BEST SHORT STORIES FROM THE SATURDAY EVENING POST GREAT AMERICAN FICTION CONTEST

2019

BEST SHORT STORIES FROM THE SATURDAY EVENING POST GREAT AMERICAN FICTION CONTEST 2019

Preface by Steven Slon
Editorial Director and Associate Publisher, *The Saturday Evening Post*

Series Editor Patrick Perry
Executive Editor, *The Saturday Evening Post*

Assistant Editor Zach Manges
Editorial Assistant, *The Saturday Evening Post*

Other Anthologies in the Best Short Stories Series:

Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2018

Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2017

Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2016

Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2015

Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2014

Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2013

Published in the United States by The Saturday Evening Post Society, 1100 Waterway Boulevard, Indianapolis, IN 46202
Website: saturdayeveningpost.com

Contents

Preface

Why Fiction? Why Now?

A certain member of my extended family — I won't mention her name — doesn't believe in fiction, doesn't read fiction, doesn't see the point. "It's just stuff someone makes up," she says.

It's a hard case to argue, since, yes, fiction is untrue by definition, but it's not to be confused with meaningless made-up fluff — or the cynical, self-serving lies that have been lately described as "alternative facts." Camus explained the seeming paradox of something being objectively false and yet deeply valuable at the same time, saying, "Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth."

As a kid, I was a voracious reader of fiction and I would wrap myself in a good story and disappear into a fully realized world. I learned things in that world. I learned about bravery and deceit; about sex and ambition; about love and loss. Sigmund Freud acknowledged that he developed his theory of psychoanalysis by reading Shakespeare. The best fiction gets to the essence of the human experience, revealing things that simply describing what is visible in the real world, what is happening in the real world, cannot equal.

Those who have purchased this book are in for a treat. You are about to be rewarded with 13 never-before-published gems from writers who may well be household names in the near future. This is the crème de la crème of the more than 200 entrants from our 2019 Great American Fiction Contest.

It was no easy task to select the winning entries. For those who tried and did not succeed, don't give up. Rejection is part of the business of being a writer. In fact, this is the perfect time to announce that the 2020 Great American Fiction Contest begins now! For guidelines and all the info you need to submit your work, please go to saturdayeveningpost.com/fiction-contest.

I'd like to thank Joan SerVaas, our publisher, without whose commitment to fiction and to the arts this project would not be possible. I would like to extend special thanks to *Post* staffers and friends of the magazine who shared their time and talents in reading each and every one of the stories submitted and for helping to judge this year's contest. Those who pitched in include head judge Michael Knight, Contributing Editors Peter Bloch and Holly Miller, Art Director Amanda Bixler, Senior Editor Jesika St. Clair, Assistant Editor Zach Manges, Executive Editor Patrick Perry, my wife (and my own best editor) Estelle Slon, and previous Great American Fiction Contest winners Lucy Jane Bledsoe, Linda Davis, M. West Moss, Myles McDonough, and Julia Rocchi.

Because, yes, fiction matters.

—Steven Slon,
Associate Publisher and Editorial Director

Introduction

Connection

By Julia Rocchi

How much is connection — its presence, its loss, the long shadow of its memory — part of the human condition? As this year's crop of winning stories in *The Saturday Evening Post* Great American Fiction Contest reveals, the desire and search for connection fuels our very lives, sometimes with reciprocation and fulfillment, sometimes not. And when disconnection does occur — be it perceived or actual, physical or spiritual, past or present — we bring our personal gulfs to everything we experience ... including to what we read.

Here, stories offer us a way to link hands across the chasm. We feel less isolated when we read compelling fiction that splays our yearnings across the page, laid bare and vulnerable by a skilled writer's craft. No matter how fantastical the situation, no matter how alien the environment, we recognize our shared humanity through universal themes that connect us instantly to characters on the page.

This literary connection typifies *The Saturday Evening Post*'s long-standing belief in and commitment to the power of storytelling. Throughout its 200-plus-year history, the *Post* has sought out stories from promising unknowns and published short fiction by such celebrated American authors as Ray Bradbury, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Allan Poe, J.D. Salinger, Zora Neale Hurston, and Kurt Vonnegut. And competitions such as the Great American Fiction Contest continue to surface fresh talent.

Look no further than 2019's winner to understand fiction's ability to expand a reader's universe while connecting with him or her on a visceral level. Michael Caleb Tasker has given us an aching meditation on isolation and loss through his protagonist Allan, whose desire for connection amid a faltering marriage and lack of deep friendships draws him to his young neighbor Chloe. The teenager also feels disconnected from family and peers — in particular, her father, Rudy, whose solitary and itinerant career as a cowboy underscores the story's theme of rootlessness.

With cold November descending into snowy winter, complicated relationships — including Rudy's fraught and fleeting return — surround Allan and Chloe. They play out this moment of their lives in separate houses with separate trials, coming together only occasionally in the front yard. As the days darken, Allan and Chloe's interactions offer a brief, warm spark that puts their other troubles into sharper focus. Each has recognized a kindred spirit in the other, and though their nascent friendship lasts briefly and ends abruptly, they have nonetheless crossed a new border — a

fitting nod to Hermes, god of travelers and boundaries, whose name Allan tries to invoke throughout the story yet never fully summons.

Renowned author Joyce Carol Oates — herself a *Saturday Evening Post* contributor — writes in the introduction to her essay collection *The Faith of a Writer* about how, in the writer's life:

> "...[T]he solitary yields to the communal [...] We begin as loners, and some of us are in fact congenitally lonely; if we persevere in our art, and are not discouraged in our craft, we may find solace in the mysterious counter-world of literature that transcends artificial borders of time, place, language, national identity. Out of the solitariness of the individual this culture somehow emerges, variegated, ever-alluring, ever-evolving."

For writers, readers, and stories alike, what begins as solitude becomes community, and thanks to great fiction, we all have the opportunity to connect.

Winner

Mount to the Sky

By Michael Caleb Tasker

When she told him to hurry, that they would be late already, he thought of all that foundation the ladies wore, thought of how it would get onto his jacket, onto his collar as they came in for those light, expensive-smelling kisses, and he thought of that pile of coats that always made him claustrophobic. He fingered his tie, listened to her heels on the floor upstairs, and took his drink onto the back porch. It was almost dark, and deep purples slipped over the sky, and he could hear them again, next door, yelling. He liked the sound of the girl's voice when she yelled.

He watched her come out of her house, quiet now, and stand in the driveway. She was very thin, he thought, very small, too small for such a voice. She looked around and kicked out at a tricycle and he took a step backward, into the porch, into the dark.

He heard Lori come up behind him. "She's younger than your scotch, Allan." He nodded and finished his drink.

"You ready to go?" she asked.

"Gin."

"What?"

"I was drinking gin."

"Good for you. Let's go. Any later and they'll think I had to drag you."

"You do."

"Hurry, hurry."

"You look great."

"As good as your young friend?"

"Better."

When they left the girl was sitting at the curb, smoking a cigarette. She looked cold, Allan thought, cold but happy with it, and when she took a deep drag, watching the sky, he tried to remember that Greek god with little wings at his feet.

Allan watched the girl rake leaves. It was early and the sky was dim, gentle, an easy November blue that seemed to say it would always be so quiet and he smiled, still waking, still dreaming, and when she looked up at him he didn't register. He came back to himself and saw she was frowning at him and he felt old. He blinked out a smile and went into the kitchen to start the coffee. From the counter he could still see her, through the window, raking, looking happy with the work and with herself.

Lori came down the stairs, already talking. He didn't know if it was to him.

"I'm going to walk to work," he said.

"Walk? But it's cold."

"I like the cold."

"They say it will snow this week."

"I hope so. When we were young there was always snow by November."

"You must have had a different childhood."

"Coffee?" he asked. He kissed her, gave her a mug. She still smelled of whiskey sours and someone else's cigar.

"I need a hot bath," she said. "Scalding."

He looked out the window, looked next door. She was still there. "Think she'll do our lawn?"

"Who?"

"The girl."

"Chloe. Her name is Chloe. And I'm not game to ask her. Yesterday I thought she was going to murder her father."

"That's not her father."

"Still, it was nice her mother got a break from it." She laughed, sipped her coffee, and looked over the kitchen, over the living room behind him. He wondered how long after he left the house before she would pour herself a drink.

When he left for work the girl was sitting on the curb again, and when he nodded at her she frowned weakly, with nothing behind it, and he knew she wanted to smile. He stopped.

"How's Rudy?" he asked.

She studied him a minute. She wasn't good-looking yet, he thought.

"You know my father?"

"A little. We had a drink together, once or twice, before the divorce. That seems like so long ago now."

"It was."

"He still spends all his time on the road?"

"They don't tour so much in the winter. He'll be spending the next two months here in town."

"Does he still smell like horse shit? I used to love that smell."

"Me too," she said. She smiled at him and he thought maybe he was wrong; maybe she was good-looking. He wanted to touch her cheek but she was too old for that. Or too young. He wasn't sure anymore. "He'll be here soon if you want to wait."

"I can't. Tell him I said hello."

When the snow came he was awake, downstairs, a prowler in his own house. It fell fast and full, bright against the windows, and he went outside and stood in the cold. Down the block the light from the street lamp was dim, muted by all the snow, and when he coughed the sound rang out. He looked at the house next door and wondered if the girl still had her room upstairs, at the back. She had

been a quiet baby and he remembered that lost and laughing look her father always had when he played with her, rolled her around on his belly in the garden. And he remembered her father's quiet face when he had to go on the road, down to Texas, over to Wyoming; he remembered watching the two of them sit on the curb, watching the sun go down, when she was about three, not long before he was told not to come back, never to come back. He wore a brown felt Stetson, the hatband a braid of white horse's hair, and he put it on the girl to shield her from the sun.

They had been to a party, another one, and in the morning his head hurt. Voices, old conversation, and missed jokes ran through his mind, repeating themselves, and when he heard the glass break he thought it was imagined. He looked out the kitchen window and waited, but they were quiet. The young trees outside were bare and looked a wonderful and twisted black in the morning light. He set bacon in a pan and heard the girl's mother, heard her frayed voiced all ready to break, and he wondered who had thrown what.

