

# Bartleby Snopes Issue 10



A Literary Magazine

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#### Submission Information

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Bartleby Snopes  
Issue 10

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## Story of the Month Winners

*Each month we publish 8 stories and host a Story of the Month contest. The Story of the Month winners are chosen by the readers of Bartleby Snopes.*

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## The Incomplete Sentence by Kate Folk

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**A**nne had to buy eggs because her boyfriend, Tim, wanted to make a quiche. Tim was an engineer whose company built skyways and pedestrian tunnels. Anne wrote sentence completion questions for a standardized testing company called TESTI, which was not an acronym for anything.

Because Tim's job was so lucrative and \_\_\_\_\_, Anne was expected to complete all the \_\_\_\_\_ duties.

- a) edifying.....subsidiary
- b) onerous.....domestic
- c) engrossing.....autocratic
- d) lethal.....compensatory

It was an unseasonably warm day in March. Anne preferred cold weather, which kept nature's unhygienic parts gelled into place. Warm days made everything soften and ooze.

Anne's office was abuzz with outdoor lunch plans. Tanya, a dumb woman who worked a few desks over, kept asking loud, rhetorical questions about the weather.

"How about that weather today? Did you ever see a finer day in March?"

Anne put on headphones and kept her face close to the computer screen.

Anne hadn't brought anything for lunch. She waited until Tanya and the others had gone outside to eat their lunches on a patch of grass under the flagpole. Then she went into the break room. From the communal fridge, she borrowed someone's apple and a container of Greek yogurt. She went to the supply room to eat these things, one hand gripping the door handle.

Anne got off at four. She took the stairs down from her tenth floor office, so she wouldn't have to talk to anyone in the elevator. On the western horizon a band of storm clouds loomed, fuzzily bordered, the color of bruises.

Because that day's weather had been \_\_\_\_\_, the villagers were \_\_\_\_\_ when their homes were leveled by a category five tornado.

- a) tempestuous.....placid
- b) capricious.....perturbed
- c) idyllic.....dismayed
- d) timorous.....consoled

Anne stopped at Hy-Vee Grocery on her way home. It should have been a simple errand, but Anne could not find the eggs. They were not in the cheese and yogurt aisle, nor in some annex to the milk case.

Anne finally found the eggs where they had no right to be, in the alcohol section, at the end of a refrigerated wall of six packs. There were many kinds to choose from. Anne was annoyed at Tim for wanting to cook. Usually they got take-out or ate simple things from a box.

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While Anne was mulling the implications of her preference for white eggs over brown ones, she felt something jab the tender skin of her back, above her right kidney. She turned to find that an old man had poked her with his rubber-tipped cane.

"You mind?" the old man said. "I need to get at them eggs. You're in my way."

The cane was still extended, ready for another prodding. Anne moved aside, and the old man hobbled forward and leaned close to the eggs.

"Excuse me, sir," Anne said. "I don't appreciate you touching me like that."

The old man mumbled into the eggs.

"Hey. I'm talking to you." A ball of anger had formed in Anne's chest. The same ache as when she swallowed a large pill without water. Anne touched the old man's arm.

"Get your hands off me!"

"You can't go around poking people with your cane. A simple 'excuse me' would have sufficed."

"Don't make me take you over my knee," the old man growled.

The ball of anger had sprouted tendrils that clutched at Anne's chest. Blood rushed to her extremities, and her fingertips tingled. All her constituent parts lusted for retaliation.

The geriatric man's \_\_\_\_\_ appearance was deceptive, as his behavior revealed him to be a \_\_\_\_\_.

- a) anodyne.....tyrant
- b) bestial.....dilettante
- c) farcical.....harlequin
- d) innocuous.....buffoon

Anne went to the cleaning aisle and found a mop, its rectangular head sealed in plastic. She stood behind the old man and pushed the mop's handle into the folds of his cardigan.

At the moment of contact, the old man shrieked and collapsed. Anne imagined the xylophone sound of bones clattering together. Her anger was absorbed into a sponge-like apparatus of fear. The ceilings were dotted with cameras, concealed within black semi-domes. Anne was careful not to look up as she edged into the wine aisle, set down her basket and walked out of the store.

The purple band had swelled to a seething purple mass that choked the western third of the sky. Anne stopped at a gas station, bought a pack of Camels, and lit one just as the first fat raindrops hit her windshield.

Anne was chain smoking on the front porch when Tim's BMW pulled into the carport. She waited for him to say something about the cigarettes, so she could point out that he'd finished the last of the ice cream without telling her so she could buy more. But Tim just smiled and went inside. Anne stood in the doorway while Tim loosened his silk tie.

"I tried to get groceries today," Anne said.

"Good."

"I know you wanted eggs so you could make a quiche."

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"Not tonight. Too tired. Thought we'd get Chinese."

Tim began to whistle. He climbed the stairs. "Can you call? You know what I like, but get whatever you want."

Tim, a typically \_\_\_\_\_ person, was surprisingly \_\_\_\_\_ when it came to his girlfriend's feelings.

- a) obsequious.....attentive
- b) subversive.....supercilious
- c) perspicacious.....obtuse
- d) brash.....opalescent

Anne could have wept. She hit 6 on the speed dial. She had China Delight's menu memorized, and rattled off items like lottery numbers. The food arrived quickly, delivered by an overweight teenager who appeared to be on drugs. He had taken no precautions against the rain. His bushy eyebrows provided awnings for his sad, red eyes.

Tim came back downstairs, having showered and donned his Ralph Lauren pajamas. Anne set out chopsticks and glasses of wine. She bristled when Tim asked for a fork; she had long suspected that Tim only pretended not to know how to use chopsticks.

They opened the cartons, and the dining room filled with steam. Anne picked at her food while Tim told a story about a practical joke they'd played on one of the temps.

"You should've seen the look on his face!" Tim said, slapping his thigh. His face sobered when he realized Anne wasn't laughing. "How was your day? Write some good fill-in-the-blank questions?"

Anne couldn't tell Tim about the old man. He wouldn't understand. He might even insist she call Hy-Vee and turn herself in. So Anne just said, "Nice day, huh?"

"Gorgeous, just gorgeous!" Tim gushed. "Me and the guys threw a Frisbee around at lunch!"

The rain continued through the night. Toward morning, Anne woke from a disturbing dream about the sentient mops in Disney's Fantasia.

The sky was clear the next morning. The rain had driven up earthworms from the soil, and their swollen purple bodies littered the sidewalks. On the short walk to her car, Anne impaled four worms under the sharp heels of her shoes.

The worms were so \_\_\_\_\_ that killing them seemed an act not of cruelty, but of \_\_\_\_\_.

- a) lackadaisical.....serendipity
- b) forlorn.....compassion
- c) impetuous.....malevolence
- d) strident.....beneficence

Anne read the local news online, refreshing the page every ten minutes. She found no reports of the old man's condition, so she switched to the obituary page to see if he'd turned up there. Nothing.

What had she done with the mop? This sudden thought sucked the air from her lungs. She must have leaned it against something. Not the glass case; she would have been disturbed, even in her panic, to have created an obstacle to the imported beer. Nor

would she have simply let the mop clatter to the floor. Anne cursed herself for not wiping the handle clean of her fingerprints.

11:30 a.m., and still no news on the old man. Anne strolled casually through the break room. Several people were in there, waiting in an informal queue for the microwave. Anne couldn't risk sampling someone else's food, and her dollar bills were too damp and crumpled for the vending machine.

Anne returned to her desk. She was tortured by hunger and remorse. Her work was suffering.

The \_\_\_\_\_ girl had no friends; eventually, she drowned herself.

- a) forsaken
- b) vapid
- c) promiscuous
- d) codependent

Anne was forced to scrap all the questions she wrote that day. She knew it was time to confide in someone about the old man.

When she got home, Anne vacuumed, showered, and put on a crisp white dress. She sat on the couch with her legs folded beneath her. She knew that a wholesome first impression would be vital to Tim's reception of her tale.

Tim whistled his way across the front porch and into the house. Anne asked him to sit.

"I'm gonna hit the showers."

"It'll only take a minute. I have something to tell you."

Tim's eyes widened predictably when Anne described poking the old man with the mop.

"I thought you were over this shit," Tim said.

Anne's eyes shone with incipient tears.

"You need to go back to therapy."

"He started it."

"He's an old man!"

"So that means he gets to assault people?"

"He could have been senile. He could have Alzheimer's. He could be a veteran, Anne!"

The threat of tears hadn't worked, so Anne drew her knees in to her chest and glared at Tim.

"Fuck him," Anne said. "He's an asshole."

"I'm calling Hy-Vee," Tim said. He plucked the phone from its charging cradle.

"No!" Anne leaped off the couch and wrestled the phone from him. She promised to confess the next day.

"And buy some damn groceries, while you're at it," Tim said.

Anne loathed Tim's fits of sanctimony. She had long allowed him to suckle self-esteem from her pathological quirks. Though she didn't want to hurt him, Anne knew Tim would have to pay for his disloyalty.

The next day, Thursday, was Anne's day off. She drove across town to the Super Wal-Mart, where she bought groceries. She also bought a Styrofoam tray of discounted pork chops.

When Anne got home, she unwrapped the pork and put it on the back patio to let it sweat in the sun. An hour later, she hosed it off.

When Tim came home, a steaming pot of sweet and sour pork chops awaited him. Anne had also prepared rice pilaf and a spinach salad.

Annette, an already \_\_\_\_\_ woman, sometimes pretended to be on a diet so that she wouldn't be expected to eat certain \_\_\_\_\_ foods.

- a) moribund.....delectable
- b) wanton.....malleable
- c) lissome.....unpalatable
- d) corpulent.....putrescent

Tim sat down and rolled up his sleeves.

"Jesus, this looks amazing," Tim said. "All I had for lunch was a hot dog."

But before he pierced the meat with his fork, Tim paused and fixed Anne with a stern look.

"Anne, did you ask about the old man?"

"He was fine," Anne said quickly. "He's given them trouble before. I talked to his son."

"Good for you, Anne! I'm glad you did that. Don't you feel better?"

Anne nodded. She watched Tim devour three pork chops, which she'd made according to his mother's recipe.

The next morning, Tim had diarrhea. He called in sick. Though physically weakened, he was still in good spirits.

"I've been working too hard," he said. "This must be my body's way of telling me to take it easy!"

Anne received the call shortly after lunch; Tim had taken a cab to the emergency room. Anne continued writing sentence completion questions until four o'clock. Then she went to the hospital.

Tim was hitched to machines by tubes in his chest and left arm. His skin had the smooth, waxy appearance of processed cheese.

"The doctors said it must be something I ate," Tim said. "Probably the hot dog."

Anne dabbed Tim's sweaty forehead with a paper towel. "Definitely the hot dog," she said. "Those street vendors are filthy."

The nurse came in, and said that Tim would have to stay overnight. Anne was alarmed, and felt a twinge of remorse. She had not expected him to suffer quite so much.

At work the next day, Anne accidentally mentioned Tim's illness to Tanya. Tanya promptly created an email prayer chain for Tim. Then she lingered by Anne's desk, racking her feeble brain for new ways to inquire about Tim's condition. She told Anne stories of her own experiences with food poisoning.

"Dehydration's the real killer," Tanya said.

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Anne couldn't let Tanya's prayer email take credit for Tim's recovery. She went into the supply closet to make her own deal with God. Kneeling in the dark next to the broken copy machine, she whispered the terms of the agreement. If she went to Hy-Vee and confessed about the old man, Tim would recover.

Anne worked through lunch and left at three, driving straight to Hy-Vee. She approached the first employee she saw. A pudgy girl, chewing gum and fumbling in the pockets of her apron.

"Excuse me," Anne said. "On Monday, I had an incident with an old man. It was in the egg and beer aisle."

The girl's bovine jaw worked the wad of gum.

"The eggs are in a very impractical place," Anne said. "By the beer. Across from the wine."

"Oh. Aisle two."

"He screamed and fell down. He might have been injured."

The girl shrugged. "I don't know nothing about that."

Anne turned from the useless girl and stalked the perimeter of the store, finding no trace of the old man. She sat on a bench outside to wait and watch. After an hour, Anne decided that since God probably didn't exist anyway, she might as well go home and watch Wheel of Fortune.

When Anne got home, an unfamiliar car was in the driveway. A white Kia, in Anne's spot.

"Anne!" Tanya said. She waved from the kitchen, where she stood over the stove, stirring a pot of something. Tim was in his recliner, reading the newspaper.

"Where have you been?" Tim said. "I called your phone about fifty times."

"Oh, I hope you don't mind, Anne!" Tanya said. "Your work line kept ringing and ringing. Finally I thought I should answer the darn thing, it could be important!"

"Tanya's been wonderful. She's making chicken noodle soup."

Tanya turned down the heat and put a lid on the pot. She wiped her fingers on Anne's favorite dish towel. "Just let it simmer. In an hour it'll be good to go."

"Tanya, please stay for dinner," Tim said.

"Oh, I don't know . . . would that be okay with you, Anne?"

Tanya and Tim looked at her expectantly. Inches from Anne's left shoulder, Tanya's purse hung from the coat rack like an ugly gray fruit.

Anne closed her eyes and breathed the smell of soup.

"Of course you should stay for dinner," Anne said. Tim nodded and looked back to his paper. Tanya affected a small celebratory dance, then resumed her vigil over the soup.

Anne plunged her hand into Tanya's purse and grabbed her keys. "I have to borrow your car," Anne said. She ran out before they could react.

Anne drove east. In two hours she had crossed the Mississippi into Illinois. She continued driving to O'Hare airport, where she dumped Tanya's car in the long term

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parking garage. As she drove, Anne's thoughts centered on the last sentence completion question she would ever write.

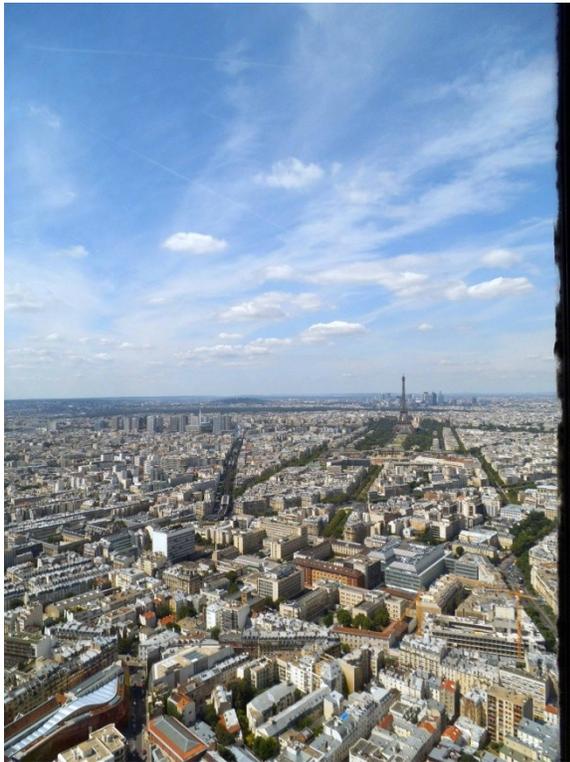
Although a potentially \_\_\_\_\_ food to those with illnesses affecting the throat, soup is an \_\_\_\_\_ choice for people suffering gastric maladies.

- a) misanthropic.....efficacious
- b) deprecatory.....archaic
- c) palliative.....asinine
- d) salubrious.....adroit

Anne wrote the question on a scrap of paper and placed it on the dashboard. She locked the keys in the car and walked toward the elevators, prepared for some sort of surrender.

Editor's Note

***The Incomplete Sentence*** was our January Story of the Month.



"Horizon á l'ouest" © Chris Fradkin

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## Fenway by Jeff Marcus Wheeler

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The house we lived in had a red, "Sold" magnet stuck over the yellow tin "For Sale" sign in our front yard. I gave the sign a slap as I got home from school before hopping the fence into the back yard to wrestle with my St. Bernard, Fenway, named for the celebrated stadium the Boston Red Sox call home. "Fenway, Come here boy. Fenway." I got down into a crouch and braced myself for an impact that didn't come. "Fen-way!"

I ran inside and asked my mom if she let Fenway in the house. She was wrapping our plates and bowls in newspaper and putting them in a box she had already written "Dishes" on with a Sharpie. She said "Of course not," and reminded me that he was an outside dog and asked if the gate was open? She said that maybe he got out.

"No. The gate was shut," I said. I was positive that it was latched when I got home, so I told her I was going to ride my bike around to look for him. I double-checked the gate before setting off on my Huffy that was a little too small for me. I went up and down our street three times before deciding to head toward the baseball diamond and then across town to the old cemetery. I asked neighbors and strangers along the way if they'd seen a St. Bernard. Nobody had seen my dog.

I pulled up to the house and my mom was out front watering her hydrangeas and said, "Oh Honey, I told you that the gate was probably open." I looked again to find the gate now open and swinging.

When my dad finally got home from work he stepped out of his pick-up with a new Red Sox hat in his hand that he wordlessly handed me. I said, "Thank you" and put the hat on, uninterested in why I was receiving the gift. "Dad, Fenway's gone. We've gotta find him," I pleaded. He lumbered across the yard like a gangster, kissed my mom and told me to get in the truck.

I slid across the bench seat, closer to my dad, to have a better view out of every window when he asked, "Have you thought about what color you want to paint your new room?" I didn't answer but he didn't seem to notice and kept on. "There'll be a lot of new things in Cedar Springs. New room, new school, new friends," he looked at me, "new TV channels," he laughed and nudged me with his elbow. "It'll be real different at first. We're gonna have to stick together. But, I've got a good feeling about it. A real good feeling." We drove around town – up and down each street – but we didn't find Fenway. I asked if we could check nearby Machias or even Ackley Pond but it was time for dinner.

Back home we ate chicken casserole. "No hats at the dinner table," my Mom told me and I took off my new cap, placing it on the ground under my chair.

Afterwards, as I cleared the table, she reminded me that I still needed to finish packing up my room. I threw away the last of the paper plates and asked if someone would take me back out to look for Fenway a little while longer.

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"What did I just say?" Mom asked, as she poured gin and tonics. "We need you to pack. Come on. Help us out."

"Can we go tomorrow?" I asked.

"Probably. We'll see."

"Dad?"

"I said, 'We'll see,'" my mom snapped and handed my dad his drink.

That night I didn't get much packed. I went right to bed, though I couldn't sleep. I kept looking at the spot where Fenway would lay, every night, snoring and farting in his sleep. I loved the disgusting noises that dog could make.

On one occasion a few years before, when I was only a pup myself, I leaned my face in next to his to listen to the rough sounds of his sleep. In a startle and without thinking, a ten-month-old Fenway woke up and snapped at my face with his sharp puppy teeth. It took six stitches to mend the wound and a visit from a police officer to determine that Fenway was fit to remain a pet in our home.



I rolled over in my bed and looked at the picture of Fenway and me in a pile of yellow and orange leaves, that I had in a cheap plastic frame on my nightstand. I touched my upper lip and fingered the tiny, almost unnoticeable scar and cried.

At around two or three in the morning I got up and emptied my nightstand drawer onto the matted carpet of my room. I threw away everything from the drawer except the Trapper-Keeper that housed my baseball cards. I flipped through the plastic sheets of the binder and moved all of the Red Sox players from the front four pages to the middle where I had everyone sorted by position. I pulled the picture of Fenway and me out of the frame and tucked it between the cover and the first page before placing the binder in the bottom of one of the boxes I was suppose to fill with my things.

I spent the next three days determined, riding my bike up and down the fields near the house and through the parks in our town. I hiked the nine-mile

loop trail along the Cutler Coast calling his name and I went door-to-door to homes and

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businesses asking if anybody had seen my dog. Each night my mom asked me how school was and I'd say it was fine. Each morning I'd throw out my sack lunch in a neighbor's trash can and set out again to spend every minute I could that day looking for Fenway.

After the third day of my search my parents were waiting for me when I got home. They were furious. *Where the hell have I been? Why haven't I been at school? Why isn't my room packed? He is JUST a dog.*

"I'm not going *anywhere* without him!" I wailed desperately. "You'll have to leave without me."

I was slapped for talking back, and slapped again when I said that I hated them. My mother's ring had cut me under my right eye and a trickle of blood started to fall down my cheek. I touched my face and rubbed the blood between my thumb and finger as I looked at her. "Why won't you help me?"

She turned away, crying, and my father sent me to my room. "You can't talk to your mom like that, buddy."

That night she opened my door and said that she'd, "spend all day tomorrow looking for Fenway," while I was at school. She brushed my hair with her hand and kissed me on the forehead before saying she was sorry. I never opened my eyes.

The next morning I went to school for the last time and knew she wouldn't find him.

We moved two days later. As we drove away my mother leaned over and wiped away my tears telling me that everything was going to be okay. That I was going to love Cedar Springs. "It would have been really hard to move across the country with a dog," she said.

When we stopped for gas a few hours later I said that I was going to the bathroom but after I locked the door behind me I wiped my eyes and threw out my Red Sox hat instead.

### Editor's Note

**Fenway** was our February Story of the Month.

Photograph – "Loss" © Frank Cademartori

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## The Stana Yurich Snatching by Refe Tuma

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**W**e started playing the Stana Yurich Snatching just after school ended. Jared Baumgartner came up with the name, but I told him about Stana. I heard about her on the way to his house. My mom was listening to the radio in the car. I wasn't paying it much attention; it was just a hum, like when you ride your bike under the power lines, until she put her hand up to her mouth and said "Oh God," and turned it up.

"What's going on?" I said. She shook her head and said "Poor thing," like she hadn't heard me. The voice on the radio had that stuffed-up sound people get when they've been crying.

*"—I called and called for her, but she didn't come down."*

I stuck my head between the front seats and said "Who?" I could see her lips moving. It always embarrassed me when she prayed. "Who?" I said.

*"I went up the stairs, and—oh God! I was going to yell at her. I was going to yell at her!"*

*"Take your time Mrs. Yurich. We know how difficult this must be for you. What did you find when you went upstairs?"*

*"She was gone. My Stana was gone."*

My mom reached for the dial and clicked off the radio. She asked me if I knew the missing girl. I said no.

"You wouldn't, I guess. She goes to Woodford."

There were two elementary schools in our town, Woodford and Lincoln. I went to Lincoln. The only time I ever saw anyone from Woodford was at soccer practice, since there were kids from both schools on my team. All boys, though.

When we pulled into Jared's driveway he was waiting on the porch. He tried to run up to meet us and my mom had to shoo him out of the way so she didn't run him over.

#

I told Jared the news, how a girl named Stana Yurich had disappeared during the night and how nobody knew where she was, not even her mom and dad. I pressed my toe into a strip of tar on the driveway and said "The cops will find her." He told me that one of his cousins went missing once, but it turned out she had run away to go live with her boyfriend and have a baby. I asked if that meant the baby was his cousin too, and he shrugged and said "I'm not sure. We never really see her anyway."

Jared got his bow and arrows, the kind with suction cups for tips. He gave me his sling shot. It had a broken wrist strap, but he said "It still works, see?" and shot an acorn up onto the roof. It bounced down the shingles and got stuck in the gutter. We played detectives. Our case was the Stana Yurich Snatching, and we were the only ones who could solve it. We knew that detectives didn't use bows and arrows and slingshots, but in the game they were shotguns and tazers.

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Everything was a clue: the suspicious looking stick we dusted for prints, the gum wrapper wadded with half-chewed gum we checked for the kidnapper's germs. We found two empty pop cans near the gum and figured out that it was *kidnappers*, not *kidnapper*. I wrote every clue in a notebook that Jared's mom let us use. Jared said "We should put the clues in a safe and lock it up so the bad guys can't steal them," but I said "No, we need to look at them for a while until it all comes together."

Some nights we heard the racing heartbeat of helicopter blades circling the forest preserve outside our neighborhood. Once we even saw policemen lined up in a row, walking slowly though a field with German shepherds and long poles. Jared and I watched from the road, straddling our bikes. My mom didn't let me ride my bike without a grown up anymore, but Jared's mom still did. Those times were real, not part of our



game.

The kidnappers turned out to be the mob, at least the first time we played. They held Stana for ransom—a million dollars—and her mom and dad had to sell their car and all their stuff to come up with the money. After that, they were gang bangers who needed her to squeeze into a warehouse full of drugs because she was the only one small enough to fit.

Another time they were from China, and a few times they were aliens. The aliens sucked her up with a big green tractor beam through a hole they made in the ceiling. They closed it up with a hologram so it wouldn't come together for us, but we figured it out anyway.

Once Jared said that when we found her, Stana would give us each a kiss. I said "Girls don't kiss detectives, they're just doing their job," but I thought about it later and decided that maybe she would.

#

Jared and I played the Stana Yurich Snatching nearly every day that summer. Stana was still missing. The news talked about her every day in the beginning. Soon they only mentioned her when they covered the investigation into her mom and dad.

*"—I was with Alenka the night her daughter disappeared, that's how I know. She was still drinking when I left. She always drank when her husband was on one of his trips."*

By the time school started we were both a little tired of the game. We ended up with different teachers, so we didn't see each other much. I played video games at Tommy Dieter's house after school, and sometimes I saw Jared riding his bike with the two blonde-haired girls that lived at the end of his block. When we did see each other, we didn't talk about the Stana Yurich Snatching. Jared said it was a kid game, and we're too old for make believe. I said "Yeah," but for a while I wasn't sure I meant it.

