together, one child at each end of a twelve-pound Sockeye, and were trying to heave the slippery thing into the large wooden crate. They stood on the tips of their toes to reach the top of the crate, grunting and huffing all the while. Then they shoved the fish over the edge and into the box.

Willie drove the forklift for the remainder of the afternoon and Herb still hadn’t shown up by quitting time.

Sharon felt a chill in the air as she made her way through the woods to her encampment. She’d lived in Alaska all her life, and knew the seasons could change abruptly and figured that she’d have about one more week of work at the weigh station. Willie hadn’t said when he thought the net fishing season would be over, but Ned and Bill had told her they planned to pull up stakes in a couple of days.

She looked forward to a little food and the quiet night. She certainly wasn’t in the mood for what she found once she got to her campsite. The place had been knocked to the ground. The walls of the rickety shed lay atop each other in a mess that made her meager home look like a garbage heap.

At first Sharon thought a moose had gone on a rampage and stomped her living quarters to shambles. She looked for hoof tracks, but the only thing she found was boot treads on one of the sheets of plywood. The corrugated roof had been dragged to the edge of the bluff and lay teetering in the wind. No animal had done this.

Her cooler had been pulled down from the tree, the lid torn off, and the contents scattered among the twigs and underbrush. The few possessions she had from a life she barely remembered were stomped and broken. A picture of her daughter lay face down in the mud. Sharon cleaned the image of the little girl as best she could, but a long crack in the surface of the paper cut the innocent smile in half. This was an act of meanness, she thought, and then went about fixing things the best she could.

The lid had popped off the plastic peanut butter jar when the vandals must have thrown it against a tree. A few ants crawled about in the gooey mess. “I’ll bet you guys thought you hit a windfall,” she said to the bugs as she picked them out of her food. She placed the tiny creatures on a leaf, and looked around for the lid to the container.

She really liked her cup of tea in the evening but every little bag from the Lipton box had been purposefully stomped into the ground. Not one looked useable.

She began to set the walls of the structure back into its square shape. As she lifted the corrugated metal back onto the top of the structure, she wondered if it would be wise for her to crawl inside this thing tonight and sleep. What if the vandals came back?

The ragged blanket she slept in every night had either been dragged away or thrown over the edge of the bluff. She couldn't see it anywhere. She'd spent worse nights than this out in the open. One thing about being a drunk in the country, you learned to sleep where you passed out. Many mornings she'd awoke surprised at how the night had comforted her.

She scooped out a bit of the peanut butter with a finger and put it into her mouth. It's a pretty meager dinner, she thought, but probably better than some were getting tonight.

She took a walk around what had been her domain and found a tree with plenty of moss growing at its base. Stepping on it several times to test its softness, she knew she'd found her bed for the night. Gathering handfuls of branches, mulch and other forest debris, she began to weave together a makeshift covering for the night. She sat down on the moss, leaned against the tree trunk, pulled the stiff earthy blanket up over her shoulders leaving only her face visible. Even though she'd be hidden from the naked eye, she still had a clear view of her shack.

The sun settled behind the ridge of mountains on the other side of the Kenai River and a light purple hue filled the sky. Night would take over the land eventually but until then the glow of a setting sun would last for hours. Sharon leaned her head back against the tree and knew that she could not let herself fall deeply asleep. She closed her eyes, her mind in a semi-wakeful state, something she learned from her grandfather when he'd taught her how the old-time trappers used to survive.

In the still of the night, the image of the little sister and brother carrying the heavy fish floated across her mind. She smiled. They were such serious, hard little workers. Sharon's mind drifted to thoughts of her own daughter and wondered if she cried for a mother.

The swooshing sound of an owl's wings startled Sharon to attention as the bird landed on a tree near where she sat. The night had passed quietly, softly, and then she heard the roar of a motorcycle engine in the distance. It came closer, and closer, until she saw a single light gleaming through the underbrush, traveling up the moose trail toward her camp.

Sharon lowered herself deeper into her covering, peering out through a small opening in her earthen blanket. She watched as the driver of the cycle positioned his headlight to shine on her shack. She heard the heavy boots of the driver step onto the ground, cracking twigs, clumsy, awkward footing, and a stranger to the wilderness. The driver came into the light of his own vehicle. It was Herb. He pulled off his riding goggles and kicked at the side of her shack.

"I hate the smell of you, fish kicker," he shouted, and with a heavy boot he pushed roughly at the wall. The place easily slid to the ground.

Sharon's breathing, soft and slow, would not betray her as she watched Herb stomp on the rickety structure. Then with the angry eyes of a man gone mad, he looked down at what he had done. He walked to his bike and turned the front wheels from side to

side, casting the bright beam of the headlight across the underbrush. The light slid past where Sharon sat. She closed her eyes, not wanting her pupils to reflect in the glare. He revved his engine several times, and shouted, "I know you're out there, fish kicker. It'll be safer if you just go back to where you came from."

He let out a howl like a triumphant warrior and then spit into the darkness. He then turned his bike around and made his way along the moose trail, headed for the highway. He had not frightened her. He was too much of a fool to be feared.

She remained in her hiding place, and in the morning, at the first light, she crawled out from her earthen blanket, dusted herself off and walked along the edge of the bluff, headed for work.

Sharon sat waiting near the horseshoe pit when Willie arrived at the weigh station.

"You're here early. I didn't know you liked your work that much," he said.

"I don't. Today's my last day. I'll collect my pay after the last pick-up drops its load."

Willie didn't seem surprised and said, "O.K."

Sharon saw the Harley parked at the edge of the driveway, near the house. "Herb come back last night?" Sharon inquired.

"God, knows when," Willie replied.

Herb did not come out of the house until after the noon break, and then he sat on the ground polishing the wheel rims of his bike. At one point Sharon caught him watching her. His eyes were mean, angry, threatening.

Willie did not say a word to his son, and worked the forklift himself. Willie gave Sharon a few extra tasks, jobs Herb would have ordinarily done. Tomorrow Willie would have to manage on his own. How this thing worked out between father and son wasn't any concern of hers.

It didn't surprise Sharon when she saw the sheriff's car drive up the road. The police officer had been there every day since the body had been caught in the fishnet. She suspected he'd have the same nonsense questions to ask her again, but this time, he walked directly to Willie.

"Season's almost over, I hear," Sheriff Allan said and took off his sunglasses.

"That's what they tell me," Willie responded. "You find any more unknowns floating around in the river?" Willie said as he picked a few fish scales off the back of his hand.

"No. No more bodies. We found out who the dead guy was though. His name was Butch Benton, from Anchorage. He'd done a good amount of jail time. Had his prints on file."

"Well, you've been busy, now haven't you?" Willie rubbed his hands together. A cool breeze blew into the weigh station.

Sharon stood in the doorway. The sheriff glanced over at her. "How you doing today?"

"Fine," she said and turned her back to the sheriff, but did not leave the doorway.

"Butch was last seen at the Irish Eyes Tavern. Someone said they saw him leave the bar with Herb. And they never saw him again."

Willie did not reply to this but stood looking at the sheriff.

“Willie, you own a 38?” Sheriff Allen asked.

“I own a couple. Doesn’t everyone around here?” I couldn’t tell if suspicion or anger raced across Willie’s face but his gaze had not moved from the sheriff.

“Your son, Herb, he own one, too?” The Sheriff looked out into the yard where Herb sat polishing his Harley.

“What are you getting at, Allen?”

“I think I’ll have a chat with Herb,” Sheriff Allen said and he walked out into the sunlight, passed the horseshoe pit, and then he stopped and stood behind Herb.

All the color had drained from Willie’s face and Sharon realized that he most likely knew all along what his son had been up to.

She watched as the sheriff said something to Herb, then put a hand on the biker’s shoulder. Herb quickly stood up and started off running down the road that led down to the river. Sheriff Allen might have looked awkward, but he out-ran Herb. Grabbing him by the collar, the sheriff pulled the young man down to the ground.

“Oh, God,” Willie gasped, and Sharon saw fear strike the tired old fishmonger’s face as if he’d been hit with a fist in the gut.

“I’m sorry about this, Willie,” Sheriff Allen said as he walked Herb passed the weigh station headed to the patrol car. “Maybe it’ll all work out, but I got to take your boy in.”

Sharon watched as the sheriff clipped cuffs around Herb’s wrists. Herb no longer resisted and he willingly lowered himself into the back seat. When the sheriff’s car turned and headed out of the road, she thought Herb had a smirk on his face as he glanced out at his father.

Willie looked ashen now. He pulled the doors of the shed closed. “Wait here,” he said. “I’ll bring your money down to you.”

Sharon slipped out of the smelly rubber boots and leaned them against the door. She felt sorry for Willie. He hadn’t done badly by her. A few minutes later she heard the screen door to the back porch of the house slam shut. Willie walked toward her, and handed her an envelope. “Thanks,” he said.

Sharon did not count the money, but she nodded, shoved the envelope into her pocket and walked down the gravel road. This time when she reached the highway, she turned right, not left. She had the picture of her daughter in her pocket. Everything else back at her camp amounted to trash.

She had walked several miles down the road when Sheriff Allen drove by. He parked his vehicle in front of her and stepped out, still wearing those stupid shades, but he was grinning.

“Where you headed?” he asked.

“You tell me,” Sharon replied.

“I have no idea where you’re going, fish kicker.”

“Sharon. My name’s Sharon Wolf.”

“Well, Ms. Wolf, it’s going to get pretty cold out here soon. I brought you something.” He opened the back door to his patrol car and took out a heavy winter coat and handed it to her. “Thought you could use some comfort,” he said.

She took the coat, nodded, but said nothing.

“Well, maybe we’ll see you again next fish kicking season.”

“Maybe,” she replied.

Sheriff Allen got back into his car and sped off down the road.

Sharon walked a few more miles. The clouds hung close to the earth this afternoon and a wind had begun to blow a sharp whistling breeze into her ears. She put on the coat the sheriff had given her, and she wondered if anyone had bothered to come by her mother’s home and chop enough firewood for the old woman’s winter stash.

Editor’s Note

Fish Kicker was voted *Story of the Month* during October.

Fish photograph © Margaret Mendel

Deathbirth by Christopher T. Drabowski

I remember a bright, blinding light, the feeling of immeasurable happiness and all-embracing love. I was awaked from that state. Sucked into a dark tunnel. Grasped by two luminous creatures. The wonderful light was further and further away until it completely disappeared... paradise lost. I did not feel any fear, everything was delightfully neutral.

When we flew down to the ground the creatures released me. I was next to my own body. I just stood there and watched. At first I did not care at all – as if I was watching some boring museum piece – but then something made me enter that body and my feelings changed completely. I woke to life. I was lying on the pavement, feeling as if I had a big weight on my chest. I slowly came to my senses. It was my deathbirth – I appeared to this world with a massive heart attack.

In one moment I saw the whole life in front of me. The strangest thing was that I knew every detail of it ever since I was a little child. I knew that for some forty or fifty years I would be a librarian and my dreams of being a real writer would never come true. What a cruelty – a man appears to this world and knows that he will be nobody, that his future will bear a lot of boring years full of disappointment and the feeling of unfulfillment.



The worst thing is the knowledge that everyone has to live to his unbirth; mine will be in 78 years, three months and five days. For some period in life the passing of years is a blessing. You are still stronger, affected by less and less diseases. You get more and more fit, both corporally and intellectually. Unfortunately, when you are a bit over twenty the first symptoms of what is still in front of you are beginning to show. You make more and more stupid things. You have less and less life experience and money. Finally you end up totally financially dependent on your parents. You go to a university and get still more stupid. The maximum of dumbness is at the beginning of the primary school. You get juvenile dementia. You cannot read or write. The state of your mind is disastrous.

When I recall the youth that is still before me, I remember the family dinners. It will be a real, everyday rite. It begins when a mother smudges plates and cutlery in a sink and then goes backward towards the table. She puts all the dirty dishes on the table and then in various order we sit down and begin our meal. At first I unchew food coming out of my guts. At the end of this unchewing a piece of pork chop comes out of my mouth. I immediately stick my fork into it and put the meat on my dirty plate. After a while I add another piece into that bite and within a quarter of an hour I have a whole, hot and fresh pork chop!

After dinner, when everything is on the plates, my mother takes it to the kitchen to put our dinner divided into various parts into the fridge. What happens next with the meal? After a few days the mother takes it out of the fridge, puts into bags and goes with my father to take it back to the store. They come back with a lot of new money in their wallets. The only problem with the dinners is that afterwards you are usually hungry for a while...

Childhood is a nightmare. You shrink, lose your mind. You spend more and more time playing silly, careless games like unbuilding block houses or sandcastles. As time passes by, you know fewer and fewer words. Then you start emitting strange sounds and cannot even poo on your own. These are the symptoms of infancy, when you shrink drastically and don't have much awareness. It has, however, some advantages – including the fact that you are not aware of the coming unbirth. And it is the end of your way down here. It happens when you are as dumb as a bowl of pudding. You go with your mother to the hospital and her organism absorbs you. Then you are carried around in her belly for 9 months until you completely disappear, but you don't care – you don't exist.

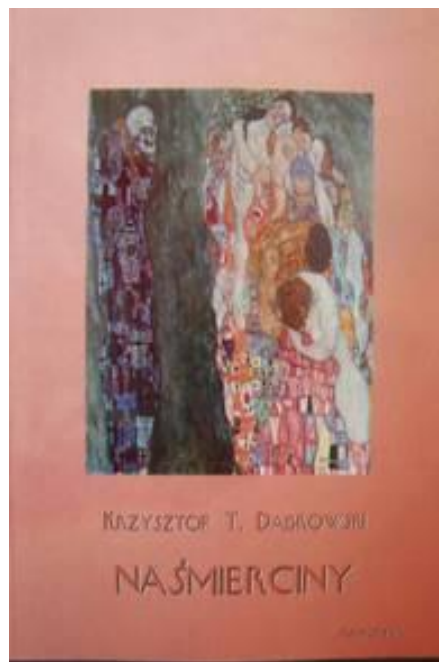
Back to my life. Now I am 78. In three years my lovely wife, Anne, will be deathborn. Now my memories of her are a bit pale because of the passing of time but I know that they will come back with a blaze of colors and sharpness at the moment of her deathbirth.

Before the moment of deathbirth and before the soul steps down, the body must mature in the insides of the Mother-Earth. A skeleton is created from the dust, and then it is covered with guts and muscles, and with epidermis. A few days before the deathbirth, the body is cold and pale. We take it out of the ground at a place called the cemetery. As time passes by, the soul penetrates into the body and a new life begins.