The girl came out and sat down on the porch steps. Her mother came out and stood behind her, stood over her, her shoulders wide in her long black coat, wide enough and black enough that Allan thought she looked like an owl watching a mouse.

"I'm leaving now," her mother said.

"I'm waiting for my father."

"Don't hold your breath."

When she got in the car, when she looked at her daughter, Allan wondered if she might drive straight into the porch.

After she left, Allan watched the girl, ate the bacon straight from the frying pan, and wondered why Harris had spent the night smiling so shyly at Lori. Harris was not a shy man.

A roughed-up Buick pulled up at the curb and he heard a wild guitar from the radio. Rudy got out and stretched, grinning, but his face was too hollow and his eyes too gray to ever really look happy. He cupped the girl's head with a big hand, then they got in, drove away, the music rambling after them. Allan shook his head. It was too damned early for bluegrass.

The lead-up to Christmas excited Allan, and in the morning he put the outdoor lights up, over the front porch. It was snowing again, lightly, and when she came out of the house, very quietly, he almost didn't hear her. He plugged in the lights and switched them on. They were red and silver, a little cold without the green, he thought, but clean looking. He looked over at the girl, sitting down at the curb, smoking a cigarette. The nicotine smelled good in the cold air.

He walked to the curb.

"Aren't you a little young to be smoking?" he asked.

"A little," she said. "You want one?"

"I stopped a few years ago."

"I know. You always smoked in the backyard. I could smell them from my room. I missed it when you stopped."

"You liked the smell?"

"Not really. Not then." She looked over her shoulder, at his house, at the lights. "I like those lights."

"Me too."

She looked so small sitting on the curb, like a swift wind might pick her up, throw her about with the snowdrift, and he sat down next to her, looked down the street at the dark, sleeping homes. There used to be more Christmas lights out, he thought, a long time ago.

"I heard you last night," she said. "Heard that music you were listening to."

"Nat King Cole."

"It was nice."

"I didn't think anyone could hear me."

"Not anyone sleeping. I was awake."

"I hope I didn't bother you."

"You didn't," she said. "You're always up late. Or early. Either way, you're always up."

"Guess I'm worried I'll miss something."

She looked at him like she didn't believe him.

He heard his front door open behind them, heard the silence of Lori watching him with the girl. She would think of something smart to say, something sharp that he couldn't come back from, and she would save it.

Later, when he left for work, she was still out there, still on the curb, lost in dusty, faraway thoughts.

It caught up with him and he fell asleep, early, downstairs, by the Christmas tree. When he woke it was dark and Lori was still out. The lights from the tree lit the living room, and for a minute he remembered the way Lori used to laugh. It was a delicate laugh, like fine woven crystal that danced away and invited him to follow.

He heard Chloe, next door, growling, and he sat up and looked at the tree, at the lights, and thought it all looked a little bare without gifts, without wrapping. He listened to her yell, listened to her mother, tried to make out the words. He heard something about Rudy and went to the kitchen for a scotch and he drank it at the window, watching their house, waiting for something to move at the windows but saw nothing but snowdrift, whipping at the air, lost between their homes. He fixed another drink, a tall one, full of ice, and when he poured the scotch he noticed the bottle was close to empty and he wondered who Lori had over.

Chloe's mother got louder, yelled out *No no no* so loud Allan stepped back. Out the window the snow picked up and he moved to the front porch, into the cold night, let the easy sound of the wind drown the yelling. The snowfall was coming on faster, heavier, and he thought come morning the streets would need to be plowed. The door slammed and he saw Chloe walk out of the house, walk down to the curb, and sit down, wrapped in a ranch blanket, and after a minute he heard her

crying. A soft and quiet cry, and he remembered the panting whimper of a coyote he had hit with his car the last summer.

The falling snow caught a car's headlights. A door snapped shut and he heard Lori's familiar step; small, precise heels hitting the pavement, a happily determined rhythm, and he saw her come up their pathway, her head turned, watching Chloe. She stopped for a second, her long dark hair caught in the wind, and he could just make out the line of her lips, the soft open mouth. She nodded slightly to herself and walked on, left the girl alone.

She jumped a little when she saw him standing in the dark, on the porch.

"Keeping an eye on her?"

"Keeping an eye on you." When he kissed her she smelled of gardenias. "You smell terrific."

"I should hope so. You bought the perfume." She started inside the house. "Are staying out here? It's freezing."

"I'm coming."

"Is she crying?"

"I think so."

"Fighting again?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear it?"

"Not the words," he said. "I heard them mention Rudy."

"Rudy? The cowboy?"

"Yes."

"God, is he back again?"

"I guess so."

"I hope I don't run into him. There's always something so damned depressing about him. Gets me down every time."

Allan followed her into the kitchen. She took down a glass, made herself a drink and then another one while he watched her. She had gotten thinner all of a sudden, he thought. Her collarbone seemed like it might snap under a hard kiss, and he walked up to her and ran a finger down her neck, along her collar.

"Christ. Your hands are like ice." She moved his hand away, kissed him easily on the cheek, and smiled that dinner-party smile. "I'm going to shower. Give me a minute and come join me?"

When she walked upstairs he heard something whip and bang outside, down the back, and he walked to the back door. The girl was out there, in her backyard, smoking a cigarette, her head down as she watched something in her hands. She moved quickly, lightly, her hand snapping at the air and he saw the lasso cross her yard and catch the handlebars of a child's bike. She pulled it down hard. When she took a long pull on her cigarette, her face was hard, was serious and hollow.

He left the party early, without saying goodbye to the Davenports, to the Scotts, to Lori even. He couldn't remember when he had last seen Lori. Early, before they brought out the champagne,

before the singing, talking in whiskey-soaked whispers to Heather. Laughter still rang in his ears, the greasy smell of makeup and starched hair lingered, and he walked quickly through the snow, the heavy swollen clouds low in the sky, pushing in on him, stealing the air. His mouth was thick with gin and his mind wandered, quickly, aimlessly, through homes and seasons and he remembered a Christmas from years ago, when he started staying awake nights. He remembered the mean and dashing look in Lori's dark eyes that didn't fade when he kissed her, and he remembered staying downstairs, watching Rudy and Chloe walk down the road, the two of them carrying a Christmas tree as the snow billowed like wild white birds around them. She was small then, and serious. She held the back of the tree and when they came up the driveway to the house they both looked at him like they thought he was not real.

He saw the Buick up ahead, parked, the engine running. Cobwebs of silver moonlight ran through the sky and Allan stopped, watched the car, and wished he still smoked. He walked over and knocked on the car window. Music played very quietly inside the car.

Rudy stepped out and walked around the car to Allan. His coat was old, worn out, and didn't look warm enough for the winter, and when he held out his hardened hand Allan smelled the horses that Rudy spent all his time with.

"Jesus, Rudy, you must be cold."

"It's not so bad. Not with the heater going."

They shook hands. Rudy looked older, thinner, and in the dark evening Allan could not make out his eyes but felt something lonesome and wandering in them. He grinned at Allan and shivered into himself.

"You just stalking your old house?"

"I guess I thought they might still be awake," Rudy said. "Well, I thought Chloe might still be awake."

"She usually is about now."

"Still bad at sleeping?"

"Still bad at sleeping."

"Me too," Rudy said. "It's not so bad if I'm here, in town. I can drive out and take a look at the old house, see who's awake, watch you sneak around your living room. On the road, though, it ain't as much fun."

"Still riding?"

"Oh yeah. Mostly do roping these days, but still riding." He looked up at the darkened house. Snow wandered slowly over his face, over the street and across the sky, and when the moonlight broke through the clouds Allan saw how old Rudy had become. "How she doing anyway?" Rudy asked. He nodded at the house and looked at Allan, hard.

"I guess she's okay. Doesn't seem to like Wallace very much."

"Smart girl."

"You teaching her to rope?"

"No. Her mother would kill me."

"She's learning anyway. Saw her a few days ago using a lasso."

Rudy frowned at the house, mumbled under his breath, cursing softly.

"She was good at it," Allan said.

"She'll pay for it, she doesn't keep it quiet. Her mother hates all that, hates the whole circuit — the people, the horses. I used to shower twice before I came back home to her. Never seemed to do much good."

Allan looked into the car, saw the saddle, the horse tack and worn-out ropes in the backseat. And he saw the duffle bag and thick army blanket and he wondered how many nights Rudy spent on the road, in his car, the heater on against the cold wind outside.

"You're packed?" Allan asked.

"Mm? Yeah. I'll be hitting the road soon."

"Oh. I thought you were here for the winter. I thought there were no shows for a few months."

"Going to Nevada. There's always something in Nevada. I got a good chance at a big purse." Rudy smiled, a wide smile, wide enough to hide behind. "Damn, she used to hate it, me up and leaving, chasing purses around, chasing the big contests so she didn't have to worry about nothing. Boy she used to hate it."

"You mean Chloe or her mother?"

"Good question."

"Chloe know yet?"

Rudy bit his bottom lip and looked behind Allan, down the road, and watched a car come quietly through the snow, headlights barely cutting through the night as it passed them. The brake lights came on and they both turned to look at the car. It idled, warm, black, too dark to see inside, and Allan's mouth dried, suddenly, and he had to pull hard to fill his lungs. He listened to the engine hum, the sound pushing at the wind, the snow moving quickly, nervously, away from the car, away from the heat. The door opened and a frail inch of laughter came out, light and flirtatious, and then Lori's long, stockinged legs and when she stood, shaking some thought from her hair, pulling her fur coat tight at the neck, Allan thought he was still a child next to her. She waved and laughed again before running up to the house. The car sat a minute but she didn't look back and after she had gone inside, turning on the lights, dropping her coat on the armchair, Allan looked back at the car, a long, low Ford, and he tried to remember what kind of car Harris drove.

He looked back at Rudy.

"Nevada's a long way away."

"You got that right."

It was cold and the wind, that mean and hulking wind, laughed through the streets silently turning the world to ice, and Allan liked it. He walked home from work, in the dark, the wind cutting his flushed cheeks and thought it had been a while since he had been drunk, really drunk, so that he couldn't hear any words coming at him, so that he couldn't chase those thoughts anymore. He still had that $80 bottle of scotch he got himself for Christmas. He wondered where Lori would be.