It wasn't until almost Christmas that they found her. It snowed hard the night before and school was cancelled. My mom and I had spent the morning eating pancakes and watching Christmas movies on TV. I was all bundled up, lacing my boots, when the news came on. My mom called for me to wait, something had happened. The pond next to Woodford Elementary had frozen over, and some kids were sliding around the ice on their sneakers when one of them saw a ghost.

It was Stana, staring up through the ice.

The reporter said she was probably killed around the time she disappeared. A man I didn't recognize was arrested, and so was Stana's mom. Mrs. Yurich looked a lot different than she had that summer, when she was always wiping her eyes and pleading with the camera to bring her baby back. Now she never looked at the camera. She just walked behind the policemen with her eyes closed and her lips pressed together. It was like she put on a mask, or maybe took one off.

My mom put her arm around my shoulders and squeezed them real tight. She kept saying "It's ok, it's ok," like I was crying. After a while I did cry, a little. I had spent the summer searching for Stana Yurich, rescuing her, even kissing her sometimes, but it was all make believe.

My mom asked me if I wanted to invite Jared over to play, but I said no. I wasn't sure he'd come, and I didn't want anyone disturbing the snow just yet; not even me. She kissed my forehead and said "Stay close" and let me outside. I walked a few feet from the door and stood still, looking out over the unbroken snow. I thought about the pond at Woodford, and about Stana. I could see her, frozen under glass like a princess from a fairytale; like she was really just asleep, not dead and falling apart.

### Editor's Note

***The Stana Yurich Snatching*** was our March Story of the Month.

Photograph © Aaron James

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## Solitary Swedish Houses by Gwyn Ruddell Lewis

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I am large, strong and my hands are as soft as the day I lost my mother. She left this world giving birth to me. I am not so old and it is strange to think that these kinds of things still happen. Facing me, across the fjord, I see the cottage I had been told about. The cottage behind me is small, with white paint peeling away. The windows are black. That is the cottage where I lived as a small child. Just me and Father. The cottage across the fjord has brightly lit windows that stand out white, the rest of the cottage a black silhouette. I am about to swim out to that cottage, hoping to meet someone half way. The water is cold. The moonlight, reflecting on the fjord's gentle peaks, hides its dark depths. It is almost winter and the fjord has not yet frozen, but it will in a few days, I feel the fresh bite of it.

The locals - living in sporadic houses, spread thin in nature, somehow centered on the small white rectangle and tall square steeple of the Lutheran church—talk of a large salmon living in these waters. The stories have been going around for thirty years, much longer than the lifespan of a salmon. There is superstitious whisper about the salmon.

Although she was gone from me on the day I came to this world, I did not feel that I completely missed my mother until the day we moved to London. Father had married a narcissist, an awful stepmother formed in the mould of German fairy tales.

Before London, before the stepmother, Father taught me to tickle salmon. In our cottage, quietly hidden, we cured the salmon and sold it to the Lutherans leaving church on Sunday. We never went to church, Father declared the spruce his nave, the fjord his font.

There was no salmon to be caught in London, but still I cured it. Every day I bought the best salmon, with gills shining fresh-cut red and eyes inquisitive. I kept Father's knife, worn thin from sharpening. With fins cut away and the salmon filleted, I pulled out the sharp, clear pin bones running down the middle. The salmon were never orange, they were better than that, shimmering with a hint of pinkness, broken by gentle layers of off-white fat which grew thicker at the belly. It was a magnificent thing, a sight that ended up perfectly composed once the salmon had spent some time in my salt, sugar, clean grassy dill and the mix of spices (not many) that Father had told me and I tell nobody. Cured, the soft flesh that had flopped and folded develops a pleasing firmness; the salmon has greater substance and stronger standing in the world. This is gravad lax. The restaurants and delis I sell to say it is the best they have ever had; subtle, the perfect show of the salmon's quality. I do not know how it tastes. An architect does not need to live in the houses he designs, they trusted me. I made gravad lax and nothing else, they trusted me to make their salmon. I have not eaten salmon since I was four, over twenty-five years ago.

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I once turned into a salmon. Right where I am standing now. The woods are as I remember them, they come right to the edge of the fjord. Our cottage was a part of the forest. This was my context and content as a child. Standing here again, I feel the solitary quietness always missing in London. On a bright night, when I was four years old, moonbeams snuck into my room, waking me. I heard splashing from the fjord, playful and light. Sneaking out of my bedroom I saw Father, asleep again in the armchair turned towards the window, looking out over the fjord. The front door was never locked and I eased the door open and made my way down the short bank. Salmon were jumping and splashing, flicking the water with their tapered tails. Their silver and blue scales shimmered in the moonlight, warming to coniferous green at the top. Their bellies shone white like the moon on the ripples reaching the shore. I took off my pajamas and walked into the water. The salmon did not stop, they jumped higher, calling me in. I waded through, until the water reached my young chest. The salmon played around me, cooling droplets splashing my face. I took a deep breath and dived into the salty fjord. Under the water, I saw everything clearly: the salmon dashing and leaping, the moon's beams, clean lines lighting the bottom of the fjord. I stayed under



and held my breath until my lungs ached. I held my breath to the stinging point of panic.

Instead of swimming back up to the surface I swam deeper. Agile and quick, I turned and swam, flicking my feet. The sting in my lungs had gone; I was breathing under water. With that, I swam up and jumped through the air, swishing my tail. I had become a salmon and, in that moment, knew that the same thing had happened to my mother.

Salmon swim many miles and find themselves hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away from their ancestral home. In hollow dipped nests, like holes, mothers lay their roe. Thousands of young fry vie for life and learn the smell of that special place. Salmon eat krill that turns their flesh pink. They fatten, developing wood pine-patterned flesh. Later a longing draws the salmon back to their gravel nests, guided by their sense of smell. In the wild, salmon will eat other fish, but not their own. The salmon are, themselves, eaten by others

and that is their unyielding context. I do not eat salmon but others do and my affinity, along with what I learnt from Father, promises the most dignified consumption.

After Father died, I left the house. I see the stepmother once a year, on the anniversary of his death. We attend his grave and visit a restaurant, it is usually difficult

and we do not say much. I left the house, taking with me Father's filleting knife, whetstone and, in my head, his recipe for gravad lax. I rented a small industrial unit to prepare my gravad lax. I could not afford to rent somewhere else to live so I stayed in the industrial unit. It was cold and I had to be careful not to let the landlord find out, but, at night, when the other workshops were empty, it was quieter than most of London. In the beginning, I slept in a sleeping bag on a single mattress, but as the business improved I was able to make enhancements to my nook. Convincing the landlord that I was building a smokehouse (he did not know the difference between gravad lax and smoked salmon), I built a small log cabin from spruce pine. The smell reminded me of the cottage by the fjord, the solitude of the woods. My olfactory keenness wished me home. There were no windows, so I read the poems of Tranströmer and imagined the confusion of trees outside, the cottage low by the fjord, not a sign of London.

Two weeks ago we met for the eleventh anniversary of my father's death. The visit to the graveyard went by in silence, quiet contemplation and machination. After we had ordered our drinks in the restaurant, my stepmother, the stepmother, broke the silence between us.

'How have you been, Tomas?' She held her head high, tilted back, breathing out after speaking, as if she were smoking a cigarette. Classy but cold.

I shrugged my shoulders and read the menu. The restaurant was small and newly furnished in clinical fashion. Perhaps the stepmother held herself more like a surgeon with a scalpel. Her eyes frozen hard, hiding calculation.

I was not hungry and ordered what seemed to be an open sandwich: fine sliced rye bread, brown crab meat, shaved celeriac and a powdered remoulade. Winking at me or the waiter, the stepmother ordered salmon confit served with shards of crisp salmon skin and a liquorice tea broth.

'So, Tomas,' she said. 'Still don't eat salmon? How is mummy dearest?'

I sometimes find it hard to forgive Father for taking us away from the fjord, but then I remember the life and journey of a salmon.

'Your father only told me because he was worried about you,' she said. 'Thinking your mother was a salmon. Oh dear. You were an odd one. I have no idea why you moved to London with us. I'm sure you would have been much happier up there by that lake in nowhere, Sweden.'

'I was a child.' I was only eight when we moved to London.

'I suppose you were. But you're not a child now and I see you, and somehow don't imagine that you've changed any of the ideas you have about your mother. Tell me, you don't ever worry about making your mother into gravad lax, do you?' she laughed.

I excused myself to the bathroom.

When I came back from the bathroom the food was waiting at the table. The stepmother had started.

'No need to stretch this out any longer than necessary,' she said, eating another forkful.

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I ate my food, more canapé than open sandwich, in large mouthfuls. As she had said, no need to stretch this out. The last small rye tasted different; richer, with a fatty crispness. I looked at the stepmother. She was laughing.

'Oh dear. What have you done? Hope that wasn't mummy?'

I did not say anything.

The crisp of salmon skin, so tasty and wrong, had given me something, a knowledge. A message transferred through taste—a call back to the fjord, back home. The instruction was precise: swim towards the dark cottage across the fjord. I did not remember a cottage across the fjord as a child, but I knew it would be there now. My own cottage, reflected across the black mirror of the fjord. Swim towards the cottage and meet my mother. As I stared beyond the cold, insincere restaurant, the stepmother reached across and, out of guilt or curiosity, touched my hand.

'Your hands. They're soft,' she said.

It was the salmon and the salt. The salmon's oils as I prepared the gravad lax; every day my hands received the treatment of fish oil and salt. Cleansing and softening. As I said, hands as soft as the day Mother left and now as soft as the day I will see her again. Smiling, I told the stepmother I had to leave and that we were unlikely to do this again, unless she was a good swimmer. Her eyes shone bright and wet, her mouth dumb, caught in question.

I have made the run back to this shore. The black cottage stands across from me, its windows whiter than moonbeams. A release of sweet, light, smoke from the cottage transcends the scene. The fire burns my childhood diary, pages coiled tight in the forest's dark spruce. The locals helped me find my way back to the fjord, although now that I am here I think I could have smelt it from London. Two lonely cottages, struggling to hear each other across the fjord. I wade in and my blood cools. As context and content again converge, I discard my legs and dive into the water.

### Editor's Note

***Solitary Swedish Houses*** was our April Story of the Month.

Photograph – "Retiree" © Frank Cademartori

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## Busy People by Jamez Chang

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**F**orward of the morning, your hand let go of mine, overtaken by rush-hour trampoline, caved heads bobbing. Through cinderblock tunnels, they pushed past you like cloak-dust, as you sat whimpering on the ground, thin piston hiss asking strangers to churn you steady, but their growl-gnaws kept on racing. Inside a subway corridor, their ceiling beams had sent its message: "Busy."

Under rusted scowls and unplugged stares, their ear-buds fed higher rhythms intravenously, oblivious to a frightened child left out of place, a father reaching through thick crowds to find you, walking right past you underground.

In the subway corridor, you heard them slither through turnstiles, "amusement-park rides," I once said, and you were scared, staying crouched-down crying, and that's when she told you about *The Busy People*.

"The *Busy* would wait for their trains on a platform rumble—and the reason they wouldn't stop was not because they didn't care, but because they were sad, only lining up for a slower retraction. And it's not your fault you have a slick grip, your arms—just not strong enough yet, for now, just too little," I imagined she'd said.

Churro dust sprinkled down, and that's where I found you, comforted, beside the cart, by a woman in alpaca, she stood beside you when others didn't, hands cradling two sugar stick wands, and she pressed your cheeks with those sticky napkins, dried your tears with flicks of fairy dust, and the porcelain placard nailed above her head in steel would always read "Times Square."

### Editor's Note

***Busy People*** was our May Story of the Month.

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Helen stared at her dark-haired husband, dinner plate in one of her hands and bizarre note in the other. Shocked, she watched him sip his espresso and waited for him to speak. Instead, Renaldo ignored her as if she hadn't stopped washing the dishes. He smiled and licked the crema off his delicate lips as he finished before departing for his study.

The dinner table was bare except for the demitasse cup and saucer. With the dishes all in the sink where Helen was supposed to be mechanically washing them, all traces of Renaldo's marinated pigeon and fresh olive oil sautéed peppers were gone. The sight made Helen feel abandoned.

Noting the dribbling from the plate onto her matching torn grey sweats, Helen dropped the plate in the clouded soapy water and stared again at the note.

Despite the contents, she couldn't help notice how beautiful the note was. Flowing letters drawn like impressionist brush strokes, maybe with a fine fountain pen, on parchment-like stationary paper. The kind of paper Renaldo had used to send his relatives abroad announcement of their wedding. But, the message was not beautiful.

She read again:

*Oh, my perfect little pigeon. How happy you will make my wife with your wonderful tastiness. You are so different from the roast of last night's culinary sufferings. So overcooked. So tough. So flavorless. Is this how my Helen feels about me? That I am bland? That I am a tiresome thing that sustains mere life but does not exalt the soul? I worry, my careful creation. What is my Helen trying to tell me by presenting me with such a meal?*

Helen shook her head in disbelief. It was ridiculous. A note? Stuck to the bottom of a plate where she'd be sure to find it? Renaldo wouldn't do that to talk about something so serious. It was too much of a joke.

Admittedly, Renaldo did not generally talk about problems openly. Confrontation was vulgar; Helen guessed he thought that although he had never specifically said so. Even at office parties, he'd never correct anyone who introduced him as the company's Spanish interpreter. He would just smirk...and then snub that person forever after. Renaldo spoke *Castilian*, and only 'a fool' didn't know the difference.

Still, reserved or no, this was her. He told people she was his 'artist,' even though she sold deliberately crude birdhouses thrown together from scavenged scrap wood. They'd always had that connection beyond words, ever since the lit course back in their college days. She'd read the assigned stories to him because his English was so new and he couldn't follow. He couldn't resort to such odd ways to communicate with her.

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Scrunching her face in the way she knew made her look ugly, she *hmmphed* and threw the note in the trash. It really was a joke. That was all, a playful little joke. He wasn't serious. Not her Renaldo.

Then Helen dutifully scrubbed the dishes. The joke was cute, but that was about it. Cleaning the dishes was still necessary. It may not have been as 'carefully perfect' as the pigeon, but it was her contribution to the meal. Her and Renaldo took turns cooking and the other always cleaned up. That was their way, their partnership.

But, two nights later, when it was again Renaldo's turn to cook, another note waited for Helen on the bottom of Renaldo's plate. Renaldo had already gone upstairs to make an international call to the family back home, so Helen immediately snatched the note and read:

*My suckling lamb, though Helen enjoys you with me, I think that there are really only two of us at this meal this evening. My wife may dine with me, but her thoughts seem far away from me. The spaghetti of the night before leaves me no other thoughts to think. The noodles...so underdone. Though they bent with the softness of a light caress, each bite had a hard crunch like a slap and a raw starch flavor of neglect. Did my Helen rush the cooking so she could later meet a lover? Is there anything else for me to believe from this?*

Helen balled up the note in her fist and threw it at the wall. She nearly threw the plate after it, or at Renaldo. Nearly stormed upstairs and broke it over his head while he trilled pretty foreign sounding sweetness to his aging mother.

She fumed, clenching the dirty plate. He knew she wasn't the world's greatest cook. Helen never pretended any different. Renaldo may have had flair and finesse in the kitchen, but she was more limited and made no secret of it. Roasts and spaghetti were her best, though better than the TV dinners from before they had met, and her best was sometimes over or undercooked. Why would he act now like that failing meant more than it did?

Scouring the dishes with much more strength than necessary, Helen wanted to scream at Renaldo. Demand an explanation, force him to confront this head on instead of hiding behind clever little notes.

But Helen knew Renaldo would not say a word if she charged in like that. His way was to sidestep gracefully, like a matador. Only a bull met such a charge head on. A matador, however, would simply not be there anymore.

Helen sagged and rinsed the dishes before dumping them in the strainer. So what was she to do? If she couldn't force Renaldo out of his little game, what could she try? Cook better so he wouldn't think she didn't love him anymore? Learn to be fancier about it so he wouldn't notice her mistakes so easily?

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Is that what he wanted from her? Didn't he know she would have done all that before if it were possible? Wasn't her cooking proof that it wasn't? After five years?

With no more dishes, Helen felt helpless. She couldn't go to Renaldo because she hadn't figured out how to respond. There was a distance between them for some reason and she would feel it all the more if she was close to him. Instead, she went to the garage.

The garage was hers. Her workshop, a place Renaldo never went. He never even parked his car there. They both didn't, what with all her tools and discarded logs and lumber found in dumpsters or at roadsides. Between the half-built birdhouses, fasteners, and other junk items that might one day be useful, there was room for nothing else there but her. It was a sanctuary, but all she wished was that she didn't need one.

Helen picked up a recent work – a house assembled from two by four leavings recovered from a construction site trash heap. It looked like a clumsy jigsaw puzzle with perhaps a bit of Frankenstein's monster thrown in. Not sanded, not even, not even symmetrical, it was far from pretty or elegant.

Still, that was the point. That was why some rich idiot would give her fifty or even seventy-five dollars for the worthless thing. Her houses were supposed to look like they lacked craftsmanship, like they were made out of garbage. Then the buyers could feel smug that they were doing their part, like the carbon offsets and other frauds they willingly fell for. They felt good and she got good money for no more than twenty minutes work. No one expected anything more of her.

So why did Renaldo all of a sudden? She made the gesture like she was supposed to; she cooked for him when it was her turn. As usual, it wasn't good. When did that start to mean that her feelings weren't adequate? Was the food even the problem? Or, was it perhaps something else and this was all just Renaldo's way of dancing even further around the reality? Would things be fixed even if she suddenly could cook for him the way he did for her?

Helen sat with her plain face in her rough hands. It was hopeless. She had no idea what was really wrong and no idea at all how to fix it. Renaldo would be lost to her, like he was on the other side of water in a departing boat, waving handkerchiefs to tell her things in a pattern she couldn't understand.

She looked down at the makeshift house on the shop table in front of her. Though it was finished and ready for sale as it was, she started pointlessly sanding it. Her need to do at least something wouldn't let her be.

The next night, though, Helen chewed the last bite of her adequate ham and watched Renaldo at the sink. The thrill of sneakiness electrified her, but she tried to be patient. She wanted to pull it off just as he had done, but for that she couldn't rush things. She had to wait.

Renaldo scraped ham grease from the baking dish into the trash, his dinner dishes already ready to be washed. Helen had deliberately eaten slower than him, watched him, carefully looking for her moment. It wasn't until he cleared his portion of the table that she would have her opportunity, so she had to make sure she was still eating when he

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was through. Without, of course, dawdling obviously. The whole thing would have been up if she had been obvious.

The ham hadn't been anything special. She hadn't even done the improbable and made sure it wasn't too dry. She knew it would be, and it was. Helen had accepted this. Even the au gratin potatoes were from a box and would have been better if she had stirred more frequently. It had been dinner and it had been fine, but nothing particularly more than that.

No, Helen had hatched a different plan while doing useless things to that birdhouse. She had thought of it and then waited for her chance. As Renaldo had run water for the dishes and used the sprayer to make the soapy water foam, she'd noticed he wasn't looking and stuck a note of her own to the bottom of her plate.

She still wasn't sure why she had done it. It had just felt right. No more able to replicate the elegance of Renaldo's ones than she could his dinners, she'd written her own in cheap ballpoint pen on the back of a Safeway receipt. It read:

*Dear Ham:*

*What is bothering Renaldo? I thought maybe you would know since you were going to be spending time with him tonight. He has always taken me as I am, never wanting me to be someone else, and I love him for that. But, lately I feel that he has forgotten me and thought of someone else in my place. Suddenly, the things I do are taken to say words I never wanted to say. Maybe my husband and I are losing touch. That thought scares me. I want nothing more than to be as close to him as we have always been. Can you help me, Ham?*

Helen's heartbeat raced. She was sure Renaldo had to know what she was doing...even if he pretended he didn't. It wasn't as if she was sly. She wasn't; she knew that. Regardless, whether Renaldo saw through her or not, he acted as if he didn't have a clue.

At his place at the sink, Renaldo gracefully turned at the waist. Seeing her empty plate, he reached toward her. Helen gulped and then smiled, getting up to hand him her dishes.

Their eyes locked briefly. It felt like the time before they'd dated when he 'happened' to run across her at the dance club. Her friends had dragged her there and she hadn't been having a good time, but he'd caught her eyes and claimed her to the dance floor.

At the instant both of their hands were on the plate, Helen saw Renaldo smile as his fingers felt the note on the underside. Her fingers withdrew and she held her breath as he peeled off the note. He read, not hiding the note at all, and smiled again. He'd gotten her to play his game.

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Suddenly, like the graceful matador's stab after the bull is distracted by the cape's pass, Helen shot her arm out and smacked Renaldo across the back of the head. "Now cut the crap!" She yelled. "And talk to your damn wife!"

After all, she wasn't going to do *everything* his way.

Editor's Note

***The Des Moines Kabuki Dinner Theatre*** was our June Story of the Month.



Photograph – "Shadow Surfer" © Frank Cademartori

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## Staff Selections

*The following stories were selected by the editors. These stories represent our favorite and most memorable pieces from the past six months.*

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## A Falling Body by Catherine Barter

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He looked the same: irresponsible, well rested. His skin was unlined. His nose, twice-broken, formed a hard line of smashed bone down the centre of his face. The nose had seemed to speak to each of the nine women Alex had slept with of some quality of vulnerability they found attractive.

Very early in the morning on a Saturday, Sara was peeling open a pack of photographs. She took them out and shuffled through them with the same dexterity she used playing poker, until she selected one and slid it across the kitchen counter. Alex picked it up and looked at it. He was hot and hung over and some kind of clear scum floated on top of his coffee, formed contours and shapes like islands.

'You don't have to show me photos,' he said. They were sitting on the high stools in Alex's kitchen. 'I just saw her this week.'

'Last Saturday,' said Sara.

'Okay, last Saturday. What's she done since then?'

'I'm sorry,' Sara said. 'I keep forgetting how incredibly dull our child is.' She always said *our child* in this sort of sanctimonious way like she was pretending to be somebody else. Okay, there was the new version of Sara, remade, reordered, who suddenly seemed distant and unfathomably wise - she'd quit smoking and knew about nappy rash, spoke to Alex with gentle condescension, and had books about breastfeeding mixed in with her physics textbooks; but he knew there were still minutes of the baby's life she didn't care about missing, like probably most of the hours it slept, or cried.

Alex squinted at the photo and hoped Sara didn't notice the slight tremor in his hand as he held it. He needed to eat, needed salt and carbohydrates and warm, flat coke. 'I thought we said ten,' he said.

'It's half past nine,' said Sara. He looked up at her. She rested her chin on her hand and looked unsurprised.

'Yeah,' said Alex. 'Because I thought we said ten.'

'It's half past nine. I'm half an hour early. Mum can only take her until eleven. It's not like I was supposed to come for Christmas and turned up for Halloween. Deal with your life, Alex.'

Conversations always seemed to quickly escalate into deal with your life, Alex. Nice weather today, deal with your life Alex. Your shoelaces are undone, deal with your life Alex. Alex was pretty sure that when the baby was old enough to go to school Sara was going to write a self-help book for young single mothers and it was going to be called *Deal with Your Life, Alex*.

He'd made this joke to his own mother and she had told him that he was exceptionally naïve and self-involved. Deal with your life, Alex.

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'He's got a baby,' his friends would say at the pub, trying to impress girls. The maturity somehow reflected back on all of them. Alex would look serious for a moment, take a sip of beer, put the glass back down in a manner he would describe as thoughtful.

'Yeah,' he'd say. 'Yeah. Little Emily.'

Later, carrying Steve home because he couldn't take his drink, dragging him through the streets like a body they were trying to dispose of, stubbled and smelling like lager, smoke in their pores, Steve's body a hot dead drunken weight, mumbling into his chest about the girlfriend he's cheating on—

Alex would think about the night he met Sara. Like he could trace a line from the moment she handed him a Stop the War flyer to the moment she handed him a very small and unknowable person with a still-soft skull and blue eyes.

They had slept together only once. She was two years older than Alex. Now they would probably still know each other when they were old and the baby was a grown-up and knew that she had been accidentally conceived in an ill-considered if only slightly drunken one night stand.

Sarah had left in the morning and Alex had pretended to sleep.

When the baby first saw him, she was three days old, and looked doubtful.

'I know,' he'd said to it. Her. 'I'm sorry. You probably could have done better.'

'She seems disappointed,' he'd said to Sara, standing next to him, still looking washed out and exhausted from the effort of producing this new person.

'Yes,' Sara said, in a tone that said yes, Alex. Women do find you disappointing.

He looked back into the crib. 'Hi, baby,' he said, and the baby looked back at him.

He had tried to make a space for her in his flat, a place for the crib and the pushchair and the changing mat and all the other accessories she seemed to come with, all the well-made and expensively branded stuff that someone else had paid for, Sara or Sara's parents. He thought it could stay at weekends. But there wasn't any space. The flat was already cramped with one person and the TV and the piles of unread newspapers, shoes, albums, empty beer bottles waiting to be recycled. A rugby ball signed by all his teammates, balanced on a bookshelf.

He had given up rugby when he started his degree, in geo-information and cartography. This was a degree program he had seen advertised somewhere, and he had liked the word cartography. His mother had said Alex, if this is what you really want to do.