After my wife was deathborn I felt as if somebody turned something on in my head, starting a new way of perception of the reality. It was the end of my solitude. Now she was a part of my life. I felt a deep friendship and connection, as if she was a part of me. In a moment I realized all thick and thin, that will be a part of our life. In 54 years we will have a passionate, full-of-ecstasy romance, which will precede... her disappearance from my life. It is horrible, that I will have to lose her one day. One day I will forget that she ever existed. It is so depressing that words can hardly describe it; unfortunately, everyone has to go through this.

Soon my parents will be deathborn, only a few years after the deathbirth of my wife. Their souls will enter their bodies during a terrible car-crash. They will be the ones to accompany me in my last moments.

It is funny how mankind is going dumb. Something exists and then it doesn't. People use inventions that disappear – the scientists forget about them. And so we recede in an unexplained way – and it is natural. Our civilization fades away. I don't know what happened before my deathbirth. Unfortunately it is so, that with every moment we forget what happened a while ago. We lose it irretrievably. I imagine that as humankind we were far more advanced. From different sciences I will be taught at schools when I will be young, I will learn that our civilization is on the decline. There will be two cruel world wars. The computers, television sets and cars will disappear. We will end up as wild apemen with clubs but... but it is not my problem. I have 78 years of dull, predictable life and a few moments of joy. I will long for them before the end of my life comes.



Editor's Note

Deathbirth was voted Story of the Month during November.

The story was translated from Polish to English by Monika Olasek.

Photographs © Christopher T. Drabowski

Waking in the afternoon, he stiffly swung his elderly legs over the edge of his bed and tottered down the hall to his kitchen. He opened the cupboard and got his medicines, one at a time, lining the bottles up on the counter. There were so many pills, prescribed by different doctors for his many ailments, such as arthritis, beriberi, catarrhs, diabetes, ennui, *folie a deux*, gout, halitosis, ichthyosis, jaundice, kleptomania, lupus, mesothelioma, necrosis, oxygen poisoning, quixotism, recidivism, sepsis, tetanus, ulcers, vertigo, warts, xerophthalmia, yaws, and zoomorphism.

He filled a tall glass with gin and washed the pills down in a few gulps. Thus fortified, he looked forward to his daily walk to his park, where he would sit at his bench under his oak tree until it was time to return home and go to bed. This had been his life for as long as he could remember. Parents picnicking at the park told their children what their parents had told them, that he had always been there, under that oak, and that he'd always been an old man. They often gave him little offerings from their baskets. But he was never observed to eat anything: he would simply take their gifts, their loaves of bread and candy bars and cheese, and feed them to the pigeons.

His favorite part of each day was when the people would come to him for his wisdom. Petitioners would line up before his bench, holding out five-dollar bills on which they'd written questions. He would take their money, read their questions aloud and give his answers. Someone might write, "Is my husband cheating on me?" And he would look the supplicant over and say, "Yes," while depositing the bill in the pocket of his tattered coat. Or, "Are you really a prophet or just a weird old man?" And he would say, "Yes," pocketing the five. It was, he thought, a good life, one of public service and dignity.

But all this was yet to come. Now, he was just leaving his apartment. After summoning the elevator, he had to wait in the hallway as his neighbor, a bird-like lady whose name he'd never bothered to learn, struggled to debark with several bags of groceries. He watched her drop a bag, then another while retrieving it, then the first one again. Apples and cans of cola bounced and rolled around in the elevator and out into the hall. At last she got all her purchases over the threshold so as to make room for him. He smiled politely at her as the door closed, and then he rode down and went out into the street.

He trudged cheerfully through the dirty city, tiny old-man steps that produced only rudimentary momentum. He knew how many steps it took to get to his park, and as he counted them off he was happy. But near the end of his route, after rounding the last corner, he stopped abruptly, alarmed by an impossible sight. There, beneath the brittle snow-coated branches of his pin oak, a man was sitting on his bench, a usurper, an upstart! The old man's hands squeezed themselves into fists and he started to tremble. It

suddenly seemed to him that he'd always expected something like this to happen. And yet here he was, totally unprepared.

He thought about the first time he had come to his park. That was a long time ago. The bench had been occupied when he found it. Yet with old-man entitlement (for he was already an old man then), he had sat down anyway, and the person sitting there before him had muttered something and left. And he had sat there ever since, and his right to do so had never been challenged, until now.

Paralyzed by conflicting impulses, unable to decide to advance or retreat, fight or flee, the old man simply stood before his usurped bench until the snow soaked all the way through his shabby boots. Slowly he became aware that the challenger was speaking to him: "You all right over there?" The words broke the spell that had held him in place, and he immediately lurched back to the safety of the corner. The day was now fading fast, the sun already half-hidden behind ugly modern buildings. His boots sloshed as he hobbled homeward, heartsick and heavy-footed. The sky was almost black by the time he reached his block. A single sickly sodium lamp shone down on his neighbor, the bird lady, as she left their building dressed for a night out. He hoped she wouldn't look at him, but she smiled and waved, and he felt weak with shame.



Editor's Note

Auspex Usurped was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Photograph © Margaret Mendel

EXTRACTS FROM A REVOLUTION

The queen swallows poison from the silver thimble around her neck, but the king trusts that the stroke of the executioner's ax will be clean and true. Reports of miracles reach the capital from throughout the kingdom: love suicides returned to life, God's voice turned to baby's babble. Exhausted celebrants, stinking of drink, sleep in the streets. Now the secret police know who the insomniacs are, and the insomniacs themselves just how interminable the night is.

WITNESS BOX

At birth we're given a name we wouldn't choose. Later our parents die to make room for the future. There are regular trains into the city, but few trains out, and the clocks on public buildings are often missing or else wrong. The weather never improves. Some days a hesitant crowd of mothers in black collects outside the former opera house on the basis of a rumor. Oh, how strange to wait to be examined and not know to what extent the testimony will change in the course of transcription.

NOTES TOWARD AN INVESTIGATION

Although he seems to already know the answer, the investigator asks how the object up there can be the moon when it's spinning like a Ferris wheel. I shrug. He has short, fat fingers like the stumps of melted candles. He asks again would I lend a pyromaniac a light. I concentrate on ignoring the screams coming through the wall. Somewhere I learned the heart is the size of a fist.

PRESENTIMENT

Last name first middle initial date of birth permanent address mailing address same as above single married education ever convicted if yes explain. . . . It seems I've been applying my whole life for things I don't get. Today I finish quickly, but can't leave, not until the warning sirens stop blaring. The woman at the back counter who takes my application looks like the bitter widow of a paid snitch – something about the doggy wetness of her eyes. I turn away before I realize, or she suspects, that that's what I'm thinking.

THE PARABLE OF SUNLIGHT

It's a rare sunny day, but the streets are strangely empty, as if arrests are about to be made, or already have been. Head down, heart revving, I start across the square. The fountain is dry, stained with dead leaves. An old man, with the drab, diligent face of a lifelong student of numbers, scatters bread crumbs for the pigeons. I pretend not to notice – it's safer – and in seconds, reach the far side, where bodies in the early stages of decay hang like gray rags from the trees. I glance back at the old man. He's watching me, and I wonder why and whether tomorrow is supposed to be just as nice as today.

AT THE MISSING SOLDIERS' OFFICE

The general sits before an open ledger, rubbing his forehead as he studies with mounting perplexity the emerging marks and stains. Although not at fault, the clerks whisper nervously in the background. No matter how many names they erase, or how thoroughly, the ledgers always fill up again by morning. Outside the windows the public hurries past on other errands. These days only dignitaries get to visit the basement museum, where most discover an interest in battle flags, officers' dress swords, and, of course, the shoe full of bones.

HOMEFRONT

Better stay on your meds. Or get some. Otherwise how will you ignore the pile of hacked-off limbs on the hospital lawn, the amputees limping or crawling away, as disability permits, their sacrifice worse than forgotten – misremembered? You'll end up scribbling on napkins and the last remaining walls, and the scribbles, presuming they're discovered, will sound when pieced together like a suicide note left to mislead investigators. Christ, you'll end up like me, driving slowly over a bridge of bones, your face gray with exhaustion, while along the slatternly, post-industrial river, morning birds sing in the cadaverous trees.

LATE INNINGS

The man at the ticket window asks for some identification. My dark laughter? The socket of my missing tooth? I pass through the ancient turnstile. The war is here and it's not, like a book on the nightstand that you'll never open. I'm inconspicuous at the ballpark in my threadbare mourning clothes. The crowd is huge but sullen, as if they know something the players down on the field don't – that the starting pitcher will be betrayed in the late innings by the bullpen, that grass crumbles, that everything that isn't dying is already dead.

EVACUATION INSTRUCTIONS

Listen for directions from authorized personnel: which hopeless thoughts to avoid, how long to wait for the destroying angels to tire and the broken buildings to stop burning. Remain inside the train if possible, but if not, open the side door and go out, and love the truculent witnesses to ambiguous events, love witches' gloves, dead men's bells, bloody fingers, love the street dogs that bark dismally and the sunsets that can be beautiful if the light catches the brick dust and swirling ash just so.

LET IT BURN

Tomorrow is even farther away than we thought, the mottled greenish purple of an old bruise. It doesn't help to shut my eyes. I can still hear gas hissing from shower heads, still feel the sun like a scabrous hand on my back. I promised myself a day-off today, but the ceiling cameras will remember whether I just remained standing here or moved. And what if it's true that the old songs of vanished birds are released when wood from the trees in which they sang is burned? Friends, gather all the fallen branches for a fire.

Editor's Note

Tiny Fugue for Tomorrowland was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

In school, she was the beautiful girl who would get teased by all the other children; the fourth daughter out of five very precocious daughters. If her classmates had known that beautiful awkwardness that showed on her face—the wide Italian nose she wouldn't grow into for another ten years, the fervent condition of her green eyes, and the lovely smile that made everyone else smile—they might not have made fun of her back then. But she was gullible. There was no denying it. She was the little one from Federal Hill who wanted to believe in everything, and sometimes she did. She was that little girl you would see out on the porch at night—the one staring off into space, dreaming of a world that existed out beyond the city pavers of Barker Street: the great big world on the other side of the ocean beyond the Providence River.

Julianna never did get to travel much, had never been to Vieste before, where her mother's family had immigrated to America right after the war. It had always been her dream to go to her mother's birthplace. And now, as a grown woman, she found herself in Italy, in the province of Foggia, and she felt like a stranger in her grandmother's small house—awkward and out of place like a sylph cupped in an old, gray hand.

Julianna stared down at the shattered china on the floor and she tried to hold back the tears. She looked up at her grandmother.

"Nonna, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention. I didn't mean to. Those were all the dishes!" Julianna said.

She held her blond hair up over her head with one hand and looked at her grandmother.

"We'll live," the grandmother said. "*Durante la guerra* . . . I sold my wedding ring and fed your aunts and uncles and your mother with bread for a whole month during the war. They lived."

"But Nonna. I mean, this is the—" Julianna huffed.

Her grandmother gave her a stern look.

Julianna knew better than to finish her sentence. She stood up and walked over to the open kitchen door and threw some of the broken dishes in a small bucket. A warm breeze blew in and Julianna looked down the stucco footpath along the front of the house. The castle of Frederic the II stood off in the distance and she could see Pizzomunno cliff jutting up from the beach down below. And there was an old man down in the street. She could see him as he pulled a cart of fruit and vegetables and shouted out to all the *Viestana* of la strada Corso Umberto.

"I'll make it up to you," Julianna turned toward her grandmother. "I'll go buy some fruit. We don't need dishes for that."

"All right. You're the lawyer. I'll clean the rest of this up and you go buy some fruit for us so we can eat."

"Are you sure, Nonna?"

"Yes. Yes. Please. Don't test my patience. Go buy some fruit for us."

Her grandmother looked at Julianna and the elder Rinaldi smiled. "Go down to Marina Piccola and ask for *il fruttivendolo Mussolini*," the grandmother advised.

"Mussolini the fruitman?"

"*Si*."

Julianna nodded and picked up *sine lire* from the kitchen table and checked her face in the mirror. "I'll be right back," she said, and she walked out the front door of the apartment and went out into the bright sunlight outside.

She walked down the narrow street, closing her eyes for a second as she breathed in the clean salty air. There was the sound of children laughing and playing and a slight diesel smell just beneath the redolence of the ocean. She could feel the sun as it shined down, hot, on her arms.

Julianna walked along the streets and didn't really think about how her mother or grandmother had survived the war on nothing, or that there ever really was a world war. Julianna was from Federal Hill not Vieste. She graduated from Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island and thought she knew all she needed to know. Old stories about war and famine and making do with nothing were just that: old stories.

Julianna walked down the yellowing stucco and cement streets and all the old *Viestana* watched her from their stools inside the doorways.

An old man with a cane sat on a chair at one corner. Julianna looked up at the sky there. The deep cobalt color blinded her and she put her hand up to see. She could feel beads of sweat, wet, under her arms, and it felt good to be away, and to be warm, and even to feel sweat and not worry.

She smiled and tapped the old man on the shoulder.

"*Io sano Maria Rinaldi's la nipote. Dove se trova il fruttivendolo Mussolini?*"

The toothless old man laughed out loud like she was a fool and he smiled at Julianna. He tapped his cane on the ground and pointed it toward the end of the street.

"*Grazie*," she said.

Julianna walked toward the center of town, where the old man had directed her to go. She looked around at the great trees in the square and the park benches and the Italian people milling about but there was no man selling fruit or vegetables. There was no one selling anything in the square.

That's strange, she thought.

Julianna walked completely around the entire square but saw only a young man against the wall under a wildly crooked pine tree. She could feel her stomach begin to tighten from hunger. She thought of her grandmother and decided to go over to the young man.

He smiled when she walked up. Julianna blushed hard.

"*Si?*" he said.

"Um, *il fruttivendolo Mussolini?*" she said not at all like a lawyer.

"Ah," the young man said. "You are an American?"

"It's that obvious?"

He smiled kindly as his tanned arm rose and pointed down toward the park, just in front of the old German U-boat that was shipwrecked on the sandbars of the beach.

“*Grazie*,” she said, and she turned and walked toward the park down near the beach.

She smiled to herself as she thought about the young man, and she walked toward the ocean, wiping her blond eyebrows with her arm.

Julianna tried to walk in the shade and not smell the incense of all the freshly slaughtered lambs hanging on hooks out in front of the shops on the sidewalk.

Down at the beach she felt very hungry and the air smelled like oranges and raspberry *gilato*. She looked around and wondered what Vieste must have looked like with all the men off to war in Africa, with her grandfather, a Fascist, a skull on his lapel, ready to kill even his own son, her uncle, an American GI who fought in Normandy. It hardly made sense now.

Julianna looked around. Two young girls on a Vespa whisked by on the street as an old Mercedes truck followed closely behind. They were the only ones around. There was no fruitman.