Inside he left the lights off, made the drink in the dark, standing at the kitchen counter. Next-door the living room light was on and he could see the movement of the television beating at the window. He took his drink and went outside, out the front, without his coat, and saw Chloe sitting on the curb again. He watched her, saw her breath mist in the air and swiftly dash away, chasing winter. After a minute he went and sat down next to her.

When she looked at him her eyes shone, and he knew she had been crying the dry tears of what his father had called a rough and tumbler.

"How old are you?" he asked.

She watched him a minute. "Fifteen."

"Old enough, then." He held out his drink.

"What is it?"

"Scotch. Incredibly good scotch."

"That's what my father drinks."

"I know."

She took his glass and had a small sip. He could see her breath get taken away. "Not many cowboys drink scotch," she said. "Always go for bourbon or beer. Or both."

"And not many cowboys live among lawyers and bankers."

"He doesn't anymore."

"He did for a long time, though."

"I know," she said. "Still can't picture it."

"And I can't picture him on the road, riding bulls or whatever it is he does."

"He rides horses. Not bulls."

"I saw him. The other night. When he came to say goodbye."

"I didn't." She took another sip and handed the glass back to him and he waited for those eyes to wet up again. "We were at Wallace's parents' place. Stayed the weekend."

"Good time?"

"You bet. Mom and Wallace got drunk. Got to hear about what a loser my father is."

"Oh."

"It's okay. For a loser he sure wins a lot." When she smiled up at him, her eyes somehow wild, bristling, somehow very far away, he wanted to put his arm around her, hold her, keep her with him.

A small light came on across the street, in Parker's garage, and soon the smell of kerosene gripped the air and he knew Parker was standing at his workbench, looking out the window at the two of them. He liked the way the lamplight moved across the windowpane. He took another drink of the scotch and held the glass out and when she took it, watching him in that way young girls have, he looked down quickly, at her hands, and saw how rough they were already and he remembered all the roping she had been doing.

Later that night, while Lori slept, he went downstairs, padded around the house, looked through his records while he finished the scotch, alone. He liked the quiet way the night breathed when it was so late, and later, when he went to the kitchen for another drink, the moon was out bright in the

clear sky, and he saw the girl standing in the backyard, holding the lasso limply in her hand, watching something in the darkness, watching something that wasn't there.

He took to stopping off at Oliver's for a drink on the way home. He'd sit at the bar and watch happy, breathless women let themselves be impressed by men who were a little too old, a little too sad but somehow expectant of the fawning, watch the way they cut so forcefully into Oliver's famous T-bones, watch the way they sipped so quickly at their drinks so the waiter seemed to always be with them. One night a woman sat close to him, smiled weakly behind her heavy black hair. She had dimples that made her look young and when she ordered a gimlet she drank it so easily, so needfully, that he ordered one as well. By her look she thought it was a come-on and he let her, made small talk and thought about Lori and the way she had with Harris. When he left, walking home well-past dark, his thoughts wandering around in gin, lost and happy about it, he realized that he smelled of the woman's perfume and was suddenly struck with guilt.

Lori was out and he showered, ate some toast, and then ran up to shower again before falling asleep on the sofa, listening to Nat King Cole sing about lonely men, and later, when he woke, he saw Lori's coat by the front door and her purse in the kitchen. His head hurt and he had a glass of milk and went outside and watched Chloe's house. It was dark, sleeping, and he waited, half expecting her to come out to say hello.

There was snowstorm upon snowstorm and the world turned white, quiet, and disappeared. The banks closed, schools closed, and Allan stayed home and sat in the kitchen and listened to the radio, watched Lori cook, happily, smiling up at him every now and then and he wondered if she still liked having him around after all. He made coffee and took a strip of bacon that was cooling on a plate. Lori winked at him. She came close and he took her hand, pulled her to him and kissed her and when he saw the blue and red lights rolling silently over the snow outside he felt her go tense, felt her making the effort to stay so close to him. He let her go, smiled, and looked back at the police cruiser pull into the driveway next door.

"What do you think happened?" he asked.

"You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"She ran away."

"Chloe?"

"That's right."

"When?"

"Two days ago. I think. Before the storms started. God, when do you think it'll stop? I'll have cabin fever by tomorrow."

"You look like you have it now," he said. "Two days ago?"

"You're always listening to that damned thing, have they said when it will all stop? When will you go back to work?"

"I don't know. Soon, I guess. Where do you think she went? Chloe, I mean."

"God knows. Somewhere without these damned blizzards.

"Maybe she went to Nevada."

She looked at him, wide-eyed and gone, far, far away, and shook her head. "No. That's not far enough. Not for her."

It took Allan a few weeks to get used to her being gone, to get used to the quiet nights, to get used to the fact that the deep railroad of yelling was an afterthought from his own tired mind. It was her voice, the fighting, that he missed.

He bought a bottle of single malt he couldn't afford and walked home. It was warm and when he passed the Wilsons' home, he smelled the gardenias blooming and he thought about sitting outside, on the front porch, listening to Nat King Cole, listening to "Blue Gardenia," softly, quietly, so as he didn't wake Lori, didn't wake the neighbors.

Lori was home, reading in the living room, and she smiled at him when he walked in, smiled wide and blank and his skin ran cold.

"What's in the bag?"

"Scotch."

"Ugh."

"I guess you don't want any, then?"

"No. I'm going out soon. With Claire. But thanks." She looked at him briefly as he set the bottle up on the dry bar, turned the bottle just so, and walked away. "Not having one yourself?"

"I will later."

He ate dinner alone, at the kitchen counter, and when he smelled cigarettes he went outside to look for Chloe but forgot that she was gone. Spring had come on strong and the air was damp, smelled of turned soil, and somewhere, cigarettes.

It was early when he heard the yelling, but he was awake anyway, downstairs, sitting at the piano, in the living room, the lights off, waiting for the daylight to break in the sky, to slowly spill into the living room, into the house. He smiled then remembered she was gone and listened harder. The voices were deeper, stronger, somehow sadder, and he poured himself a fresh scotch. The yelling became screaming, a man's voice swearing to god and Allan took his drink outside, sat on his front steps. Thin streaks of red daylight crawled through the sky, and the man's voice got louder, and when a door slammed Allan saw something move across the street, in the Parkers' upstairs window, and he wondered which of them was watching. He heard the familiar sound of Chloe's mother about to break. He took a sip of scotch and smiled. Rudy's Buick was parked at the curb. With the growing light he saw the mud and dust on the tires, kicked up on the mudguards, and Allan wondered what part of the country had mud so red. Rudy came out of the house, his ex-wife's voice trailing after him, calling him a son of a bitch, a useless son of a bitch.

Rudy came down the stairs and stopped in their yard, then turned back. “You should have told me. The minute she was gone, you should have told me.”

“You really expect me to think you would care?”

“What the hell else do you think I care about?”

When she screamed *Oh just go away, just go away!* it was so loud, so hard, it spooked Allan, like the fight had jumped out at him from nowhere. The door slammed and Rudy kicked the tricycle so hard it hit the house. He turned around and looked up and down the street, his face cool and red in the dusty morning light. It was quiet, not even birds sang, and Allan wondered if the fighting had scared them away. He watched Rudy pace, watched his body soften as the anger left and he walked slowly to the curb and sat down, lit a cigarette, and he took a deep drag, watching the sky, and Allan tried to remember that Greek god with little wings at his feet.

1st Runner-Up

Charlotte's Mother

By Jeffrey Ricker

On the drive to Ironville, Charlotte imagines the places her mother might be, all of them bad: in a ditch, in the trunk of someone's car, in the middle of the road. New scenarios keep coming to mind. They pile up on top of each other until she thinks she might scream.

She did scream after the home called to say her mother had walked out, hailed a cab, and ridden off. Charlotte raged at the administrator, frightening even herself. She's calmer now; she can't imagine maintaining that level of rage for very long. She assumes — hopes, really — that her mother took the cab to Ironville. She can't think of anyplace else she might have gone.

It's 50 miles down Interstate 55 from St. Louis to Iron County and another 15 along back roads through the Arcadia Valley before Charlotte gets to the place where she grew up. With one hand on the wheel, she leans over and paws through the glove box and eventually finds the half-empty pack of Marlboros. They're at least five years old. There's no lighter, but there's a book of matches tucked inside.

She fumbles to strike one, bringing the match to the end of the cigarette before the tiny flame goes out. Once it's lit, she cracks her window to flick the ashes outside.

Charlotte drives through the town too fast for the unpaved roads, tires spitting up gravel and dust in her wake. It's been 10 years since she moved her mother into the home, 10 years since her father died and no one was left to look after Charlotte's mentally absent but still physically present mother. The doctor has given her good odds of seeing 90 or more. She's 87 now.

She grinds to a stop in front of the house and gets out. It's breezeless and hot, the drone of insects the only thing worrying the air. Charlotte rushes up the steps, but her mother's not there. She stares at the front door a moment, at the realtor's key box on the handle. Jiggles it; still locked.

She glances around. Something besides her mother is missing, and it's not until she goes to the side of the porch facing the yard that she figures it out. The wind chimes are gone.

Charlotte's first memory is the wind chimes. She was lying in bed the first time she heard them, a heavy-piped echo that reverberated in her chest. They used to hang from a hook over the railing, directly across from her bedroom window. The hook's bare now. Charlotte glances over the railing to see if they've fallen into the yard, but all she sees are weeds and overlong grass going to seed. She hasn't bothered to have the lawn kept up since the last listing, and there aren't enough neighbors around to complain.

A scum of dirt coats the porch swing, a half moon of it wiped away where her mother's hat rests. Oval with flat sides and a ridge around the crown, its blue-gray wool felt blends in with the dust. As

a kid, none of her friends' mothers wore hats, but Charlotte's mother always put one on before leaving the house. Charlotte never asked why, too embarrassed by the habit to draw attention to it.

Charlotte picks up the hat and looks beyond the porch, her gaze passing over the lawn and across the alley into the neighboring yards. Ironville's a small place, and it only seems smaller now. The town has no stoplights, and only a few stop signs. It's more of a pause, a comma along the way to someplace else.

No one has lived in the house since they moved her mother out. Charlotte and her husband tried to sell it, but the market was soft, prices were plummeting, and no one wanted to move this far out from the city. They still don't. They put it back on the market last year, where it sat for six months. No showings, and no one came to the one open house. She's given up now. It's not like they need to sell it. She and Nick can afford to let it sit and slowly decay.