At first he didn't think he had the basic maths proficiency they asked for, he'd wasted his school years on the sports field, but somehow all the equations he'd been doing when he caught a ball, all the angles he'd had to calculate by instinct, doing that over and over, it seemed like it had carved out paths in his brain that he could reuse. If you throw a ball, there is weight and velocity. Its curve across the sky is calculable and the place in which it will land and at what speed is knowable; the trajectory of an object in the sky can be anticipated.

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He and his fractured bone and thick shouldered teammates drank cheap continental lager and crushed up the cans and in the morning on the field ran backwards, looking up, wrote maps on the sky. If they could do *that*—

'Half an hour,' Sara repeated. 'I've really thrown your whole day off course. I know how finely calibrated your schedule is—'

'I have to write essays,' Alex said, and quickly, before she could greet that with ridicule, he said, 'I was going to tidy up. I would've tidied up before you got here.'

'You don't need to tidy up for me,' Sara said. 'You need to tidy up if she's going to stay here.'

'I know,' said Alex. 'I thought I was being auditioned. That's why I was going to tidy up.'

'You need to clean,' Sara went on. 'You need things to be safe, it's like this whole world of stuff you haven't even thought about, all these stupid little things—' Sara broke off, shook her head, and then smiled self-consciously. 'I'm not obsessed with domesticity,' she said. 'I'm still an interesting person.'

'I know.'

'You shouldn't get to be this interesting, funny person who draws maps and I just start talking about Domestos and baby food.'

'I know. I know that. I'm not interesting or funny.'

'Okay, well, that's true.'

Sara started to put away the photos. Behind her was a mirror, and Alex saw his reflection, his square head, ruined nose. He wasn't good looking, but he looked like someone honest. Women had told him this.

His flat was hot and unclean.

When he looked at the photographs he felt blank and expectant, felt that he was waiting to be rewritten. Sometimes, now, in the mornings, he woke up and wanted to cry.

And he talked to himself sometimes, lips moving, a soft incantation of half-formed thoughts, practising ways he might say to her one day, you were intended, you were meant, I saw you coming and I was ready for you.

Before she became, like Sara, a tough and wise woman who saw only the ruin and not the complicated ways in which he could heal, the complicated ways in which he could get better.

'I can get better,' he had whispered to the baby when he first held her. Imagined that she might one day see the good in him. See that his arms, at least, were very strong, and that he had learned the equations for a falling body and that he could look at the sky, running.

### Editor's Note

***A Falling Body*** originally appeared on the web in May 2013.

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**M**y mom has spare plots at Red Cedar, the cemetery a little ways down the road from our house. She says if I don't straighten up I'll be in one of them plots soon. I don't take her seriously most of the time. She gets a little dramatic when she's had too much wine. But I am here now, by the cemetery gates, near the clearing where Mercy is buried. There is a pond behind her where the geese go when the weather's decent. It's surrounded by willow trees, and I think she'd like that. But what do I know about her, really?

Excursions of this sort have been common lately—the cemetery, I mean. I sneak in at night, lie down next to Mercy's plot, and watch the stars. I guess that sounds strange. Mercy was my best friend Trevor's older sister. She died when she was fifteen, hit by a drunk driver who drove up onto the sidewalk while she was coming home from school one October evening, on a Friday if I remember right. The mishap has preserved her at fifteen forever. I'm sort of in love with her for it. Is that messed up?

I am home from college for summer vacation. It is nearly over now, and I can't tell you where the time has gone. Into the ether, I guess. I was supposed to get a part time job, but it is pointless now with only a few weeks left until school starts. Of course, I'm rationalizing. I've had all the time in the world to get a job, and I've spent it drinking myself stupid and watching old Japanese horror movies and a lot of internet porn. Might as well be dead. Lately, the days have been blending together like one long purgatorial clusterfuck—the seconds, minutes, and hours all passing without notice, with no particular action to speak of. I have no context in this world. Pops says it's a phase that everyone goes through at some point, better to get it out of the way when you're young. I have to pick a major next semester. As of now, I'm undeclared.

My older brother Ted came home in some kind of drunken stupor tonight. I remember him easing through the front door, being careful to close it gently. It was late, around the time I decide that there's no way that I'll be able to sleep, so I turn on the TV. I was on my way to the kitchen to get my whiskey when Ted passed me in the front room, unaware of my presence. His head drifted from side to side as he made his way upstairs and into the bathroom, passing childhood pictures of us in the hallway. Subsequently, I heard vomiting.

When the sun is down, it's nice here in the cemetery. Once you get over that uneasy, surreal feeling from being around a bunch of corpses, it's beautiful. The moonlight showers down on the hills. Various shades of green comingle in the abyss. Sometimes when the wind blows, you can actually hear the leaves and branches of an old willow tree rubbing up against the wrought iron gates, now flaking with rust. It makes this jingle-jangling noise, reverberating across the clearing.

After Ted threw up, he came down stairs and sat on the couch. He still didn't notice me, standing there in the kitchen. "Ted?" I said, if only to make my presence known. His legs jerked forward and he stood up like a surge of electricity had gone through him.

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And then he was just standing there, staring blankly through me at some fixed point beyond our shared reality. I snapped my fingers in his face, trying to jar him back to our world.

"Ted, you in there?"

He remained unresponsive.

"Ted," I said, louder this time. He rubbed his eyes and made an unintelligible grunt, all the while avoiding eye contact.

"Man, what the fuck are you on, exactly?" I asked.

"I need to go to work," he said.

And as those words came out of his mouth, the alarm clock on his cell phone went off. It was true—he needed to go to work. Ted's a security guard for a corporate office downtown. He's got the early shift, or he *did*, I suppose.

Ted started to head for the door to leave. The question occurred to me as to why he even came home. But then I saw his condition, and realized his actions weren't guided by sense. I moved in front of him.

"Woah, woah, woah," I said. "You can't drive anywhere right now."

"I'm fine."

"No. No, you're not. Sleep it off."

"Dude, I need to go to work."

"Well you should've thought about that before you did whatever the hell you did last night." I stood in front of the door, directly in his path.

"Bullshit, man. Move out my way."

"You can hardly walk. You're not going anywhere. Go lay down on the couch."

"Don't make me hurt you," he said.

"Go sleep. You can't drive. You could kill somebody."

"Yeah, and that somebody's standing in front of me right now if you don't move."

He slouched over, leaning on the wall. Then, suddenly, he burst up and tried to juke around me. It didn't work. I grabbed hold of him and got him in a head lock. He murmured something to the effect of, "When I get out of this, I'm going to fucking murder you." This only strengthened my resolve. "Just go to sleep," I said. "I'll call you in sick. It's not a big deal." I flung him onto the couch pinned him with my knees on his shoulders. I had him down momentarily, and we made eye contact. It was the first time I had ever taken him down. I mean, he's 5 years older than me, and has a good 50 to 60 pounds on me. I could tell this was his personal low. I let up on him, just for a second, and he squirmed his arm free and punched me right in the nose. I fell back on the floor and clutched my face. Tears welled up in my eyes and I felt blood start to pour out of my nostrils. Sound sleepers, my parents are.

"Fine, go. Go get yourself fucking killed," I said. "I don't care anymore."

At that point, I wasn't exactly keen to Ted's movements, but it seemed like he sat up and looked at his hand as if he wasn't sure what had happened. Then he turned to me and tried to talk, but began crying instead. It's a little jarring to see a grown man cry, hard to process while it's happening. Mom says Ted was a very jovial baby, never made

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much of a fuss over anything. I hadn't seen him cry since he was 11 back when Beth Langley socked him right in the nards.

But now he cried for everything that had happened to him, and more so for the things that hadn't happened. Things he never even knew he wanted until they ceased to be possible. Nothing of value had come to fruition in his life, and he felt it. He couldn't articulate it, but he felt it. Just another broken home, another family ripped in twain by subtle but unstoppable forces. A cycle repeated. I suppose I have a bit of a dramatic streak in me as well.

Ted fell asleep about fifteen minutes later. I sat on the floor, leaning over the couch until I was sure. There was a moment before when I got up to leave, and he started whimpering like a wounded dog. So I waited until he was out cold. And then I went to the cemetery.

Walking through the place, I always notice that the ground is never quite even. Whenever I go over small bumps in the terrain with my heel, I imagine the corpses have been reanimated and are reaching for the surface to reclaim their lives. Not one of us can compete with the dead. No one. They don't have to speak for themselves. Even if they could, I can't imagine they'd have much to say. The dead don't have to do anything; they have nothing to prove to anyone. No ego to fellate, no face to save. And yet we carry them with us everywhere. It always takes a while for my eyes to adjust in the dark. When things are that dark, you *really* start to see.

I fell asleep in the cemetery on accident. That's never happened to me before. Usually I just lie out under the stars for a while and let my head clear. I guess this time I wasn't exactly dead set on going back home. If anyone knew about my little walks, I suspect they might think I'm one of those kids who's obsessed with death. I'm not really. It's a habit. Something to do. No more significant than going to the mall. Everyone needs an escape; mine just happens to be a cemetery. Sure, it's strange, but it helps me to relax. A lot of the time I feel this strange kind of pressure on my chest. The weight of impending adulthood, I suppose. When I breathe in, my lungs fill with dread. And when I exhale, they shrivel in apathy. The neurons in my brain are choreographed to an ancient Indian rain dance. I don't know why I go here. I don't quite understand what's happening to me.

The groundskeeper found me in the morning. He nudged me with his foot.

"You okay, kid?" he asked.

The sun was in my eyes. All I could see was the man's silhouette. I got up and brushed myself off.

"Did you uh, did you know her?" He pointed down at the grave.

"Not really," I said.

"Well, what were you doing passed out next to her damn grave then?"

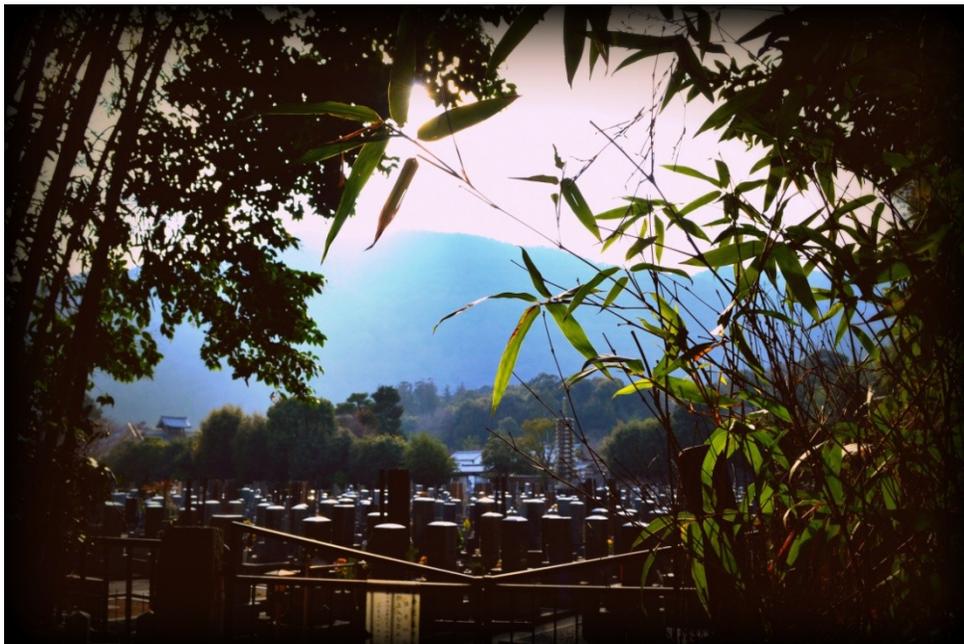
I didn't have an answer for him. Not one that made any kind of sense.

"I don't really know. Just visiting, I guess," I said, finally.

"Visiting?" he asked.

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I looked down at Mercy's grave, and in the light of day, I saw it for what it was. Nothing. Remnants of a life wasted. I can imagine her doing her hair and make-up with her friends, talking about guys and dreaming of the right one for her. And look what happened. Her grave looked so much more meaningful in the moonlight. I was fucking kidding myself, thinking it was relevant to me at all.



"Yeah," I said.  
"Visiting."

The  
groundskeeper  
scratched his  
head. I noticed he  
had a little golf  
cart behind him.

"Am I in  
trouble?" I asked.

He kicked at  
the ground, and  
after a moment's  
hesitation, started  
laughing.

"Is something  
about this funny?"

"It's just a  
little weird, I

guess."

"I would think you'd be used to it. Kids come in here all the time and get wasted."

"Yeah but, you were just lying there. Like you were dead or something. I thought you might've been dead."

"I'm not."

"Well, do you want me to give you a ride back to the front?" he asked.

"No. I can walk, thanks."

He drove off in his cart and I made my way back to the gates, the sun blaring down on me. There's something about that cemetery that makes it a bit sobering in the sunlight. I think it's the stillness. Things are just still. The air doesn't move; the leaves on the trees never waver. Sometimes I wonder if I'll go back there and visit her grave when I'm old and grey. That's the thing about cemeteries. No matter how old you get, the graves will still be there. If it's a well-kept cemetery, at least. Though, I surmise that 99% of the graves don't even get as much as a wreath on Christmas. No matter, I suppose. They're not here. We are.

I made it to the gate and the groundskeeper was in the parking lot, about to get in his truck. There was a bumper sticker on the back that read, "My son is an honor roll student at Lewis Nathan Elementary." I was an honor roll student there once.

Something about that made me feel down. I'm not sure how to articulate it. Maybe it's the way I imagine the groundskeeper. I have this narrative about strangers in my head—what goes on behind the scenes. I imagine his wife leaving him for a buff fitness instructor. And I imagine his son, oblivious to the drama, wondering when the next third weekend of the month is going to roll around, so he can see his father again. I imagine the groundskeeper as a child, wanting to be an astronaut. I imagine him seeing the moon landing on television and wanting that for himself. And I suppose that's why I feel down whenever I think about it. He never got to be an astronaut. That's what happens to the dreams of ordinary people around here.

And I have to pick a major next semester.

*Editor's Note*

*In the Sunlight* first appeared in our April 2013 Issue.

Photograph – "70s Cemetery" © Frank Cademartori

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## The Last Haircut by Daniel Joseph Giovinazzo

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Dad didn't tell me it was going to be my last haircut, even though, it seems, he must've known. I sat anxiously inside Dad's barber chair, set before a mirror down in the dark basement of our house. Behind me Dad stood underneath the basement's sole flickering light bulb. It hung from the ceiling on the end of an extension cord. Across from me I saw Dad's reflection in the mirror. Still in his work clothes he wore a pit-stained button down shirt and wrinkled khaki pants. Dad's posture had been ruined from twenty-five years in the barber business. Thousands of long days spent on his feet, cutting hair. Amidst his pale, ghostly complexion, a pair of spiritless brown eyes were cast inside dark shadowy circles. The Winston cigarette suspended between his lips burned dangerously low on the filter but I didn't have the courage to say anything. Through the mirror I could see him, looking up, through the smoky fog to a dusty crucifix, nailed to the wall above the mirror. Dad stubbed his cigarette, lit another, and then stumbled towards the crucifix. Holding his hand up to the crucifix, he used his fingernail to peel away a layer of dust.

"This cross was a gift from my Mother," Dad said. "Just before she died, she gave it to me and said 'non perdere questa.' Don't lose this." His fluttering eyes appeared to be traveling-time. "And look. Look at what I've done with it."

Dad turned his back on the cross. Bumping his elbow on the corner of his black tool case. Four pairs of scissors, three black combs, a wooden handled brush, clean razors, two uncoiled extension cords, and little pieces of dark hair—my hair—littered the concrete floor.

I tried to stand up and help him, but Dad's big hands prevented me, pushing my shoulders back down into the chair.

"Forget it, son." He said. "Forget it."

The raw, popping sound of knee caps crackled through the basement like a dying flame. Jumping out of the chair I knelt down next to Dad and got right to work, organizing a handful of combs.

"Capadosta!" He said. "Come suo padre." Dad spoke Italian when he was thinking about his mother—Nona, as I had called her. She passed away nearly eight years earlier but at that moment in the dim basement, her presence seemed very much alive and with us.

"Now that's an Italian mother for ya," he said. "Even ten feet under they can still make you feel guilty about not going to church." Dad said before taking a long drag on his cigarette.

"Why did you start smoking, again?" I asked.

"Stress."

"What's it like?"

"What's what like—smoking?"

"No," I said. "Being stressed."

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"Listen, son." Dad spoke through a foggy pane of smoke. "I'm going to tell you the truth. Do you understand?"

I nodded but at fifteen years old I didn't understand the truth.

I didn't understand why Dad had changed so much over the last six months. He gained thirty pounds. A yellow jaundice illuminated his chubby face, glazing his cheeks and nose. The swelling stain seemed to manifest deep within his skin and it turned his teeth, fingernails, and the whites of his eyes pee yellow. Hidden underneath his cuff links, an irritated rash gathered in patchy red smears at his forearms and elbows. Mother told him not to scratch them, but he couldn't help it. The cracked skin had become so delicate. It flaked off at the slightest touch, falling to the floor amongst hair clippings.

Between nervous pulls on the cigarette, Dad thrust his index fingernail underneath the frayed cuticles of dead skin around his thumbnail. He scraped the edge of his fingernail back and forth, until strips of skin began to curl up and peel away from his thumb. In their wake the skin pieces left behind small drops of blood trickling delicately down the sides of his thumb. Dad flicked tiny pieces of dead skin into the darkness. My eyes followed each piece through the air, hoping to add to my collection of Dad's skin. But dead skin is elusive, you know, and I lost track. Each piece seemed to be swallowed up by darkness.

If I ate pieces of Dad's skin, I wondered, would I grow up to be more like him?

Dad's shaky hand clutched a pair of scissors just above the tip of my right ear. I closed my eyes. I didn't move. I welcomed the needle sharp pain, a chilling shudder rolled down my spine. Opening my eyes, I pretended not to notice the blood trickling down the edge of my earlobe.

"Ahhh, managia lo cuccio," Dad cursed, dropping the scissors on the concrete floor, he snatched a towel out of his black tool case. "It's nothing, Danny. Just nicked ya that's all."

I'd always considered Dad an artist. Wake up, Dad. I thought, staring into his reflection in the mirror. Wake up. Practice the art of barbering.

"Don't look at me while I say this." I looked down at the rough concrete floor. "I—I have skin cancer." He paused, clearing his throat. "It's called T-Cell Lymphoma." I couldn't take it anymore and I looked up at his reflection. His eyes were fixed on the crucifix as he spoke. "But please don't worry because there's nothing to worry about. I'll get better, I promise." He said, gripping my bloody ear with one edge of the towel, veiling my face from his reflection with the other. The sounds of his words piled up. A traffic jam in my head. I tried to turn around and look at his face instead of his reflection so that I could be sure I wasn't dreaming. But his big trembling hands clamped my jawbone like a gentle set of vice grips and kept my head straight. I heard crying, men don't cry.

The only thing I knew about cancer was that it killed people. Cancer was a death sentence. It seemed unfair to me. Why Dad? Why not a criminal or a murderer or some

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evil person? For what then did Dad sacrifice so much of his life if only to die an early, painful death?

Suddenly, I wanted to know everything about Dad. Like a puzzle missing pieces, I wanted them all. At that moment Dad stood so close to me, so why then did there seem to be some much between us?

Dad gave my last haircut in silence. He moved clumsily about my head, as though he forgot how to cut hair. He trimmed my sideburns, unevenly, and cut the top too short on the left side. A crooked version of the flat top. He pulled the apron off my body and dark brown hair clippings fell to the concrete basement floor. At the sight of my hair, he paused. Staring down at the basement floor, he must've known.

Dad sauntered upstairs while I waited in silence for the smoke to clear. Then, as always, I cleaned his tools one by one. Soaking combs and scissors in disinfectant, coiling extension cords, neatly replacing buzzers, a small container of itch powder, a spray bottle, and a wooden handle brush inside Dad's tool case. I found the broom and dust pan on a hook to the left of the basement stairs. That day, I couldn't wait to brush the floor clean. I couldn't wait to dump the hair in the trashcan. To get rid of every piece of hair. To pretend that haircut never happened.

Editor's Note

***The Last Haircut*** first appeared in our March 2013 Issue.

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## The Somethings by Stefanie Lyons

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### OLD

My sister's getting married to this old guy. Her head doctor said it has something to do with "Daddy Issues," but Jeannie says it's because she thinks he's cute. And that when you think someone's cute, you don't see age. I don't think Arthur's cute. I just think he's old.

Arthur. Even his name sounds elderly. He's at least a decade older than she is and she's twenty. Which makes him over thirty. See? Ancient. But as she likes to point out, I am not even a teenager yet, having just turned twelve, and I have so much to learn. That's true, but he's still old.

Arthur does old-fashioned stuff like smoke cigars and read the newspaper on his front porch. He tries to get me to sit with him, but I don't like to. He carries a cane even though he doesn't have to and calls his cell phone "the telephone" which is just ignorant, if you ask me. He has his own house where he lives all by himself. Well, soon Jeannie will live there with him, I suppose. Then they'll turn into old fogeys together, rocking in the swing chair out back and reminiscing about the good ole days. She'll probably start calling me "Pumpkin" like he does, which I hate, by the way.

Jeannie thinks Arthur's distinguished and finds the outdated stuff he does to be charming. She actually used that word, "charming." She said, "You wouldn't understand, Aster. Arthur's a man. Boys are selfish and immature, but Arthur's charming." She said something about him being distinguished too; but that conversation was so goopy I don't even want to repeat it. It makes me gag just thinking about it.

### NEW

Today we're going to Mira's Bridal to get our dresses fitted. I'm a bridesmaid so I get to wear a special dress that makes me look older than twelve, though not as old as thirty, thank goodness. In my dress, I'm dazzling. The material is gauzy with layers and layers of fabric, so much so that it feels like I'm perched on a cloud when I sit down. The color is called Rustic Pewter, which is a new hue for bridal wear, the saleslady said. It's very contemporary although the color reminds me of what's left of the wrought iron fence that leans on the outside edges of our property. It's tangled in vines and corroded with brownish-gray flakes. I like when nature takes things like lawnmowers and old cars and reclaims them for herself. I also love when it rains—and it rains a lot in Washington. Being in this dress reminds me of that feeling when I'm shimmery wet from a mid-day deluge and I can smell the Earth around me. Jeannie doesn't know any of this. She only knows I like the color and am happy to be a bridesmaid. Mostly, she's concerned with what she looks like in her gown.

Jeannie's dress is off-white. The lady who helped her pick it out said white dresses weren't vogueish anymore. Jeannie wants everything to feel modern and new, so she took the bridal lady's advice and only considered off-white gowns.

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"I'd like it to be a little more fitted," Jeannie says, twisting side to side in the mirror looking at her dress, the skirt, fluffy and full, trailing for miles past her feet.

"It fits well for the cut," the seamstress says.

"It's not tight enough." Jeannie grabs the fabric around her waist, pulling it in.

"Empire waist is timeless," the lady says, adding, "and flexible with waistlines."

Jeannie gives the woman a dirty look. The woman smiles, although she seems nervous, probably because it looks as if Jeannie might start crying. I have to agree with the seamstress, although I'd never breathe a word of it to my sister. But Jeannie's dress can't be too tight or else there won't be any room for the baby—fresh and new—growing inside her.

### **BORROWED**

Arthur's age isn't the only reason I dislike him. I know it's awful to loathe someone just because they're old. They can't help that they have gray hair and wrinkles and drive really slow and wear their pants cinched around their waist. Although Arthur doesn't have wrinkles or gray hair or do any of those things, I'm just being mean. But I still don't like him and I can never tell Jeannie the reason. She loves her "distinguished" and "charming" old guy.

I used to think Arthur was cool. But then there was that day about a year ago when he and I were waiting for Jeannie to finish fussing with her hair so we could go to the zoo and see the lemurs. He kept poking my mid-section and saying, "Why ya so touchy, Pumpkin?"

"Stop it, Arthur," I said, not in the mood to be annoyed. And honestly, he was really making me feel uncomfortable. I just wanted to get in the car, go to the zoo, watch the red ruffed lemurs eat kale with their hands, and forget that Arthur was giving me the heebie-jeebies.

But he wouldn't quit.

"Can't I touch you?" he asked.

"No, you can't," I said. I pulled my shirt down so it overlapped the top of my jeans, serving as my protective armor.

"You don't really like me, do you?"

"I like you," I said, feeling bad. He was, after all, a pretty nice guy. He was polite, didn't treat me like a baby, and he'd never made me feel weird before this.

"Then why are you being so mean to me?"

"I just don't like being poked, that's all."

He leaned in, as if he was going to say something top secret and very important. His eyes narrowed and his face was so close to mine that the bristles of his unshaven beard grazed my cheek. I shivered, overwhelmed by bad vibes. He smelled like Old Spice. It was uncomfortable. And musky. I leaned away, rubbing the goose bumps out of my skin.

"See," he said, moving out of my personal space, "you don't like me."

"I like you," I said, though not liking him one bit right then. "But I don't like this game."

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Arthur didn't seem to hear me. He swooped in and planted his lips on mine. They were crackly and dry and it felt like I was kissing the rusted part of our wrought iron fence. The force of his kiss made my stomach lurch and I almost vomited in his mouth, which would've served him right if I had.