Julianna walked the streets for another hour, and everywhere she went she asked for Mussolini the fruit man, and they all laughed at her as though the whole town was in on it, and each person pointed to somewhere different than the person had before them.

Julianna gave up after she could no longer walk. She sat down near the beach, staring out at the houses, all pink and sallow and white like Beirut before the bombs came. She looked out at the German U-boat, and the lighthouse on the jetty beyond the beach, and the ocean that was the same color as the sky. There was a man sculling in a boat.

She felt rather common sitting there so far away from home.

Julianna sat there and thought: There is no fruit man. . . and suddenly the past seemed all the more difficult to her.

She stood up and overheard two voices. They were speaking English. She saw an older couple and she ran over to them. “You speak English!” she said as she reached the couple.

“So do you,” the man said.

He took Julianna’s hand and happily shook it.

“Do you live in Vieste?” Julianna asked.

“For the last five years. We used to own our own business back in Toronto,” the woman said.

“Do you know your way around town?” Julianna asked excitedly.

“Just visiting, ha?” the man said.

Julianna smiled and nodded. “I was trying to find Mussolini the fruitman, but I can’t find to bring back to my grandmother,” she said.

The couple both smiled at each other. They both laughed and Julianna half expected them to point toward the sky.

“Oh him!” the man said. “Every once in a while some young person like yourself is sent off looking for him. You know, he isn’t around much anymore. But he’s right down there today, young lady.” He pointed back toward the street.

Julianna looked and imagined the old man she had seen with the cart earlier that morning.

“Where is he?” she said. “I don’t see a thing.”

“Right there,” the woman said, moving her hand seemingly at nothing. “Right there. He’s next to Hitler’s pollo and Stalin’s cartas.”

Julianna turned around and looked at the couple in disbelief. She smiled and thought of her grandmother: how she always made do with what she had, and how Julianna didn’t.

“Oh!” she said. “She tricked me?” Julianna felt rather naive in her experience, and it all seemed rather funny to everyone, and she wasn’t hungry anymore. And then it struck her that she had never seen her grandmother wear a wedding ring. She looked at the couple. “I think I have to go see someone,” she told them.

Julianna ran through the ancient streets of Vieste: the young Italian children sitting on the ground cross legged playing with stones, all the old men leaning against the scant yellow walls talking to each other about the old days and the war. Julianna reached Corso Umberto and she looked up and saw her grandmother waiting for her in the doorway. She was smiling and holding wild figs and several oranges.

Julianna walked over to her and they both laughed out loud at each other as they hugged; and it was exactly the way Julianna had pictured it when she was a child back in Rhode Island, back up on her porch when she lived on Barker Street on Federal Hill and homeland Italy was simply a dream.

Later that night, she wrapped herself up in a blanket and stared outside the open window that overlooked the whitewashed streets of ancient Vieste. Off in the distance there were fireworks going off on the other side of a hill and an old white skiff sailing by silently out on a moonless ocean. There were children laughing and running down an alley where it seemed like something imaginary was chasing them and then there were three women standing there in another alley not far away. Julianna watched the three women gesture and talk in low tones and adjust their feet and listen to one another. She noticed the stars sewn into the sky up above that alley and she had this sudden feeling of sadness for not having discovered this earlier in her life, but felt an even greater sadness for everyone else who might not discover this at all.

Editor’s Note

To See Her in Sunlight was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Days (flow) follow and he is (un)dead. He walks (stumbles) (drunk) for days. Days following (days flowing). (her not flowing). (her without red). Him (stumbling, drunk). (wailing).

He walks through it:

(a funeral dark and without. A man in a box. Him in a box. People tending garden. Him as a father. His father. Him with tall even boots. Him in a coffin. Cartoonish in a series of ways).

(people snorting into tissues. People crying and ashamed. People at sea, sailing. People like humanity. Inhumane. His wife statuesque. Uncrying. Her there and a father gone. Her man gone. Her father gone and a baby coming).

(arms hug, hung, weak and strained. Fashionable. One arm or two. Family or love or lust or liking. Brother or sister. Father or daughter. Father or son. No father. Other fathers. Not this father. This father. Her. His her. Her weeping explicitly and without intent).

(sandwiches the size of baby birds. Birds like sandwiches repaired and sweeping through. Flying over. Her eating and drifting. People milling. Her, a boat. Anchor up. Him never wandering back. Her looking and nodding and going).

(she showers and reclines on the couch and eases into the changes. Her, watching tv. Towel dried skin and speaking to the baby. Melodies and mentioning. Listless endless stories, cranking and scribbling. Hot days with a baby already conceived. Her, half-hearted and weakening. Nothing coming out).

(He watches her watch tv. Her unmoving body. His desire to un-die. His want. His longing. His staggering stumbling steps. Unmoving, he watches. He can't can't can't. Her, drinking air, sleeping. He watches her, her mouth parted, her hair slick and wet. Her. Showing).

(Her, crying again. Late nights in bed still unmoving. Still watching tv. Him still wanting. And a cat in the noon of night, with her trying to find sleep. Him elsewhere and drinking warmth. Nestled in banks of embers arranged like blankets. A funeral and him in a box. Her, with life inside, motoring along regardless of these kind of days).

He only walks out of it sometimes:

Days that (keep) going (won't stop). Days like this (him drunk). Him (staggering) and trying to find his (undrunk) legs. (trying to uncork her). (like a bottle). (one ounce, two, a hundred, etc).

Short, Ginger, Eager

Tom the cat's owners went on holiday.

After 2 days Tom was starving.

Then a ladybug crawled up into Tom's ear and suggested very loudly that he should get a job.

And do what? Tom was good at sleeping and chasing other cats from his yard. The answer was obvious: security guard.

The ladybug hitched a ride on top of Tom's head and off they went to the unemployment office.

A lovely lady called Emily took down Tom's details - *short, ginger, eager* - and he was asked to wait.

An hour passed by (that's 5 hours in cat time).

Extend Your Life

Did you know there's a part of The Bible where you can check a box and magically extend your life by 50 years? You just take a pen and *presto chango* you've got another half a century!

Apparently this is well known among those who make it into their 90s in certain parts of the Christian world but the rest of us have no idea as we of course have never read The Bible apart from 'In the Beginning, God created... ZZZZZZZZ...'

The Life Extension Checkbox is just one of the bonuses the Bible has, and if you are up on your technology you'll know on DVDs these are called 'Easter Eggs'. The 'Easter Egg' is the term for little bonus bits on the DVD where the ardent viewer gets hidden extras the rest of us plebs just pass on by because we don't know they're there. It might be an interview with the individual who invented the show, or pics of the writers, or bloopers, or an impromptu song by the Dali Llama when he had a cameo part in an episode in 2004.

In fact they were called Easter Eggs in The Bible long before DVDs had them – way back in the 15th century in fact. A monk scribe was told to create one by a bishop, who was told to do so by the Pope, and the first 'Easter Egg' – the aforementioned Life

Extension Checkbox – was created and with the invention of the printing press millions of Christians could now read the Bible, and a select group lengthened their lifespan by 50 years. The average life back then was only 30 years, but some people lived into their 80s. How did they do it? That's right: the Checkbox. Leonardo Da Vinci knew about it. Centuries later Wordsworth did, too.

Anyway, the Life Extension Checkbox allows anyone to add 50 years onto their life. That's one Easter Egg you've really got to have. You know those centenarians - usually French women who knew Van Gogh or Renoir – who are interviewed and asked about the secret of their long lives, and they say No Drinking, No Smoking, even No Sex! Well, they leave out the Life Extension Checkbox for a good reason: they want to break the record for the oldest person in the world and they don't want their rivals knowing about it. I forgot to mention that apparently you can only check the box once, so holding out until you're 104 can really be worth the risk.

Decide?

The disheveled man approaches you from behind. You turn to look at him with a quiet curiosity, then look away, and continue eating.

He presumptuously runs a grimy, calloused hand along your side while puffing on a greasy cigarette.

"You're a beautiful girl. My name is Carlos, what's yours?"

You shiver, but say nothing. Others look over at you and you hope they will do something, but to your frustration they just go back to their meals.

"Come on... don't be shy," he says.

You continue eating and hope he'll go away.

"Hi want to *ride* you," he whispers into your ear. "Is that a *bold* thing to say to a lady?"

You stop eating and instinctively hold your breath for a few seconds.

"Hi want to *use* you, pretty girl," he says.

You exhale and blink rapidly.

"We could be a great team, you and I," he says. "So how about you finish what you are eating, and let us become one, hokay?"

With that, Carlos hurriedly leaps on your back, and just as quickly you throw him to the ground, winding him. You show your teeth and it looks like you're smiling, but of course horses don't really smile, do they?

Carlos grimaces, dusts himself down, laughs and tries again, and this time he succeeds.

"Easy, girl! Don't you worry, I used to ride beauties like you in Spain when I was a boy, and back then bareback was the only way to ride!"

You try and buck a bit, but soon give up as you've already spent the afternoon charging at the sun until you were all tuckered out and hungry, and you still feel weary and so you let Carlos win.

"Let's go," he says.

You slow down just outside a property. Carlos speaks into a mobile phone: "Hello, I want to talk to you houtside..."

You watch as a man opens a door. He squints to try and see if he can recognize the man on your back.

Another man comes from around the side of the building. You can see he is carrying a rifle at his side.

"Tell your buddy to stop where he is and not come any closer," Carlos yells out.

The first man gestures for the second man to stop where he is.

A woman walks briskly from the building and with the first man starts to approach you.

"Stop where you are!" Carlos yells out.

"What do you want?" the woman asks.

"I want your money," Carlos says.

"We don't have any money, the second man says. "We're a charity, buddy, we protect animals. We ain't got no money."

"Well I say you are a stinking liar, buddy, cos I know for a fact you got a donation yesterday of 5 gran' from an old lady. Eet was in the paper."

The first man talks with the woman and she talks back to him.

"Get the money from your safe, hokay? Or wherever you keep it," says Carlos.

The first man yells something to the second man who raises his rifle and points it at Carlos.

With that Carlos pulls a silver revolver from his jacket pocket and points it at the man.

"Hi wheel shoot you, asshole!" Carlos yells out. "Hi'll do it."

"I don't care," the second man says, "I'll kill you, too."

"Really?" says Carlos, cackling. "What hif I don shoot you, Mister smart guy, what eef I shoot the horse instead?"

The first man and the woman yell out for Carlos to be calm and for the second man to drop his weapon. It's only money after all, the woman says. But it's money that would help the animals, the second man says.

Just as Carlos seems about to lose his temper and shoot you, you hear the crack of a gun from behind, and terrified you fall on your side, spilling Carlos onto the gravel.

Carlos manages to roll over to see your man, the farmer, holding court with a very old but effective rifle of his own.

Carlos holds his bloody arm. He points and gets off one shot that just misses the farmer's head.

The farmer is unperturbed, but just before he can manage to get off a kill shot, the first man yells out for him to stop.

The first and second men, together with the woman and the farmer have a quick chat and then walk back toward you. You have stood up but are unsteady on your feet. The three strangers and the farmer gently stroke your head.

"Easy girl," they say.

Carlos looks up. "Hi haven't done nothing," he says.

"You tried to rob from us," the woman says.

"That is true," says Carlos, smiling defiantly.

"You stole and threatened to kill this poor animal," says the first man.

"Also true," Carlos says. "So, I guess you call the cops, yes?"

"No," says the farmer.

"No?" Carlos says.

It's ten minutes later. You have a saddle and bridle on. The second man's rifle is strapped to your side and a piece of twine is tied to the trigger, around the bridle post and also your rear right leg.

Carlos is tied to the fence and he laughs. "What is this?" he says.

The woman says: "For the crime of threatening to shoot a horse, we will let the horse decide whether you live or die."

"*Decide?*" says Carlos. "You make me laugh you stupid woman!"

You stand there, your glassy eyes reflecting the indifferent smile of Carlos.

"See," says Carlos, "the horse she is saying 'Hi no want to shoot Carlos, he ees my friend'."

"A friend who shot at her owner, hey Carlos, remember that...?" says the first man.

"She don' remember," says Carlos, she ees only an animal, she is stupid."

You snap your leg quickly back, and a shell explodes through Carlos's chest.

"That's right, Mister Carlos, horses ees stupid," says the farmer, smiling.

Clinton Mills by Ryan Dilbert

Clinton Mill is the millionaire Florida senator who called for the slaughter of thousands of the state's centaur population.

Clinton Mills is a mechanic who looks a lot like Bruce Springsteen.

Two hatchet men, Francis and his twin brother, TJ, kidnapped the wrong one. Rarely has a singular 'S' been so critical.

Clinton Mill is spooning his wife, with his beagle, Spankings, sleeping at his feet.

Clinton Mills is being dragged down a flight of stairs and thrown on the basement floor. Francis kicks him in the collarbone before he ties him to a chair. Clinton has a potato sack over his head. It scratches against his sweating face. He cannot see Francis' gaunt and freckled face or the dice in his eye sockets, two black dots serving as pupils. Francis had his real eyes shot out during a card game.

Clinton Mill awakens to his phone ringing.

"We've kidnapped Clinton. Five million to bring him home again," a husky voice said.

"I'm Clinton Mill. Who the hell is this?"

They hang up. Clinton suddenly finds the dark unnerving.

In the basement, Gordyl, a burly centaur with yellow-tinted glasses tears the sack off Clinton Mills' head. He curses in his ancient, native tongue. TJ asks his bro what their boss is saying.

"Does it matter?"

Gordyl grabs Francis by the neck and holds him in the air.

"I gave you his address. How did this happen?"

Francis' head is suddenly full of childhood stories of centaurs ripping humans apart and picking out bits to eat. He stutters how he and TJ lost the dossier at a titty bar and decided to just look him up in the phone book. Gordyl slams Francis into the dryer. He loads his crossbow and screams that he'll get Mill himself.

Clinton Mill is against human augmentation. He recently proposed a bill to outlaw the insertion of gems under fingernails. He made an impassioned speech regarding the issue at Congress that was met with glorious applause.

Clinton Mills once spent several months' paychecks on a girlfriend's mechanical wing implants. When she broke up with him, she flew out of his window and pretended not to hear Clinton spitting her name.

Clinton Mill is a tyrant and a sleaze ball. Funded by big oil and the organ black market, he is planning a run for president in the next ten years.

Clinton Mills is a dick. He loves to slip opened condom wrappers in men's cars and imagines the hell they'll catch for it while chuckling madly.

Clinton Mill rushes to his office where the speaking door sleeps. He taps on it and its one metal eye flutters open. The door's mouth turns a murky red as it says, "What is it, Mill?"