Charlotte drops her cigarette and crushes it under her shoe before walking down the three steps to the lawn. A cloud of tiny white insects blooms at her feet as she moves through the ankle-high grass to the alley and cuts across the neighbor's yard to get to the next street. There's no sidewalk; there aren't any sidewalks in town. The sight of people walking down the middle of the road was common when she was a kid. Traffic was always either light or nonexistent.

The road leads to Main Street, the last street before the railroad tracks rise up like a levee on the west side of town. All the east-west streets dead-end there. There's nothing on the other side except farmland and the river about 10 miles away.

Charlotte hasn't worn the right shoes for climbing up this hill — flats with no traction — but she tries anyway, sliding on the dry grass and catching herself before falling down. It hasn't rained for weeks. A hollow, desiccated feeling has settled over everything.

There are no trains to Ironville anymore. Once, the town was a stop between Memphis and St. Louis, but service ended before Charlotte was born. Her mother used to tell her stories about taking the train up to St. Louis with Charlotte's grandmother. Going to the big city, she called it. Since she's lived there, St. Louis has only felt right-sized to Charlotte.

From the railway bed, she can see for miles. It's so flat here, the sky a relentless blue, no clouds. When she was a kid, on days like this the sky felt like a heavy, flat anvil crushing the world, pulverizing the hilltops and splintering the second floor of their house before she could get to the basement. If she were out swimming at the old quarry, which would she choose: be crushed or drown?

Drown, she thinks now.

She lights another cigarette and walks between the rails, heading in the direction of the station and St. Louis. From up here, the town looks even smaller. Four streets run parallel to the tracks and four more perpendicular, one continuing all the way out of town toward the highway. The even number and the one endless road make the town look lopsided. She could count all of the houses in town from here. She hasn't seen another person since she got here. Does anyone even live here anymore? If the end of the world came, would anyone be here to notice?

The train station is no more than a shack, really. The boards of the platform and the siding have turned gray, the windows milky. None of them are broken — even minor vandalism is too much effort, or maybe there are no vandals left.

Charlotte keeps walking. Next door to the station is the hotel, the one building in town that stands more than two stories tall. When she was a kid, Charlotte thought the building looked huge. It was already closed back then, just like the station and the rail line. The older kids at school said it was haunted. Unlike the station, the hotel had been vandalized, the ground floor windows shattered and now partially boarded up. Vines have insinuated themselves into the brickwork. A corner of the roof is caved in.

Charlotte considers going back into town and knocking on every door when she hears the station door open behind her. She looks back. Her mother stands on the platform, peering down the tracks toward her.

"Gonna get yourself run over if you're not careful," her mother says when Charlotte nears. "Train should be along any minute."

In the nursing home, between episodes of clarity, her mother has repeated that sentence often. *Train should be along any minute.* She's dressed up, a pale blue skirt and matching jacket, a darker sapphire blouse, gray shoes. Gloves. The hat, now tucked under Charlotte's arm, matches the ensemble. Once she climbs up onto the platform, she holds it out.

"I think this is yours."

As if reluctant to come closer, Charlotte's mother leans forward and takes the hat. After brushing off nonexistent dust, she settles it on top of her thin hair.

"Train should be along any minute." She checks her watch and squints into the distance.

Charlotte didn't expect to be recognized. Her mother's awareness comes and goes; often, it's just not there. Sitting on the bench beneath a window, Charlotte wonders how she's going to get her mother from the station into her car, and back to the home.

"Where are you going?" Charlotte asks.

"St. Louis. I have some shopping to do." She's brought her purse with her, a gray leather clutch that matches her shoes. She flips open the clasp and peers inside, removing a handkerchief but not doing anything with it.

Charlotte stares out past the train tracks, across the flood plain at the soybeans quietly shriveling in the sun. Her mother and grandmother used to take the train to St. Louis to shop along Grand Boulevard and Washington Avenue, spend hours in the ladies' department at Famous and Barr downtown with her grandmother saying *bring me this and this and this, and also my husband needs a gray suit and you have his measurements on file and please have it delivered.* At some point, in some boutique, a glass of champagne would be put in her grandmother's hand.

Her mother tried to recreate those experiences with Charlotte, but they had to drive up to St. Louis, most of the boutiques had closed, and the only things you could get on Washington were drugs or hookers. They went to Plaza Frontenac instead. The salespeople at Neiman Marcus never offered champagne.

Charlotte can imagine her grandmother, though, striding through a store like she owned the place. She lived until Charlotte was 19, and Charlotte never stopped being a little afraid of her.

"That's a terrible habit," her mother says when Charlotte lights her third cigarette. "My daughter used to smoke. Told me she gave it up, but I can still smell it on her band uniform."

Charlotte played flute in the high school marching band, over 30 years ago. Her arms got so tired holding up the flute as the band marched across the football field during halftime, all while the blue wool of the uniform chafed her wrists, the collar digging into her neck.

Her mother sighs. "Train should be along any minute." She seems to address the comment not to Charlotte, but to the tracks next to the platform, to the fields beyond.

"Maybe there's trouble down the line," Charlotte says. She should have asked Nick or someone from the home to come with her. A fight won't surprise her.

Her mother checks her watch. "Too late to go now. No point in waiting."

She gets up and adjusts her hat, gives her gloves a little tug before starting the slow shuffle to the stairs. Charlotte follows. Her mother's gait teeters and she reaches for the handrail.

"Can I give you a hand?" Charlotte asks. "These stairs aren't in the best shape."

Her mother narrows her eyes but takes Charlotte's arm anyway. This close, Charlotte can smell Chanel No. 5, the same perfume her mother's worn since she can remember. Powder and spice.

"I don't recall seeing you in town," her mother says.

Charlotte expected things like this to always sting, but it doesn't anymore. She smiles and leads her mother down. "We're new here."

Her mother nods, apparently satisfied with this answer. It's a good day for her, all the lucid moments. Maybe being back here does it, all the familiar places.

She leans heavily against Charlotte's arm, her feet sliding down each step. With her mother, it takes twice as long to return to the house. It gives Charlotte more time to look around. Something else about the town has changed, but she can't put her finger on it. She glances down the streets, looking for something different: something new, or more likely something missing, torn down. All the houses still look the way she remembers them: short, square, faded from decades of sunlight bleaching the landscape, making it look like a memory.

As a teenager she hated this postage stamp of a town, the streets that went nowhere, the dead ends at the railroad tracks and how there was only one road out of town and she was too young to drive, had to walk up to the highway and wait for the bus that took her to school two exits away. She couldn't wait to get away.

Eventually, Charlotte gets her mother back up to the porch. Maybe she should have taken her straight to the car, but now she's settled into the porch swing and is pushing it with the toe of one shoe against the boards. She begins to remove her gloves, tugging on each finger to loosen them, and doesn't look at Charlotte as she asks, "Why Ironville?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why did you come to Ironville? You must have had a reason. No one comes here by choice."

Charlotte's mother looks at her with narrowed eyes, and instantly Charlotte feels like a teenager again, on the receiving end of an unanticipated question.

"You didn't choose to live here?" Charlotte asks, her throat tight. Her mother laughs and shakes her head. It's been a long time since Charlotte heard her mother laugh.

"I thought I'd put this place behind me when I finished high school," her mother says. "But then I got married and my husband got a job in the mines, so we ended up here." She sighs and pats the purse in her lap. "Right back where I started."

"Your husband worked in the mines?" Charlotte almost said, "Dad worked in the mines?" but caught herself. Her father worked in administration as far as she's aware. He went to and from an office in Potosi every weekday throughout her childhood. His day began before sunrise and ended after sunset, no matter the time of year. She can't imagine him in a hard hat and one of the elevator cages that ferried the workers down, like inmates to a daily incarceration, the weight of the earth pressing from a mile above.

"He did for a while," her mother says. "Everyone did, if you didn't leave town. He got promoted, though. Works in an office now."

"So why don't you move?"

Her mother shrugs, a casual gesture that doesn't match her outfit. "After a while, it just makes sense to stay put. One place is pretty much the same as another."

No it isn't, Charlotte wants to say. St. Louis is nothing like this little town. But contradictions would only confuse her mother, who's now looking through her purse again. She snaps it shut, her lips puckered in frustration. "I've misplaced my key. Would you see if my daughter is home yet?" She gestures toward the front door. "Tell her I missed my train."

Charlotte goes to the door and makes a show of knocking. If any of the neighbors come out and see them, will they recognize her and her mother and wonder why she's knocking on the door of an empty house, their own house?

She can't see anything through the frosted glass panes in the front door. She tries the doorknob but it's locked, of course. Charlotte goes back around the other side of the house. Her mother has taken off her hat and placed it on the swing in the spot where Charlotte found it earlier.

Charlotte paces from the swing to the front door and back again. The planks beneath her feet give a little, a bouncy thud like she's walking in heels. Her mother has stopped pushing the swing and stares at Charlotte with empty eyes.

"Who are you?" Just like that, her mother's gone back under.

"A neighbor," Charlotte says. "We just moved in. Is your husband home?"

Charlotte's mother shrugs. "Train should be along any minute." She goes back to rocking the swing.

In the distance Charlotte hears the wind chimes. There's a breeze now, gentle but persistent, flowing toward town from the river. The sound of the chimes is deep and metallic, the kind you hear with more than just your ears. Charlotte steps off the porch and into the grass, trying to pinpoint the

source of the sound. It's the house two doors down, maybe. She glances back at her mother, who has picked up her hat and is brushing off the crown, then heads off across the lawn again.

As she gets closer to the house two doors down, she can see the wind chimes, several rods of differing lengths arranged in a circle around a wooden striker. They look black from a distance, but once she's standing at the steps leading to the porch, they're the color of rust. Charlotte closes her eyes and listens. They make the same music she remembers hearing from her childhood bed. *Why would someone steal the wind chimes?*

She climbs the steps. The chimes hang in front of a window, the blinds half-open and lopsided. The house has the hollow sound of abandonment. The only other person she's seen since she arrived is her mother. They're like ghosts drawn back to haunt the town.