I wished I had. I wanted to.

"Arthur," I said, pushing him away and wiping his sandpaper kiss out of my mouth with the backside of my hand. "You can't just go around stealing kisses from people."

I wanted a scrub brush. One that could expunge this memory.

He smiled. His eyes returned to their usual sparkle. "My dear Aster, I didn't steal your kiss, I borrowed it. I'll return it later if you'd like."

## **BLUE**

After the wedding ceremony, after the "I do's," after Jeannie tosses the bouquet and Arthur throws the garter, after they both feed each other cake; Jeannie waves me over to stand by her.

Smoothing my hair, she presses her soft, full lips to my forehead. "I'm a wife now," she says.

"How does it feel?" I ask, thinking surely this must be the biggest rite of passage in a girl's life outside of getting her period. Both of which I've yet to experience.

"No different," she says. "A little different," she adds. "Like I'm old now, a grown-up."

That seems like what she wanted all along—to be an adult. I know I can't wait to fill in the cup of my bra, wear tampons, and shave under my arms.

Outside, everyone forms a line. Handfuls of rose petals wait to be tossed on the happy couple as they depart for their honeymoon. I look up at the cobalt sky, wide and clear. The few clouds floating above my head look as gauzy and fluffy as my bridesmaid's dress. I stare at the endless blue and think about how nature takes over everything, turning it more beautiful in its own way, unlike people. Unlike old guys who steal kisses and turn happy memories into heavy, dark ones.

Jeannie and Arthur run out to cheers of well-wishers and flying rose petals. Jeannie grabs my hand before ducking into the awaiting car. "It's going to be a boy," she says, her hand squeezing around mine then releasing.

The car door closes and they drive away as I ponder this. I am going to be an aunt. I am going to have a baby nephew. I will have to buy him a blanket or booties or a sweater or a pillow. I'm not sure what exactly, but it will be something blue.

### Editor's Note

***The Somethings*** first appeared in our March 2013 Issue.

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**1**

I am buying a fancy garbage can. It's the sort of thing you can only find far away, so I have to purchase it online.

Katherine calls.

"You'll never guess what I'm buying," I say.

"You're buying a fancy garbage can," she says.

I am crestfallen.

"How did you know?" I say.

"Because they ran a big thing on them in the *Times*, and you always buy something when they run a big thing in the *Times*."

Katherine is like this: full of shabby empiricism.

"Well," I say, "You'll never guess what I'm going to buy next." I haven't actually planned to buy anything next.

Katherine pauses a minute.

"You aren't going to buy anything next," she says with finality.

Clearly, it is not my day.

**2**

The garbage can arrives. Katherine says I should throw a party.

"For what?" I say. I'm not known to throw parties.

"To celebrate the garbage can," she says.

I think about it. It's not really an option. I don't have the tools, the necessities, the infrastructure.

"We can use the garbage can," she says.

It offends me, dozens of faceless guests tossing their waste in my new garbage can.

"Not like that. We can place it in the center of the room—like an idol."

I look at it, freshly emerged from its packaging. Crumpled cardboard and plastic peanuts lie scattered around it, the withered leaves at the base of a new bud. It is shiny and, with proper preparation, it could be magnificent. In short, it makes a fine idol. But it would take up too much floor space in the center of the room.

"We can use it as the punch bowl," she says.

It is settled. We are throwing a party.

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## 3

A true punch has five ingredients. There is haggling.

"Rum," I say. "Rum, vodka, Curaçao, tequila, and pineapple juice."

"Rum," she says. "Rum, vodka, pineapple juice, cranberry juice, and peach nectar." Katherine is a devotee of peach nectar.

We reach a compromise minutes before the guests arrive. A red liquid sloshes over the brim as we drag the can to the center of the room. We dip plastic cups, toast the idol, and drink. Pink stains linger on our lips. The doorbell rings.

"Hello," we say, as our guests cross the threshold. "How are you?" The door opens and closes, the bell buzzes, plastic passes from hand to hand. At some point the music goes on. A man I've never seen before spills on the couch. It is official: the party has begun.



"Nice punch bowl," someone says, arms akimbo and admiring.

"It's not a punch bowl," I begin. "It's a garbage can. I bought it after reading a thing in the *Times*." But no one is listening, because an obscure but catchy song has come on. All my guests are clamoring to name the band and say they like them.

I dip my cup. I have to bend surprisingly low to reach the liquid. The inside of my elbow brushes the slick brim. It stains my shirt. Across the room, over the music, I hear two single friends discuss the punch bowl

together. They have never met, but they make a good match; they are equally desperate.

Katherine drifts over.

"Some party, huh?" She smiles. The places where her teeth and gums meet have turned light pink. "Everyone loves the centerpiece."

"But they all think it's a punch bowl," I say. "They keep saying 'nice punch bowl.'" She looks at it.

"It is a punch bowl," she says. "Look at how everyone goes over to it. They dip their empty cups in and pull out cups full of punch. You couldn't do that with a garbage can."

I think about this.

"It wouldn't be sanitary," I say, cautiously.

"Exactly," she says. "It wouldn't be sanitary."

We are quiet a moment. I use the time to fill my cup again.

"Cheers," Katherine says, once I've drawn it up. We butt Solo cups. My armpit is wet with punch. "To sanitation."

## 4

I wake up alone. I am wearing a white Oxford shirt with pink splashes down the front. The sleeve shows a strawberry meniscus at the armpit and the elbow. I am not wearing pants.

In the living room, the inside of the centerpiece is dyed red. The color climbs up the sides in fading bands, like the stripes on a dock at low tide. I grab a sponge and go to work. My head throbs. The stains remain unmoved.

I straighten up and pause for breath. Empty cups stand all around the room. Some loll drunkenly; some pile inside each other. A few bow and scrape towards the once great receptacle. The lowest expose their yawning openings.

I look around for my phone: no missed calls, no new messages. It is time to do something decisive. I clear my throat for an announcement. I address the night's wreckage. I disown everything messy.

For once I have made myself perfectly clear. In twos and threes I cluster cups in my hands and toss them into the fancy garbage can. Soon it is brimming. It makes a pleasant but hollow tinkle on its trip to the trash room.

When I return, my phone and I sit quietly on the couch. I listen to my own words hanging unchallenged in the air: impressive, manifesto-like.

Editor's Note

**Waste Management** first appeared in our March 2013 Issue.

Photograph © J.M. Miller

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## Second Hand by Austin James

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The viewing was scheduled on a Friday morning, burial shortly after followed by luncheon at a flashy church. Movies and TV taught me everything about funerals. Rosaries and twenty-one gun salutes. Victorian riding hats with netted veils. Widows sucking smoke from long cigarillo holders like exhaust pipes.

Even in all my wisdom, Mother made me attend anyway. Hindsight understands my adolescent denial.

#

He'd pick me up on Saturday mornings, which made for restless Friday nights. Yet somehow I was never sleepy when I heard his old Ford pickup coming up the street. The split vinyl upholstery smelled like cigarettes and fast food, and reeling the windows down didn't help. A plastic case full of ashtray runaways and worn cassette tapes (some glued together with spattered soda) sat between us. He called it a soundtrack from the "cocaine days of rock and roll". I always felt like an adult when talked like that. Mother wouldn't even let me watch rated R movies.

Fingering through the tapes, I'd ask: Did you know Dave Mustaine from Megadeth was one of the original members of Metallica?

Or: Iggy Pop's first high school band was called The Iguanas. That's where he got his name.

He'd say something about always wanting to have a rock and roll documentary riding shotgun. His smile hid the sarcasm.

Sometimes he would take me downtown to the basketball courts or to a matinee. Swimming down at the YMCA. But most of the time we just hung out at his place. His girlfriend, Sarah, would make us toast with cinnamon and sugar. Most visits, he'd work on his truck while I threw a ball for their dog, a collie named Fray. Sometimes I helped by fetching him things.

Sockets and wrenches.

Greasy, worn-out hand tools.

Cold beer from the fridge in the garage.

I'd ask him about souped-up engines and turbo chargers. His truck could be **fast**, like in the movies. He'd tease and tell me the "old clunker" would fall apart if it went any faster. Still, I always asked because he'd let me help more when I did.

#

What TV doesn't tell you about is the sunburn. White gloves on boiled fingers. Hours spent draining body-length blisters before the viewing. Summer sun on the pavement-- imagine a peach on asphalt that steals your shoeprint.

They replaced a chunk in the back of his skull for aesthetics during the viewing, something similar to replacing a divot during a game of golf.

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One time we took Fray to the park to chase squirrels. *He* lounged on his back beneath a shade tree and smoked a cigarette. A woman trotted by on the sidewalk, blood-blond hair pulled back and tucked beneath her walkman's headphones. Tight spandex jogging suit with matching tennis shoes. She was older than me, maybe a high-schooler.

He said something like: Pretty girl.

Which startled me. I didn't answer but looked away, pretending to watch something else. Fray wrestled with a large stick--apparently the Heavy Weight Champion of the stick world.

He asked if there were any girls that I liked.

Me: *Like*, like?

Him: Yes *like*, like (lazy smirk on his face).

Me: Nah. Girls at school just like the older boys. And I look young for my age.

He said: I think you look your age. Maybe a little older.

He brushed his cigarette out against the elm and told me: The problem is that you grew up watching twenty-somethings playing teenagers on TV. Of course you think you look young.

Me: So what? Girls are *weird* anyway.

He laughed and said my feelings would change. That soon girls would be the *only* thing I cared about. I'd fall in love and have a whole new reason to be alive.

I asked: Like you and Sarah?

Him: Right.

After a moment he asked: How would you feel if me and Sarah got married?

Me: So she'd be kinda like my big sister?

Him: Yep, that's what they mean when they say *sister-in-law*.

Me: That'd be awesome! I bet mom's always wanted a daughter...

His interruption: Mom doesn't know. We don't exactly see eye-to-eye these days.

Me: Why not? She asks about you all the time.

(Lighting another cigarette) he said something like: Hey, what's Fray got over there?

#

The gun was a .357 Magnum: 5-round revolver with a 2-1/4 inch barrel. They say he bought it at a pawn shop earlier that week. The bullet, a .38 Special, 125-grain jacketed hollow-point. Standard ammunition you can pick up at Wal-Mart.

#

He was supposed to come get me every weekend that summer but he skipped some in August. After running over Fray with his truck.

Saturday mornings spent sitting on the curb, fading with every loud muffler.

Hindsight understands Mother's hideous reaction.

When we did get together he'd sit on the hand-me-down couch drinking beer; maybe at the fold-out kitchen table. Or on the front porch with bloated garbage bags full of abandoned beer cans. Watching cars drive by and drinking from liquor bottles that smelled like charcoal and rubbing alcohol.

He didn't sugarcoat my toast like Sarah. His place felt hollow without her frilly decor. Flowery paintings and ceramic doodads replaced with empty walls and blank shelves. He'd tell me to watch TV (if you twisted the foil-wrapped antennae to just the right angle, you could pick up channel seven).

One night I walked in on him in the bathroom. He sat on the dirty linoleum floor, bottle nearby. His eyes were soggy and red.

Me: It wasn't your fault. Everyone knows that all dogs go to heaven.

Him: Heaven? What are you talking about, *heaven*? I'll be out in a minute.

He slammed the door and sent me away to whimper. Our favorite professional wrestling show started at nine, the one we almost always watched together.

#

Another thing TV doesn't tell you is how much recoil a snub-nose revolver actually has. The jaw shatters when one is fired inside someone's mouth. Considering that those particular bullets had 248 pounds-per-foot of muzzle energy, a velocity of 945 feet-per-second--it's useless to search for every shard of tooth.

#

That last weekend we hung out he couldn't pick me up because the Ford was broken down so he met me at a bus stop down the street from his place. His orange shirt (orange like saltwater taffy) looked stained and wrinkled--more so than usual.

His breath smelled like mouthwash; his sweat like liquor.

He slept all afternoon while I meandered through a static whiteout looking for something to watch on TV. When he finally got up he made me find the phone so he could call Sarah. Their conversation was shorter than most television commercials. He crumpled the phone and said: *Fuck!* Teeth grinding behind his tense jaw. He didn't say anything for the rest of the night; he sat alone drowning cigarette butts in left-for-empty beer cans (some crushed like siblings).

At least he found channel seven in time for wrestling.

### Editor's Note

***Second Hand*** first appeared in our January 2013 Issue.

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## Pyramid Scheme by Ryan Werner

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The Crawlspace was decent but named in earnest. A four-piece band placed anywhere in the room made comfort difficult and sweating mandatory. It's a music venue in the same way that a Buick with a tape-deck is a music venue.

All of its appeal was in sideways logic, that only bands who loved what they did would play at a place so opposed to reason. My own musical ability was pitiful—vulgar, even—and my only usefulness was in the auxiliary tasks involved with any band playing any show. I was van driver, gear loader, merchandise seller.

"And it has cobblestone in front of the doorway," Jeff, the bassist for the Honeybreakers, was telling me. "Do you know what that does to the casters on an amplifier? Fuck."

Jeff wanted to quit because his life was better than his band.

"My wife's pregnant," he said. "I only get two weeks off for vacation and this tour is a big chunk of it. What do you think will happen if I keep doing this? I won't even have any money left to buy back my half of the record collection after the divorce."

"Right notes at the right time," I said. "There's an easy loneliness to most things." I was witch doctor. High priest. Soothsayer.

#

Tommy was the master of the ghost knob. When the sound guy would tell him that he's too loud, Tommy would turn around and lightly run his fingers around the volume knob on his amp and then follow it up with a lighter touch on his guitar. The other guitarist, Hank, followed his lead and every first chord became a massive event.

Anyone who didn't leave the room ended up in love with the band—the same flimsy reasoning that led the band to the venue. When the room did clear out, it was my job to tell Tommy that he's getting too old to walk a room. This was Jeff's job before he stopped wanting the same thing as everyone else in the band.

The borrowed van was a surrogate home. Tommy was riding shotgun and everyone else was sleeping. Hank and the drummer, Burnout Mike, were all the way in the back by the gear, sharing opposite ends of the same pillow. Jeff was curled into the middle seat next to a pile of amplifiers.

I turned to Tommy and said, "Turning down isn't the same as taking the night off."

"It's a guaranteed reaction," he said.

"Shouldn't you trust the songs?"

"I don't trust rock and roll at all," he said. "It's a pyramid scheme."

I shrugged and ran over something in the road that was already dead.

He said, "Where's the credibility? Where's the money? I like porno because it's an approximation of fucking. I like wrestling because it's an approximation of violence. What's rock and roll an approximation of?"

Jeff shouted, "It's the real thing *and* the sham."

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An approximation of life.

#

Years before he didn't want to be in the band, Jeff drank a bottle of gin before a show and almost got kicked out. He played the songs correctly, but in the wrong order. Nobody ever figured out why. I thought it was maybe an interpretation of a Honeybreakers set, a piece of high art that I also thought kind of sounded like hammered shit.

Jeff begged to be back in, said how much the band meant to him—everything, at the time—and that was it. Tommy forgave him because they had known each other nearly twenty years, which would be a long time even if they were adjoining walls instead of, say, people.

For a while, inhibition was still an acceptable topic of discussion. It wasn't until later that they began to merely stammer through what they felt, silently resent what they observed in one another.

#

Jeff knew he wouldn't make it through the tour without some sort of way to measure literal fidelity against figurative fidelity. We'd started going to the van before shows to listen to him and Tommy's high school recordings and talk about personal troubles borrowed from the appendix of a Beatles biography

Jeff pulled a cassette player the size of a shoebox out of his bag and said, "It seems like everyone wants to be humble and nobody wants to be humbled."

He filtered through a bag of tapes and pulled one out delicately, as if selecting a donut or a child. "This one's just me and Tommy," he said. "Cheap Trick covers."

The age of the tape was apparent in both the muffled sound and the fact that Tommy didn't know how to play leads yet—he was singing the bendy guitar notes in "I Want You to Want Me."

"Surrender, surrender," Jeff on tape sang in the background of the next track. "But don't give yourself the AIDS."



"Fuck," Jeff in real time said.

I nodded and said, "Catchy. Wonder why they didn't go that direction."

We went back inside and sat with Hank and Burnout Mike, who, by the time they remembered that the altitude in Salt Lake City would allow them to get completely shitfaced off 3.2% alcohol beer, had already counteracted it by drinking too much.

The first band was setting up and brushing their hair. I made a list of things that interested me more than watching their set and came up with most things. I went to the bathroom and looked at my face, which would have been a better idea anytime between a week and fifteen years ago. I couldn't remember why I went to the bathroom in the first place.

Tommy walked in and said nothing to me, but I could see him over my shoulder doing either exactly what I was doing or a slight variation on it. I glanced back and forth between our reflections. There was something about our faces that meant we were no longer children even if we played their games.

I asked, "Do you think Utah makes our faces sag?"

"When you're older," Tommy said, "You don't stop wanting the things you always wanted. You just start to wonder why you want them."

We walked back to the side of the stage where the opening band was playing the first notes of their first show. I watched them watch their girlfriends watch them and waited for a mirror to break.

#

Revising my dreams into the necessary shapes involved going out to the van every night and playing guitar in the street. I waited until after the show, after everyone had locked into the distractions that would take them through to morning. I would strap on whichever guitar I grabbed first and commence to shredding first against the van and then eventually to the center of the street. This was a small reassurance that my life would eventually resolve itself if attacked from compromising angles.

We stayed in neighborhoods that feared silence. My musicality was comparable to that of a carburetor filled with pennies. I only knew Honeybreakers songs, and even then it was only an approximation of someone else's muscle memory.

It was during these solo concerts that I thought of where I'd be if I had built a mindset out of songs instead of manifestos, what would be different if I had followed through on either.

Satisfaction is a lateral move.

#

As soon as I put the last piece of equipment into the van and closed the door, all I could think about was the next action of consequence I'd take, which would be the exact opposite of the one I just did. Five hours later we pulled up to the practice space and unburdened ourselves of the gear.

The bar across the street was wedged between a lumber yard and a porno warehouse. As a home for functioning alcoholics, business picked up between work and dinner and

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then again right before closing. Hank and Burnout Mike went in for a drink once the gear was locked up.

"Two guys walk into a bar," Jeff said.

I kicked a cigarette butt into another cigarette butt. "And then what?"

"That's it."

Jeff walked to his car and Tommy and I watched him for a moment as he sat down in the driver's seat, breathed in, and held it. We did the same.

When he drove off, Tommy and I got into the van. He said, "I'm thinking of the new songs."

"French horn?"

"Organ," he said. "Country balls with a punk rock dick. It'll work. Trust me."

"How can I not?" I said, but in the back of my head I thought about the real thing and the sham and the last days I was young.

*With apologies to Police Teeth.*

#### Editor's Note

**Pyramid Scheme** first appeared in our February 2013 Issue.

Photograph – "Cast Cross" © Frank Cademartori

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In front of the tenement building there was an overweight Doberman leashed to a parking sign. The Doberman sat on the pavement and whined.

Sabi and her father walked by the dog and towards the front door of the tenement building. Sabi's father rang the buzzer. There was no answer. He rang the buzzer twice more until finally the buzzer rang back and the door unlocked.

It was eight p.m. but the summer sun was still up. Sabi heard the door snap closed behind them. This building was much smaller than the one Sabi lived in. There was a lobby in her building with an elevator bank in the middle and tall rubber plants in every corner. There was no lobby in this building, just a set of stairs leading up to darkness.

Sabi held on to her father's hand. It was hot inside the building. The cracked marble floor was sticky. Candy wrappers, flattened cans of soda, and gum littered the steps.

"Where are we going, Papi?" Sabi said.

"Third floor. That's where my cousin Jai lives with his girlfriend. They have an old refrigerator that needs some help. I told him I'd come by and fix it."

Sabi had been stuck in the apartment all afternoon and had wanted out. She was only six and was not allowed to play outside with the other kids in her neighborhood. Sabi's mother didn't trust anybody. She still had nightmares from the big blackout that happened last week around this time. Sabi and her mother had watched an army of New York City teens run down the streets, hollering and hooting. All night, Sabi's father guarded their building with all the other male neighbors. Tonight, when Sabi watched her father pick up his toolbox, she begged him to take her with him. Sabi's mother said no, but her father said yes, and his word was always final. "Besides," he said to her mother, "it won't take too long. We'll be back before you know it."

Sabi and her father walked up to the second floor. Three black doors lined a narrow hallway. One door still had American flags and cartoon firecrackers taped on it from two weeks ago. On the third floor there was a trash bag in front of one door. They stepped around the bag and walked towards the last apartment door. A slaphappy Johnny Ventura merengue was playing inside the apartment. Sabi's father pounded the door like he was afraid no one would hear him. A short woman opened the door. She wore a wrinkled blue housedress. Her honey eyes looking at Sabi then down at the floor.

"Hey, Oscar," she said.

"Hey, Maggie. Is Jai home?" Sabi's father said.

Inside on a black couch lay a young man. Three small metal fans faced him, oscillating from one side to the other. "Who's that?" he said, not bothering to turn to see.

"It's Oscar," Sabi's father said.

"Oh, shit, man. You actually came over." The young man rubbed his eyes. He took his time sitting up but didn't stand. He stared at Sabi and said, "That your kid?"

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"She's my helper," her father said. He pulled her a little closer to him.

"She's a cutie."

Sabi pulled on the side of her father's t-shirt and covered half her face.

Jai led them down a short hallway. At the end of the hallway was the entrance to a small kitchen. Maggie stood by the refrigerator. The fridge stopped working two days ago. Jai stepped back out into the living room to smoke. Maggie opened the fridge door. The stench of rotting meat and fruit made Sabi cover her nose. Water leaked from the bottom tray onto the linoleum floor. In the living room, a loud bang was followed by Jai's apologies. He had tripped over one of his fans. Maggie ran out of the kitchen. A few minutes later she returned. In her hands she held a couple of tattered towels. She spread the towels on the floor by the fridge. Sabi's father ignored her while she did this and spoke to Sabi.

"I'm going to look behind the fridge," he said.

"That's where the engine is," said Sabi.

"No," said her father. "It's not an engine. It's called a compressor. It compresses refrigerant vapor. That's how a refrigerator remains cold."

"Oh," Sabi said.

Just then there was a loud knock at the door. A muffled male voice followed. Maggie stepped out of the kitchen to see what was going on.

When she came back, she had a brown bag in her arms. She set the bag down on the kitchen table. She pulled out from the bag a bottle of tomato and clam juice, and a 40-ounce beer bottle. She moved quickly around the kitchen, opened a cabinet, and grabbed a couple of plastic cups. She poured some juice and beer in each cup.

Sabi's father said thank you when Maggie handed him a cup. She grabbed three cups and headed out to the living room.

"Papi, I'm thirsty," Sabi said.

Her father grabbed an empty plastic cup and filled it with cold water from the faucet.

Sabi sipped the water.

"Don't drink too much. If you have to pee you have to hold it until we get back home, okay." Her father said reminding Sabi of one of her mother's rules about visiting strangers' homes.

Outside, the men were cackling over some bad joke.

Maggie returned. "I hate it when Vinnie comes over," she said. She sat on a chair by the kitchen table. Sabi's father moved the refrigerator away from the wall until he had enough space to crawl behind it.

"Sabi, go to my toolbox. There should be a small black box inside. You see it?" Sabi handed him the black box. She watched her father open the box and pull out something that looked like a hand radio.

"I'm measuring how much electricity is needed to run this fridge, Sabi. In these old building sometimes the electricity doesn't work like it should. Maybe the refrigerator isn't the problem. In a little while, I'll figure it out."

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After a while, he crawled out from behind the refrigerator and looked through his toolbox. He pulled out a wrench, screwdriver, and what looked like a hose with two small clocks on either side. He crawled behind the refrigerator and went to work.

"Ask Jai and his buddy, to come in. I need them to tilt the refrigerator." He said to Maggie.

Later when he put everything back in place, he asked Jai and Vinnie to keep the refrigerator tilted to one side a little longer. Vinnie lost his grip and the refrigerator door opened and hit Jai in the face. "Fuck!" he said. Sabi stood by the kitchen sink, away from the men and the refrigerator.

Her father crawled out from behind the refrigerator and told Jai and Vinnie to push the refrigerator back into place.

"See, it's working now, Sabi," he said. "How does it feel to be my little helper?"

"Feels good, Papi." She stared at the floor so as not to see everyone looking at her.

"That's twenty bucks," her father said, heading to the sink to wash his greasy hands.

Sabi wanted to sit down but no one offered her a seat. Her father finished washing up and put all his tools away. Jai pulled out his wallet. He rubbed the bump that was forming on his forehead.

"Just put some ice on that, man," Vinnie said. He poured himself another cup of clam-tomato juice and beer.

Maggie looked nervous. She stood by Vinnie and watched Jai pull a bill from his wallet.

"Twenty bucks is a bargain. I just saved you two hundred dollars. That's what it would have cost you to replace your refrigerator. You should be a little more grateful."

Sabi's father smiled and poured himself another drink. "I fixed that in record time, Jai," he said. "Re-aligned the wires like nothing. You know how many wires are back there? And you got to know what you're doing cause once you pull them out you got to remember where they belonged."

Jai counted the money from his wallet. "Yeah, man, you're a fucking genius," he said.

"Maybe your lady can help you settle the bill."