Clinton asks him if he should be concerned with this kidnapping incident. "The centaur who arranged it is riding to your house as we speak." Clinton bows to the door. He calls the Miami police and they soon rush to protect him.

TJ whispers to his brother that he should just scrape out Clinton's eyes and trade them for his own dice eyes. Francis tells TJ to run and get him an ice cream scoop.

Clinton Mill waits on his roof with a shotgun, smoking a joint to calm his erratic heart. He hates all magical creatures, but something about the centaur especially disgusts him. They disrupt his Bible-centered view of the world. He sees Gordyl charging on his lawn and he grins. Nothing thrills Clinton like wetting the ground with centaur blood.

Clinton Mills tries to wriggle free from the ropes around his wrists. Francis stands in front of him, arms crossed, eyeing his captor's deep-set brown eyes.

"Why don't you let me go? I'm not the guy you want."

Clinton knew that if this dice-eyed man knew him, he'd answer that Clinton deserved a little pain. Every car he had keyed, every tab he walked out on, every drunk girl he slipped into sits now in his head like a jury of ghosts.

Gordyl pulls up several yards away from Clinton's house. There are several squad cars parked on the grass. Police aim their guns at him. Clinton Mill taunts him from the roof, grabbing at his nuts before cocking the shotgun. Gordyl comes from a long line of warriors, but he knows the difference between courage and suicide. There is no way he can come out of this victorious. The sight of Clinton sticking his tongue out and aiming his shotgun makes him weak with sadness. He knows that Mill will continue to live, while his people slowly die. He wants to be a hero, but instead has to settle for slinking away back into the forest.

Clinton Mills manages to slip out just as TJ walks in with the ice cream scoop. Clinton isn't a big man. His shoulders are narrow and his wrists are skinny, but fearful of dying, he is strong enough to break the chair over TJ's head. Francis grabs him from behind and chokes him with his forearm. TJ, half-blind with blood, piles on and pummels Clinton's jaw with his work boots.

Clinton Mill thanks the police with a taste of his wife's strawberry pie and coffee he bought while down in Costa Rica. He then makes frenzied love to his wife before passing out next to her.

Clinton Mills fights the men off with his nails and his elbows and his teeth until his body no longer listens to him. He spits up something pink before blacking out.

Clinton Mill dreams of sawing off mechanical wings off heroin addicts, of racing in aluminum cars, of grabbing a bear by the mouth and shaking him. He drifts off until his alarm sounds the next morning.

Clinton Mills' eyes are removed and the two twins throw his body into the river without ceremony. He floats face first, drifting among algae and gasoline residue until the sun rises in the morning.

Dalton sat at the front window of his apartment in Flatbush eating a bowl of Cap'n Crunch and pondering why so many pirates lost a leg. Were they the human equivalent of pigeons? His thoughts of pirates led him to an image of parrots, and before he knew it, Dalton had cruised to Pet-orama. He limped the entire distance—including the subway stairs which he took one at a time—working out the notion of a peg leg. Dalton was thorough that way.

He once spent an entire day without arms by tucking his empty jacket sleeves into the pockets, zipping it up, and slipping it over his head. At first, he folded his arms in front of his chest, but when he observed the effect in the full-length mirror, he decided that the lumpiness of his arms under his jacket appeared unnatural. Not wishing to appear odd, he loosened his belt two notches and tucked his arms into the sides of his pants. It was an exhausting day because he had to walk everywhere. He couldn't swipe his Metro card for the bus or subway and hailing a cab was impossible.

When he arrived at Pet-orama, Dalton was seduced into the aquatic section by a pair of freckled legs. The owner of these legs was bent over, looking intently into an aquarium.

Not overly skilled in the art of flirtation, Dalton positioned himself on the other side of the tank and hunched down to face her. He sucked his cheeks in, making a fish mouth, and flapped his hands at the side of his head like gills. Dalton watched her eyes watch the fish, then notice him. She had a strange look on her face which he had no time to interpret because the tank was full of angel fish, and his mind went racing after halos, saints, statues, incense, pews, the confessional, and his right hand being smacked as an adult voice said, "Dirty boy!"

He stood up, knocking his head against a display of sponges hanging from the ceiling above the tank.

"Your eyes are like marbles," he said to her. Then seeing the marbles in her head glare at him, he added, "Because...because the water and the glass of the aquarium made your eyes small, like peewees or maybe shooters. Although now, on account of your thick glasses, they look more like bumbos, uh, boulders, uh, the big fat...large marbles."

He stopped speaking, looked at a shelf holding bags of colored gravel, river rocks, pumps, plastic mermaids, deep sea divers, and an underwater Santa, and wondered if he should apply for a job at Pet-orama. Then suddenly, she was on the move, and Dalton limped rapidly after her.

She stopped walking and asked him, "What's wrong with your leg?"

Her deep, raspy voice reminded him of that girl he used to call late at night before his credit cards got cancelled.

"I have an ingrown toenail," Dalton responded.

"I work for a podiatrist," she said.

Bad luck.

"I see," Dalton said.

The idea of dealing with the sock fluff caught in the corner of someone's big toenail, or their toe jam, calluses, bunions, or pronations, caused bile to lurch in Dalton's stomach.

"I'm on my way back to work now," she continued. "Would you like to visit the doctor?"

The ultimate question came to mind. Dalton had faced it several times when he woke up with a really bad hangover, and again when he wanted to explore the cradle of civilization on the government's money and visited the Army Recruitment center. The last time he faced it was when he wanted to know what it was like to wear a bra, which is what got him fired from J-L Mart. They really should fix those doors in the dressing room.

Is it worth it?

"I don't believe in conventional treatment," Dalton told her, knowing that he could never talk about, acknowledge or have someone else touch his feet.

"What treatment are you using?" she asked.

"I'm dipping it in melted wax."

"Doesn't that burn?"

Dalton felt light-headed from the image of red wax hardening around his foot and cracking when he flexed his toes.

"Not really," he squeaked.

"I've never heard of that treatment."

"I read about it in an airline magazine on a flight to Prague," he said, contemplating for a second or two why Prague and The Hague were pronounced differently.

"I'll have to tell Doctor Gutmann about it. Do you have a copy of the magazine?"

"My name is Dalton," he said to change the subject.

"My name is Jane."

For a moment, Dalton was catatonic as he felt himself holding a chimpanzee in his left arm, grabbing a vine with his right and swinging through a rain forest, screaming at the top of his lungs because an elephant had tipped Jane over and was precariously close to stepping on her head. Where was Boy?

"Hello?" she said and snapped her fingers.

"Can I walk you to your office?" he asked, hoping there was no large plaster of Paris foot hanging outside the building which would send him straight back to the psychiatrist.

"All right," she said.

Dalton limped along behind her, watching her pleated wool skirt undulate with each step. Green, black, yellow, and red plaid. He wondered what clan it was and went off

onto bagpipes, shortbread, funny accents, rain, heather, Shetland wool sweaters, itching, men in kilts bashing each other with clubs.

He caught up with Jane and asked, “Why aren’t you wearing a uniform if you work for a doctor?”

“I’m the receptionist. I answer the phones and make appointments and put magazines in the waiting room. What kind of job do you have?”

At 28, Dalton had spent his career in retail, mainly shelving apothecary items at a major drug chain. He arranged the items alphabetically by name and methodically aligned them to the edge of the shelf each morning. His tenure ended when the Dr. Scholl’s products were moved to his shelving section and he passed out at the sight of the rubber shoe inserts.

“At the moment, I’m considering my options,” he told her.

They passed the alterations shop, thread, needles, prick your finger, sleep for 100 years, awakened by a kiss from a prince. I’m not gay. The bakery hard rolls, warm buns, sweet turnovers, tart tarts, cream-filled donuts, ladyfingers, bear claws. They should sell condoms. The carwash. Why am I such a failure?

“Well, here we are,” Jane said, stopping outside a gate on which hung a sign that read:

Dr. Wayne Gutmann, Podiatrist
We treat feet...

Dalton turned a little sideways, away from the sign on the gate, which he noticed had a small illustration of a foot on it, and kept his eyes on Jane as he asked, “Dr. Gutmann? Shouldn’t he be called Dr. Footman?”

“But that’s not his name,” Jane replied.

“Right,” he said, wondering if they actually would ever see each other again deliberately.

“Well,” she said, putting her hand on the gate.

“Do you live around here?” he blurted, stalling her departure a little longer.

“I don’t think that’s an appropriate question, do you?” she replied.

Dalton thought it was a very appropriate question. He needed to know how much farther he would have to go if he was ever to visit her. There was that one day that he spent cross-eyed and he got a migraine. Distance made a huge difference. Dealing with her profession was hard enough, but he couldn’t deal with distance issues.

“Are you sure you don’t want the doctor to look at your foot?” she asked.

“No. No. I’m fine,” he said.

“Well,” she said.

“Well,” he said.

“Well, here, just in case,” Jane said, as she took her business card out of her purse. She wrote something on it before handing it to Dalton.

Dalton looked at the card. Jane Romanzinzo DeZouza. Her name buzzed inside his head as he repeated it silently, thinking of beehives and honey and Winnie the Pooh,

Eeyore. Tigger. The cowardly lion. The wicked witch. Flying monkeys. He felt a panic attack coming on.

“Well, goodbye,” she said, making a little wave of fingers of her left hand.

Dalton made claw-like motions with the fingers of both hands before he limped away. As he turned the corner heading for the Labor Department, he dropped Jane’s card into a trash can. He liked her freckled legs and her white blouse. But she had written her home phone number just under the slogan, “We treat feet...” and he could never look at it again.

* * *

Six weeks later, Dalton lay in bed all morning staring upward, wondering if he could find something spiritual in the water stain pattern that would make his ceiling worthy of being ripped out and sold at auction. In the afternoons, he prayed to find a Hershey bar with the image of the Virgin Mary in it. Or a ham sandwich that had the shape of Christ. Or at least one of the apostles. Something he could sell. Dalton wasn’t religious, but his unemployment compensation was ending in a week.

Sensing his nervousness at having to become re-employed, his mother advised him, “Why don’t you go on disability like your father.”

Dalton’s father had been on disability ever since the 1980s when he got in a fight with his cousin, Phil, over how to hang dry wall and Phil shot Dalton’s father in the foot three times with a nail gun.

For weeks, Dalton considered some way of getting on disability without the use of a nail gun. A stapler wouldn’t work.

With no alternative, Dalton finally scheduled a job interview at the Hardware Station in Manhattan.

Going into Manhattan would take extra time. Extra time away from his own personal bathroom in Flatbush, and Dalton hadn’t been able to use a public toilet since he was six years old and his mother had taken him into the ladies room at Macy’s where that little girl had started screaming.

He had made an attempt to urinate at the stadium once after a Brooklyn Cyclones game, staring at the urinal for ten minutes, frozen on account of knowing where everyone’s hand had been right before touching the flushing handle. Eventually he entered a stall and tried with all his might to relieve himself. Nothing. When he realized that he might wet himself on the subway train on the way home, he started to cry.

“Hey, buddy what’s wrong,” a burly voice yelled out from the next stall. “You a Yankees fan?” When Dalton didn’t answer, the voice called out, “Hey fellas, we got a Yankees fan in here.”

Three rowdy guys broke the stall door open and beat Dalton up.

Dalton’s solution to the public-bathroom-job-interview dilemma was to purchase a box of adult diapers. He had become acquainted with them at J-L Mart where he had often wondered about the experience of wearing them. Did they chafe? Were they noisy

when you walked? Were they hard to put on? Going home on the subway he looked around at the different people on the train to see if there were telltale signs that they were incontinent.

He got all the answers to his questions when he got home. First of all, it wasn't easy putting the diaper on and getting it adjusted. Then he found that the diaper was so bulky that he couldn't fasten his trousers. He tried on every pair of pants in his closet. The only piece of haberdashery that would fasten over the adult diaper was a pair of overalls, which to Dalton seemed appropriate interview attire for Hardware Station.

He walked around the block several times on Saturday, so he'd get used to wearing the diapers outdoors. He thought the diaper made a squishy sound when he walked. He couldn't tell. Was it making a sound or just feeling like it made a sound? Every few minutes, Dalton bent over to listen to his crotch as he walked. He still couldn't tell.

On Monday, wearing freshly ironed overalls, white shirt, and an adult diaper, Dalton felt so secure that he stopped at Hunky Donuts for a hot chocolate. And when Dalton arrived at the Hardware Station, he daringly asked at Customer Service for the location of the water fountain.

After he had enough water to cause him a belly ache, Dalton found the Personnel Office. Joe Doversky made Dalton wait almost a full half hour past his scheduled interview time before calling him into his office.

Joe Doversky asked him, "Do you have any gardening experience?"

Gardening, mowing, weeding, raking, hoeing, turning rocks over and finding roly polly bugs.

"NO!" Dalton shouted.

Dalton recognized that expression on Joe Doversky's face. The interview had already gone bad.

"How about construction experience?" Joe Doversky asked him calmly.

Backhoes, mud holes, wooden fences, cement mixers, steel rods, piles of bricks, electrical wiring, getting hit on the head with a manhole cover when Con Ed blew up the street.

Dalton blinked fast and made his stomach hard as he said, "Only with Tinker Toys. And, uh, I painted my bedroom once."

"Are you all right?" Mr. Doversky asked.

Dalton couldn't answer. He really needed to urinate and was busy squeezing his whole body tight.

"Dalton?" Joe Doversky had that look again when Dalton opened his eyes.

"Well, Dalton, thank you for coming in. We'll be in touch."

"When?"

Dalton stood up.

"Soon," Mr. Doversky said.

Dalton quickly ran out of Doversky's office, out of the store, all the way to the subway station. When he got off the train, he ran down the stairs and all the way to his apartment building. Once inside, ran to his own personal bathroom.

Then, he made a phone call.

"Dr. Meese," Dalton asked, "can you help me get onto disability?"

* * *

After several months of waiting for his disability claim to be approved, Dalton spent a morning, practicing tremors in his hands, then his legs. Walking was difficult to say the least, so he changed to practicing seizures. He jerked his head and made himself foam at the mouth by putting liquid soap on his tongue. The soap was very bitter and kept him spitting for half an hour.

He decided to go outside and wander around with his eyes closed. Once he got outside, though, he started doing hopscotch jumps. One, two-three, four, five-six, seven, eight-nine, ten. When he reached ten, instead of turning around and hopping back to one, he did a 360 degree turn on one leg and continued on, one, two-three, four, five-six, seven, eight-nine, ten.

When Dalton reached Flatbush Boulevard, he turned right and walked half a block to stand in front of the window of ABC Medical Supply where his eyes panned the crutches, Latex gloves, scales, rubber tubing, quad canes, boxes of dressings, and a very attractive mannequin wearing a nurse's uniform.