Charlotte brushes her hand across the rods, her fingers coming away red. Before she realizes, she's decided to take them — it's not theft if she's taking them back. She lifts them off the hook, holding the strands together to keep the rods from making any noise. Still, they clank into each other as she turns and hurries down the steps and back toward the house. She listens for a door opening behind her, the thump of footsteps on floorboards, or a shout of protest. Nothing.

"What on earth are you doing with those?" her mother asks, her voice drowsy as if she's just woken up. Charlotte hangs them up and gives them a rattle, the deep gong pleasing. Her hands are covered in rust, and she has nothing to wipe them on.

"I remember these from when I was a kid," Charlotte says, wiping her hands together over the edge of the railing. A bit of the rust comes off, but mostly she just smears it into her palms.

"I don't," her mother says. "I know someone had them because I'd hear them all the time, but they weren't ours."

So she's the petty thief, not the neighbors. When Charlotte closes her eyes she can see the chimes, though, hanging from the hook right in front of her. If that memory isn't genuine, maybe she can't trust anything she thinks she knows.

When Charlotte turns around, her mother's eyes are closed, her hat back on but perched slightly askew. For a moment she was present, really present, but she's already passed through and isn't stopping.

Charlotte sits down next to her and delicately picks up her mother's purse. She leaves rusty fingerprints on it as she removes the wallet, sliding the one Visa card from the card slot. Her mother only has a few dollars in the bill pocket, not enough to take a taxi anywhere, certainly not all the way back here again.

Pushing with her toe, Charlotte sets the swing rocking again. Eventually she will have to wake her mother and begin the careful choreography of getting her into the car. For the moment, she lets her sleep, her head tipped forward, chin resting on her chest. Charlotte leans closer, marking each exhale her mother takes, not willing to look away until she inhales again.

2nd Runner-Up

Fishing for Owls

By Aimee Parkison

Jefferson, Texas, on a sticky spring afternoon, my husband's up to no good. I wait for disaster to rain down like tiny frogs clinging to branches after a tornado. My husband, Jace, a heavy man, dons a faded tractor hat. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he steers his motorized wheelchair down the ramp outside our house while whistling "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

Closing the door behind him, I slide the window open and pop off the screen. A blast of fresh air, hot and muggy, hits my face like breath. Outside, baby grasshoppers jump like hot oil on a griddle. Robins sing. Owls call. The sky ebbs the deep vivid blue of painted china. Meanwhile, I pretend I'm cleaning the windows.

I'm waiting, watching, hoping Jace doesn't notice.

We've been living here for two years, ever since our retirement from the military, and we aren't accustomed to a life of lakes and tourists, friendly dog walkers. Our lot is surrounded by trees and owls. Big pickup trucks hauling shiny fishing boats on trailors cruise by our double carport, slowing down to view the stretch of asphalt where Jace's neglected pontoon boat and bass boat sit, gathering cobwebs beneath the oaks. At this hour, the dense leafy shade of mature maples bathes the ramps near the end of the driveway. Standing near the window, hidden by umber curtains, I spy on Jace, my husband of 10 years, a diabetic and avid fisherman.

He lost his legs to nerve damage last summer.

Now that he's disabled, I'm constantly spying, keeping watch, to search and inspect his body, the house, the wheelchair, our surroundings, looking for clues that we'll be all right. Once a birder addicted to owling, I know how to observe without disturbance, though I don't go birding or owling anymore. I've given it up for Jace.

My first love was the monkey-faced owl, a barn owl that roosted near my childhood home. I remember its humanlike face, the eyes directed forward, the wide wings, and hooked beak. I listened for the strange, loud double-clicking echoes among buildings and the screaming, its droll quizzical expression and white underparts reflected in streetlights. I loved that owl. I fell for it, the way I would eventually fall for men who were strangers to me. When I gave myself to them, the men reminded me of owls, their quizzical expressions, white bellies, their secretive nature. I stalked them, when I was young, but only the secretive ones. Like Jace.

Nearing the end of the cracked concrete drive, the wheelchair stalls. Jace jerks back, as if realizing he is on display. He halts the chair at the final stretch, just before the asphalt road. I hold my breath,

wondering if he'll be able to reach far enough to get the newspaper. It's right there on the concrete, wrapped in its clear plastic bag, where the carrier threw it.

The neighbors are watching. I spy them in their windows, looking out, on their front porches, in their yards, pretending to tend to the grass. Yesterday, this moment birthed disaster. A little thing like a man going out to retrieve the newspaper on his own driveway. Yesterday, Jace had fallen out of his chair. Hard. Smack onto the concrete. His hands and elbows and face were bleeding. Bruises all over his pale skin. I ran out of the house to lift him back into his wheelchair. He was too heavy. The neighbors ran to gather him in their arms, picking him up and putting him back into his chair.

"Okay," he said, smiling but shaking. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

Inside the house, I cleaned his wounds with iodine and checked for broken bones before laying ice packs on his elbows.

Today, just as he's bending down, grasping, he removes a metal pen from his shirt pocket with a flourish. He flicks this pen, which has a pointer, retractable and approximately two-and-a-half feet long at full length. He nudges the paper with it. He thumbs the end of the pointer, and a claw on the opposite end flexes outward, grabbing the newspaper. Jace lifts the paper into the air, hanging from the end of the pointer. The neighbors watching from their porches applaud.

Jace smiles and waves at everyone, before turning this wheelchair back to the ramps.

He's a clever man, my husband, with unusual charm, the ability to disarm even his greatest detractors, like his mother-in-law, who never liked me being with Jace, who is nearly my father's age. I always preferred older men. I remember what Mother said when she found out I was marrying Jace: *A fisherman is a jerk on one end of the line waiting for a jerk on the other.* Jace laughed about that for days, but I didn't think it funny.

"An old fisherman lives here with the catch of his life," he announced to Mother when she first visited this house, shortly before his amputations.

Mother only smiled wryly, asking for a drink, then whispering in the kitchen, "The fishing is always better on the other side of the lake, isn't it, dear?"

I didn't know quite what she meant.

"There's something fishy about this fella," she said after a few drinks, while eyeing all the prize-winning bass mounted on the den walls near Jace's trophies.

"I'll not deny it," said Jace.

This was before he lost his legs, when he went fishing every weekend, rain or shine, and won trophies in fishing competitions.

"Early to bed, early to rise, fish all day, make up lies?" Mother asked, examining his trophies.

Jace raised an eyebrow and his beer to her. "You know the old proverb, Norma? Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day ... Teach a man to fish, and he will sit in a boat, and drink beer all day."

"Men and fish are alike," Mother said to me later that night before turning in to bed. "They both get into trouble when they open their mouths."

Jace was so deliciously sunburned then.

He smelled of the lake, the wind, the sun, the water.

He tasted sun-kissed.

His hairdo was courtesy of his boat, in the days when he used to assure me I could separate the men from the boys by the size of their rods.

That was before the amputations, when Jace lived to fish and fished to live, when life was too short to fish without beer. Back when wishes were fishes and everyday was a fish fry, Jace used to live for the lake, the water, the catch of the day. So strong, determined, adventurous, full of energy, before his amputations, he was the one who carried me to bed when I was tired. Now, I spend entire hours regretting I'm not strong enough to carry him.

I used to venture out at night to go owling. He used to leave for the lake in the dark hours of morning so that we crossed each other in our adventures, one of us coming home, one of us leaving. Now, we both stay at home. He resents it, not as much as my asking why he doesn't go to the lake anymore. There are other things we don't do anymore, but I don't like to think about that.

Sometimes at night, I venture into the yard to stand beside the decaying pontoon boat. That's how I first saw the neighborhood ambassador owl and realized the owl was calling to me, letting itself be known, as owls rarely do. I wanted to explain to the owl it was too late. I no longer went on trips to search for nests in caves, tree hollows, bridges, and buildings. Gone were my childhood visits to caves littered with droppings, pellets scattered amid golden-brown feathers. The owls I loved fed on cotton rats and nested in deserted buildings, bridges, and water towers, but never during the years of rodent shortage. They refused to brood in hunger. The mated pair I once watched for months fed their brood on the foreparts of rats, leaving behind hind parts and separate stomachs scattered around the nest. I found them by searching for scattered stomachs of rats they killed.

Tonight, the bold ambassador owl finds me, again, and stares with inquisitive eyes. He's a barn owl with the perfect white monkey face.

The owl and I stare at each other near the carport where the pontoon boat rusts in the dust of neglect. I notice one of the owl's wings is damaged, wounded, and I wonder if it knows what Jace and I have learned. One's body can become a stranger, a separate entity, even to oneself, or to one's partner. I feel guilty about not noticing this sooner, though I was the one to spot the sores. The trouble began on Jace's left foot, an ulcer that wouldn't heal.

What happened to Jace was related to his diabetes, but the official medical reason for his amputations was poor circulation due to damage to his arteries. Without adequate blood flow, the body's cells cannot get oxygen and nutrients they need from the bloodstream. Infections do not go away or cannot be controlled. With so much nerve damage to his feet, Jace couldn't feel pain. This meant he couldn't heal. He had an ulcer on his foot that grew and became infected, but he never even felt it or knew it was there until I saw it.

Jace isn't the only one who can't feel pain. Some people stare at amputees, regardless of what they are doing, never realizing the pain they are causing. I guess to some people the pain of others is interesting. Watching struggle is entertainment.

"I'm a free show," Jace says, whenever we catch people staring at him.

"I'll never forgive them," I whisper, especially if those who are staring are adults.

But later, he tells me he no longer takes it personally.

"Everyone needs to invent a new game or to find a game to make life worth living, or else we die," he says. "Staring at me is just a game to them."

I'm thinking how wise he is, how much sense his words make, but how little his spoken wisdom relates to his actions. His game was once fishing, and now he has no game. I wonder if he realizes he isn't following his own advice, or perhaps he has a secret game he hasn't revealed to me.

I'm thinking about this tonight, as I walk out of the house, quietly, wanting to be alone with the full moon, just for a little while, not daring to go beyond the confines of our property. Somehow, as always, I end up walking to the pontoon boat. I stroke the dust on the paint and remember the sun on the water.

I wonder when the ambassador owl will return. It blends into the bark of the trees, never revealing its roost, even after crows mobbing. Unlike the Romans, I don't believe owl hoots signal death. Like the Greeks, I feel hoots are good fortune.