Jai looked at the short woman. "Maggie was supposed to keep an eye on you. Make sure you actually worked. Well, Maggie you think he's worth twenty bucks?"

Sabi's father threw his arm over her and kissed her forehead. "Papi?" she said, not knowing what to ask him. Something felt wrong.

"Just pay me, man," he said.

Jai handed him a crushed up five-dollar bill.

Her father's voice dipped low. "I said twenty dollars."

Jai's face hardened. He stepped closer to Sabi's father. Sabi stared up at Jai then her father.

"What no discount for relatives?"

Her father shoved her towards Maggie.

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"I don't think you're worth twenty bucks," Jai said. "It took you what? Fifteen minutes to fix the refrigerator. Besides no new parts required, right?" Jai shoved his finger against her father's bony chest.

"Just take the five dollars," Vinnie said.

Sabi's body tingled as she watched Vinnie step behind her father. He was getting too close to him. Before she knew what she was doing, she kicked Jai on the shin.

"Fucking kid," Jai said, but her father grabbed her and pulled her up in his arms.

"Jai," Maggie said, "you promised. No trouble." She pulled on Jai's arm.

"I'm gonna kill him and his brat," Jai said. Maggie pulled him close, wrapped her arms around his neck, so that his nose was only a hair width away from her lips. Jai closed his eyes. She told him to forget them.

Vinnie drank some more.

Sabi cried on her father's shoulder. He leaned down to pick up his toolbox and walked around Jai, Maggie, and Vinnie. "I'm sorry, sweetie," Sabi's father whispered as he carried her out of the apartment. He let her go so that she could walk down the stairs on her own.

"I probably shouldn't have brought you with me," said her father. "You shouldn't have seen that."

"Will Maggie be okay?" Sabi asked.

"Yeah, she'll be fine. She's used to them."

"Why did your cousin get so mad at you, Papi?"

"I don't know. I guess he didn't have enough money to pay me."

"Was he going to beat you up, Papi?"

"No, he was just acting tough in front of his friend. Men do that sometimes."

"Do women act tough?"

"Women don't have to act tough."

"They don't?"

"Sometimes they do, but you'll never have to because I'll always be there for you."

"Papi?"

"Yeah?"

"What are we going to tell Mami?"

"That's a good question. If we tell her the truth, she'll never let you leave the apartment. So we'll tell her we did a good job tonight and leave it at that."

"What if she asks me about tonight? What do I tell her?"

"Tell her you were an excellent little helper."

Outside, the fat Doberman was gone, but his leash was still tied to the parking sign.

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### Editor's Note

**Little Helper** first appeared in our January 2013 Issue.

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It happened the first time after the doctor told Kara that Sam had passed away, the result of a brain aneurysm rupturing during the delivery of a breached calf. For two hours, Kara sat with her back against the car door and left leg stretched in front of her, letting the damp from the morning's rain creep into her jeans. A silver sedan pulled into the hospital's entrance a few hundred yards away and she watched a pale, squat man in a blue-striped shirt get out and walk towards the hospital's entrance. Kara didn't think he saw her, but she felt concerned. He might get bad news too and try to sit out here, try to talk to her, try to commiserate.

She hadn't spoken to the doctor when he told her; she'd nodded to show that she understood. When he asked if she'd like to sit in the waiting room or his office, she'd shaken her head and waved him off. The idea of talking now, explaining, drove into her stomach so hard that it had to rebound back out and she twisted to her right, puking into a puddle. Kara stood up shakily, moving and moving quickly for the first time in hours, hoping the man hadn't heard and turned back to find the source of the sound. He must have been in the hospital now—she couldn't see him. When she turned back to her car, she saw herself still leaned against the door, head lolling as she watched clouds twitch around and in front of the sun.

Kara looked at her reflection in the car door's window: wide, freckled nose, chapped lips, light brown eyes. She ran her fingers over her cheekbones and knew she was there, but when she looked down, she was there too. Crouching, she made eye contact with the other Kara, who seemed unsurprised.

"Shit," she murmured, reaching out towards herself, feeling skin chilled by sitting outside but still warm. It couldn't be an out of body experience, she thought, if both you's still have bodies. Suddenly the other Kara lurched towards her, retching into the puddle again without seeming to add to it.

Her left knee felt strange and she looked down. The other Kara's hand was on her knee, helping hold her up, but it was also in the knee and braced against the ground somehow, some way she couldn't explain and didn't want to see. Kara jumped back and watched the still crouching Kara fall to the side even though both her hands appeared to have stayed firmly on the ground. Kara kicked herself out of the way, fumbled the door open, and then slammed the door, locking it. As she pulled out of the lot, she watched the other Kara sit back up as though the car hadn't moved.

When she got home—a small, renovated farmhouse that she'd lived with Sam in for seven years—Kara still felt as though she'd been shocked, a quick jolt to the nape of her neck. Somehow it all made it easier to call first Sam's parents and then her own. She finally cried when Sam's mother began sobbing and Kara thanked Sam's father when he promised he would take care of everything. When she put the phone back in its cradle

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and went to sit down at the kitchen table, she saw herself still standing beside the phone, idly twisting its cord.

There were three more Karas that night: one appeared huddled naked in the old clawfoot as she drained her bath, another stood by the front door and played with the knob, the last one she found crying in the bed after she'd returned from drinking a glass of water in the kitchen. By then, the Kara standing beside the phone had sat down and begun drinking tea. She'd taken her water and settled into the seat beside the tea-drinking Kara, enjoying the quiet company.

When Kara woke up the next morning, she found a Kara asleep on either side of her in bed and two more on the floor curled together like spoons. She sat for a moment, surveying the sleeping women. It was the most crowded the room had ever been. Kara crawled out of bed gingerly and made her way downstairs.

The kitchen smelled of coffee and fried eggs. Eight more Karas sat around the kitchen table, managing to share three chairs. Kara didn't care to look closely and see quite how this worked—the memory of the parking lot Kara's hand on her knee reminded her of the smell of ozone. A small laundry room came off the kitchen and she thought she might hide there, but there were five Karas tucked inside already so she went outside.

Two Karas stood in the chicken coop, working as a team to feed the hens and collect more eggs. There were at least twenty-one of them to feed now by Kara's count, excluding herself. A different one walked around with Sam's old white horse on a lead. One more lay balled up on the porch like a cat.

Sam's father had planned to send Sam's niece Heather over that day with food and to help around the house, but Kara didn't think this was a good idea anymore. There wouldn't be room in the house for Sam's niece. And Heather might see the many Karas—or she might not. Probably one was worse. There was the kitchen phone, but Kara didn't want to walk back inside. She felt a little annoyed with all of the Karas for filling up her house, keeping Heather from coming over—Heather who was a good girl really, especially for a teenager—and stayed with them sometimes. If Kara had wanted to do laundry this morning, she wouldn't have been able to make it to the washing machine because of all the other Karas.

"It's rude," she said under her breath to herself and whatever other selves might be listening while she walked to her car. She couldn't remember using the phone since yesterday when the hospital called her so it only made sense for it to be in the car and it was, under the front seat, probably knocked there by a thoughtless kick. Kara dialed, pressed "Speaker," and tilted her head back against the headrest.

"Hi. Hey, Kara is that you?" Heather's voice always sounded deeper on the phone.

"Yeah, it's me, Heather. How're you?" It was the most she'd spoken in nearly twenty-four hours and she thought her voice sounded metallic, rusty. She worked the pads of her fingers against her jaw while she opened and closed her mouth.

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"I—I guess I'm okay, you know. I think I'm still really shocked, but I cried a lot last night. What about you, though? Do you want me to come over now?" Kara closed her eyes when the concern entered Heather's voice.

"No, no honey; it's not that. It's... Well, I think I want, I don't think I'm ready to be around anyone yet. It's so sweet of you to offer, but maybe tomorrow?"

"Of course, if that's what you want." Heather drew out her words and Kara pictured Sam's sister Mary standing beside Heather, trying to coach her.

"It is, but thanks. I'll call you tomorrow," she said when she heard Heather begin to inhale as if to say more. Hanging up, Kara opened her eyes and looked at the keys she'd left in the ignition yesterday. She turned them, starting the car. Whether or not she liked her, she couldn't feel good about having left the first of the new Karas in the parking lot yesterday. Kara hadn't tried to talk to them yet, but when she got back, she thought maybe they could figure out how to stay in the house together. She put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway.

Editor's Note

**Karas** first appeared in our June 2013 Issue.

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## Everything Foreign by Monic Ductan

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In college, I made friends with my Jewish roommate. Her name was Leah and she was from Brooklyn. When she asked me home with her for Thanksgiving, she mentioned we could go to synagogue together. I asked if there would be other black people there.

"No," Leah said. "There won't be. Why does it matter, Annie?"

I rolled my eyes and didn't say anything, but I wanted to ask if she had ever been some place where she was the only white person. I knew that the answer was no, she hadn't. And so how could she understand what I was really asking?

Leah and I saved the change we earned from our waitressing jobs and went on weekend escapades in her old Volvo. Our school was in New York State, but sometimes we'd drive over to Penn or up to Canada for the weekend. We once drove all the way to North Carolina because Leah had read a book about the Outer Banks and wanted to see what they looked like. She claimed the salt water turned her curly hair to frizz. She straightened her hair as often as I straightened mine. We complained about our curly hair, even used one another's wide toothed combs and straightening chemicals. Even now, when I remember Leah Berg, I see her tearing barefoot across Nag's Head beach with her wild hair flying out and her sarong slipping down just enough to reveal the curly brown hair beneath her navel.

Leah declared herself a feminist, but not the man-bashing type. She loved men as much as I did. She preferred the ones that came home with her from bars and sweated all night and then left early and never called.

"It's simpler this way," Leah said. "All I need is a good lay every now and then."

"You talk like a man," I said.

I wanted the type of guy who would hold doors open for me and recite poetry, and though I'd dated only ones who did the former, I had yet to find any who did the latter.

"You're such a sap," Leah said. "Lower your standards."

I couldn't lower my standards. From the first moment I began to notice boys, I knew I wanted one that was different from me. The first boy I ever kissed was an out-of-towner. I was in eighth grade, and I had always lived in South Carolina, never even ventured out of the state. He was from Boston and had an accent that was completely foreign to me. When he stood to introduce himself to our English class, and that voice came out, I was drawn to it, as if lured by a Siren's song. His name was Mark, and I expected him to introduce me to new things, explain his corner of the world to me. I was disappointed to learn that Mark did not have much to teach me in the way of culture since we were both American and raised in the same culture. The first thing I learned from him was when to open and close my mouth during a kiss.

Catholicism was the second thing I learned. I was raised Southern Baptist, but Mark was Catholic. He took me to confession with him and explained how it worked. I liked the idea of confession, the idea that I could say anything. The priest would not tell

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anyone and God would forgive me. I began to make weekly pilgrimages down East Broad Street all the way to the railroad crossing and the overpass, and then I would slip into the only Catholic church in our town. The windows were stained and the altar was wide and long, much grander than anything in my clapboard Baptist church. At mass, the choir stood tall and formed their mouths into perfect Os. At my church, there was much more ostentation. The choir swayed from side to side, clapped their hands, and even moved their hips a little too much, so that they looked more like dancers than worshippers. Our church was a tiny space with ceiling fans. The old ladies smelled like denture cream and peppermint, and they would hug you so tight you half smothered. My conversion to Catholicism was the first phase of a lifetime spent sampling new religions and cultures.

In college, I dated men from every part of the world. Haiti. West Africa. Ethiopia. Puerto Rico. India. The Netherlands. Italy. The man I remember most from my college days is Leah's brother.

As it turned out, I did go home with Leah at Thanksgiving during our sophomore year. Brooklyn was another world to me. The city blocks and the men in yarmulkes with those dark strands of hair down the sides of their faces were so different from anything I ever saw growing up in the Deep South.

As Leah drove us through the city, I asked about her family.

"Does your dad wear a yarmulke?"

"Nope," Leah said. "Does yours?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Only on weekends," I said, keeping my face neutral.

She grinned as we pulled up in front of a brownstone. I didn't know if the smile was in response to my question or if it was just in anticipation of being home after months of living away at school. In contrast, I had not gone home since I first left for college the year before. Though I did sometimes miss my mother and even dreamed about our little shotgun house, I still could not bring myself to go back there. I felt that I had matured, and so it was hard to go home. I wanted to shake the red clay of the Piedmont from beneath my feet and become someone new.

On that Thanksgiving Eve, Leah and I decided to bake pies. Halfway through mixing the ingredients together, she realized we needed more flour and left to buy it. I was beating yams and sugar into a thick, orange glaze when I heard the kitchen door open and felt the cold New York wind on the nape of my neck. The man who stood in the doorway was not much taller than me, and he had Leah's face—straight dark eyebrows hung low over brown eyes that were too close together. His chin, like Leah's, was broad and slightly pointy. I knew that he must be her brother Seth.

Seth stepped forward. "You must be the beauty queen from Alabama," he said, and Leah's dimple winked in his cheek.

"South Carolina," I said. I noticed that he offered his hand to me with his palm facing down, and I had to reach up to accept his handshake.

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He was a charmer. By the time Leah came back from the corner market, he had regaled me with stories about crazy co-workers at his accounting firm and talked me into having dinner at his apartment on Friday evening.

Seth lived in Manhattan. Though I wanted the dinner to include only the two of us, we shared the evening with Leah and two of her friends from NYU. They all talked about which boarding schools they had attended, their summers abroad, and myriad other things I knew nothing about.

I did wind up in bed with Seth. It happened that weekend after Thanksgiving. Leah had driven back to school on Sunday morning, but Seth offered to take me back the next day if I would spend the night with him.

Before Leah left, she whispered to me, "So if you marry my brother, will you convert?" She giggled. "You could be a Baptist Catholic Jew." Leah loved to tease me about religion.

In bed with Seth, I tried to get his take on religion. He was a non-practicing Reformed Jew. He didn't want to talk much about himself. Instead, Seth asked about South Carolina and how I grew up and what I did there.

He traced my face with his fingertip. "I really like your nose and lips and hair," he said. "You look so different from me."

Something burned in my belly. At the time I thought it was the wine, but now I realize that I was to him what so many other men had been to me: an experiment. I was his chance to taste something foreign to him: a blue-collar black girl. But I didn't realize any of this at the time. And so I said, "I would really like to spend Christmas with you."

He didn't answer.

I lifted my head and propped it on my hand. "Do you have plans for Christmas?" I asked.

His brown curls brushed across the pillowcase as he shook his head.

"Christmas is another month away, Annie. I guess we could get together, I mean, if we're still friends then..."

Realization dawned on me. This man wanted nothing to do with me outside of his experiment. We would not spend Christmas together or even speak again beyond that night.

"Take me home, please," I said, knowing that he would take me back to the dorm, but what I really wanted was to go back to South Carolina. I had become someone new, and I longed to see my welcoming mother in our little shotgun house.

### Editor's Note

*Everything Foreign* first appeared in our January 2013 Issue.

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## Blood Related by Wyl Villacres

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I've been praying to this painting of the Virgin Mary, the one on the back wall of this dive bar, Cal's, the one on Devon with icicle lights on the ceilings, while drinking well whiskey and cheap beer for the past two months. Or at least I've been trying to pray. My success or failure depends on the difference between church sanctioned prayer to a known religious icon and silently wishing my ex-girlfriend of the same name would come back and love me again.

Last night, I might have gotten a little too drunk and woke up with a hangover. So today, in an attempt to work out the residual alcohol from my blood stream, I went on a bike ride. I rode from my apartment in Rogers Park, working my way through the July sun, always too high and too hot, past mom and pop shops, potholes in the streets, Mexican fruit stands on the corners, and the Jesuit university looming over everything, down to the Loop, all tall buildings, shirtsleeves, and ex-girlfriend's-new-boyfriend idling next to me at a stoplight. His car's vanity plates were what did it. From three cars back, coasting over the crest of the bridge on Dearborn, I could read it. CHRISNUM1. Or maybe I couldn't read it. Maybe I just knew, with every foot I glided closer, that it had to be him. I felt a surge of something in my gut-- bile maybe? I stopped short of the front door, staring at the back of his head through the rear passenger window. My day off of work, and I'm strangling my handlebars, white knuckled, as he sits behind the wheel of his shiny new Mazda, probably driving off somewhere to do something that has something to do with moving from Chicago to Washington, DC with my girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend. Whatever.

Two months ago, around five in the evening, Mary turned to me as we were walking down Devon and called me boring. She said it without tone or inflection, as if it were my name. She said that all we did was go to Cal's and drink until we were ready to fall asleep. I didn't see what the problem was. She didn't mention that she had already replaced me or felt like she needed to. Just that I was boring. She swings her hips when she walks, like she's showing off. I said nothing, because that's the only thing I really know how to say. It wasn't the first time I'd been called boring, and chances are that it won't be the last.

Twenty-four minutes later, we were sitting belly-up to the bar, elbow to elbow with some of the best aging alcoholics in the city and listening to David Bowie, when she turned to me and said that I was boring again. Then she said "I can't deal with it anymore! I need something- someone more interesting. I'm done," in that breathless tone that she uses when she doesn't want a response. Then she walked out of the bar, leaving behind half a bottle of Schlitz and all of a shot of Bellows. I was also there, left behind and fighting tears, but it didn't feel like she was leaving me there. More like she was throwing me there. Discarding me there.

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July is hot, and as I sit waiting for the light to turn so I can start to pedal, I notice the beads of sweat running down the front of my shins and start to curse the blacktop for reflecting so much heat. It takes my mind off of Chris sitting next to me, brown, coiffed hair bobbing back and forth, drumming his perfectly tanned fingers on the steering wheel, the bass from his speakers vibrating just so, just loud enough to notice without really hearing. Chris is listening to some god-awful electric dance music, modulated bass, distorted, shrill, high tones, glitchy vocals looped to incoherence. He's always liked that kind of stuff—fast music that sounds terrible. Ever since we were kids.



Chris is, in the very real and not-at-all kidding way, my cousin. His mom and my mom are sisters. We have photos of us in the bath together. Blood relatives.

So it's not that weird for me to start fantasizing about grabbing the U-lock off of my handlebars and smashing his windows. It's not weird for me to imagine climbing through the broken window and wrapping my hands, bleeding and covered in glass shards, around his neck. But I could never do it. I want to wish him ill, but I can't. He's still my cousin. We're still blood. Maybe, though, I can jump the light. I can wait for him to hit the accelerator, always too hard, and then pull left and slide out and let him run me over. This isn't a terrible plan. This is feasible. This would make him stop, already feeling awful, already with knots in his stomach, step a shaky foot out of his nice car and see me lying there, bleeding. I bet he'd fall to his knees. I bet he wails.

He called me the day after Mary and I broke up. "I've got bad news, man..." he choked up, sniffed a few times to hold it together, continuing with "I fucked up man. I really fucked up." If I would have looked in a mirror, I could have imagined him speaking to me. Same jaw line. Same eyebrows and nose. His eyes are green, mine are brown. He makes a lot of

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money and I'm full of shit. Our eyes fit us. He told me how they had been "hooking up for a few weeks."

The light was still red.

That morning, there was a knock on my door. Through the peephole, stretched and distorted was Mary. We had dated for two years. I had told her once I thought we should move-in together, but she just smiled straight, perfect teeth and shook her head "no." Her orange hair caught the light, even when it was dark. She said that she wasn't ready for that kind of a commitment. Chris and Mary had been dating for two months. They are moving-in together. Across the country.

"This should be the last of it," she said into the box in her arms. She had stopped saying words to me.

"Cool, thanks. So... excited for the move?" my breath this morning smelled like rotten milk. I skipped brushing my teeth last night as well as this morning in favor of another shot of whiskey and hiding from the daylight under my covers, respectively.

"We don't have to do this whole thing. This whole... *talking* thing." Mary was wearing dark lipstick, like wine dripping from her mouth. Part of me wanted to taste it. Part of me wanted to vomit.

"Oh. Ok." I took the box. Inside were things I hadn't missed. A belt buckle/bottle opener. A red, fuzzy teddy bear I won in a claw game. A warm bottle of beer—"Mary's Beer" from some microbrewery in Ohio. A scarf. I looked up from the box and she was already halfway down the stairs. Two flights, three flights, out the front door, a trail of her perfume hanging behind her. It smelled like petrichor and lilacs. I thought lilacs were supposed to be calming. My heart just beat faster.

I went inside, threw the box onto the coffee table, and thought about Chris. This was his fault. They met last Thanksgiving and became instant friends. They hung out without me. I never had a good feeling about it. Mary would always talk about what he was doing. His job at an advertising firm downtown. His loft apartment in the Loop. I was content skating by without a college degree, twenty five and happy to have been promoted to "Associate Team Member," a ten cent raise, while selling overpriced soaps to tourists at a department store on State Street.

Mary let me know that Chris' firm made ads for the shop I worked at. That was a month before we broke up. That's when I started to hate Chris.

The cross traffic on Wacker is slowing down or speeding up, the light turning yellow, which meant that if I want Chris to know exactly how I feel, I have about five seconds to decide. I look at my cut off jean shorts, my sleeveless, cigarette burned t-shirt. I think about my back, dark with sweat. I think about Chris' air conditioning, the trunk of his car probably filled with moving boxes. I level my pedals for a quick takeoff. I start thinking about my lack of insurance and the Mazda's acceleration, about how Chris bragged about torque and horsepower when he first got it a year ago. About him and I going a hundred and ten miles-an-hour on route twelve through Wisconsin, laughing about something, singing along to the classic rock station on the radio. About Mary and him doing the same, heading east towards their new home. I lean forward on the seat,

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and start pushing down with my right foot. Everything moves slower and slower, the adrenaline coursing through every vein. The light blinks, the yellow turns off, the red lights up.

I start pushing, hard. I start pushing down and pushing down, my bike jumping out into the intersection. Chris probably doesn't see me. I'm in position. I hear the Mazda's engine scream, feel my tires grip into the street. Sunlight, flashing off of a high-rise window, hits my eye and all I can see is Mary walking down the stairs. I try to blink it away and she's curled up next to me on the couch, her head in my lap as I trace her ear with my ring finger. I start to smile, my chain grinding on the hub. The air freezes everything around me, the heat still rising from the street. Another flash of sunlight and I'm nine years old, Chris and I making fun of Lily Schwick while we ride our bikes past her, before laughing and calling girls "stupid" even though we both desperately want to hold their hands. There's only a second left to fall in front of Chris' car.

But I let up and watch the silver Mazda go past, faster than it should. I didn't really want to die. I just felt like it. I'll probably feel like it for the majority of my miserable existence. I still don't think he saw me. Maybe he did. Maybe he sped off to avoid a run in. Maybe he was trying to throw me off balance--I don't know. What I do know is that while Chris and Mary are off, driving across the country, laughing and smiling together until Mary starts to think that he's gotten boring, I'll be selling soap and drinking until my skin is yellow and leathery. Tomorrow is another day of drinking, but at least it's another day. I cut across traffic when I could, heading east to the lake, over onto the bike path and rode slow, back up to Roger Park.

### Editor's Note

***Blood Related*** first appeared in our March 2013 Issue.

Photograph – "Waft and Wisp" © Frank Cademartori

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## Conversation and Precipitation by Laura Newsholme

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I was twelve when I first started talking to the clouds. Twelve is such a strange age in a girl's life. I myself was surprisingly mature in many ways; I had breasts and menstruated and thought constantly about boys and yet in so many other ways, I was a child. One manifestation of my childish nature was talking to the clouds. I would lie on my back and spend my time telling the clouds my secrets and my wishes. Other girls of my age wrote frantically in journals: I had no need of a journal; I simply talked to the clouds. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when at age twelve and a half, the clouds started to talk back.

I remember the first time I got a response to my incoherent ramblings with shocking clarity. As usual, I was lying on my back on my bed, which was next to an enormous window. We lived in an old house, and one of the many differences between our house and the more modern properties closer to town were the size of our windows. My mother would moan whenever she redecorated, which she did frequently, because she would always forget about the difficulty incurred when trying to buy curtains to fit our enormous windows.

This particular rant to the clouds was all about Billy Phipps. Billy Phipps was the apple of my twelve year old eye. I believed that we were destined to be together and like many twelve year old girls, I analysed every gesture, every fleeting glance, every word spoken and every smile. I was convinced that he was madly in love with me, but was far too shy to do anything about it, because I was not one of the 'popular' girls. Billy Phipps was very much a 'popular' boy. He embodied the perfect blend of cheeky monkey and brooding youth to find himself the idol of both the boys and the girls. He played on the football team and was tall and broad for his age, and yet there was a certain sensitivity to him, that showed itself in the poems and stories he would compose for English classes. To the twelve year old me, he was the perfect man. Unfortunately, Billy Phipps was also the perfect man for Jessica Furlough and this particular rant had begun because I had found out that apparently, Jessica Furlough and not myself, was the perfect girl for Billy Phipps. I railed at the base injustice in the world that he could not see through my twelve year old baby fat to the beautiful woman just clamouring for release. Surely he would respond to my sensitive nature and find me irresistible if he would just take the time to get to know me. Oh the horror!

'Billy Phipps does not matter, Emily. Put him out of your mind,' came the voice and I knew immediately that the clouds were speaking to me. I cannot explain how I knew that I was hearing the clouds, but there was never any doubt in my mind. More surprisingly, there was no fear. I was shocked, understandably, but I was never afraid of the clouds. There was nothing to be scared of. They were not intimidating or judgmental. They were just the clouds and they were talking to me as I had spent hours talking to them.