And then he saw the seat cushion shaped like a donut. Although he knew it was for people with piles, Dalton wasn't exactly sure what piles were. He'd tried to find an image on the Internet at the library, but the Reference Librarian had asked him to leave.

Dalton couldn't go inside ABC Medical Supply because he started to have a panic attack at the sight of a model foot with a bandage around it, so he went inside the discount store next door where he approached the register.

"Yeah?" She said.

"Do you sell pillows?" Dalton asked, noticing a display of makeup pencils on the counter that were on sale two for a dollar.

"Are there any socks on aisle two?"

"Socks are on aisle one," the clerk responded.

On aisle two, Dalton found a suitable foam rubber pillow and carried it to the counter. He studied the makeup pencils. One of them was an irresistible shade of red and he opened it and drew a flower on his forearm.

"If you use a pencil, you gotta buy it!"

Since they were two for a dollar, he grabbed a black pencil as well.

When he got home, Dalton cut open the cloth pillow casing and removed the foam rubber. He spent a few minutes poking at it with his fingers before he cut away a section of the length to make it square. He drew an uneven circle on the pillow with his new black makeup pencil. He outlined that in red, just for fun.



With a sharp kitchen knife, he carved out the center of the donut. He decided to cover his donut and used safety pins to close the end of the case around it and put safety pins around the center of the hole. He cut away the cloth in the hole. Then he signed *get well autographs* all over the pillow case like it was a leg cast.

Dalton carried a chair into the bathroom and sat on the donut posing with crossed and uncrossed legs and arms. Finally, he put the donut on his head and pulled it past his face to sit around his neck like a

brace.

He drew stitches on his forehead with the black pencil, then gave himself huge Groucho eyebrows. He drew huge outlines around his lips with the red pencil. He had started to give himself the measles with the red pencil, when his doorbell rang.

Ding!

Dalton had so few visitors that he immediately ran to the door and opened it. He opened the door in his donut collar and makeup for Mrs. Jenkins the federal disability insurance investigator who was making a surprise visit to determine whether Dalton was actually mentally incompetent or just faking.

Editor's Note

Photograph © Alana Cash

The plane's engine failure wasn't the worst thing that happened, nor were all the deaths that ensued in the crash. Philip got out without a scratch. It was a miracle. Luckiest guy in the world.

Being lost in the middle of the Amazon wasn't the worst thing that happened.

Running out of food and water wasn't the worst thing that happened, either.

Philip was sick of his situation and sick of himself, but he had no means of killing himself. His staying alive was far more unbearable than any plane crash, hunger or thirst. The tree bark was too slippery to climb, the branches were too brittle to bludgeon himself with, and he couldn't bring himself to starve to death. It was too hard, and there were too many juicy grape sized bugs around for him.

He had walked for what felt like days when he heard voices arguing. There were about a dozen of them, if Philip had to guess, all of English descent and all speaking with the same tone, pitch and mannerism.

Philip pushed through the thick vegetation and found a very large, very peculiar tree.

The bark was light gray. The tree's trunk was about three feet in diameter at the base. Flesh colored leaves grew out of the branches like thin little fingers. The tree's fruit, which grew from beneath the leaf thickets, were heads. Human heads.

All of the heads were identical; thinning white hair, a sharp, well-groomed white beard and a mustache that curled at the tips. They all wore circular glasses and all of them were very upset.

"I think I heard something," one said.

"You didn't hear anything," said another.

"Well, I didn't hear anything, but I do see something," said a third.

"Heck to what you think you see," said a fourth, and from a fifth, "My word, I see it too. Hello there, young man."

All at once every head on the tree turned to stare at Philip.

"Jolly good! It's been years since I've had good company," said one of the fruit.

Philip was beyond amazed. Had he not been so depressed and fatigued, he would have screamed or ran away or even ran towards the tree. But, drained, he just stood staring at the tree, and politely waved at it.

"Hello. My name's Philip."

"My name is Theodore Henry Wilde the Fourth," said all of the heads simultaneously. "What brings you out to this accursed place?"

"My plane crashed."

"Ah! You must have Survivalism in your blood, eh? Good bones, too, from what I see. You're built very well," said one of the heads.

“Thank you,” Philip said.

“Oh, don’t thank him. He always butters people up so they like him more. He thinks you’re quite awful, in fact,” said another head.

“Don’t put words in my mouth!” the other head said.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” said the other. The two began to argue, each acquiring allies in his argument, until the entire tree was screaming at itself.

“Um...” Philip said, and immediately the tree became quiet.

“Oh, where are our manners? Here we are arguing with ourselves while you stand there gawking. If you have nothing better to do, I can tell you a story to pass the time,” a head said.



“I don’t have anything better to do,” Philip said bluntly. “To be honest, I’m trying to kill myself.”

Half of the tree’s head laughed, while the other half looked on with sympathy.

“Don’t be silly!” said Theodore Henry Wilde, laughing.

“It’s a cruel world,” Theodore Henry Wilde sadly said.

“I died once, which segues us to story time, have you the time to hear

it,” said one head.

“Sure,” Philip said.

“I want to tell the story,” said an upset head.

“Well you can’t, you always muck it up,” said the head who brought up the story of death in the first place. To Philip, “I, like you, had a body once.”

“You started the story off wrong,” said the head who was upset that he couldn’t tell the story.

“Oh, just shut it! As I was saying, I had a body once, and I took my body to far off places to experience things unlike the kind I found in London. I traveled the Nile, walked beside the Great Wall, lived amongst the Aborigines and scaled every mountain worthy enough to scale.

“I came to this terrible place with my brother-in-law and a business partner. We came to hunt... nothing in specific, really. We’d be happy with a zebra, or a monkey, although we secretly wanted a lion or an elephant.

“A week into our adventure, we came across elephant tracks and a large amount of blood. Scattered around the blood, chaotically mixed about as if they hunted the creature whilst on fire, were human tracks. My associates and I followed the human tracks, thinking it would be a good idea to speak with the hunters to learn their tactics.”

“Big mistake,” said another head.

“They looked at us like we were demons, but if you saw what they looked like, you would know who the true beasts were. They wore their kill’s blood on their face, its entrails on their bodies. They used feathers and strips of dead skin as head ornaments. We didn’t even get a word in before they attacked.

“I was the last one to run. Jonathan, my sister’s husband, took off first. He was hit in the back of the neck with a dart and fell immediately. William was shot in the back of the leg with an arrow. He tried to run still, but they were on top of him in seconds, hacking away with their axes.

“I ran as fast as I could. Then I felt a prick on my behind.”

“It was a dart,” one of the heads interrupted.

“Yes. Shot in the behind, and then all was dark. They killed me while I was unconscious. How awful. I don’t remember anything, if there was anything, after I died.

“Apparently they beheaded me, planted my head in a patch of verdant soil, and the result is what you see now: a Head Tree.”

“I didn’t know you could plant heads,” Philip said.

“You can’t, which is to say I can’t either. But the things who did this to me-”

“Us.”

“-Right. The things that did this to us could do that and things far more heinous.”

Two of the heads began whispering, stopping only to look Philip up and down. From one, “I see you have two arms as well as two hands. Very impressive. I was wondering if you could do us a favor?”

Some of the heads looked at the head that had just spoken with worry.

“It depends what the favor is,” Philip said.

“If you could, please cut this tree down.”

Half of the heads yelled their hurrahs while the other half screamed in fear.

“Don’t do it!”

“Yes, do it! I can’t stand this life anymore!”

“Kill us!”

“Let us live!”

The tree began to bicker with itself once again, this time more savagely. It said horrid things to itself, striking every emotion the many heads on the tree had. Philip could hardly bare to listen.

After a brutal round of taunts, the heads that wanted to live were too upset to want anything but death. All at once they sadly howled like lost pups to the moon.

Conflicted, Philip turned away from the tree and walked away. He walked due west, where he could hear the faintest sounds of a running river. He had learned from a guide that where there is a river, there is hope.

He took with him all of his guilt, his sorrow and his depression. He was elated.

“Good thing I only have one head,” he thought as he saw the river in the distance. If there was one thing he learned from the Head Tree, it was that man was his own worst enemy.

Editor's Note

Photograph © by Margaret Mendel

Um...Excuse me?" the Captain walks up and asks.

He's going to look at my rank. That's always the first place the higher check so they can gauge their actions. The military is the last known caste system in the United States. And I am the unclean.

"Specialist." He found it. And now his resolve is strengthened. No longer unsure of his status in this exchange, he gains confidence at clearly being my superior. "Can you tell me what room the Foreign Affairs class is located in?"

I check the class roster on my desk. He tries to lean over to get a peek at my list. The desk has a barrier to keep his command eyes and command stench from wafting into my area.

I find his class on the list. "Room 314 Alpha." I add more instruction. There is nothing more annoying than being bothered again two minutes later by an embarrassed officer asking for further guidance. "Take the elevator—" I point to it. You can never be too sure with these yahoos "—go to the third floor."

"Uh-huh."

Already he's giving me the uh-huh with the blank stare. Bad sign. People come to my desk always ready to ask questions but never prepared to receive answers.

"Take a left. It will be fourteen doors down. Can't miss it."

The Captain gives me the eyeball and moves out. He wants to say an eloquently cutting remark but must juggle his busy schedule with his need to validate his command status to someone as worthless as me. He doesn't bother. He walks to the elevator and leaves. One more happy customer. The ballbuster is he would have gotten lost without my directions.

There is a map of the entire building, all four levels, on the wall beside my desk. There are maps in every hallway of this building. Yet people still come to me, asking for directions, as if they don't have time to read a map. No wonder we're stuck in Iraq, everyone wants the easy answer.

I work the security desk at the SOAF building. I know, I know, it's an acronym. What can I say? The Army loves acronyms. But SOAF is easier to say than the Special Operations Academic Facility. This is where the Green Berets go to school to learn their job and a foreign language.

No, I haven't seen Rambo in the halls. People don't go to class with gully suits on while low crawling down the hallway shouting, "All Clear!"

Think of the SOAF as a college building full of students going to and from class all day long. Except instead of college kids, the students are soldiers. Yes, they have backpacks.

My job, working the SOAF desk, is not a job you can sign up for. This is not one of those 212 ways to be a soldier in the United States Army. This job, though easy, is tougher to get than one thinks. I am ranked as a Specialist in the Army which essentially means I'm at the top of the food chain for bottom feeders. I have reached the glass ceiling of minion-hood.

If I become any higher ranked, I'll be in charge of other personnel. Up one more rung in the ladder, and I become a Sergeant. But who really wants that kind of responsibility?

I am also an OT. Another acronym, welcome to the world of the military lingo. OT means I'm out of training. This Special Operations Academic Facility that I am currently guarding, yea, I'm supposed to be taking a class here right now. But I'm not. I'm sitting behind this help desk, forced to watch my former classmates enter and leave.

Oh great. Here comes someone else with a confused look. It's funny how people twirl around like a ballerina when they're lost. They think that by spinning they can unclutter their brains and finally navigate the building. Unfortunately, a centrifugal force isn't the answer.

"Is this the Special Operations Academic building?"

"Yes, it is," I answer. I like the look of him, plus he's a private. Lower ranked than even me. "How can I help you?"

"I have some paperwork for Mr. Bevels." Mr. Bevels is the building manager.

"Take the elevator." I point to it. You can never be too careful. "Top floor, his office is on the right."

"Thank you," he says.

"You bet," I answer.

This is my seventh month at the job. I'm pretty proficient at its intricacies. I have video cameras on the corner of my desk. I can see all the entrances and exits and loading docks in the back. I never watch them. They're in black and white. Not even my grandparents watch TV in black and white.

The threat level dictates the number of security guards we have here. There have been a few times we've actually manned the booths outside and checked IDs upon entering. It's amazing how pissed off people get when they have to show their ID and they don't have it. Never mind that the rules require you to have Identification on your person at all times. There's always a few students who wave a photo ID of a clown or a dead celebrity, like Elvis, and walk right past you. They're the same cocksuckers who later come inside to tell me a guard let them in after they waved an imposter ID. They act like we're protecting their life. I tell the Elvis imposter to find something more substantial to do than pretend he's someone else.

It's mid day. I would love to take a nap right now, but that would be unprofessional. So I pull out a crossword puzzle and begin. My comrades are over in Iraq fighting a losing war. I wage a different struggle with the same results on page 43, 12 across. Five letter word and the hint is talisman. I am the George Bush of crosswords. Clueless.

I don't look at the papers. I may feel guilty, and the only thing worse would be if I didn't. I think that may completely shatter my self-image. I have a cush job. There is no doubt about that. It came with a price. The price of disappointment. I paid the price with the credit card of realization. My bill said, "Life isn't fair."

That's why I got this job. Because life isn't fair. I am part of a statistic. Yes, I am a part of the 48% of the Army who has not deployed into a hostile zone. And do you want to know why? Because life isn't fair. If it was fair, guys on their second or third deployment would have my job. No, in this country, we stick it to the people who volunteer.

You want to volunteer for the Army? Fuck you, and here's another year of deployment added onto your contract. Stoplosses—you have no choice. And you wonder why credit card companies can change your billing without notifying you. Because the government can.

I don't hold it against myself. I enjoy things one day at a time.

I tried out for the Special Forces. I was what they called an 18 X-Ray. It was an enlistment option that guaranteed me the right to try to become a Green Beret but not the right to be one. That had to be earned, or at least that's what my recruiter told me.

It was OK, though. I had played millions of hours of Ghost Recon and Call of Duty 3. I was prepared to stealthily stalk my pixelated victim from behind and slit their throat. I could snipe an enemy from long range with a variety of weapons ranging from the AK-47 to M203 Grenade launcher. There was no mission I could not handle. At least in the video game.

I weighed my options. Do I become an Army Green Beret (and have my own song), a Navy Seal (and do a lot of diving), or Marine Force Recon (and land on beaches with boats)? I had to carefully weigh my options and the associated prestige. What did I want to be known as a "former" of? The former members of these fine professions are the object of awe. No Dr. or Mr. proceeding, but immediately following the name comes "he used to be in Special Forces." A knowing nod and awe comes from the recipient of such classified knowledge. And every time they see the former spook, they try to ferret out dark black secrets of government intrigue or behind the scenes info, or if that part in Tom Clancy's novel could really happen.

In the end I came to an obvious conclusion. Rambo could kick Steven Segal's, Charlie Sheen's, and Jon Cena's combined asses.

"BRRRRRIIINNGGGG! BRRRRRIIINNGGGG!"

That's the phone. In addition to keeping the building safe and everyone directed to the proper spot, I also have one more penultimate task.