"I've seen it before," Jace says, when I go back inside the house, where he's waiting for me near the fireplace full of lit candles. "I know what you're doing."

"What?" I ask.

"Your friend in the trees? He watches me too, and I have plans for him."

"What do you mean?" I'm worried for the owl.

When Jace tells me what he plans to do with the ambassador owl, I begin to wonder, if it works, will it be because of the strangeness of the wounded owl or the strangeness of my husband?

The next day, Jace gets to work on his new game, taking a full week to prepare. He rigs a system of ropes, weights, and wheels, fashioning long pulleys behind our house, cords stretching from tree to tree to hang homemade wooden cages dangling like chandeliers from heavy branches. Jace installs huge, high-powered spotlights to shine on the night sky. The neighbors watch from their back porches, as if mesmerized.

Now, we have an entire neighborhood of "concerned" citizens who can't keep their eyes off Jace. I hide my outrage. What good would it do? He's drawing attention to himself, making everyone stare all the more, giving them an excuse.

Jace, gleeful, says, "It's all part of the new sport I've invented." He appears proud people are watching. "They're taking pictures and making videos, honey," he says.

The neighbors have invited friends to watch him. Local tourists have gotten word, driving by our house slowly to get a glimpse of the system Jace has rigged in the backyard, the mystery he has created. Jace won't tell anyone, except me, what he's really doing. I pretend to be enthusiastic, because it has been a long time since I've seen him this way, but my heart hurts.

"Bless your little heart," Jace says, when I tell him I'm worried.

His spirits are lifted, his eyes are full of light like on days of fishing tournaments. The neighbors, gazing shamelessly, cheer him. He's a local sensation, or a freak, which is the same thing.

Only in Jefferson, I think. A former fisherman, Jace is just the type of man for this place. So much of his spectacle is possible because Jefferson is located between Caddo Lake and Lake O' the Pines. It thrives on tourists who visit for outdoor recreational activities and events every year, like the Holiday Light Trail and the Barbecue Cook-Off. Jefferson is ripe for a new event, a new sensation, the sort of nightly sideshow Jace is creating. Here, we have many nature activities, including steam paddleboat lake tours, horse-drawn carriage rides, antique shops, ghost tours, and now ... Jace.

Maybe that's why no one has called the police yet. No one has reported Jace because people are looking forward to more spectacle. Friends and strangers gather around our fence in the evening to watch and chat. As Jace drives his wheelchair in circles over the oversized balcony in our sloped backyard, he's holding a fishing pole. His electronic wheelchair makes rounds on the balcony, the fishing line whips through the air over the trees, and the new sport he has invented seems like a crime against nature.

"Jace," I say, "explain to me what you think you're doing?"

"Fishing for owls," he says.

"What?"

"If I can fish from the lake, I can fish from the sky."

No matter how many times I beg him not to, no matter how I try to reason with him, he's determined to fish for owls all night long.

He has even ordered new business cards. Tonight, he hands me one of his cards, which reads, *Jace Allman. Why fish from water, when you can fish from sky?*

"Get it?" he whispers.

I get it. I do. Owls are predators. That's why he likes to lure them in, despite stories of the woods, old stories of people attacked by owls. I want to tell him these stories, but then I change my mind. I'm afraid for the ambassador owl.

The first time I saw the owl, I felt I had seen something special: a secret friend, a kinship in its gaze.

After downloading a recording on his phone, an owl hooting during mating season, Jace sits quietly to wait for dusk on the balcony. Clutching a large flashlight, he pushes play to start the recording. Eventually, the owl answers back. We can hear it calling a mile away, before it appears. Why, I wonder, is Jace taking such a risk? He's doing it, I think, to please me, but also for the thrill, the challenge. Inventing a new sport. To entertain himself and the neighbors. Because he can't sleep. Perhaps even because he feels guilty that I gave up birding to care for him. And yet, I'm keeping a secret from him. I think what he's doing is wrong and want him to stop, even though I tell him it's great and I love it.

I worry. What would really happen if he caught the ambassador owl? Owls are usually secretive and don't like being seen by humans, so why and how would one be so willing? Maybe, I suspect, it's because the owl is wounded and must care for its brood in times of rodent shortage.

The owl sits in the oak, staring down at Jace.

"Bait," Jace whispers to me as the owl watches us. Jace looks at the owl as if it might answer. "What do owls like to eat?"

"Rodents," I say.

"A rat or squirrel on a hook and string will chew through or run under the house. That's no good. I need something that will fly."

"Sparrows?" I ask. "Bats?"

"Bats!"

In the morning, Jace rises early and staples a net over a hole in the carport, a gap between the brick wall and the carport's metal roof.

"It's the bats' only door. I've seen them flying in and out in the evenings," Jace says with a twisted smile.

"It doesn't seem fair," I say, when he nets the first bat, brown velvet wings flopping in terror as Jace holds the writhing bat in his heavy leather gloves.

Jace grabs his rod and reel, then ties twine to the foot of the thrashing, squealing bat. He attaches the twine to fishing line on rod and reel, so the bat is connected.

"This isn't very sportsmanlike," I say.

"No," he says, looking at me sadly. "I'll just test it tonight. I'll not call the owl yet. I just want to see if —"

Before he can finish his sentence, the bat begins to fly, still connected to the fishing line. Jace gives it more line, letting it out farther and higher. "Look at it go," he says with a smile. "This might work after all."

"No," I whisper.

He carefully reels the bat back in, grabs it in his gloved hands, and cuts it free from the twine and line. Released and free, the bat flies away, disappearing in darkening sky above the trees.

"Well?" I ask, thinking what Jace is proposing to do to the owl will require great skill, unlike what he has just done to the bat.

"You're right. The net isn't fair to the bats. They're trapped, so there's no sport in it. Before I start fishing for owls, I need to fish for a bat."

He fishes for bats by threading a large moth on line and flying the moth on the line outside the bat hole. A bait bat is finally caught, mouth tangled in the line while devouring the moth. Jace secures the bat, throwing a net over it, then knotting twine threaded with fishing line on the bat's leg. Now, he's playing a recording of owl mating calls. When the ambassador owl answers, flying toward him, Jace lets the bait bat fly on the line to lure the owl. Jace fishes with the bat, live bait as it flies through the dark sky on line, attached to rod and reel.

Jace almost gets the owl, but not quite, giving up, waiting for another night.

To keep the owl interested, Jace uses sounds I collected long ago on old tapes from a recorder placed near a nest box outside my childhood bedroom window, when I spent nights listening to owls' whistles, cackles, grunts, and growls. Jace begins to mimic these sounds. He hoots at dusk, pulls out his phone, finds the bird call app, and plays the owls' mating call. Then, he cranks up the old tape

player on max volume, hooking it up to speakers to play the sounds I recorded from the owls of my childhood.

The ambassador owl flies nearer.

I sit on our back porch, beneath the balcony, under the plastic awning faded from sun, and sip a mojito blended with mint from our garden.

When Jace catches the ambassador owl, as it swoops in for the bait bat, I hear screams and laughter, whispers, as he reels the owl on strong line, netting the owl with the bat in its beak. Jace deposits the stunned owl in one of the tree cages connected to pulleys. Jace uses pulleys to bring fresh cages to the balcony and then to return them to the trees, where they dangle like rustic chandeliers from oak limbs. A struggle for his strong arms, his well-defined muscles working, Jace captures the mate of the caged owl next.

As the stunned owls reanimate in cages, they stir, dazed, coming back to fly from their chandeliers, lit by solar landscape spotlights. After drawing them nearer with the pulley, Jace opens the cage doors with his clawed pointer, the one he uses to reach the newspaper on the driveway each day.

The neighbors applaud, again and again. He motions for silence, and they obey his unspoken command.

On the balcony under the pecan trees, he calls to the owls, again, getting them to call back. It scares me because of their eyes, the way they stare as they answer back, as if actually trying to hold a conversation with him. He's setting up his laptop with more owl recordings on the balcony table under the pecan trees. These are not mating calls but the calls of young owls, nestlings, calling to their parents. It's wrong, wrong, for anyone to do what he's doing. I fear he will anger the owls and we'll both pay the price of his foolish game.

I hear Jace and the owls have conversations. Now that he has learned to lure them, to mimic their voices, they answer. In the pecan trees near the balcony, the owls roost, calling to him as he lures them nearer.

The calls become louder, increasing in intensity, and then I hear another sound, unlike any that I have heard before when he is fishing for owls. His voice changes and is not at all owl-like but the screech of a little boy, frightened, overwhelmed. When I hear his little-boy cry, my maternal instincts kick in, and I rush up the rickety stairs leading from the porch to the balcony, where I find my worst nightmare. He has netted a great horned owl so large it won't fit inside the cages. Jace doesn't know what to do now that he's got it.

"Let him go," I say.

Jace says, "Out of the way!"

He's trying to cut it loose, but the owl is staring up at the inky sky, taking off too fast, beating its wings, slapping Jace's face. Jace's nose is bleeding, and he is holding his fishing pole. It whips crazily in his large hands as the owl circles above. He's reeling the owl in as it swerves higher, pulling away.

Reeling and reeling, he's giving it more line, and yet the line threatens to wrap around the branches of the nearer trees.

"I'll wear him down," he says.

God knows if he'll be able, or what he'll do with the owl if he succeeds.

The owl wants to escape with the bait. It weaves above, circling down. Jace reeling, reeling, huffs as if out of breath. Sweating profusely, he attempts to pull the owl from the sky. The line breaks. Jace falls back against his wheelchair, the pole still in his hands, the great horned owl disappearing into the dark.

"One thing I'll never buy again," he says, catching his breath, "is cheap line."

Something about the wild look in his eye makes me remember the way we used to love each other. I don't want him fishing for owls anymore because I worry he will get hurt or hurt one of the owls and be sorry. He doesn't like hurting things, usually, except for fish and bait. He has switched to sparrows now but wants to look for more bats as well as flying squirrels.

Past midnight, he's toying with the new line and the sparrows in their cage.

"When I was a kid," I say, "a man named Jimmy got too close to a great horned owl during mating season. Its talons cut through his skull like a hot knife through butter."

"No kidding?"

"Jimmy had a lobotomy — a lobotomy by owl."