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What you perhaps are not aware of is that the different clouds have different personalities. In a very profound way, the animistic religions of ancient times had it right all along, at least, they did in my experience. They would worship rivers and trees and nature in general and each and every object had a different persona. The clouds are no different. I found that the cumulus clouds were the most accessible and this was no real surprise, after all, cumulus clouds are known as fair weather clouds. They are the fluffy white balls that every child draws to represent a cloud and their appearance in the sky is all the more striking when the sky is the shocking blue of a midsummer day. They don't presage rain or storms. They just appear to give us momentary respite from the sun and they are all the more welcome for it. The cloud that spoke to me on that first day was a cumulus cloud.



I took the cloud's advice and I tried to put Billy Phipps out of my mind, which was not easy as Jessica Furlough was flouting their relationship for all the world to see and there was rumour that the fledgling couple had kissed behind the bike sheds. I would come home from school and throw myself on my bed by my enormous window and rant to the clouds about my tribulations. One of them would always respond and I began to value them as my closest friends. They were kind and honest and so much wiser than anyone I knew. Plus, I never felt like I was intruding on their time. It felt to me like they waited in the sky just for me and slowly, they became my clouds and I became the girl who prayed for rain. Unlike those around me, my face lit up when the storm clouds gathered and nothing made me happier than the constant grey sky of a British summer.

I know what you are thinking and you are right. It is incredibly arrogant for me to describe the clouds as mine. Some of you will be thinking that the clouds belong to everyone and no one.

Others of you will be insistent upon the fact that they are not sentient beings but simply humidified bodies of water. Well, it is arrogant for me to say the clouds are mine, but I'm afraid that they are mine. I know they are, because they told me so. I was the only

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person they had encountered in eons who bothered to listen to what they had to say and I did listen. Not only did I listen, but I implemented. I took their advice and I ran with it and my life as a pre-teen was easier as a result.

Perhaps that isn't what you were thinking. It certainly wasn't what my brother James thought when he first encountered me having a conversation with the clouds. I was fourteen at the time and he was eighteen and it was the summer before he was due to leave us to go to university. James and I had always had a good relationship. We were lucky. There were enough years between us for us not to suffer from the inherent jealousy common between siblings who were closer in age. It also helped that he was a boy and I was a girl. As a result, I never borrowed makeup or clothes without asking and he never made me look stupid or beat me up in front of his friends just because he could. He was my big brother and he took the job very seriously. So, when he came into my room stealthily one afternoon and found me midway through a detailed conversation with my clouds, he was disturbed to say the least. I knew that he couldn't hear the clouds and so to him, I was having a one-sided conversation. Admittedly that must have seemed quite strange.

'What on earth are you doing?' he asked, aghast.

'Nothing. Don't worry about it.' I replied. The clouds had all gasped upon his entry. They didn't see it coming and neither did I.

'Who are you talking to, Weirdo?'

'No one. Just shut up James. And you're supposed to knock before you come barging into my room you know. I could have been naked or something.'

'Em, what's going on with you?' he asked. 'You've been acting odd for a while now and you never bring any of your friends home like you used to.' There was genuine concern and worry in his eyes but I couldn't very well tell him what I was doing and the clouds were advising temperance. Somehow, I managed to convince James that I was just talking out loud and he went away, but his fears didn't and I discovered later that he had spoken to our mother about what he had walked in on.

Sometime later, I found myself in a psychiatrist's office. I was fifteen and on the advice of my brother, my mother had been monitoring my conversations surreptitiously. By the time James returned from university for the Easter vacation, my mother was convinced that there was something strange going on with me and that was when I began my visits to Dr. Greenbaum. He was a nice enough gentleman and never treated me like a child, but the clouds were wary of him and his apparent well meaning suggestions. By this stage, I trusted the clouds more than anything else in my life and why wouldn't I? My beloved brother had betrayed me to my mother who had then assumed that I was crazy and taken me to seek professional assistance. I had no control over events, like most fifteen year olds, but unlike any of the fifteen year olds I knew, I was in danger of losing control of my freedom. The more I denied that there was anything wrong with me, the more inquisitive the questioning became and I didn't want to tell people about my clouds. They would never have believed me anyway.

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Following six months of intensive psychotherapy, I still talked daily to my clouds and it was decided that my 'recovery' would be better served if I was committed to a psychiatric unit. My mother was distraught, but there was a large part of me that believed much of her reaction was due to embarrassment and the horror over what people would think and the clouds said nothing to disabuse me of this notion. James was truly remorseful and I knew that if he could have gone back to that first day and said nothing, there was a good chance that he would have. He didn't want me to have to go into a hospital and be surrounded by sick individuals with real mental issues. I knew that he was plagued by guilt, but I was sadistically pleased. In a very real way, this was his fault. If he had just left well enough alone, I would be laying on my bed by my enormous window talking happily to my clouds with no cares in the world. Instead, at the age of sixteen, I was committed to the psychiatric secure unit.

I was there for eighteen months and they were the most bizarre months of my life. For the first year, my behaviour changed little. I still talked to my clouds, but I was sensible enough to be sly about it. I whispered to them out of my cell window, nose pressed against the glass like an urchin. The night time clouds were less friendly than Cumulus, but they still got me through the difficult times and it was sagely Cumulonimbus that advised me to modify my behaviour. I was to respond to every suggestion favourably. My doctors thought I heard voices; I heard voices. I accepted that this was a problem and wanted desperately to receive the help I needed. The doctors thought I had made a breakthrough. I was kept on the ward for a further six months, and then, two weeks before my eighteenth birthday, I was released back into society, cured.

That was ten years ago. I have never required psychiatric help again and continue to function as a perfectly normal and well adjusted human being. I am engaged to a wonderful man and have a job I love. I also still talk to my clouds. I have learned to be circumspect over the years. I could have insisted that I was not crazy and still have been on a psychiatric ward to this day. I chose life and lies. My name is Emily. I am not crazy; I just talk with the clouds.

### Editor's Note

***Conversation and Precipitation*** first appeared in our June 2013 Issue.

Photograph – "Sky Power" © Frank Cademartori

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**P**ine Ridge is a big rez, about the size of Rhode Island and Delaware put together. Big as it is, things get around fast. You can't fart without 50 other people knowing. When a rumor spread that Ignacio Puente was coming back to Pine Ridge, I was the only one who believed it. John David Gutierrez, my best buddy, said it was nothing but bunk.

"He's in college in California, why would he come back to this dump?" he said.

"Maybe he misses you," I said but John David told me to shut up. Ignacio had been gone for almost four years. Neither of us had heard from him since then.

"If he comes back," John David said as we rode our bikes down Crazy Horse Circle. "I'll punch him in the face and call him an asshole."

Ignacio and John David met during our junior year at Red Cloud High School. They dated in secret, but most people had suspicions anyway. One night, a few weeks before graduation, John David went to Ignacio's house to 'study' for a test. Mr. and Mrs. Puente walked in on them making out and told John David to never come over again. The day before we started class at Sitting Bull College on the rez, Ignacio disappeared. After not seeing him for a month, we found out his parents flew him to college in San Francisco. John David didn't take it too well. He couldn't stop crying for weeks and his appetite went away too. He lost about 25 pounds during his grieving.

"What if he said he was sorry for leaving?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter, I'm still kicking his ass," John David said and knowing him, he probably would. We stopped by the Puente house, looking for clues. All the lights were out and the car was gone, which only said they weren't home.

"Maybe they're picking him up from the airport," I shrugged. "I thought I saw Mr. Puente heading towards Rapid City earlier."

"I thought I saw Mr. Puente earlier too, but it was just a pile of dog shit," John David answered and I almost fell off my bike from laughing. The Puentes were Pentecostal missionaries from Orange County, California. They came to Pine Ridge a couple times a year, but one time they stayed put and opened a church called "Temple of God's Love" over on Sundance Road. Ignacio was the receptionist there in high school and once he told me that every time he got off work, he'd drive home in tears.

"Some church members tell me they want to kill homosexuals and they don't know I'm one and I love one," Ignacio said. Within the next week, he was gone.

I was pumping gas into my car at Big Bat's when I thought I saw Ignacio in front of me. It was past 11 at night and I was falling asleep after a long day at work, so I thought Ignacio was a mirage. He was more muscular and his hair was shorter. He was barely recognizable but his little scar near his right eye gave him away. Mr. Puente gave him that scar when he found out about him and John David.

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"Nimo!" he said and ran towards me. "I just got home about an hour ago and I wanted to keep it low-key and then I run into you!" Ignacio hugged me so tight that he lifted me off the ground.

"So whatcha doing back here after so long? You didn't like San Francisco?" I asked when he put me down.

"No, it was great," he said. "I went to San Francisco State and got a degree in Kinesiology. It's a nice city, gay friendly, but it was missing something."

"Indians?" I asked which made him smile. Ignacio is Puerto Rican and John David is half-Lakota, half-Costa Rican. They both got a lot of smack talk for not being 'full-blooded' and more talk for being gay.

"Has JD been with anyone else since I left?" Ignacio asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "He would've told me about it."

"He probably thinks I left him for someone else, but I didn't," he said. "I still love him, Nimo. I hope he doesn't hate me after everything that happened." Knowing the way John David was, I doubted he hated Ignacio. He always said he did, but sometimes I'd catch him staring at his mini Costa Rican flag in his truck. Ignacio gave him that flag for their first Valentine's Day together.

"When do you think I should talk to him again?" he asked.

"Uh, I'd give it a couple of days," I said. "Last week, he said if saw you here, he'd punch you in the face."

"I deserve that," Ignacio sighed. He hugged me again and told me he'd be keeping in touch with me, but I didn't believe him.

At work the next week, I was replacing light bulbs in the student lounge of Sitting Bull College and John David was there, studying for his summer class. If he passed, he'd graduate with a degree in Business Management.

"Need help?" he asked from his table.

"No, I got it," I said, even though I did need help. My injured leg was acting up on me again, so I almost fell off my ladder.

"Hey, John David, can I ask you something?" I said as I screwed a new light bulb in. John David nodded, so I asked him what he would do if Ignacio *really* came back to Pine Ridge. I don't remember exactly what he said, but it was pretty violent.

"That sounds terrible," I said and stepped down from my ladder.

"What the hell did you expect? Run into his open arms and kiss his face off?"

"Yeah, you see-" I said, but John David cut me off. He said he did love Ignacio for a long time, but he didn't anymore.

"John David, he came back," I said before he could keep on yelling. He stood up from his chair, walked over to the window, and pressed his cheek against the hot glass.

"That burned like hell, I guess I must be awake," he said. "Are you messing with me, Nimo? 'Cause if you are, I'll kill you." I told him I wasn't and if he wanted to see Ignacio, he could find him at the Temple of God's Love.

"If he wants to talk, he knows where I live! He's known where I've been for the last four years!" John David shouted. He took his textbook and threw it across the lounge.

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"Sorry Nimo, I'm not mad at you," he wheezed. "I'm just, ah, I can't even talk." He picked up his textbook and walked out, covering his sniffles with his hand.

A little before my shift was over, me and Ate took all the trash to the dumpster. I told him about Ignacio being back and he said he already knew about it.

"This is Pine Ridge, son, people knew Ina was pregnant with you before I did," he said. "So what's JD gonna do? Take him back?"

"Doesn't seem like it," I said. "John David is too angry."

"Ignacio could've found a way to keep in touch if he really loved JD," Ate said as he tossed the last trash bag into the dumpster. "Your grandparents didn't want me dating Ina, but I married her anyway. She's my world, Nimo." He took off his rubber wedding ring and replaced it with his golden wedding ring, rubbing his fingers on the surface.

After I clocked out from work the next Tuesday, I drove straight to the Temple of God's Love. They were getting ready to have a service about the Book of Corinthians. Ignacio was at the front desk, greeting everyone who walked in. I squeezed in through the crowd and asked him if he and John David had talked yet. He shook his head and told me he figured it was over for good, but he didn't want it to be.

"Then tell him that," I said.

"He hates me, Nimo," he said. "What's the use? Hey, if you wanna stay for the service, we're having dinner after."

Since there would be food, I did go to the service. My parents aren't Christians, even though a lot of people on the rez are. They raised me on the traditional Lakota religion. Miss Running Bear, John David's mom, is a traditionalist too. Ignacio has been Pentecostal his whole life because of his parents. When Ignacio came out, his parents beat him up, so he stayed at John David's house for a few days until they calmed down. So when Ignacio left, John David felt betrayed and I didn't blame him.

"Did you like the service?" Ignacio asked as we ate grilled chicken and corn.

"Eh, it was okay," I said. "Your dad gets kinda boring after an hour."

"Yeah, I know," Ignacio said with a laugh. "I've heard that sermon about five hundred times and he still hasn't changed it. It's one of my favorites though."

"Why? Your dad said gays are going to hell at the end of it," I reminded him.

"He always says that, Nimo," Ignacio sighed. "Anyway, the first book of Corinthians has a couple verses about love in chapter 13. I used to read those verses in San Francisco, whenever I missed JD, which was actually every single day."

While dessert was being passed around, I asked Ignacio why he vanished. He avoided the question at first by changing the subject to his college life. When I asked him again, he told me he felt scared. He said his parents told him that if he kept being with John David, they would disown him forever.

"They wanted me to be straight and they sent me to college in San Francisco," he said. "I guess it's tough for you to understand, Nimo. Your parents really love you."

"Maybe you should be having this conversation with John David instead of me," I said. Ignacio stared at the floor for a moment and then he said at this point, it was all up to John David. He didn't want to force anything on him.

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"I left him without telling him why," Ignacio said. "I broke his heart into pieces."

As I drove home after the dinner, I thought about the story of how my parents met. Ate met Ina at the annual Sioux Plains Pow Wow in '82. She was a fancy shawl dancer and he was a janitor, cleaning the tables at the food section. Ina sprained her ankle during a dance and went to rest at a table Ate was wiping down. Ate said when he saw Ina, he froze. The first time John David saw Ignacio during lunch in our junior year, he watched him walk from the vending machine to a table across from us. John David sat next to me, frozen in place, for the rest of the lunch period.

"Dammit, Nimo, I told you I'm not talking to him," John David said when I brought up Ignacio during a game of pool at his house.

"At least hear him out for a couple of minutes," I said.

"Would you be quiet? You're messing up my shot," John David said and then he struck the eight ball into a pocket.

"Loser!" I said and he asked for a rematch. So I let him have the first shot of the next game. The eight ball spun right into a pocket on the left side of the pool table.

"This is pissing me off, let's go get something to eat at Big Bat's," John David said. We got into his truck and I noticed his mini Costa Rican flag was missing. I asked him about it and he said he didn't have to hang it up anymore since everyone knew he was half Costa Rican.

"Everyone knew you were half Costa Rican when Ignacio first gave it to you and you still hung it up," I reminded him.

"Look, it's my truck, I'll do what I want," he said and turned up the radio.

"Nimo, JD, my favorite customers," Mr. Graywolf said when we got to Big Bat's. "Your parents came by about an hour ago, Nimo. They bought a mega pack of condoms and ten tubes of lube."

"Gross," I groaned. No matter how many times Mr. Graywolf tells me that joke, it always makes me want to throw up. While me and John David waited for our usual hot dog combos, I asked him if he really hated Ignacio because I wasn't sure.

"Is the sky blue?" he answered. "Can we just drop it, please? It's over between me and him, Nimo. I don't want him back."

When our hot dog combos arrived, so did Ignacio. He stopped at our table and then John David got up and went outside.

"Does that mean he doesn't want his hot dog?" Ignacio asked.

"I'll get to-go boxes, you go talk to him," I said. I stepped outside a few minutes later, not seeing John David. Ignacio was standing by John David's truck, whistling.

"Where did he go?" I asked.

"He said he had to pee and went back inside, which I'm gonna take as a no. I'm going home," Ignacio said. I told Ignacio to sit tight while I went to get John David. I found him by the water fountain next to the restrooms.

"You are not making me go out there," John David said. So I made a deal with him – if he and Ignacio didn't make up, he could punch me. If they did, I'd punch him. With that, John David agreed to talk to Ignacio for a couple of minutes.

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"Honey," Ignacio said to him when we were outside again.

"Don't honey me," John David said. "What do you want?"

"I want you," Ignacio answered.

"How do I know you're not gonna leave me again?" John David said and to be honest, he had a good point. Ignacio reached into his pocket for his wallet. He took out a picture of himself and John David together in our senior year. On the back, he had written "Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:8."

"I kept this picture with me the whole time," Ignacio said. "When I missed you, I'd look at it and I would read Corinthians to remind myself what love was because there were times when I'd forget. You showed me what love was."

"I did not," John David said. "Did I?"



"JD, you are the perfect description of what love is according to Corinthians," Ignacio said. "But if you wanna find someone else, that's okay. I still love you, JD."

John David stared at the ground. He told Ignacio he'd get back to him. I climbed into his truck and he took me home without saying a word

until we got to my driveway.

"What do you think I should do?" he asked me. I told him it was his choice. Then he asked me what I would do if Cindy Blackbird, my ex-girlfriend and my first love, wanted me back.

"I'd jump off the Black Hills," I said. "She didn't love me the way Ignacio loves you. I loved her but truth be told, all we really did was have sex a lot." John David unlocked the truck's doors and I slid out. I watched him reverse and take off towards the stop sign at the end of my street.

The Temple of God's Love has an annual pow wow to raise money for the church. I showed up early, before everyone else took all the free food. Ate and Ina arrived a little later. Ina was going to be selling her famous jewelry. Ate was going to be at the drum circle, even though his throat had been bothering him.

"How are you gonna chant loud enough if you can't talk?" I asked him.

"There's an ancient Lakota secret to that, Nimo," Ate said with strains in his voice. "Think about the ugliest person you know completely naked."

"You need your head examined, Jay Eagle," Ina said to Ate. They shared a kiss on the lips and went to opposite ends of the pow wow.

I found Ignacio at the drink booth, serving lemonade to a line of sweaty people. He gave me a large cup of lemonade with extra ice.

"No John David?" I asked.

"Nope," Ignacio said as he served himself a cup of water. "But there's still time." He sat down on a cooler and wiped sweat from his forehead with his hands.

"Need a towel?" John David asked. When me and Ignacio played football in high school, John David was the towel manager and always had a clean towel for us.

"I do," I said.

"Not you, Nimo, you're not sweating that much," John David said. "How about you, Ignacio? You're soaked."

"I could use one," Ignacio said. John David admitted he actually didn't have a towel with him, but he did have something else just as good.

"Uh," John David said. "I'm still in love with you, Ignacio, and you know I'm serious 'cause I hate almost everyone. There, I said it. I'm so lame." Ignacio got up from the cooler and asked him to say it again.

"I love you," John David said. "And I wanna be with you, but I swear to the Creator, if you leave me again, I'm gonna kick your ass from here to the moon."

"Don't worry, JD," Ignacio said. "I'm not going anywhere. Hey, Nimo, can you give out the lemonade for a few minutes?" I nodded and got behind the stand. I watched them head towards the parking lot, talking to each other. When they were away from the crowd, I saw them hold hands for the first time in over four years.

### Editor's Note

***The Return*** previously appeared in our June 2013 Issue.

Artwork – *The Return* © Felipe Campos

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## Sissy Spacek by Timothy Gager

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I woke up and she was lying dead next to me. Later they said it was from natural causes. It was bullshit because she was only thirty-three. How natural is that? The whole thing was new. I understood I had to call the police. I had a stretchy past so I didn't know what to say. I said she just stopped breathing. They drove me to the station and questioned me for three hours. When I got home, she was gone, as if she was never even there. They took my sheets.



I called members of her family. They'd never liked me too much. Their daughter was too good for me. Her last boyfriend was someone they liked. They knew nothing of him. I knew he smoked a lot of crack. I was the clean one. They knew nothing of me. It should have been better that way.

Her mother answered the phone weak and quiet. She'd already cried. Has anyone else been contacted? She said she had no idea. She said it would not be a good idea to show up at the funeral.

I bought a black suit. I already owned a blue one and a grey one. I wanted to not stand out and black needed to be purchased. Her sister, who I recognized through pictures thought I worked at the funeral home. I introduced myself and her hand fell out of mine as if she

was slipping away. I waited a few minutes and it was as if I was waiting for a bomb to go off.

There was a murmur which caused the hair to stand up on my arms, my legs...my back and then my head started to buzz. The crazy father was coming into the room. He

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had to be held back. He yelled something about how it would have never happened if not for me. In the background the crowd of voices chanted, no, no, no. This wasn't a time to fight. The whole thing seemed scripted. There was no time to mourn. I left.

The night she died we'd watched a movie made in 1974. Radicals were bringing a bomb to a newspaper office. Sissy Spacek looked like Patty Hearst. The word "Dynamite" was written on each stick. It was good times. It never seemed dangerous at all. Still--she blew up.

*Editor's Note*

***Sissy Spacek*** previously appeared in our April 2013 Issue.

Photograph – "Teisha Bonnie Twomey" © Michael Gromacki

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## Go-Kart King by Anthony Feggans

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Our first date was a Sunday brunch, and we were best friends before the waiter could take our order. The talk was bite sized at first - pleasant and not in the least bit intrusive or substantial. But at some point in time, without any real definitive moment to specify, he wasn't just the guy I had that one date with- Bob or John or Tommy or something; He was Sean, from Salisbury, who hates broccoli, loves football, has a twin brother, owns a pet toad, loves strawberry flavored everything. The waiter, a wide-eyed, red headed, country-twanged, pink freckled slip of a girl named Robin had called us an adorable couple with a sincere smile and a hushed tone so the people around us couldn't hear that we weren't just "buddies" or "pals" or "bros."

Sean ordered first, asking for warmed blueberry syrup on his eggs, apple juice instead of orange juice, bacon instead of sausage, wheat toast with strawberry jam, and coffee, no cream, with lots of sugar. I had wanted to order the same thing, but doing that on a date is such a clear, desperate attempt to be liked, a begging whine to be accepted and thought of as a soul mate, giving him the impression I'm already, in my mind, picking out a California king bed for "our" place together, looking for a yard big enough for "our" English bulldogs, furnishing a living room large enough to house our mutual friends we invite over. We talk to them holding each other by the hip, none of us wearing cologne, preferring beer to \$13 vodka and cranberry juice, happy we don't have to "hook up" with random guys we met in some bar that we'll never see again, those Bobs and Johns and Tommies out there.

One of the tables, a family of 3, dad, mom, and daughter, stopped in front of our table before leaving, making Sean pause midsentence. They had been staring at the pair of us through the only thing separating their table from ours, a diamond woven wooden divider covered in framed pictures of old country singers, antique ads with women holding bottles of Clorox or boxes of Tide, movie posters for Rock Hudson's "Giant," Randolph Scott's "Ride the High Country," and guys in big hats riding bulls.

The dad, all torso, shoulders and gut, dressed for spring in the middle of autumn with his t-shirt tucked into his shorts, cleared his throat and stuck out his hand for Sean, recognizing him as one of the mechanics from the place up the street that fixes his Buick. Sean, without a smirk or smile, shook the stranger's hand with a firm affirmation of recognition, an acknowledgment of their mutual respect for lug nuts, or gauges, or shock absorbers, for knowing why this type of oil is bad for that type of engine, for being able to describe, in detail, the difference between the octane ratings of 87, 89, and 91 for gasoline.

Sean was proud of his work, and happy to talk about it, as long as he was at work when talking about it, like the first time I'd met him when I'd brought my car to his garage for an oil change. I'd asked just enough questions about car upkeep to bide my time in figuring out if he'd be offended or flattered if I asked him out. At that time, he

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was eager to talk about cars, never once breaking eye contact or losing his half smile. But every time I asked a question over our brunch about fixing cars, he'd change the subject, clearly wanting to keep the two, his personal life and his career, separate from one another.

"Did you know Randolph Scott was gay?" Sean asked me while I watched the family as they walked out the restaurant, the daughter at just the right age to make the way her dad was carrying her inappropriate. I looked at him, brow furrowed, confused.

"Randolph Scott." He pointed to the picture of the man in the movie poster, holding a pistol at his hip. "He was from here in Charlotte, too" he said, stressing "too" so I would understand that Randolph would be a friend of Sean's because they were so alike, and that if given the chance, Sean would have had sex with him.

We sat on the rocking chairs on the wooden front porch of the restaurant while Sean showed me his pet toad he'd found while fishing, and I didn't have the heart to tell him it was a frog.

The subject of go-karts came up while discussing how competitive we both are.

Growing up, a neighbor that had lived down the street had built a go-kart and drove it all the time. We had nothing else in common except for that little candy-red, white racing-stripped speed demon, but it was enough for me to fake a love for hockey so he'd let me drive his go-kart. When I told Sean this as a way to warn him about my expert handling of go-karts, his laugh was full of indignation and mean spirit. So I challenged him, betting I'd win.

"I'm a betting man," he said, chest out. "What do I get when I win?"

"Sex. I'll bottom."

"No, not that." he said, looking away, suddenly uncomfortable, even ashamed. "If you win," he stated in a rush, "You get Fred, my toad" lifting him up.

"If you win, you get my watch," I said, trying not to be offended, wondering if he thinks less of me for bringing up sex already. We hugged, just long enough to be intimate, but too short to be romantic, and I left him that afternoon stooping over his frog as it hopped in a spit of grass next to the parking lot.