I must answer the phone. If I don't, who will? If no one is on my end of the receiver to verbally answer the caller's question, then all hell breaks loose. The caller would be unable to reach anyone and thus assume the building was devoid of security. If the building is devoid of security, then there are no students. If there are no students then there are fraudulent expenditures of the defense departments and budgets (and

coincidentally no more Green Berets are being trained). Someone contact the President and let's get a handle on this thing!

"SOAF building. How may I help you?" I ask in my honey-sweet voice. This could be my opportunity to speak with the Secretary of Defense and tell him what a joke this all is.

"Is Specialist Mendez there?" a female who most certainly is not the Secretary of Defense asks. She is far too young for such an esteemed position. So I drop the honey sweetness and lay on the sarcasm.

"Ma'am. We have over six hundred students in this building at a given time. But no. No, he's not here. In fact, I think he said to cover for him, or was that Specialist Herndon?"

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"Yes," I answer. "Yes it is." And I hang up.

I joined the Army to become the ultimate badass. Ninja training and Indian scout school was on the horizon. Soon I would join the ranks of MacGyver and James Bond with my snappy wit and remarkable ingenuity.

Boy, was I disappointed.

The Special Forces course is a nine month long test of strength, endurance, intelligence, and character. At least that's what the brochure says. To enter the course you must first pass selection. Think of it as an open house for a frat— if they like what they see, they'll ask you to pledge.

I was selected to enter the hallowed Green Beret training grounds and could now take part in the Special Forces Qualification Course, the initiation of the frat. The initiation is four phases plus language school spread out over a period of nine months.

Overall, the course was very unsatisfying. I kept hoping at some point we would learn ninja vanishing tricks and expert marksmanship with a bow and arrow created from twigs and pig dung. All my expectations were thoroughly thrown down on the ground and stomped.

Think of it like this, I am in an academic facility filled with Special Forces, a college of Green Berets if you will, and do I feel any safer? Hell no.

Red Dawn was the greatest propaganda movie ever made. It inoculated a generation with fear of surviving the anarchy threat. I wouldn't be surprised if the military funded the movie. Like the movie, Special Forces is the great lie we all choose to believe. We want to believe the movies. We want to believe a super smart Arnold Swartz egger is protecting our freedom and safety from would-be terrorists without us ever knowing. We want to believe he is the smartest human being alive, capable of lifting and driving cars equally as well, and can shoot a pea from the head of a charging horse.

The truth is, there is no such person. There are no superhumans out there. I watched a newly minted Green Beret eat a dried cow turd to win a ten dollar bet. Yes, this is what stands between the would-be-terrorists and us. Forget snake eaters. *Turd* eaters. A guy too stupid to walk away from ten bucks.

We want to believe in heroes, and we want to believe they're better than us. It's all hype. There are no above-board human beings capable of feats of incredible self sacrifice and at the same time, cold-blooded killers who ruthlessly beat down opposing terrorists. There are no story book endings.

There are only people. Only us. The good, the bad, and the ugly, and we are all capable of being the hype, the hero, of the movie of our life.

There were days I would look around at my classmates and cringe. These people are the best America has to offer? All around me were imbeciles capable of eating or sniffing glue, maybe doing both at once, or steroid heads with inferiority complexes.

Now I'm a dreaded OT, out of training. To them I'm a disease. A parasite unworthy to be looked upon. These same morons walk past me with the same oblivion they have treated their entire life with and due to some Darwinian anomaly managed to survive to this point.

I've seen America's best, God help us with America's worst.

I was thrown out a month before finishing. A piddly charge, but aren't they always to the accused? Any alcohol related offense is enough to be booted from the course. So a small-potatoes public intoxication ticket was enough to derail my dreams of male elitism, but if I do something, I like to go overboard. So I did the assault for good measure. I'm not a violent guy. Fill me up with tequila and jack, then call me a dickhead, and I morph into a violent guy. Even the best of us have faults.

There was no ceremonial chastisement. There was no media embarrassment. I was bailed out of jail and taken to the office where I signed my "drop" paperwork. It was a bureaucratic nightmare of signing and flipping paper that officially ended my stint in the Special Forces Qualification Course. And here I am.

But this job is the reminder of life's unfairness. My former colleagues may view me with disgust, but it is I who am not afraid of deployment. The paper I signed released me to worldwide orders, but somewhere along the way bureaucracy aided me. And now here I am.

Behind this desk, the king of my castle.

Look at that guy. Another person lost. Here he comes. Shit, that's a star on his rank. I need to stand up for this guy.

Generals are always the same. As long as they feel they get their due respect, they're oblivious to everything else. I've met more than my share of Generals. Oh, they're in this building all the time. They're always lecturing or meeting about some other nonsense.

You can always tell them by how they carry themselves. It's like a Pomeranian, all pomp and their shit don't stink.

Usually we get the heads up about these special guests. Someone in the chain of command usually gets wind of it and forces the labor pool to pony up a mass cleansing of the grounds. I'm talking sterilization. We roll out the red carpet. Generals get the special treatment. Maybe they think it's always as clean, or everybody is always nice and polished. It's hard for me to classify Generals as human. There's a fervency in their eyes

that I equate to a cult leader. I've never been a part of a cult, but I think it's a suitable hunch.

In some ways the Army is a cult. One has to believe a true believer to take all the bullshit and stay in. Maybe it gives meaning to their life, a purpose. Whatever. I just know these cult leaders are off in the head.

I salute. I don't want to cross this guy. One negative word to my higher-ups about my performance and I'm done for with this job. It's amazing how the power of life and death are in General's hands, even not on the battlefield.

"May I help you, sir?" I ask. I don't dare drop my salute until he returns it. Sometimes I swear they make you hold the salute pose to make themselves feel more important.

"Yes..." He's looking for my rank. His eyes just narrowed. He found it. "Specialist. This is the Special Operations Academic Facility, right?"

"Yes sir," I respond, still standing there like a chump as this guy talks to me without returning my salute. I want to take my hand down and shoot him a bird. I want to tell him to stick this ceremonial bullshit up his ass and shove it.

And then he returns my salute. I put my hand down as he walks over and leans on the desk.

"I'm supposed to give a lecture in room 247. How do I get there?"

I know right away something is fishy.

I look down at my schedule. Just as I suspected, nothing is happening today in room 247. This will be a tricky proposition. "Sir, are you positive today is the day? According to my schedule—"

"Your schedule is wrong." The General looked down at his paperwork. "According to this," he holds up the paper before slapping it down on the desk, "my class meets today. Now, all you need to do is tell me how to get there."

I look down at the paper. I see a date on it. It isn't today's date. It's tomorrow's. I am at the intersection of good sense. Do I try to point out the obvious or let him discover his own mistake? I take the road less traveled.

"Sir, but—"

"*Specialist*, just tell me where the fucking room is located. And not another word from your mouth."

I acquiesce. "Up the elevator, second floor and to the right." I have a job to protect. I can't just go around pointing out the mistakes of these cult leaders. They will command their cult followers to throw me to the wolves, and it will happen. I promise. You can't tell a fanatic anything they don't want to believe. And if the seaweed doesn't flow with the current, it gets uprooted and drifts away.

He's spinning in a circle, looking disoriented.

Exasperated, he questions, "Which way is the elevator?"

I point to it. I should have been more careful. Judging by his expression, I either made a face or he was embarrassed by his own stupidity and wanted to take it out on me.

“I don’t know who you think you are Specialist, but you have a bad attitude.” And with that he storms off and presses the elevator button. There’s an awkward two minute gap where he waits on the elevator to come to this floor. I sit in silence and he stares up at the numbers and watches the light descend integers.

Can you imagine the havoc in these hallways without me? Everyone jockeying for position around the map, fighting and shoving. No one willing to listen to a central authority. Pandemonium and mayhem everywhere with no central authority figure to interpose justice? People would spar over who was in charge. I am designated and everyone listens to me. I am the dictator and this is my kingdom. I know everything that happens here.

And now I practice my stealth skills hiding behind this desk. I am the man for this mission. It requires no overseas foreign time. These sterile white concrete hallways with the white tile, this is my deployment, this is my home. I patrol these borders and maintain the peace. I am a peacekeeper. I give direction. Without me, no one would know where to go. I am irreplaceable.

Who do I think I am? I’m Almost Forces.

Rose's mouth is set in a grim line. Her sour face, the one she used when she disapproved of my behavior as a child, the one she shows to Timmy and Tessa, my seven year old twins, the face that looks set in stone. I reach over to adjust a crimp in the shoulder strap of the seat belt, but Rose slaps my hand away. Not a push, but a hard slap. I would cry out, but if I began I would end up screaming .

Rose gives a desultory wave to my children and husband standing on the lawn.

"Bye, Grandma," the children call in unison.

"We'll all come next weekend, Rose, after you're settled," Peter adds.

Rose quickly turns her head away, her hands folded in her lap. Her eyes, staring straight ahead, have a glazed, faraway look.

Oh, Mama. Why are you making this so hard? You have to go to the Marcus Home. My marriage, my job, my children's lives. And yes, my sanity... No exaggeration, Mama. You're chipping away at all of it. Little by little. And you'll keep at it until there is nothing left.

Auntie Rose, then Mama Rose, then Mama. A gradual progression from the time I was three years old. Rose, a 45 year old spinster at the time. My father unknown, my mother a runaway. Rose, my mother's older sister, was my only relative

"Your mother just dumped you here and took off with her new boyfriend." Rose didn't believe in glossing over the truth. "Black is black and white is white. You can't make one become the other."

I remember little about my mother. Long blonde hair, silk against her skin. Mint in her kisses. To hide the booze, Rose said. I missed her and was scared of Rose. Tall and straight and plain. At first, I refused to switch over my love and call her Mama. She was Auntie Rose until I went to school and felt set apart, not having a mother. By then, we had become used to each other. There was a softening on each side, and Mama Rose came easily. Within three months it became simply Mama. It was a change that had pleased Rose.

"We'll get to the Marcus Home early enough to settle you in before lunch is served. In pleasant weather it's possible to take your lunch and eat it on the patio. But I told you that, didn't I?"

I might as well be talking to myself. Where is Rose's mind right now? How far back is she traveling? Several times in recent weeks, I've found Rose going through her photo albums and old papers. Receipts and invoices, ledger books, business cards and stationery—the detritus of a secretarial business Rose operated out of her apartment, working twice as long and twice as hard after I arrived.

"That's how it's got to be," Rose had said. "You need clothes and food and doctors when you're sick. Now go to your room and play quietly. Today's a work day."

Sunday, however, was the Lord's Day and Rose did not work. She provided me with opportunities to learn and to have fun on Sundays. The zoo, a museum, the ballet. In summer, picnics and trips to the beach. On Sundays, Rose was more human, less the automaton who sat at the typewriter for hours, clicking at the keys, her eyes seldom straying from the page. The speed of those fingers!

"Don't stand there watching me," Rose would say to me.

"Teach me, Mama."

By the time I was 12 I was producing professional looking work and earning my allowance by helping Rose after school.

"My daughter will do it," Rose would say. "She may be young, but she's quick and accurate."

Oh, Mama! I wish things could be otherwise.

I am grateful for what Rose had done for me, and I do for Rose as much as I can. But, Rose needs more now. A house with no stairs, help with bathing, reminders throughout the day to take her medication, more frequent trips to doctors.

"I have to go back to work, Mama. You'll be on your own."

"I'm capable of taking care of myself during the day." Rose had stretched herself up as far as she could, standing without her cane. "I can get my own lunch, and I won't forget my pills."

The screeching smoke alarm had alerted a neighbor. The call to my office to come home. Cold sweat and feeling faint when I hung up. A burned lunch that Rose had tried to prepare herself. What if...I couldn't bear to think about the what ifs.

"Just to sit in my chair," Rose had said. "Just to rest. I didn't mean to sleep. I didn't..." Rose, first contrite, then angry when I got some home help. Four different helpers and four failures. Oh, not the helpers. They were jewels and bore up well for a few weeks.

"An old folks home," Rose grumbled when I showed her several brochures. "Why bother asking me? You're making the decisions." Rose, from that day, said no more about the move. She had said no more about anything.

The Marcus Home, a stately colonial style house with four columns across the porch, was once a private home. The neighborhood had become mixed with few residences remaining. Most houses had been converted to medical and other professional offices, and some had been torn down to make way for retail stores.

A place of quiet and homey comforts, the Marcus brochure proclaimed. Today, I wonder about that. Weekends when I visited before, yes, but today, mid-week... Heavy traffic, impatient drivers honking, an idling truck spewing fumes in front of a grocery store. Still, it does have charm, an aura of gentility.

"Don't you think so, Mama? The Marcus? All those flowers. Aren't they lovely?" Rose walks unsteadily along the path, refusing to use her cane. She refuses to give in. I have to admire her for that. It was this trait that had enabled her to keep me with her

during lean times, her refusal to consign me to a foster home, to keep me out of the morass of Social Services.

Rose has shrunk. I hadn't really noticed how much before. Now I'm the tall, imposing one, the one in charge. *The bully daughter. Is that how you think of me, Mama?*

"Full of gray-haired old ladies and bald men." At the entrance to the lounge, Rose mumbles her first words in days. "Perhaps that's how I'll amuse myself. Count the shades of gray. How many would you guess? Seven? Eight?"

The administrator of the Marcus comes toward us, and Rose shuts down again. A thin man in his 60s wearing a dark suit with black tie. Giving him the once over, Rose's stone face becomes even harder. Funeral clothes. I can imagine Rose's thoughts.

The residents' rooms are in an annex added to the rear of the colonial house. Rose's room, on the second floor near the elevator, is a neutral room, the color of desert sand, neither offensive nor exciting. Bed, dresser, walls, drapes. Rose heads for the bed and sits on it, giving it a little bounce. On the desk is a sheaf of papers and a telephone.

"All the numbers you need are here," the administrator, Mr. Conroy says. "Housekeeping, nurse's office, my office. Everything's listed here. Meal times, church services, weekly shopping trips."

Rose begins to finger the emergency pull near the bed.

"Don't pull that!" Mr. Conroy shouts, "unless, of course, you have an emergency. There's one in the bathroom, too." He takes a step forward, looking like he's about to slap Rose's hand.

Rose tosses the cord aside, disgust spreading across her face. I know that look, the "I'm not stupid look," the one she gave to repairmen and auto mechanics and to me often enough.

"Is that part of the decor?" she asks, pointing to a green chair with pink cabbage roses, the only non-institutional furniture in the room. "Did the previous occupant die?"

"No, no. The woman moved to another residence, closer to her children. She didn't want the chair. We can remove it."

Rose leaves the bed and sits on the chair, taking a proprietary attitude, stroking its arms. "It's ugly. But I'll keep it. The derelicts of society, the chair and I. Superfluous, left over."