Jace gazes up to the darkening sky as if thinking about owls in a new way. He goes back inside the house, without fishing for owls tonight. I hope I've convinced him to see reason, but in the morning, he is in the garage with his welder, working on something that looks like a medieval torture device.

When I was a child, my grandpa told me that young barn owls can be generous toward each other, donating portions of their food to smaller, hungrier siblings. My family had too many children and stepchildren left at our door, cousins and second cousins, friends of in-laws. With so many in the house to properly feed and care for, to survive we needed an altruism rare among animals.

With the younger children, I learned to communicate wordlessly. Before dropping out of high school, I was listening to owls in the nest box outside my window. Owls I associated with Athena's shining eyes. The children cried out in trills, barks, and hoots at night, answering the owls.

We can be generous to each other, I think. We can be generous to each other like the owls.

Jace looks like an owl when he gazes at me in the moonlight, his pale face flat and heart-shaped like the barn owls' facial disk that functions as a kind of satellite to capture sound. Of course, I never tell Jace about my childhood. He wouldn't understand, just like he wouldn't appreciate how I love the owls for their calls and their silence, the way their feathers have serrated fringes that reduce noise in flight as the velvety wings absorb sound. Jace would never understand how what he's doing could alert predators to the owls' whereabouts, make the owls worry for their young, give a lonely owl false hopes of finding a mate, or even lure fledglings from the nest.

I committed that crime against nature more than once, and I paid the price as a young girl. After nights of luring owls, I was lured by a false mating call from a married man I thought loved me before

leaving me forever damaged. I want to tell Jace. Instead, I tell him owls vocalize differently in spring, when looking for a mate, than they do in early summer, when defending their young. This gives him an idea. He uses his laptop and smartphone to listen to more recorded owl calls captured in the wild.

"Thanks, babe," Jace says.

I want to tell him about what happened to me, how a mating call can be used against a lonely girl, a lonely boy, an isolated woman or a man. But he only thinks of protecting his head from talons. That's why he goes into the garage to collect metal rods and to fire up his old welder again.

I slurp my mojito while looking away from the torch light.

When he's finished welding, he holds up a metal contraption like a cage for a man's head.

Sure enough, he puts it on so that his head is caged, his eyes staring out of the bars.

"Jace," I say.

"Baby," he says. "How about a kiss?"

He puckers up and makes kissing sounds inside the cage.

Laughing, I go back inside the house, but I'm afraid to look out the window when I hear the jigsaw. He's making screw boards for his arms.

"What now," I whisper.

His arms are braced by boards locked into place by screws. Hinged at the elbow, the boards open at his hands so he can manipulate the fishing pole and pulleys.

Jace sets up the laptop as the sun goes down over the trees, the sky whitening with that faint graying just before it darkens. Jace begins to play the recording, so that he can draw the great horned owl near. I see it landing on the branches.

Jace reaches inside the sparrow cage to remove the first tied sparrow to bait the line. Slowly, he releases the sparrow so that it flies into the sky, one foot hooked. Jace gives it some slack before flying it closer to the owl. This owl is the big one, large enough to kill a man. Every time Jace keeps the great horned owl on the line, circling above, and then cuts the line to let it go, I realize he's afraid.

Watching from the other side of the kitchen window, I hold my breath. My heart skips. The great horned owl, now caught on the line again, swoops down to land on the board attached to Jace's left arm. Jace cuts the line, but the owl stays put, holding the sparrow in its beak while staring into the cage surrounding Jace's head.

When the owl finally flies away with the sparrow, Jace rolls back into the house. He makes love to me like he hasn't since before he lost his legs. We're kissing each other like there's no tomorrow.

"Catch and release," he says, smiling.

The next night, like every other night, Jace wheels out onto the balcony and puts the cage on his head. I watch from the window, and the neighbors watch from the other side of the fence, filming with cameras, taking videos on phones.

The big owl keeps coming back, getting used to us. Jace keeps feeding the big owl, almost as if it's his pet. It lands on him, night after night. The big owl takes one bait after another, each time allowing Jace to fly it like a kite over the balcony and the pecan trees.

3rd Runner-Up

Parting

By Marlene Olin

The instructor was bent like a question mark, a corona of gray hair circling her face. Behind her, cell phones were beeping and feet were shuffling as she wrote feverishly on the board. She knew her night school students only too well. A few tattered housewives. Some laid-off construction workers. Most were dodging bill collectors and parole officers. All were fighting sleep. Her hand raced to finish the sentence, the graceful loops of the letters unraveling as she wrote. Then turning to face them, she read Dickinson's words.

"My life closed twice before its close."

Out of 20-odd students, two or three leaned forward in their seats, their fingers clasped, their eyes squinting. Maybe they were listening.

"Was she writing about death or heartache? A missed opportunity or a long-lost friend?"

Her glance swept from row to row hoping to make eye contact. That mousy girl in the back row, hiding in a hoodie, the one sucking on the ends of her long blond hair. She was wide awake now. Paying attention. Dropping the hair and grabbing the edges of her desk with both hands. Yes!

"How many doors in your life," said the instructor, "have been opened only to be slammed shut?"

Outside it was January in upstate New York. Beyond the windows, the world was blanketed with snow. Her students, she imagined, would rather be anywhere else. Nursing a beer in a bar. Throwing in a load of wash and tucking in the kids. But then she remembered Dickinson, and those nights she sat curled by the fire with a *Norton Anthology* in her lap. *Let them roll their eyes and hate me.*

"You'll find the rest of the poem in your handout. Read it and write a 500-word essay for next week."

Then — amid the groans and smirks — she packed up her notepad and pencils, shoved her arms inside her winter coat, and promptly left.

The school parking lot was nearly deserted. Light poles stood like dead trees, sending amber shadows over the snow. If the temperature didn't kill Rose, the wind surely would. She fumbled inside her purse for the car keys and prayed the door lock wasn't frozen. Finally, after taking off her gloves, wincing as one gust after another froze her face, she found them. The car turned over twice before it started.

Next she waited for the heat to kick in. Sooner or later, she would have to leave the car and brush the snow off the windows. Her goal — if she could ever afford it — was to trade in her piece-of-crap Honda for something with defrosters that actually worked. But right now, she was perfectly content, sitting there, waiting for her fingers to thaw, enjoying the hot blasts of the air pumping from the vents.

If only she could stay cocooned in her car forever. There'd be no more dawn-to-dusk shifts at the diner, no more self-improvement plans. Two weeks into her first semester at night school and she might as well be back at the shrink's. She took a strand of hair, licked the ends, and gently brushed her cheek. Screw that instructor. Screw Emily Dickinson. And screw the GED.

In front of her, the windshield was getting foggy. When she gazed in the rearview mirror, plumes of smoke rose from the exhaust. If only she had a rubber hose, a simple garden hose, wouldn't that be nice. Something quick and quiet.

She had no idea how long she slept before the noise woke her. It was like a woodpecker pecking or a knuckle rapping. *Rap! Rap Rap!*

Bracing herself against the cold, she rolled down the window halfway. A vague recollection surfaced. A ski cap striped in red and white topped with a blue pom-pom. A spray of strawberry-blond peach fuzz covering his cheeks. About her age. Twentyish. Like her, he sat in the last row of the class.

"You okay?" he said.

His breath came out in cumulus clouds. Hugging himself, he sputtered.

"Jesus, they need to get snow plows in here."

Rose lowered the window another inch and looked around. Everything was white. There was no distinguishing between the road and the sidewalk, the parking lot and the playground. "I'm peachy," she said. "Just peachy."

The poor guy looked miserable. Snot hung from his nose and froze. He wiped it with a mittened hand, shuffling back and forth, stomping his feet, mumbling *Lord of Mercy, I gonna die out here! I'm gonna fricking die.* Pathetic actually. The snotty mitten. The ridiculous hat. Two weeks into class and she'd already caught him napping, drool from his mouth spooling ever so gently over Emily Dickinson's poems. Comical really. So when he asked her if she wanted to grab a cup of coffee, against her better judgment she said *yes*.

The Candlelight Inn, they both agreed, would be the best bet. After nine o'clock, the only other places in town were the bars, and each one was seedier than the next. She followed in the wake of his pickup truck, chasing his high beams, until they pulled up in the parking lot of the town's sole motel. There were no moon and no stars, only a Vacancy sign winking and blinking in the darkness. When they walked through the front door, the tinkle of a bell woke up the desk clerk.

"Need a room?" he asked.

They buried their necks inside their coats and mumbled *Just coffee* at the same time. Then pushing their way past a set of double doors, they found the restaurant. Swinging Budweiser lamps. Leatherette booths. Somewhere a jukebox played.

She peeled off layer after layer of clothing, dumping the pile next to her, paring down to a flannel shirt and jeans, the too-big shirt and jeans swallowing her frame.

"I know you," he said.

Close up, the girl thought he looked even bigger. Mittenless, his hands were huge and ropey as if they were chiseled from stone. Everything about him — his face, his neck, his hair — looked scrubbed raw. But those beautiful hands. Just the thought of those hands made her shiver.

"I've been working at the diner for around six months," said Rose. "I'm the morning shift. The afternoon shift too most the time."

He was good at talking, making her feel comfortable, helping the words ease out. They held their coffee mugs with both hands, taking small sips, leaning in. The jukebox music was surprisingly loud. Rose figured she heard every other word.

"Most people in this town have known each other since they were kids," said Jackson.

"Is that a good thing?" said Rose.

"Good and bad. Everyone remembers everything. Things stick. You know? Your past. Your mistakes."

She swirled the spoon, watching the cream in the coffee cup. When her mother got sick, she said they were lucky. Big cities have better hospitals. Better medical care. Imagine if they lived in one of those small towns, said her mother. In those small towns, folks don't have a fighting chance.

"So," he said. Then he lowered his voice like a game-show host, "whatever brings you into our neck of the woods?"

"I grew up around two hours from here. In Rochester."

"Jesus," he said. "You could have picked any place in the world," said Jackson. "Why'd you pick here?"

The spoon spun in circles, the cream spiraling, a Milky Way in the palm of her hand. "I got sick. One day I was fine, well maybe not *so* fine. And the next day *BOOM!"*

She pounded her fist harder than she meant. Waves of coffee splashed on the table. She patted it with one two three napkins while the waitress shot her dirty looks.