The following week, we met outside the arcade on a cool, bright Saturday afternoon. I walked over to his truck and asked to hold his frog, sitting in a plastic box in the passenger seat.

"I've already made him a space. He's going to like living with me," I joked.

Sean just asked for him back, told me to wait for him inside, not amused.

We smiled and nodded children away from our knees as they begged for money to play more games, their eyes wide, wired with the whirl of colors and sounds.

Our strides were purposeful and long because the race had already begun. Sean turned his ball cap on backwards to avoid headwind. I'd zipped my windbreaker to do the same.

Some teenage girl in a black and white referee jersey read the rules in gibberish over the microphone.

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I took note of the drivers, mostly teens, a few kids, a couple of parents with their son or daughter in a side car with a fake steering wheel to turn for fun. When I looked over to Sean, I tried not to be disappointed at the clenched jaw, the hard grip he knuckled his steering wheel with, the determined stare he gave the track.

"Chill," I tried, but he just shook his head.

"If this is about the frog, I don't actually want him," I tried again.

"He's a toad," was all Sean said as the whistle blew and he barreled out of the tunnel.

By lap three Sean's go-kart started to sputter, slowing him down, not enough to ever be passed by any of the other teens, the guys bumping into the girls, making them scream and laugh, but always a distant second to me. He'd take the lead, sputter, I'd pass, and he'd spit some curse at me like I was his enemy.

On the last lap, I started tapping on my break, feigning frustration, remembering the way my dad would fake losing at checkers to me, or the way my first boyfriend would fake his moans of ecstasy and passion when I had sex with him, because the truth mattered to me, and I wanted to be the best, and those are things a man should be able to do well. Unfortunately the truth was that I wasn't the best at that time, I didn't do those things well, and they knew I wasn't ready to hear that from them, not yet.

I rolled into the tunnel, firmly in 2<sup>nd</sup> place, got out of the go-kart and started to give Sean my watch. But he just shook his head with a smile that made me feel slightly disgusted with him.

"Don't feel bad. My job is cars," he said, full of placative sympathy and woe, and a pit of hatred for him dropped to the bottom of my stomach.

We had agreed to meet at his place the next week, and with every passing day that hatred sprouted and coiled around my feelings for him. I realized I was being ridiculous in my anger: *I* let him win. But I had *let* him win, and he bragged about my loss every day: "Maybe you're a better cook than you are a racer," "I'm as great at dancing as I am at beating your butt in a race," "I could put Fred behind a wheel and you'd even eat his dust."

By Saturday evening, while we drank and watched his TV, I recoiled at his every touch. In certain light, his face was more cherub like, in a permanent pout, on the verge of a tantrum— a child without a toy or a baby without their bottle. When he moved to kiss me while we sat on his couch, I turned away, so desperately wanting to be able to admit to him how I let him win. If I could admit that to him, it would make me want him again, would make me think of him as more than a child, and would prove that I'm more than a child myself.

Instead, I just made out with him. When Sean left to cook dinner, I took Fred the toad/frog from his cage and threw him off the balcony. When Sean realized Fred was missing, I wanted so badly to feel guilty for finding such joy in listening to him whine in sorrow.

*Editor's Note:*

**Go-Kart King** first appeared in our April 2013 Issue.

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**F**inding the water gun was the hardest part. No one was selling them in January. All the big box convenience stores melted together until Lydia wasn't sure whether she was in Target, Kmart or Wal-Mart. She used the signs advertising special discounts to orient herself. She found toboggans and dancing Santa statues on clearance, but whenever she managed to chase down a checker to ask about water guns all she got was blank looks. It was in the 99¢ store that she finally found one, a super soaker buried under a pile of plastic water toys—ducks, neon floaties, and pool noodles all giving off the rubber smell of burnt tires.

At the New Year's party he called her a bitch. It had been three months since they'd seen each other. He'd come over to her apartment to watch a re-release of a trippy Japanese horror film from the 60s because he was "shocked" she hadn't seen it. He could be an asshole about things like that. "You haven't seen/read/heard X?" And then, "Really?" as if you must be lying, so vital was X work of art. They didn't have sex that night, which was weird since usually that's how movie nights ended. He would turn up at her apartment with a movie she *had* to see and a \$5 pizza from Lil Caesar's. She was in charge of drinks, and would run down to the liquor store and buy a \$12 bottle of wine, but when she got back to her apartment was always embarrassed by what the extravagance said about her and what she thought of him, so she would hide the good wine in her bedroom closet. They'd end up drinking the Franzia she kept on the counter and he'd tease her about her shitty palate. But that night their usual post movie debate didn't go anywhere, anywhere being her bedroom. Instead he left and Lydia didn't see him again until three months later there he was at Kristine's party.

The water gun was camouflage patterned, but the muzzle was bright orange. The reservoir had a dent in it, and she was worried it wouldn't be big enough but it was the first water gun she'd seen and at 99¢ plus tax it was a bargain. The cashier didn't seem to think there was anything odd about her purchase, and cheerfully told her he hoped she had, "a great night!"

Lydia hadn't heard a lot of cursing growing up. Her mother disapproved of "potty talk," and even saying the word "butt" could land you in the bathroom with a bar of soap in your mouth. But "bitch" was allowed, because it wasn't a pejorative. Her mother bred Dobermans, and bitch was what you called a fine, female dog: a "good bitch." She used to take the dogs on long hikes, letting them snuffle around in the bushes and long grasses. They were thorough, the bitches, stopping every twenty feet or so to pee. Somehow they always knew to save enough to mark the house when they got back. Walking up the porch steps of the house you would be hit with the salty smell of dog urine. Even to her less developed olfactory sense there was no doubt whom that house belonged to; it belonged to the dogs.

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Once she was back in the apartment she pulled the water gun out of its bag and set it on the counter. She didn't want to let herself chicken out or reconsider. It was early still, the afternoon just starting to go grey as it transitioned to twilight. She started brewing a pot of coffee, popping open a 40 oz can of Miller High Life to drink while she waited. She held the can in one hand, chugging as quickly as she could, rifling through her kitchen cabinets with the other. She hadn't eaten anything that day and the beer hit her hard. She could feel each individual tooth in her mouth, and her nose tingled. She pulled out the three Tupperware bowls she'd inherited from her mom and set the bowls up in a line down the center of her kitchen floor.

He didn't sound mad when he called her a bitch, which is part of what confused her at first. It was because he had misused the word "banal." He was describing the works of Jane Austen to a group of their friends and she asked him if he meant trite or mundane and he said no, it was just dull. And so Lydia said she didn't think banal worked, banal should refer to the day to day and none of their daily lives resembled *Emma* and then he called her a bitch. Everyone laughed uncomfortable, side-eyeing one another from behind New Years novelty glasses. But she had always thought of bitch as just the word you used to describe a female dog, a good whelping dog, and so she didn't react until later when her friend Kristine took her aside to say he'd always been a cunt and she was better off without him. And she said she hadn't known they'd broken up, their relationship never having been clearly defined as such.

She drank the coffee as quickly as she could stomach it. She sweetened it with packs of Sweet'N'Low she collected from restaurants, two packs a mug. Then she pulled her leggings and underwear off and squatted over the first bowl in the line, wearing just her sweatshirt. She was careful to lift it out of the range of the splash zone. It took her a long time to be able to pee in spite of the heavy, bloated feeling of her full bladder. She shifted from side to side in a modified crab walk to make sure she was centered over the bowl. She couldn't get over the feeling that someone was outside the kitchen window watching her, but every time she looked over she saw that the blinds were closed. She shifted up onto her knees, gripping the plastic bowl between her thighs and that did it. It rushed out of her at a startling speed and she was worried about overflowing the bowl but it turned out fine. It didn't smell the way she'd expected it to. It was more acrid, closer to cat urine than dog.

Her mom never kept the male puppies. She only liked to have one or two studs going at a time, and these she imported from other breeders. She said the male dogs were too aggressive to live in big groups, and liked to have them sold off within a year or two of their birth. The bitches were better, her mother would say. The bitches were worth more. Lydia never noticed any difference in behavior between the bitches and the dogs, but she learned not to get attached.

It took two pots of coffee and another High Life, but she filled every bowl in the line up. She drank a glass of water to rehydrate and get sober and then ate two pieces of bread, plain, just in case. The bowls of urine she carefully sealed up with their lids and loaded them into the passenger seat of her car, throwing in the kitchen funnel. She had

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to make a second trip for the water gun. She tried to listen to the CD he'd made for her but it made her the wrong sort of sad to enjoy it so she switched it to the radio. Her mother's favorite song was playing on the first station she tuned in to so she turned it up and sang along to "9 to 5," while driving to his house.

She parked down the street, because she didn't want the rattling sound of her car to alert him or his housemates to her presence. She crouched in the dirty snow by the passenger door of her car with the funnel and the water gun. She felt safe on his dark, tree lined street. The smell of pine and cold burned her throat. Her urine was still warm, and steam rose up when she pulled back the Tupperware lid. She used her knees to grip the gun, funneling her pee into the water reservoir. It was hard to aim in the dark, and she spilled on her hands, splashing urine up onto the cuffs of her sweatshirt. There wasn't quite enough room in the gun for all the pee. She left her car open, warm light at her back as she trooped down the sidewalk to his lawn. She'd never been in the upstairs of his house, didn't know which room was his, so she settled on the front lawn as the best place. The water pressure in the gun wasn't great, so it had a scattershot effect, not like the strong line she had imagined. She had enough urine in that first trip to make the L, Y and most of the D. One more trip back to the car was enough to finish. The left over urine she poured, liberally, on his driveway and garage door. Anyone who came by would know which bitch owned this territory.

*Editor's Note:*

***Bitches*** first appeared in our February 2013 Issue.

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I ride my bike underneath the perpetually clouded backdrop. I stop in the wet oil of a black asphalt parking spot and look up at the dark leaves of plum trees hanging over. I climb to pick plums.

Wayland, the Arrowwood manager walks by and says, "Don't fall. You'll crack your head open and bloody the pavement."

I push my way through a row of shrubs and onto the back porch, a thin bearded man. He has dozens of colorful oil paintings lined up back to back in his apartment. From an old wooden chair I ask him questions. He dips his brush in turpentine, and I sit perfectly still while he paints a picture of me, my thick red hair ribbon red blouse with kittens and yarn balls puffy painted, on front.

In Falcon Ridge, the complex across the street, I fly down a steep bright grass wall beneath thundering clusters of plum and up the other side. I ride back, skim dense shrubbery, scratch my legs on pine needles, and land on the basketball court where everyone comes out of their condos to stand talk and play.

Girl runs up and yells "Hi, I'm Alaina."

I don't like how eager she is so I make a face and ride away, and I know that I am far too important for her. I am queen of the world and I am the one who approaches people. I am the one who runs up to strangers on the basketball court, whether old or young, pretty or ugly, and gets them to let me play with them. Even the men in big Nike shoes and t-shirts know they should best just toss me the ball without arguing, and I turn around backwards and throw it over my head. Everything I do will be loved and adored, even if I miss. I skip up front of the IMAX theatre, "Mt. Saint Helens" running late, do a routine I learned in ballet for a room packed full people laugh and smile at me.

Alaina stalks me until I smile at her. We ride our bikes behind back porches a narrow path a big circle of trees and forests and dangerous cliff-like drops that circle the whole place beyond. I stare at Alaina, thin pink and purple plastic streamers wisp from her handlebars. She is skinny, blue-eyed, freckle-faced and pale. Thick straight blonde hair puffs at the top then curves under politely mid-ear. Tiny cross necklace, shiny pink shoes with silver buckles on the sides, and white ruffle socks; pastel turtlenecks; a sweater embroidered with a fuzzy animal.

We sit on the warm metallic green square of radiator rooted in the earth and brush Alaina's Barbies' hair. I stop brushing to stare and think Alaina is so cute. I am so proud of her. She is my prize.

Sneers her lips and asks, "Do you have a staring problem?"

Alaina's favorite thing to wear is a pair of hot pink pants bright white elastic stirrups bend around the bottoms of her feet. Alaina's legs are so skinny the pants stretch down the air around without even touching her legs that much. Alaina and many other girls in first grade wear stirrup pants, and all of Alaina's friends look pretty much like her.

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Alaina and her friends running around the playground, stretching on the bars, never stopping.

I can't run very long. I lose my breath, start coughing, and have to sit on the wooden ledge of the sandbox and sift pebbles through my fingers. When I am ready to run, the girls are out of sight, and their voices echo from the distance.

I climb out of the bathtub to use the toilet.

Alaina peeks around the door, sees me wipe my butt says "Ew! You really wipe like that?"

"Like what?"

Says really proud, "I never hold my butt open and stick my hand inside! I just wipe the toilet paper outside on top."

I stand on the plush peach toilet seat see my thighs in the mirror. They bulge and mold tightly to stretch pants my mother finally bought me, thick muscles and a butt blares out in upward curves I stick my hand in to wipe. I am a lumpy, sluggish rock. Unfit to run and play, I wobble like Jello. Half an hour tugging and pulling, picking up the hand mirror. I climb down, pull down the pants, and pull back up loose corduroy pants I've always worn.

It's not that big a loss because they aren't even the right stretch pants anyway. They are maroon and without stirrups. My mother never buys me the real thing. Just like how I have a Hugga Bunch doll, not a Cabbage Patch Kid. I grumble she's bought me something I don't want, and it doesn't matter if it is *almost* a Cabbage Patch Kid. Alaina has *exactly* a Cabbage Patch Kid, all of Alaina's friends have Cabbage Patch Kids, and they all play with them together at recess. I learn these complaints make me "ungrateful" and so I seethe in silence.

My mother asks, "Why aren't you wearing the stretch pants?"

"I don't like them," I pout.

She rolls her eyes. "You begged me for those pants! You always ask for something then you wear it once and you never wear it again. I'm not going to buy you clothes for a very long time!"

"But Alaina's are different."

She rolls her neck down into a slump. "Rachel. If Alaina jumped off a bridge, would you?"

"Yes!" I whine immediately.

She slumps down doubled over, completely deflated, head shaking.

Alaina and I venture out and toss the basketball. We circle the court yell insults to the boys we squash the ants with our Keds. Alaina huffs, "Your dad's mean!"

I stomp my foot down on chipped green cement look up from my kill. "Why?"

"Because he's black."

It's not true my father said he is three quarters black one quarter white. He has light brown skin. Gruff black beard, dark brown eyes and porous black-freckled cheeks. Very tight black curls puff up an inch above his head. Potbelly thick thighs and calves, just like mine, thicker than they should from hours of weekly running.

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Alaina and I take all ingredients from my cupboards and mix them together. We cook an hour it smells like black licorice—gourmet brown liquid. We shift our attention from our food, and discover that the kitchen has exploded all of its contents onto the counters and floors.

My dad comes home. "What in the world is this? Clean this up right now!" He takes Alaina by the arm and walks her to her condo, three buildings down. Unleashes her to her father, chubby man in a white t-shirt who waits under the carport.

The man gives her a spanking I watch it makes me happy.

My father and I go inside. "Just clean the kitchen," he says.

With Alaina I suggest we play doctor. One of us pretends to listen to the other's back, and I suggest we pull up each other's shirts and touch each other's backs, because you're supposed to. I lean on the comforter and listen. My leg gets pressed against hers.

"Get your sweaty leg off me!" she says, and squirms away.

We play hide and go seek. Her house is messier than mine, there are more places to hide. I panic and hide around the corner of the hallway wall.

She discovers me instantly and says, "Let me look in your ears."

"Why?"

She peers through her black plastic ear scope and says "Ew!"

"What?"

"You have all these little gross black dots in your ear!"

I am hurt. "No I don't. You're just making that up."

She calls her sister Kate over, take a look. Kate is a sixth-grader.

"Oh, yeah, there's something weird in there," Kate says and walks away.

Alaina crosses her arms and smiles and raises her eyebrows. "See?"

I look down mad but not having anything to say.

Alaina and her friend Jessica we know from tap ballet class at Northwest Aerials, they come to my door. Their hair is crimped, mine is not. Jessica's mother is driving they take Alaina's walkman headphones put one in Alaina's ear one in Jessica's they listen to "Tonight" from New Kids on the Block. They talk about how much they love Joey McIntyre. I have no clue what they are talking about, I am determined to find out.

Jessica's mother says "You girls!" like they are so charming talking like this, I want her to think the same about me.

I sit on grey stone steps and wait for the three of them to go shopping. I feel left out, I want to cry but I don't want to go in there and do it in front of them. I see the window Alaina and her friend flipping through clothing racks laughing. Jessica's mom buys them both bags with light pink leotards and tights.

Near dusk, we sit on a bench outside, bare winter tree strung white Christmas lights the three of them are planning something. They are excited, and I am silent. I don't know why I can't think of anything to say. I wish I would just smile and figure a way to remind Alaina to invite me. We ride the Ferris wheel, I feel the same. I am not really here. Wheel flying way above the city people screaming laughing and I should be looking

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at the lights, the sky, the Space Needle across the courtyard people buying cotton candy below, I can't.

I want a sister. The closest thing I have is Sara Crewe from the movie, *A Little Princess*. I don't care about the book I'd rather stare at Sara's face, clothes and room decorations. Rain pouring down the windows I make a blanket fort, fix hot chocolate with marshmallows, sit back down with my cat Sparkle and watch the movie on repeat.

Azteca Mexican restaurant my head on mom's lap I cry because I have asked my parents to give me a sister, they won't.



"We want you to be well-provided for," my dad says. "We've already started your college fund and we don't want to dip into it. And plus, we want to give you all of our attention."

They don't care what I want. I stiffen if either of them tries to hug me, and they learn not to bother trying.

"I just don't understand this aversion you have to touching!" mom says.

I have hurt her feelings and should feel guilty. I give a quick hug, and say "there."

"I love you," she says.

I say nothing.

She looks for my response.

I give her none.

"Rachel! I said 'I love you!'" she repeats.

I look up annoyed, snap "I love you."

My mother says my room is a mess. She doesn't know where I get it, she is always vacuuming and sweeping and has been all my life. I sit around doing

nothing.

I wait for the ice cream truck with my clear bag of hundreds of pennies my aunt Millie gave me. All year she saves extra pennies in a big jar, her trailer in Bothell, comes over and gives them to me for my birthday. I lace up my high tops and take pennies to

the sidewalk across the street, Falcon Ridge and wait, I hear "Do your ears hang low, do they wobble to and fro" in the distance.

I scheme for my dad to buy the New Kids poster I saw rolled up at Fred Meyer, and a few days later I have it over my bed, telling mom Joe is my favorite. When the ice cream man winds around nearby complexes, arrives at the curb, I count out a hundred pennies he smiles and I talk to him.

Alaina knocks on my door and I kick her in the shin.

"Rachel! Apologize to Alaina!" my mother says.

I roll my eyes. "Sorry."

Alaina runs away.

Mother leans on the wall opposite, arms crossed head shaking. "I don't understand why you would do such a thing. That's just malicious!"

My eyes water, I stomp to my bedroom.

At recess that morning I see Alaina linking arms with two of her friends they circle around me whispering words I can't hear disappearing in a blur of stretch.

*Editor's Note:*

*Alaina* first appeared in our April 2013 Issue.

Photograph – "Escape" © Chris Fradkin

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## Project Service by Richard McLarn

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The following document was commissioned by the federal government and the AtHome Corporation. It contains a summary of the dates 1/1/2011 through 6/18/2011, as they pertain to the Harrison family and Project *Service*.

This version of the document has been made available for public viewing. Some segments of the document have been redacted to protect the privacy of the parties involved and at the discretion of the AtHome Corporation. For full disclosure, the redactions have also been printed.

This document was funded by the AtHome Corporation and assembled by a team of investigators commissioned by the aforementioned corporation's board of directors.

On 2/23/2012 this document was submitted to the Federal Bureau of Investigations in its entirety.

On 2/25/2012 it was edited by the AtHome Corporation's board of directors and this version has been approved for availability to the public in response to questions regarding these events.

### Memorandum Regarding Project *Service*™ Malfunctions and Potential Liability Implications

To: Federal Bureau of Investigations

From: AtHome™ Corporation Research and Development Department

Date: 2/22/2012

Subject: Chronology of Related Events

#### 1/1/2011

The Harrisons receive Project *Service*, more commonly referred to as, "Robot Dave."

The Harrison family consisted of Mark (age 48), Patricia (age 46), Tracy (age 18) and twins Robert and Mitchell (age 13).

The Harrisons received Robot Dave after the AtHome Corporation, as a marketing tool, donated the first fully functional version of their new robot butler to a family for a year before it was released on the mass-market. The Harrison's were selected from a random family lottery executed by the AtHome Corporation on 7/18/2010.

The family received Robot Dave at 8:30am on 1/1/2011. Ralph Kelly, the AtHome Corporation's marketing director, and Dr. ██████████, Project *Service*'s inventor were also present. There was a meet and greet with select members of the media and an

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opportunity for other media outlets to take photos of Robot Dave obeying the Harrison's commands. Some tasks that appeared in photos include: Cooking, Cleaning, Driving, assisting the three children with their homework, helping the thirteen-year-old Harrison twins with their basketball shot, acting as a doorman and several other household activities.

At this time, no defects were reported.

1/27/2011

First defect reported.

Patricia Harrison reported the following via e-mail to both Ralph Kelly and [REDACTED]

*Robot Dave is a Godsend!!! My house has never been cleaner and I'll never worry about getting the kids to school on time again! We are giving him simple commands to start with, like you told us. I can't wait to see if he can stop the rabbits from destroying my garden, but I'll wait until later to give him that command. It might not be so simple. The whole family is anxious to see what else he can do!*

*There is one issue though. It's not even that big of a deal, but he refuses to make certain foods because he says they are unhealthy. When the kids complained, he said something weird, "I am programmed to fulfill your needs [REDACTED] ."* Anyway, the kids want their pop-tarts, so if you could tell me how to stop that, I'd be grateful.

*Like I said, he's been absolutely wonderful. We can't thank you enough.  
The Harrisons*

A brief e-mail with a maintenance command was sent to Patricia Henderson by Dr. [REDACTED]. The issue was considered resolved.

2/16/2011-2/23/2011

Second defect reported.

The Harrisons communicated the second defect through a series of phone calls and e-mails to Ralph Kelly. Robot Dave would not fulfill the request to pick the kids up from school. During this time, Robot Dave is also quoted as saying, "[REDACTED]" several times.

The twins, Robert and Mitchell Harrison, along with the elder daughter, Tracy Harrison would begin school at 8:30am. School was released at 3:30pm. The twins would attend basketball practice at the school gym beginning at 4:00pm and ending at 6:00pm daily. Tracy Harrison had student council obligations from 4:30pm to 6:30pm. Robot Dave was supposed to pick up all three children at 6:30pm.

It was confirmed that Robot Dave's programming gave him the following information: The children are at school for a combined total of ten hours a day. The children are at home and awake for an average of eight hours a day. Robot Dave is believed to have come to the conclusion that the children should live at school. This course of action was designed to save the Harrison's time and effort.

Dr. [REDACTED] made a house call on 2/23/2011 at 4:45pm and altered some of Robot Dave's code.

The defect was not reported again.

2/25/2011

Dr. Luke Wilson said the following via e-mail to Ralph Kelly:

*Mr. Kelly,*

*The recent defect in Robot Dave has raised some concerns for me. I believe he may be learning [REDACTED], which may cause some serious problems. I'm afraid I have to demand we postpone mass-production, and [REDACTED].*

*I feel now that the project was rushed to completion, and Robot Dave's programming needs to be re-done to accommodate for [REDACTED]. Without this alteration, I fear that [REDACTED].*

*Please respond ASAP!*

*Dr. Luke Wilson*

Dr. [REDACTED] was fired from the AtHome Corporation's research and [REDACTED] development team by Ralph Kelly on 2/25/2011 at 4:52pm. Accounting records indicate that Dr. [REDACTED] was paid [REDACTED] dollars at the time of his departure.

At 4:58pm Ralph Kelly sent the following e-mail to Dr. [REDACTED] :

*I'm so sorry we couldn't work out our differences concerning the project. I have ensured that the company paid you [REDACTED] dollars. That money should inspire you to keep your [expletive deleted] mouth shut when people ask you about why you don't work for us anymore. There are a lot of important people with a lot of important money wrapped up in seeing Robot Dave succeed, and we don't need some paranoid, [expletive deleted] scientist ruining the whole thing. Should you choose to open your mouth to the media, I can promise you some interesting conversations with the company's legal department.*

*Ralph Kelly*

Dr. Steven Wilcox, one of [REDACTED]'s assistants, was placed in charge of the project on 2/26/2012.

3/07/2011

At approximately 9:30am Patricia Harrison gave Robot Dave the command to: "Stop the rabbits from eating the vegetables in my garden."

4/28/2011

Third defect reported.

At 6:30pm, Patricia Harrison noticed some behavior from Robot Dave that she considered odd. Robot Dave was crushing something up and placing it in some of the food he made for dinner. At 6:57pm Patricia Harrison communicated the defect via telephone call to Ralph Kelly. During interrogation by the Harrisons, Robot Dave reported, "I have been medicating Tracy for two weeks, [REDACTED]."