"There are suitcases and some boxes and a small television in my car," I tell Mr. Conroy before Rose hits her full stride. "May I have some help?"

Mr. Conroy sighs with relief at the exit cue. We leave Rose sitting on her new possession, stroking its arms and contemplating the rear garden from her window.

* * *

When I return with a porter and Rose's possessions, Rose is in the doorway talking to a stocky woman with steel-gray hair.

"No. She's my niece," Rose says. "I raised her. But she's not my daughter. I *never* had a daughter, not a *real* one."

The steel-haired woman nods as the porter and I push past her. *It's pay-back time, is that it, Mama? I thought we had forgotten that truth. We became Mother and Daughter. We are Mother and Daughter. You're my Mama and I became your little Mellie. I'm not going to fight with you, Mama, or explain to the woman. Throw your darts if it makes you feel better.*

Once back in the room Rose hands me my purse.

"I can stay, Mama. I took the day off, remember. I've got lots of time."

"No. I'm the one who has lots of time. It'll give me something to do. Go home."

She opens the door and gives me a push into the hall. "I'll walk you to the elevator," she says, suddenly taking on the attitude of a hostess.

"I'll call later," I say. "And I'll be back in two days with Peter and the children." I almost add, "I love you," but I'm afraid Rose won't repeat the words. Not now, not when she thinks I'm abandoning her like my mother abandoned me. *Is that what you're afraid of Mama? That I'm dumping you? I won't forget you here. I'll be back, often. And you'll visit. It's not the same. All right, all right! It is the same, in a way. But not the same. Oh, I want you to stay with us, but your health, the money, the house, the stairs...There is a difference, Mama. Don't you see?*

At the elevator Rose, refusing my hug and kiss, flutters her fingers in a dismissive good-bye.

* * *

In the parking lot, a woman about my age, is crying. She's having trouble finding her car keys. "I cry each time I visit my father," she says, looking up at me. "I feel so guilty. But I have no choice. Do you have a mother here, or father?"

"Neither," I say. "An aunt."

Perhaps Rose has found a way to ease her hurt, a way that would ease my guilt, as well. Not a daughter confining her mother to a home, but a niece with an aunt.

Concentrate upon the biological truth of the situation. What Rose hadn't said, but probably meant, was that a real daughter wouldn't leave her there. A real daughter would find another way.

"It's my aunt," I repeat. "My Aunt Rose."

repeating pattern #1: trains by trent reker

I roared across the countryside of middle america in a train, in a trip filled with hope and tears through the mountains of snow from san francisco and an ex-girlfriend.

awoke on the second day from a dream in a sweat. being chased by jeeps, a gang i started by being a show-off. i am a passenger and i yell "STOP!" in the middle of the night in the middle of nebraska roaring on and on with rhythmic beats of steel and earth pushing back into each other in a motion that propels me forward into my destiny. STOP! but i couldn't. at dinner time, the steward seats single passengers together at a table. it's time to get to know you, mister tattooed rock star junkie, meet mister traveling salesman who thinks trains are more personal than airplanes. he likes to meet people. he likes to talk. he's chubby and pink with a wide tie and with a huge smile with food on his teeth he greets me. next to him is another business type, out on a vacation, separated from his wife. next to him is emptiness and a cup of coffee.

i dreamt that dream the night before. i recognized people from my train car. they recognized me as the guy who screams in his sleep. madman with close-cropped hair and tattoos and piercings who never takes off his balorama sunglasses. rays banned. it's gamma time on cnn! next up, does the president really have a stick up his ass remote controlled by satan?

dance, rummy, dance!

in the dream i woke everybody up from, they didn't know how to do it right. i took the wheel and showed them how. your turn now. circles. over and over moving in an elevated parking lot like sky harbor airport over and over in repetition across the cement paveway lines between one and the next over and over kathump kathump kathump. the connection between the past and my future repeated. kathump kathump. i cannot make them stop driving in circles. kathump kathump kaSTOP!

people's eyes followed me out of the dinner car. muttering lips whispering who that was. it was me, yelling in my sleep, on my way to tennessee to see an old friend and my mom. i did not know that i was gonna beat the shit out of her boyfriend with one punch. he was a drunk who used her. my mother, some day she'll be okay to be alone. probably not.

i've just broken up with my girlfriend. she was the cousin of a girl i had a crush on years ago. it was with her that i first went to san francisco. we ran into each other at the haight street fair. i stand out in a crowd. she was not as cute anymore, had a kid, a boy she almost named after me but named him hunter instead. he was being babysat by some droopy-drawer yuppie in an omnipresent beige baseball cap, his father. remembering that first trip to the city now as i see her i stand in the land of the trolley train electric wires hung above the street like mechanical spiderwebs that keep the city together when the earth quakes in her shake-off get-off-me dance of self preservation. poor baby, her sustenance for granted, she wriggles free of the spider ropes tied about her. not so fast, momma. we gotta hold you down and graze upon you and poke into you and rise above you and use you up until we die. you'd probably like that, if we died.

thumpa thumpaka thump.

everything repeats itself.

i tried to win her back by buying a stained glass angel and mailing it from knoxville. it was the last contact i had with her. maria was her name. she worked at express making their store windows look pretty. she was a cute girl with hazel eyes, a blonde bobbed haircut and great tits. she hardly knew how beautiful she was. i should have told her more often.

we were in fresno to watch her best friend die. michelle was a bright young woman who gave jealousy to maria. maria who cried to me that i had more in common with this childhood friend in leukemia-stricken struggle than i did with her. she was right. i convinced her otherwise. we had spent a day driving around town and came home to park the car and then take a walk in the park up the hill off haight street where we lived. there was a phone message. come quickly, she's dying.

the 1975 baby blue super beetle never drove more stoically. san francisco to fresno to the hospital where she died that night before our eyes. i wanted to cry, but couldn't. now i am on a train in nebraska because the next day my girlfriend said she did not love me anymore.

that was ten years ago this summer. i screamed in my dreams. i rode through chicago and walked along the river alone with my own cup of coffee. i was going to tennessee to hang with an old friend who would let me down and to see my mom for the first time in seven years.

that's what she gets for being so fucking weak when i was fifteen and needed her.

my friend was too busy to spend more than one night hanging with me. he had a new girl. everything. repeats. he drove me half way to knoxville where i met my mom at a truck stop. i was shocked at how old she was.

it will be eight more years before i see her again. after three weeks, i beat up her boyfriend. he was a loser and a user and his drunkenness forced me to hide in a bedroom for a week reading bukowski, burroughs and hermann hesse. when i came out, i said something he didn't like. he replied with something i didn't like. i hit him in the face and knocked him on his ass. that was it. his jaw was bruised and they were driving me from knoxville to nashville to catch my train back home to san francisco as i seethed in the back seat of a beat up lincoln town car.

i was going to pack my stuff up and drive to phoenix to play in a rock band with my brother.

there is a dog asleep at my feet. we rescued him as we were saved on our way out of new orleans. we call him kat. he's a good boy, a purebred cocker spaniel about nine when we found him with heartworms and an ear infection. we healed him. he might not know it, but he healed us, too. there is nothing like the love of a dog when you are sad or angry. he hears me yell and runs up the stairs from a nap on the couch to sit beside me, looking up, what's the matter, daddy? i pet him for a minute and he lays down as i recite the typewritten past to remind myself that i can still tell a story.

he understands the trip to a safe place given by the luck of god and the struggle to find it. he lives for the moment and loves each passing day. our destiny is not complete. until it is, i am going to curl up on the carpet with him and dream.

Mr. Ferkins has never had to consult any parenting book before, having had no reason until now to believe that his son, Henry, is any different from any other twelve-year-old. But here he is, pouring over *Distance Kills: Reaching Out to Your Adolescent*, trying to find the section where they address the habit of talking to inanimate objects, and worrying about his son's sanity.

Said son is upstairs in his bedroom, sitting on a big overturned self-locking Tupperware container, conversing with a brontosaurus named Larry who lives in a cardboard box. His dad, Henry laments to Larry, is so stupid. He thinks he's talking to the *box*. How stupid is that?

Larry admits that it is rather stupid.

Henry thinks if his dad loved him he'd be more perceptive of Henry's thoughts.

Larry asks, Is that what love is?

Henry thinks so.

Larry disagrees. What you love doesn't need to think. What makes it beautiful is its ability to exist. It takes up space and changes one exact spot forever, just because at one moment it was there.

Henry wonders if, then, if that's really all there is to it, then can you love something that's not even real?

Larry says sure.

I love you, says the boy to his dinosaur.

Mr. Ferkins enters and demands to know once and for all why Henry is speaking to an empty cardboard box. But it's not just a cardboard box, Henry shouts, it's a beautiful rectangular space-filler, and inside is not emptiness no but a brontosaurus named Larry and though not rectangular he is a beautiful space-filler too.

And because he's overwhelmed and frustrated with his son and that stupid book downstairs, Mr. Ferkins grabs the cardboard box, runs outside, and tosses it onto the garbage truck that comes every Saturday morning and sure enough is passing by now, right on schedule. Henry reaches out for Larry but is dragged inside, and begins to cry. Mr. Ferkins says he's never seen a boy at Henry's age cry at something like this, and Henry should be ashamed of himself. So Henry runs to his room, gets in the big Tupperware container, and nudges the lid closed so his dad won't hear him cry.

Larry appears in a fog and says Henry should never be ashamed for loving something, regardless of whether it's real or not, and should get out of that container: he's embarrassing himself. And Henry, who's beginning to feel slightly claustrophobic in that container, tries to nudge it open again, but the self-locking seal has self-locked. So he starts crying again because he cannot open the container and the oxygen is running out and Larry's just a blurry haze now and he can't get out, he's stuck, he's trapped.

Later that day, the garbage truck empties its contents at a special facility where the plastic is separated from the paper, melted, and flattened into giant sheets to be sent to Tupperware for the production of new EvenMoreAirtight™ locking lids. Meanwhile, Mr. Ferkins, feeling guilty and insensitive, walks upstairs to check on how his son is doing.

Eddie stood before his father in the kitchen and received his Saturday morning orders. "Downstairs bathroom, cleaned as usual." "Yes, sir." His father was 'Big Will' to everyone except his sons. He gave Eddie a squeeze on the shoulder and then dismissed him. "I'm off to town. Keep an eye on your brother." Eddie looked into the den, where his younger brother, Little Will, sat cross-legged in front of the TV with a bowl of Bugles in his lap. Eddie ducked in to give Little Will a flick on the earlobe. "How come Dad never gives you any missions?" Little Will raised a palm and slowly wiggled his fingers, each of which he had capped with a Bugle. "All in due time, Lurch," he said in a cackley witch voice.

Eddie opened the cabinet under the bathroom sink and took out the bucket of cleaning supplies. Brushes in the back, sponges in the front, spray cans in the middle, all their labels facing forward.

Little Will stole out of the den and climbed the stairs. He walked into Eddie's room and wiped his palms on the front of his jeans and then blew a cool breath into each hand in turn. He stood at his big brother's dresser and admired his collection of electrical insulators. The heavy glass bell-shaped insulators, fallen from their perches high on the utility poles, were lined up like soldiers on the long, low bureau. Some were clear glass, others deep blue or bottle-green. He picked up a green one. He liked its heft, the way it fit in his palm, and its color, which reminded him of a Seven-Up bottle. When he put the insulator back he noticed his greasy prints on it. He wiped it on his jeans and then on his shirt, but that seemed to just rearrange the smudges. He carried the insulator to the bathroom and carefully cleaned it in the sink. As he turned to the towel rack, it slipped out of his hands and bounced off the tile floor. A spall of green glass the size of potato chip shot off the insulator and spun down to a rest in the hallway.

Eddie was cleaning the medicine cabinet mirror when he heard the sharp crack from upstairs. He took the stairs two at a time and found Little Will still standing in the bathroom with the broken insulator in his hands and a pallor about his face. His eyes were cast down at the chip of glass at Eddie's feet. "What the hell!" "I was just...It was dirty." Eddie took the pieces from Little Will's hands and inspected them. "You owe me a green Hemingray Number Forty," his voice high and cracking. "But I don't know where...," Little Will started. "I don't care. You owe me a green Hemingray Number Forty."

Eddie returned to his post, finished the mirror and began on the countertop. He worked fast and absent-mindedly, the anger bubbling up inside of him. He heard the screen door slam and looked down the center hall to see Little Will pedaling his new bike furiously down the gravel driveway. Eddie returned to his work but found himself doing it haphazardly, and that would never pass inspection. He thought about dumping all his chores on Little Will as payback, but his father would never allow that. Little Will

got everything, it seemed to Eddie—except the chores. So he slowed down and started over, and as he did, he began to feel the anger in his belly turning into a churning anxiety. It crept upward and tightened his chest and throat. He left the toilet brush sticking out of the bowl and raced for the garage and his bicycle.

Little Will let his bike fall in the tall grass at the base of the utility pole. He slipped off his belt and buckled its ends between two of his father's belts to form one giant one. He laughed as he tried to imagine how fat a man would have to be to need a belt this big. He looked up to the top of the pole, and when he shielded his eyes he could see the late morning sun shining through the green glass insulator. He hoped it was a Hemingray.

Eddie rode out past the grain elevators and over the railroad tracks, alternating his gaze between the fence lines and the tops of the utility poles. He looped through town but saw nothing of Little Will, just little kids on their bikes, little kids in plastic front-yard swimming pools, little kids in the park being watched over lovingly by their parents. Finally he rode the highway out of town. At the top of the rise on the outskirts he spotted a small figure starting up the pole at the end of a driveway. He dropped down into a crouch and pedaled hard, lifting his head just enough to keep an eye on the road and to steal glances at Little Will. He arrived at the base of the pole breathless and panicked. His first shout came out cracked and dry and was blown away by the wind. Little Will was nearing the top, with his feet on the metal footholds, leaning back slightly with the giant belt looped around the pole and the small of his back. He looked like a tiny lineman, but without the hardhat and without any sense of the dangers in the world.

"Will, get down!"

Eddie scrambled to the pole with arms and legs and pulled himself up to the first pair of footholds, his hands full of tar and the smell of creosote filling his nose.

"Will, come down."

"I'm almost there. I can't tell if it's a Hemingway."

"It's Hemingray."

"What?"

"It's Hemingray!"

"It is? Good."

"No, Will, it's not a Hemingray. Come down."

Little Will was already at the next set of footholds. He loosened his grip and let his weight sag back against the creaking belt. He held his hands to his face and blew into his palms.

Eddie yelled again, "Come down, that's not the one I need!"

"Hang on, I'm almost there." Little Will climbed higher, ducking his slim shoulders around the lowest row of wires.

Eddie felt a paralyzing numbness in his core, tightening his chest and choking off his speech. The day went silent except for the pounding in his chest. He could see the

tall grass swaying, but he couldn't hear the wind. He tried to climb, but his hands and feet no longer seemed to be a part of him. As he watched Little Will twisting his way up through the cables, he looked away and searched inside himself for some hope. Maybe this wasn't really happening. Maybe Will was small enough to move safely through the lines. Then he remembered how good Will had been the very first time they played *Operation*. How he had extracted the Broken Heart without a buzz or a blink of the fat man's red nose.

A shrill buzzing pierced the silence and brought the world rushing back to Eddie's ears. He couldn't tell if it was the cicadas, or the power lines, or his own electrified anxiety. He pulled himself close to the pole and stared straight ahead, too scared to shift his gaze, half-expecting to see Will's small frame falling through his field of vision.

Finally, from above, "How do I get it off?"

Eddie looked up. Little Will's body blocked the sun, so that its rays sparked out around his head like the halos in the stained glass windows at church. "It's not a Hemingway, Will. You got to come down."

Little Will's shadow lay across Eddie's face, and he could see something new there, something small and scared and desperate.

"So we're even?" asked Little Will.

"We're even."

The Usual by Richard Radford

For the first Sunday in twenty years, Arend Tensen overslept.

He woke up in horror. Sunlight was scintillating through the plaid curtains, splaying light across his dusty bedroom, and for a moment panic flowed through him. He had never seen the room in direct sunlight, always rising before dawn and going to bed at dusk. He stared at the dust motes trapped in the rays of light and held his breath, pulse beating in his neck.

My God, he thought, have I died?

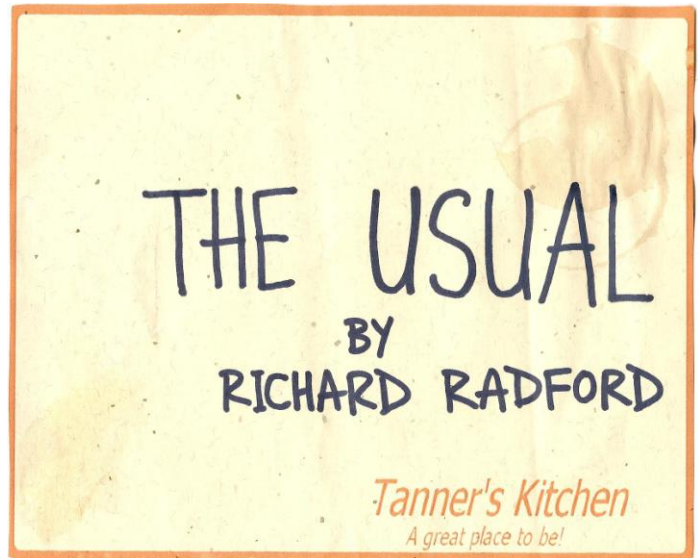
After the shock passed he looked at the alarm clock. It read four-thirteen. Picking it up and examining it, he saw that the second hand had stopped. He knew that he always wound his clock before bed, and twisted the key on the back. It was wound tight. He rapped the clock on the nightstand and the second hand began to tick. Checking his wristwatch, he set the clock to the correct time and smiled weakly.

I overslept, he thought. That's all it was.

At the breakfast table he hurriedly packed a pipe and clicked on the radio. Only an hour behind schedule, he knew that he would have time to check on his bees before breakfast. He had started it as a hobby, and enjoyed it immensely. The bees were always organized and systematic, and Arend liked to see them performing with consistent competence. He also had fresh honey saved up for the long winters.

He liked things that worked, proper order, systems that proved infallible. Sundays were his favorite: he woke up at precisely five-thirty, read the paper and drank the first cup of coffee of the day, packed a pipe, listened to the radio, then headed to Tanner's Kitchen at exactly seven. This ceremony had been kept up for the past two decades without interruption. The last time the rite was overlooked was the Sunday his wife died.

He was not an attractive man. Although not hideous nor grossly deformed, there was something unappealing in the asymmetry of his face. One ear was slightly higher than the other, the eyes were a bit too far apart, and a long broken nose rested over a large crooked mouth. When he was younger the skin was tight and made the lopsidedness of his face far more apparent. Now in his seventy-third year his epidermis



was heavily creased and drooping, giving the impression that his head was melting into his flannel collars.

The lankiness of his body, the stooping of his shoulders, and the clumsiness of his lengthy arms made him look hastily constructed. Those who saw him lurching along in his wide gait thought of a poorly treated beast of burden, or a geriatric circus bear out on a Sunday stroll. For all the world he was a monster, with the permanent crease of a frown. If one were to examine him closely, it would be seen that the only inconsistent feature of his inequitable frame was his hands. Although the fingers were gaunt and the joints were knobby, there was a certain delicacy to them. They could have belonged to an artist, or a surgeon. They were never utilized for anything so delicate, and instead were used to scoop feed and bait at Taylor's Farm & Feed for most of his life.

His physical appearance never plagued him. In fact he married young to a woman who loved him unconditionally, and after her death he drifted into retirement and was able to put his life in order extraordinarily well.

The sunlight had been deceiving. Despite the stark brightness of the day, for the first time in the year it felt like autumn. After sending a puff of breath off his doorstep, Arend apprehensively returned to his bedroom for an insulated flannel jacket, rushing back out of the room as quickly as possible without looking around it. He knew that the bees would be calm today with the brilliance of the sky, and he loped across the yard swinging the long metal bar he used to remove the sections of the hive. The frosted grass crackled under his feet.

Still several paces away, he stared at the white box with his crooked mouth hanging open. The drones were getting shoved out of the hive. The premature cold through the night had indicated to the bees that it was time to rid themselves of the unnecessary members of its collective. Many of the drones lay on the ground right around the hive, some still struggling to get back in, only to be turned back once again by the sentries. Arend dropped the bar and backed away without hesitation, then jumped in his car and immediately headed to breakfast.

Rattling down the highway in his car, Arend screwed up his face, attempting to articulate what had happened to him. He had been keeping bees for years now, and the sight of the drones' expulsion from the hive was nothing new to him. On the contrary, previously he had admired the functionality of the behavior. Food was scarcer in the cold, and the drones, who had fulfilled their only purpose to mate with the queen, would only be needy vagrants living off the collective. It only made sense. They would simply be destructive and worthless. They would do nothing for the collective but eat. Yet that had not been in his thoughts today as he stared aghast at the writhing bodies on the ground, desperately clinging to the legs of the white box, feebly attempting to force their way back in. Instead that same chilling feeling that had coursed through him upon waking ran up his spine and caused him to flee.

He had in fact been off his usual schedule, having a touch of the flu for a couple of weeks. He had almost been forced to cut the past couple of Sunday visits to Tanner's.

Perhaps, he thought, perhaps this is why it feels so strange...just getting back into the usual routine.

Arend arrived at Tanner's Kitchen and parked. For a moment he sat in the car staring at the building and warming his fingers in front of the dashboard's heater vents. Though Tanner's was, not unlike Arend himself, a rather unbalanced structure with makeshift patches over the rusty spots in the siding, he still felt better here than at his house. He had been eating at the diner for so many years it was like a second home to him, though in the past decade many of the familiar faces had been disappearing as age and disease and time carved its course. There always seemed to be something familiar, though, and familiarity was the conduit through which life flowed in his body.

Limping inside and taking his usual seat at a booth, Arend glanced around at the people lining the counter. It was a row of unfamiliar faces, and he frowned. *Surely not everybody I know is dead?* he thought, with a phlegmy harrumph, when suddenly a menu was shoved down in front of him.



"Good morning, sir," the young waitress said cheerfully. "Can I get you anything to drink for a start?"

"Where's Marlene?" Arend snapped without thinking. The waitress appeared a bit ruffled at this affront.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not sure who that is," she replied cautiously.

"Who're you?" Arend demanded. The waitress sighed.

"My name is Sandy."

"Oh," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, dear. I've been having a queer morning."

"That's okay, sir, do you need a few minutes or do you know what you'd like?"

"Just the usual...uh, Sandy." The waitress paused for a moment, and raised her eyes from the order pad to meet Arend's eyes.

"What's your usual?"

"It's what I always get," he said with a hint of irritation in his voice. The waitress scowled subtly, attempting to keep a pleasant demeanor.

"Sorry, sir, I just started here, I haven't gotten to know anybody's usual. If you can just tell me what it is I'll remember it next time you come in," the waitress said through a forced smile. Arend's gnarled face squinted impatiently, but slowly the

features twisted into a look of fear. He looked at the menu gripped in his hands, and then helplessly up at the waitress, who was beginning to become concerned.

"Sir, if you need some time-"

"C-coffee!" he shouted with sudden happy recall. "Coffee!" The waitress wrote on her pad.

"Good," she said. "And to eat?" Arend's face once again contorted into fear. The waitress gave him a sympathetic look.

"I'm not senile!" Arend shouted, and several of the diners turned their heads towards his booth. The waitress put her hand on top of his.

"It's okay sir, just keep your voice down...you can take all the time you need to remember your usual." Arend sat for a moment later, and then his long uneven lips parted slightly.

"I-I can't remember," he rasped.

Driving home, Arend stared absently at the road. The cold chill had come again, swept over him like a wave, and had dragged his inert body out into the depths. He couldn't focus his mind right now, but it was not unpleasant. The chill seemed to comfort him, and he smiled a crooked smile.

The rest of the meal had been unbearable. The young waitress had sat down at the table with him and spoken soothingly with him, even responding to his sudden angry outbursts of frustration with an even deportment. After several minutes of panicking, Arend finally got control of himself again enough to pretend to recall his order, pointing randomly at the menu. The food had arrived shortly and he had consumed it without looking at it.

He pulled his car up the driveway, calmly lurched across the lawn, passing by the bee box without as much as a glance at the corpses. He entered his house and walked up to his bedroom, pausing at the door to peek inside. It was as it had been earlier: bright, dusty, plaid curtains glowing, alarm clock ticking. The air was motionless, and he smiled. *It's so simple*, he thought, *why didn't I realize it earlier?* In the one moment it took him to pass between the door and the bed, Arend Tensen moved more gracefully than he ever had in his life, and the expression he wore was one of serenity. He carefully set his body down on the bed, and with a deep breath gazed at the ceiling, waiting peacefully. In a short time, the clock stopped ticking.

Editor's Note

Photographs © Richard Radford

Peas of a Pod by Jonathon Maisel

So, I'm playin' *Risk* with the boys. You know, that old Parker Brothers board game of world domination. It's a freakin' blast conquering the world, and with us, as close to a ritual as we got, seein' that we're not into voodoo, head-hunting, cannibalism or any of that crap.

It's a quarter past ten according to the basement clock, Cheap Trick's on the radio, some black and white Gable movie's on the tube, ice-cold Michelobs are in hand, and that nasty old rancid smoke from Art Sully's Tiparillo hangs in the air. It's me Jerry Draper, Sully of course from advanced Algebra, "Patch" Grier, our own one-eyed version of Moshe Dayan who lost his left eye in a freak-accident at golf camp of all places, and the always gassy Dale Mayweather whose increasingly audible expulsions mix with the pungent cigar smoke to create a stale, musty impenetrable fog.

I'm cleanin' up the place, takin' over the whole darn world, which wouldn't be such a noteworthy deal, except there's an old wrinkly green note courtesy of the U.S. Mint, the type with Andrew Jackson's face on it, for the winner. All I need is Yakutsk, Alberta, Peru, Venezuela, and Northwest Territory and I'll have enough for that new Zebco fishin' reel from the Hobby Hut down on Twelfth and Jenkins, just in time for the start of trout season. I got the die in hand, shakin' em up, ready to roll...

And that's when my damn cell phone rings. And wouldn't you know, it's Dad's new wife, fourth in line, the born-again, ten years his junior, the phony one who I'm supposed to start callin' 'Mom'.

"Jerry, you were supposed to be home half an hour ago."

"Come on, for Pete's sake, a half an hour more is all I'm askin' for," I plead. "It's a matter of life and death." And "I know there's school tomorrow, but I'm fourteen years old for Christ sake!" And "I'm sorry *Mom*, I didn't mean to take Jesus' name in vain."

So she tells me in that squeaky, ungodly Rosie Perez voice of hers that I have exactly five minutes to get home or she'll call my father at the power plant and tell him I'm being "confrontational and belligerent again," and then I know there'll really be real hell to pay. And "No," say the guys when I ask for my part of the pot back, you put your fiver in fair-and-square and it's non-negotiable. Sorry Charlie. And as I'm walkin' out the door lightin' up a Parliament, head down, pissed off as the friggin' Dickens, I get to thinkin' about some guy we learned about in Old Mister Lemmon's history class, that guy who they say wept 'cause he had no more worlds left to conquer. And that's when, what our high-school guidance counselor Thomas "Bubble-butt" McVickers terms my "rather fertile imagination," takes over and transports my dejected self to...

*

...somewhere out in a tent in the middle of the barren and desolate desert. A sudden sandstorm whips up and a phone begins to...

R-r-ring! R-r-ring!

“Hello. Alexander the Great speaking. How can I help you?”

“Alexander, this is your mother. I need you to come home right away please. I have just started my spring cleaning and I need your help getting some things down from the top shelf in the closet.”

“Uh...Mom...you’ve actually reached me at kind of a bad time.”

“A bad time, you say? Is this my son speaking? You know, maybe I’ve dialed the wrong number and reached a different Alexander *the Great*, because this does *not* sound like my sweet son who would do anything to help his poor little mother!”

“Mom...stop it. I’m in the middle of something important. *Really important*. Can’t this wait?”

“How long?”

“Nine months?”

“You know...you were a lot nicer when you were just plain old Alexander. Since you’ve become *the Great*, you’ve undergone some rather unpleasant changes. I really think this fame and popularity has gone to your head!”

“Aww Mom, I-I just have India left to go, and then just a couple of small places left to mop up and then...the world is mine.”

“*I DON’T CARE!*” You get yourself back to Macedonia. *NOW! NO EXCUSES!*”

“But Mom, what am I gonna tell all the guys?”

“**NOW!!**”

The phone clicks. Alexander turns to the generals seated around him in the tent. He wears a disconcerted grimace as he addresses his men...

“U-Uhh guys. Th-this is a little embarrassing, but I-I have to go home. Mom’s orders. Sorry men, maybe we’ll have some good weather for waging war next spring.”

*

And I know there were no damned telephones back in 320 B.C. for Christ-sake. But through my utter dejection, I just can’t help thinking...

You and me Alexander...we’re peas of a freakin’ pod.

Editor’s Note

Peas of a Pod was voted the *Story of the Month* during December.