Dr. Steven Wilcox arrived at the Harrison's house at 9:32pm for a technical interrogation to identify the reasoning for the defect.

The analysis of Robot Dave's responses indicated that he overheard a conversation between Patricia and Mark Harrison. The couple was discussing their daughter, her boyfriend and their intimate activities. The subject of pregnancy was brought up by Patricia Harrison. Mark Harrison spoke of the financial implications of a new baby. Robot Dave interpreted the discussion as an implied directive. He began slipping Tracy Harrison birth control pills the following evening during diner.

Dr. Steven Wilcox gave Robot Dave a series of four corrective commands.

The issue was not reported again.

5/30/2011

Fourth defect reported.

At 1:20am on the morning of 5/30/2011 Tracy Harrison snuck out of the Harrison's home. She exited the house by means of her bedroom window. Robot Dave witnessed Tracy Harrison climbing through the window while he was outside waiting for rabbits in the garden. Robot Dave waited until Tracy Harrison crossed the property line before pursuing her. He caught up to her two blocks away at the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> St. and Colfax Ave.

Tracy Harrison reported the following in an interview with Dr. Steven Wilcox:

*He ran after me down the street. When I saw that he was following me, I turned and told him to go back to the house. He said, "You are disobeying your parent's commands. You will return to your residence, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]" [pauses to blow nose] I told him to shut up and go back to the house, but he wouldn't. [pauses to wipe eyes] I thought he was supposed to listen to us. He didn't listen to me at all. He repeated what he said, but I just turned around and started to walk away. [pauses to cry] Then he*

*[REDACTED] all the way home.*

When Tracy was returned to the Harrison's house, Mark Harrison found it necessary to bring Tracy to the hospital. Her medical records from that night indicated the following:

*The patient had severe lacerations on her scalp and upper back. Some gravel, typical to that found on a residential street, was removed from the wounds on the patient's back. Thirty-seven stitches were placed in the patient's scalp.*

Robot Dave was removed from the Harrison's home at 10:20am on 5/30/2011, for Dr. Steven Wilcox to perform an analytical interview and maintenance.

At this time, Patricia Harrison voiced concerns about letting Robot Dave re-enter their home. Dr. Steven Wilcox spoke to her in person. No records of their conversation exist. Patricia Harrison agreed to let the trial continue after speaking to Dr. Wilcox.

At 4:25pm, Maintenance was determined complete by Dr. Steven Wilcox and the defect was considered resolved.

At 5:40pm, Robot Dave was returned to the Harrison's home

6/03/2011

Fifth defect reported.

At 3:45am, Vincent "Vinny" Tacker broke into the Harrison's home through the backdoor. Mr. Tacker was in the process of unhooking the Harrison's television and DVD player when Robot Dave approached him from behind. Robot Dave killed Mr. Tacker by [REDACTED].

At 4:45pm on 6/03/2011, Ralph Kelly delivered the following televised statement:

*Good afternoon to our customers and to members of the media present.*

*First off, I would like to send the sympathies of the entire AtHome Corporation to the Tacker family for their loss.*

*Today's events should never have occurred. Our research and development department determined that the highly illegal actions of Mr. Tacker resulted in an unforeseen variable in Robot Dave's sophisticated home security system. Robot Dave is designed to protect the Harrison family at all costs. Today's unfortunate turn of events was a minor oversight regarding the logical ramifications of a felony being committed against the Harrison family.*

*Of course, all future models have already had this programming resolved. The 2012 models of Project Service will create safer homes than ever before. We are also adding additional features to ensure that Robot Dave will turn any future felons over to the appropriate authorities with the appropriate amount of force.*

*Although this should never have happened, I think this instance highlights the stream-lined process by which we can solve issues of any nature in Project Service. The models can simply automatically download a software update and any issue can be solved in a matter of hours at the most*

*The AtHome Corporation regrets that this problem was not addressed before it arose. However, we know that our changes will prevent any future incident of this caliber. Thank you.*

6/18/2011

Sixth defect reported.

At approximately 11:10pm, Robot Dave entered the bedroom of Robert and Mitchell [REDACTED]

At 11:20, Robot Dave entered the bedroom of Tracy Harrison.  
[REDACTED]

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At 11:25, Robot Dave entered the bedroom of Mark and Patricia Harrison.

[REDACTED]

At 11:35, Robot Dave took a seat in the Harrison’s living room to await further instructions.

End of Timeline: See closing notes for additional information

Closing Notes: Last updated 9/5/2012

On 6/22/2011 at 3:20pm the bodies of the Harrisons were discovered by local authorities. When the county sheriff’s department entered the Harrison’s home, Robot Dave was still seated in the living room. When authorities entered the house, Robot Dave said, “The Harrison’s no longer have any needs. [REDACTED]

Only one object of relevance was found during a search of the Harrison’s home. The object was an ice pick with trace amounts of blood on it. Originally thought to be a weapon implicated in the Harrisons’ deaths, the medical examiner’s office determined on 6/27/2011 that the blood on the ice pick was rabbit blood.

Ralph Kelly was fired by the AtHome Corporation’s board of directors on 7/5/2011.

As of 2/22/2012, when this document was determined complete, the case of *The People v. The AtHome Corporation* for one count of Criminal negligence regarding the death of Vincent “Vinny” Tacker was awaiting trial. This document was deemed admissible by judge Ronald Tallis on 3/18/2012. The case ended in a mistrial on 6/18/2012.

As of 2/22/2012, the case of *The People v. The AtHome Corporation* for five counts of criminal negligence, five counts of reckless endangerment and two counts of endangering the welfare of a child regarding the deaths of the Harrison family was still in preliminary deliberations. On 5/27/2012, this document was deemed admissible by judge Jonathan Pesnalt. The case ended with a verdict of ‘not guilty’ on 8/2/2012.

*Project Service*’s launch date was moved back from 1/1/2012 to 1/1/2014.

Editor’s Note:

***Project Service*** first appeared in our May 2013 Issue.

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## George Watkins is Going Home by Matthew Guerruckey

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That morning, George Watkins thought he was Jesus. The day before it had been Michael Jackson, the day before that David Bowie—a new one, which took us all a bit by surprise. George didn't have all of Bowie mannerisms nailed down yet. His androgynous baritone wasn't nearly as effective as his moonwalk. As Vergie and I helped him into the tub he said, "Bless you, my children," then lay in the tub giving a blank stare to the ceiling as the water rose to cover his body.

As patient aides, with no psychiatric training beyond a three-week course, we were there to make sure George had whatever he needed. If what he needed was medicine, we couldn't do anything for him, we called the nurse. If he got too out of hand we couldn't do anything for him either, we just called security. We were babysitters, and the state paid us accordingly.

All George ever wanted in the morning was a bath. To an outsider it must have looked pretty strange—me, a spindly 22-year-old kid, and Vergie, a stout, round-faced woman in her forties with a skunk shock of white in her otherwise auburn hair watching an emaciated elderly man take a bath. As he sat in the tub George would drift to sleep and startle himself awake with a shudder. We had to sit with him to make sure he didn't go under. All of the other patients took their baths alone.

I spent most of my mornings making sure that George didn't drown, as his tremendous pecker floated on the water, surfacing and submerging like a submarine. George was aware of his gift, but only seemed to mention it when he had slipped into his Jesus delusion. "That's right," he'd say, "Jesus Christ needs to have a big dick," to which Vergie would reply "I've seen better," and I'd think, *where?*

I'd been working there for just over two months and I still wasn't comfortable with the patients. Vergie was a big help, but I was beginning to feel like she resented how much I depended on her. At night, when things were quiet, she'd tell great war stories of the days before the new hospital building we worked in was built, when the patients had been kept in the old brick and barbed-wire building across the street. Vergie was getting older, but she was still a scrapper. My first night on the ward I watched her drag down Janet Harper, an Amazon over a foot taller than Vergie, and hold her down until our head nurse could prep a needle with Thorazine and knock her out. Meanwhile, I'd just stayed frozen in my chair behind the front desk. I justified my inaction through regulation (we were supposed to keep one person behind the desk at all times), but really I'd just never seen anything so inhuman. Janet had rushed at her like a linebacker who'd just found a hole in the defense that led straight to the quarterback, but Vergie had sidestepped it like she was dancing around a puddle.

Tracy Ravel, a squat woman with an unfortunate pig's face full of freckles, poked her head around the door and crooked a finger toward Vergie.

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"Can I help you, Tracy?" Vergie asked, but Tracy just crooked her finger again with greater urgency. Vergie sighed and got off her chair to see what she wanted. They whispered back and forth for a moment, and then Tracy left.

"Miss Ravel is in need of some assistance." She looked at George sitting in the tub then back at me. "You going to be okay alone?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, but I really didn't know. I had never been left alone with one of the patients. Even though George was harmless, I still had reservations—but I didn't want her to know that. "George is a piece of cake, right George?"

"Oh, sweetheart, don't give him any more delusions than he's already got," she said, and disappeared down the hallway with a jingling of keys.

I took the chair that Vergie had vacated, closer to George, and checked my watch. Shift change was in twenty minutes, and the day crew got irritated if we left George in the tub for them.

"All right, buddy," I said to him, "it's time to get going, don't you think?"

George answered with an annoyed grunt and shut his eyes tight in defiance.

"Have it your way," I said, and reached into the water to pull the stopper, a trick I'd learned from Vergie. Only on a day that George was being especially stubborn would he stay in the tub after the water had drained completely, but when he did he wouldn't move until the last drop was gone.

When the water had drained he shifted to sit up at a ninety degree angle.

"Okay," I said, "let's get you out. You're going to have to help me out a bit here."

I knew I should have called someone to assist me, but I wanted Vergie to know that I could do things on my own. I placed my arms under his armpits and pulled upward. He didn't move at first, but once he realized that I wasn't going to give up he raised his arms to the edge of the tub and pushed himself up while I pulled. Once he was on his feet, George lifted one leg out of the tub—always the most precarious moment of the procedure, even with assistance. He wobbled for a moment, but I held onto his shoulders to steady him. He brought the other leg out and stood dripping onto the towel we'd laid out as his bathmat.

"Cold." He moaned.

"Yeah, I know, George, hold on a minute," I said, reaching for a towel to cover his back. I gave him one of the bigger ones to wrap around his chest as I used a hand towel to wipe down his legs.

"Cold!" he said again, louder, in a tone that startled me. I'd heard stories of George's temper, but I'd been lucky not to witness it firsthand. Though he was ancient, wet, and naked, I still wondered if I'd be at a disadvantage in a fight with him.

"I know, buddy, I'm almost—"

But George had already left me to sit in the chair. I knelt down in front of him with the towel and finished drying his legs. I knew I'd have to get him to stand up again to get his clothes on. Some mornings that was impossible. I stood up and grabbed his diaper from the edge of the tub.

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"Come on, George, let's get your diaper on first—we don't want a repeat of yesterday."

He stayed quiet until I urged him again, and then stood up. I took the opportunity to wipe down his butt and thighs, which would, hopefully, make it easier to slip the diaper on. After a bath we always applied lotion to his body to keep his skin from drying out. His kneecaps and elbows were dark and ashy. On the days that we were low-staffed or rushed, and weren't able to apply the lotion, his skin would scab and flake off. George never complained, and it probably looked worse than it felt, but we still didn't want to put him through that.

I'd never put the lotion on him myself—it had always been Vergie. She rubbed it into his skin with an ease bred from twenty years of habit and routine. His skin would shine like new leather when she was done. The bottle was travel-sized, like you'd find in a hotel. Full-sized bottles had been outlawed after one of the patients had taken one outside during smoke break, packed it with dirt, and clubbed another patient in the face with it. You could never be sure what would become a weapon.

I opened the cap and poured a bit into my hand, but it was more watery than I'd anticipated, and it all ran through my fingers onto the floor. I cupped my palm and tried again. I knelt back down in front of George and put some on his kneecap. I'd thought I'd used too much, but the lotion was instantly swallowed by his dry pores. I tried a few more times with my hand, then gave up and poured the entire bottle onto his leg.

Whenever Vergie gave George his rubdown she would gab away at him just as she would with us all night, but I didn't have twenty years of experience with George and, I was focused on getting everything right. There was nothing but heavy, dead silence as I slathered the greasy slickness in my hand on George's poor, gnarled feet.

"You're not doin' that right," he said. His voice echoed in the silent room. I jumped.

"Yeah, I know, George. I'm just trying to figure it out."

"Where's Vergie at?"

"Vergie had to help someone else. So I'm going to finish up with you today. We're almost done here, and then we'll get you into some clothes and back to bed."

"Gonna need my suit today."

"That sounds fancy," I said, chuckling to myself. "What are you gettin' all dolled up for?"

"Going home today. Gonna get packed up and leave here this morning."

I looked up at his face for a sign of change, but his face was expressionless. His glassy eyes stared forward, focusing on nothing.

"You sure about that, George?"

"Yes, sir. Been called home."

Oh. I got it—another one of his Jesus things.

"Okay, George," I asked cautiously, "who called you home?"

"My sister called up yesterday. Said it was time. Said I been here too long and they're gonna take me back in. Said it's all okay now, I can come home again."

"George, I'm not sure—"

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"You'll see. I'm gonna walk right through those doors with you all when you leave. Yes, sir. Right along with you all."

I finished applying the lotion and stood up.

"Can we at least get some clothes on you, then? For your big day?"

I struggled to put a t-shirt over his unmoving head and then helped him into a pair of pajama pants.

"Okay, then, go back to your room. Breakfast is soon."

I left George to shuffle back to his room and walked to the front desk, where Vergie sat filling out progress notes.

"Hey, Vergie," I asked as I sat down to fill out my half of the paperwork, "is anyone coming to pick up George today?"



"No, I'm afraid we'll be enjoying the company of Mr. Watkins for some time. He

told you that, did he?"

"Yeah. He's convinced that his family's going to pick him up—that his sister's going to be here soon. He said he's going to put his suit on—does George even have a suit?"

"Oh, yes," Vergie said. "George has treated us to the sight of his suit many times."

We sat filling out paperwork in silence, as other patients began to shuffle into the day room. They stared contemptuously at the clock, awaiting day shift and the cigarettes and coffee they would provide. Then, from the far end of the hallway, George emerged in a magnificent yellow and green checkered suit, tailored for a thicker version of himself.

"Well, don't you look nice, George." I said.

"Yes, sir, I'm going home, just like I told you."

"Okay, George," I said. I turned to Vergie and shrugged. She put down her pen and looked at me with an expression that hovered between sadness and disgust.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Come here," she said, and motioned to the back room where the charts were shelved. She reached up and took down a thick file with George's name, date of birth, and known allergies on the side. On the front of the chart someone had written "Volume 25" in permanent marker. Vergie opened the chart and flipped to the front page, scanned for a second, then pointed at a paragraph halfway down the page.

"That man's not getting picked up by his goddamn sister because he killed her in 1987."

I read the section she had pointed to. It told me about a violent man who had been in and out of prison all of his life, of a family who had tried to take care of him the best they could, and how that kindness had been repaid with a slashed throat. I looked out into the day room at the confused old creature in his ridiculous suit and tried to reconcile the two visions. Vergie saw my fallen face and hers softened.

"Now, listen here," she said, "This here is who George was. This is why he's here. And if he ever got off those meds and out that door it's exactly who he'd be again. Now, I know he seems funny dancing around, swinging that dick in everybody's face, but this here's the real George, and if you ever forget it ..."

She pushed her hair up away from her forehead, which I'd not realized was a wig until that moment, and revealed a jagged scar on the top of her head.

"... he'll remind you right quick."

I took my seat again and sat in silence. George sat still in the chair. His face was the same long, blank canvas it always was, but his eyes were wide and unblinking. The day shift workers had arrived and were walking the ward to check on the patients.

"Miss Vergie," George said, approaching the desk, "it's time for us to say goodbye. I'm goin' home today."

"We been over this before now, sweetheart. This is your home, remember?"

"This ain't no home, it's a prison. Y'all think I don't know that. It ain't right keeping me here. You'll see. My sister's gonna walk right through those doors and take me home. We're gonna get some good home cooking from our Mama, and I'm gonna get me a job like I had before I come here. You'll see."

He sat down in the nearest chair, muttering to himself.

"*What do we do?*" I whispered to Vergie. She looked at me with a patient, kind face.

"He does this every few months. By the time we leave here he'll be Michael Jackson again."

But George was still mumbling to himself about the home cooked breakfast he had waiting on him.

"You'll all see," he said, "it'll be just like it was."

The day nurse finished her tour and came back to the front desk. She looked over at George in the chair and asked, "Going home again, Mr. Watkins?"

"That's right, missus. Heading home directly. Gonna see my sister and have a good meal."

The day nurse glared at Vergie. "Who got him started on this shit again?"

"Nobody. George himself decided he was going to leave, isn't that right, Mr. Watkins?"

"You all laugh now, but you'll see. My sister's coming through that door any minute." His voice began to climb until it was at its top range. "You'll see! She's gonna walk right through that—"

"Mr. Watkins, please," the day nurse said, "the other patients are trying to sleep."

"She's coming!" George screamed. "I'm going home with her! She's coming back for me!"

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The day shift aides advanced toward him and he rose to bat them away. I stood at the edge of the front desk, unsure whether I should step in—feeling responsible for all of this. I looked for Vergie, but she was already standing in the open doorway with her travel mug and purse in her arms.

"Let's go," she said.

I walked with her through the entryway, past the lockers in the hallway to the main doors of the ward. She asked if I wanted to have breakfast with her in the cafeteria, but I went on without her. Until I walked through the double doors leading to the parking lot I could still hear George screaming.

*Editor's Note:*

***George Watkins is Going Home*** first appeared in our May 2013 Issue.

Photograph – "Love Locks" © Chris Fradkin

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## **Issue 10 Contributors**

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## Authors

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Gessy Alvarez received her MFA from Columbia University in 2010. She's taught fiction in the New York City public school system and at Columbia University Medical Center. Her fiction has appeared in *Camroc Press Review*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Pure Slush*, *Connotation Press*, *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, *Lost In Thought*, *Thrice Fiction*, *Letras Caseras*, and *Pank*.

David S Atkinson received his MFA from the University of Nebraska. His writing appears in *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Interrobang?! Magazine*, *Atticus Review*, and others. His novel in short story form, *Bones Buried in the Dirt*, was published in January 2013 by River Otter Press. His writing website is <http://davidsatkinsonwriting.com/> and he spends his non-literary time working as a patent attorney in Denver.

Catherine Barter is a bookshop assistant and research administrator. She studied American literature at the University of East Anglia and lives in Norwich, UK.

Darlene P. Campos is an MFA candidate at UT-El Paso's Creative Writing Program. In 2013, she won the Glass Mountain magazine contest for prose and was awarded the Sylvan N. Karchmer Fiction Prize. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *A Celebration of Young Poets*, *Glass Mountain*, *Prism Review*, *Crunchable*, *Cleaver*, *The Aletheia*, *Bay Laurel*, *Red Fez*, *Elohi Gadugi*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Houston and Nomadic Voices*, *Alfie Dog*, *Connotation Press*, *Word Riot*, *RiverBabble*, and many others. She is a writer for Kesta Happening DC newspaper and a fiction judge for *Yeah Write Review*. She is from Guayaquil, Ecuador but has lived in Houston all her life. Her website is now available at [www.darlenepcampos.com](http://www.darlenepcampos.com).

Jamez Chang's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Underground Voices*, *Prime Number*, *FRiGG*, *Melusine*, and *Menacing Hedge*. After graduating from Bard College, Jamez went on to become the first Korean-American to release a hip-hop album, *Z-Bonics* (1998), in the United States. He is the Editor of Flash Fiction at Counterexample Poetics, and currently works in the video game industry in NYC. Visit: <http://www.jamezchang.com>.

Monic Ductan studies poetry writing in the MFA program at Georgia College. Her work has appeared in *DOGZPLOT*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Uptown Mosaic*, and several other journals. She blogs here: <http://monicductan.wordpress.com/>

Lauren Dupps is a recent graduate of Ohio University who returned to her native Cincinnati. She lives there with her fiance Austin Wilkinson and their two cats, Morpheus—named for the Gaiman character and a friend's prophetic, *Matrix*-themed dream—and Towner—named for an altercation on a Greyhound bus. "Karas" is her first published story. She can be found at [laurendupps.wordpress.com](http://laurendupps.wordpress.com), mostly muttering to herself.

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Anthony Feggans is an MFA fiction student at The University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC. He instructs college freshman-level English courses at USC and is an aspiring copywriter. He plays the trombone, pretends to enjoy running, and eats his weight in breakfast food.

Kate Folk has had fiction published in several journals, including *PANK* and *Specter Magazine*. She lives in San Francisco and works as an English teacher. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of San Francisco, and has completed a first novel.

Timothy Gager is the author of eight books of short fiction and poetry. He has hosted the successful Dire Literary Series in Cambridge, Massachusetts every month since February 2001 and is the co-founder of Somerville News Writers Festival. His work has appeared in over 250 journals since 2007 and of which nine have been nominated for The Pushcart Prize.

Daniel Joseph Giovinazzo received a BA from Hartwick College and an MFA from Lesley University. He has worked as a mason tender, line cook, house-painter, landscaper, and teacher. Currently, he lives in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Matthew Guerruckey is the Editor-in-Chief of the literary website *Drunk Monkeys* and a freelance fiction writer. His short stories have appeared in *Five 2 One Magazine*, *Connotation Press*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *The Weekenders*. He has also had a story featured on Nathaniel Tower's Cold Reads podcast. A West Coast native with Midwestern roots, he lives in North Hollywood with his wife, poet SC Stuckey, and their cats Lennon and Harrison.

Austin James has been a part of multiple workshops and writing classes; most notably Chuck Palahniuk's workshop, the Cult. You can find his work at *Troubadour 21*, the *Outsider Writer's Collective*, and *Pulp Metal Magazine*. Austin studied poetry and creative fiction at the College of Southern Idaho, where he graduated in 2009.

Gwyn Ruddell Lewis is a writer and full-time father from Cardiff, Wales. His work can be found in a number of publications, including *The Portland Review* (on-line) and *Every Day Fiction* (forthcoming).

Stefanie Lyons received her MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is an advertising copywriter by day, writing her great American novel by night. Her work has also been published in *Burningword Literary*. She resides in Chicago.

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Richard McLarn is a student at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in the English program. He is also a comedian who has performed with ComedySportz Minneapolis since 2007. He lives very happily in the Twin Cities avoiding robots whenever possible.

J.M. Miller is working on a dissertation on Victorian literature. In his spare time, he casts withering glances at people who think George Eliot was a man.

Laura Newsholme is a 33 year old student of English living in Yorkshire. She hopes to continue her studies through to PhD level and would like to become an academic, specialising in speculative fiction. This is her first published work.

Lauren Perez has publications in *The Alarmist*, *Corvus*, and *the Collagist*, and is an MFA student at Portland State.

Sarah Scott has an MFA in Writing from California Institute of the Arts. Her animated memoir was screened at Outfest Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. She is currently seeking representation for her novel, which she blogs about at [teacheroriented.blogspot.com](http://teacheroriented.blogspot.com).

David Stockdale is a writer from the south suburbs of Chicago. His op-ed essays have appeared in *AND Magazine* and the *Center for Digital Ethics & Policy*. His short stories have been featured in *The Commonline Journal* and *Behind Closed Doors Literary Magazine*. He can be reached at [dstock3@gmail.com](mailto:dstock3@gmail.com), and his URL is <http://davidstockdale.tumblr.com/>.

Refe Tuma writes copy for money in Kansas City. His fiction has appeared, or will be appearing, in *WhiskeyPaper*, *Johnny America*, *Short, Fast, and Deadly*, and *The Rusty Nail*. His non-fiction has appeared in *The New York Times* and all sorts of blogs. He serves as an editorial contributor at *Paper Darts*. He goes by @RefeUp on Twitter if you'd like to say hi.

Wyl Villacres is a writer/award-winning blogger from Chicago. His work can be found in *Good Men Project*, *Newsweek's Tumblr*, *Time Out Chicago*, and *Newcity*, among others. You can find him in his digital fortress of solitude at [wylvillacres.net](http://wylvillacres.net)

Ryan Werner is a janitor in the Midwest. He is the author of the short short story collection *Shake Away These Constant Days* (Jersey Devil Press, 2012). He runs the small chapbook press *Passenger Side Books* and has a website named [www.RyanWernerWritesStuff.com](http://www.RyanWernerWritesStuff.com).

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Jeff Marcus Wheeler is a fighter, a lover, a hater, and a liar. He is not sorry for partying. Visit [jeffmarcuswheeler.com](http://jeffmarcuswheeler.com) for, among other things, a list of his publications. Beginning in the fall he will be an MFA fiction candidate at Saint Mary's College of California. He has recently moved to San Francisco where he lives with his wife and English Bulldog, Battier, and one day he'll have to throw away his Duke Blue Devils hat.

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## Photographers/Illustrators

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**Chris Fradkin** is a beet farmer who is tending crops in Central California. His prose and poetry have appeared in *Storyglossia*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *Thrush Poetry Journal*. His songs have been performed by Fergie, The Plimsouls, and The Flamin' Groovies. His photography has appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, and his Emmy-award-winning sound editorial has graced *The X-Files*.

**Mike Gromacki** is a grad student at Antioch University where he studies Environmental Studies. He lives and works in the Berkshires and enjoys photography, hiking and traveling.

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