"They diagnosed me with quote — clinical depression with paranoid schizoid features." She rolled up her sleeves and showed him the scars on her wrists.

"And you picked this town to cheer you up?"

She snorted a laugh. "I'm supposed to revisualize my life. The therapists said it's like writing a book. Except you're the author and the main character both."

Good Lord, she was talking a lot. Why was she talking so much to a perfect stranger? She brought the mug to her mouth and took another sip. Either the coffee was cold or her lips were numb. It was hard to tell.

"So one day I went driving. Endlessly driving. Driving for miles. And finally I saw farm silos and cow pastures and U-Pick-em fields. I figured this town was as good a place as any."

Wasn't there always a life derailed or a plan detoured? Rose glanced at the boy. Everyone had a story. Blah blah blah.

"Senior year in high school I was starting quarterback," she heard him saying. "The colleges were offering full rides, you know what I mean? Buying stuff my family didn't want and didn't need. But the first game of the season — it wasn't even halftime — I got tackled before the ball left my hand."

Somewhere the jukebox was playing *I'm gonna take it slow as fast as I can* and Rose looked at Jackson's hamburger meat of a face and bit her lip to keep from laughing. She squeezed her legs and pinched her thighs but nothing helped. She felt it coming. Any second a great big guffaw would just pop out. A laugh so inappropriate that the waitstaff would call the EMTs and Jackson would file her under Catastrophe. But the boy's mouth kept on moving.

"I was zeroing in on the tight end, my arm's back, my elbow's out, when all of a sudden it's like I'm hit by lightning. The next thing I know I'm on a stretcher with my leg pointing in a direction it shouldn't be pointing."

Another snort was about to surface. "And?" she said.

"And?" He sat back in the booth and white-knuckled the table. "In a town like this, it's a big deal. A front page of the local newspaper kind of deal. Five months later, after all the rehab and physical therapy, the colleges backed out. Thank you but no thank you. You know what I mean?"

She waited for the words to penetrate, to strike a chord someplace deep. The guy was practically crying, for Pete's sake! Instead she felt nothing. Then a voice replayed like a tape. *Sharing is almost as good as caring,* said the therapists.

"When I was in 11th grade," said Rose, "my mother got breast cancer. They call the treatment slash, burn, and poison. After 12 months of torture, they told us she was cured."

Jackson gripped the table harder. "And then what happened?" he whispered.

"Fast-forward three years. We're minding our own business, picking up the pieces, I'm even thinking about going back to school. I was a good student. A really good student. Then all of a sudden Mom starts getting nosebleeds. They never tell you about the chemo. That the poison in your body can flip on leukemia like a switch. And you know what happens once you get leukemia? A sneeze, a scratch, anything can kill you."

"Jesus," said Jackson.

"Wherever is that waitress?" said Rose. "I think she lost our check."

The following week, the instructor noticed the change in her two students right off. The blonde had washed her hair and wore a V-neck sweater, the hair traveling in a sinewy curve down her spine. Not only was the ski cap gone, but the boy had shaved. A startling thatch of auburn hair stood upright on his head, the cowlicks heading in all directions.

"Any volunteers to read last week's assignment?"

The Dickinson poem was usually an icebreaker. People personalized it, and the older the student, the more interesting the history. For the next hour, they heard every possible sob story — from watching two buddies die in Afghanistan to the week Mary Sue's washing machine and refrigerator both broke. Heartache is never graded on a curve.

Only the redhead in the back row surprised her. She knew Jackson Peters was college material — hell, the whole town knew about his disastrous football career — yet the boy could barely read. He had obviously plagiarized the newspaper articles. When he read his essay out loud, he stumbled and stuttered his way through.

At least he tried. The blonde, on the other hand, didn't even attempt the assignment. But the instructor not only knew her way around Cummings and Carew but sized up people fairly well, too. Improvising lesson plans was part and parcel of her job. She thumbed through the large text on her desk, and promptly found what she was looking for.

"Next week's assignment is on page 302. The love sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Read them."

As soon as the class was over, the students began packing their bags and heading towards the door. The instructor cleared her throat and spoke again. "Miss Leesfield. Rose Leesfield. Do you mind if I speak to you for a moment?"

The girl walked over, staring at her shoes. "Yes?"

"To pass this class, Rose, you have to write. There's no need to read your paper to the class. I respect your privacy if that's an issue."

When the girl looked up, the hatred in her eyes sucked the air clean out of the room. "I thought this was an English class. Tropes and alliteration and onomatopoeia. If I wanted group therapy, I'd steer my car to Strong Memorial and check myself back into the psych ward."

Underneath the instructor's feet, the floor wobbled. Still she held her ground.

"There are different ways to tell a story, Rose. Remember Dickinson. *Tell all the truth but tell it slant."*

Then letting the lesson percolate, the instructor turned to the blackboard, eraser in hand.

It had always been just the two of them, Rose and her mother, Pearl. So nothing prepared her for Jackson's family. They lived on 10 acres right outside of town. Snow spun like sugar on apple and pear trees. A crystalline horizon merged with the sky. Jackson's truck flew down a long winding road then stopped short before a large wooden house.

Gingerbread shutters. Rocking chairs on the porch. The weather hovered near zero yet the walkway was swept, the porch clean.

"Prepare yourself," said Jackson. "We've got two sets of grandparents, my sister and her kids, and my younger brother. And there's usually a homeless person or two that the church sends our way."

Even though it was February, it smelled like Christmas. A wreath of pine cones hung over the fireplace. Handmade throws lay on the couch. It wasn't until they walked past the parlor that they

heard people talking and children laughing. A cavernous family room with the world's largest flat screen opened before them.

Bounding in their direction, a teenager was the first to say *hello.* Tall and good-looking. Like Jackson, a mop of unruly hair sat on his head. Only in his case, nature had readjusted the dials. Black hair and eyes as green as spring. He looked her over. Up down. Down up. Then a hand as large as an oven mitt shot forward.

"Well I'll be. Numnuts actually brought somebody home."

Two little girls giggled in the corner while a huge man hoisted himself up from the couch. The same coloring as Jackson's brother only the pitch-black hair was threaded with silver.

"My name's Butch. Excuse my son Roy. He leaves his manners at church on Sundays."

Suddenly a whiff of vanilla wafted from the doorway. Another large person barged into the room, her chest covered with an apron, her hands carrying a tray loaded with food. Doris, Jackson's mother. Ruddy skin. Red hair. There was no mistaking the resemblance. In one graceful maneuver, she placed the tray on a coffee table, wrapped her arms around Rose, and let loose a torrent of words.

"I've got cheese curds, cheese straws, cheese balls, cheese puffs. And for those of us with a sweet tooth, I've got custard tarts, lemon tarts, jam tarts, and pecan tarts."

Rose blinked. For a few seconds, she just stood there. Her mother had always been slim. But as her illness progressed, she held her diet responsible. Toward the end, they only bought food at organic co-ops. Each meal was graced with candles and incense as if karma could provide a cure.

"Well?" asked Doris.

There wasn't a napkin or plate in sight. Reaching forward, Rose grabbed a little hill of cheese and a gummy pastry. Then she looked at her hand. Within seconds, a pool of grease had leached from the tart while the cheese had started melting. She had little choice but to gulp them both.

"Good, right?" said Doris.

Rose ran her tongue over her teeth. My God. Was there anything more delicious than butter?

"Good," said Rose.

The biggest surprise of all was Jackson's room. It was the only place in the house with a padlock swinging from the door. First he looked down the hallway to his right and his left. Then fishing inside his shirt, he pulled out a chain with a key.

Rose had no idea what to expect. Handcuffs on the bedposts? A stash of porn magazines? Instead the place looked like a museum with Lego constructions on every shelf. The Death Star. The Millennium Falcon. The Statue of Liberty. The Eiffel Tower.

Jackson stood in front of his desk blocking the light. "I had lots of time on my hands after my surgery."

Rose knew his nervous habits by now. Instead of looking at her, he gazed over her shoulder. His left eye began to twitch.

"I used to have trophies. Shelves and shelves of trophies. But one day I just tossed them out. Boy, was Mom mad. Dad wasn't happy either."

"What are you hiding, Jackson?"

"I had a lot of ribbons, too. Blue ribbons. Red ribbons. Gold ribbons."

"I know something's behind you. What are you hiding?"

Slowly he moved to the side, the heat rising to his face, the redness becoming even redder. Rose walked to the desk and felt her heart lurch. A perfect Lego replica of the City Hall was nearly finished. The Presbyterian Church with its steeple had a working bell. The old school house had a swing set and a real seesaw. And there, in the middle of it all, was the diner and a miniature version of herself.

"My desk isn't nearly big enough. I'm running out of room."

"You're doing the whole town?" asked Rose.

He shrugged his shoulders. "If I move it to the family room, my nieces will think it's a toy. If I move it to the basement, Roy will destroy it. He pretty much likes to destroy everything."

Rose ran her fingers over the buildings and rang the little bell. "This is ingenious, Jackson. Do you realize that?" Then she looped her elbow around his while the two of them stared at his handiwork. "I have space in my apartment. Let's put it there."

With each passing week, Rose and Jackson moved up row by row in the classroom. By March, they sat front and center. It was obvious that the girl was writing the boy's take-home assignments. To the instructor's practiced eye, syntax and sentence construction were like fingerprints, each clearly pinpointing its source.

But it was also clear that the boy was thriving. His hand shot up in class. His eyes scanned the board. And afterwards, when class was through, they both lingered. The instructor always had a new paperback on hand, perhaps Millay one week or Bishop the next. And the girl would accept it like an offering, nodding her head and smiling.

By April, Jackson's family considered her one of their own. And as the snow began to melt, the Peters began planning their Sunday excursions.

Jackson stood in Rose's kitchen. Lately, he spent more time at her apartment than he did at home. Of course, Doris and Butch were mortified that their child was living in sin. But when he told his parents he was just sleeping over, Jackson was telling the truth. While she headed to the bedroom, he spent every night on her couch.

"Each weekend we head to another cemetery," said Jackson. "Some families go bowling. We go looking for headstones."

For as long as he could remember, it was their Sunday routine. Church and then a road trip to another small town. And sure enough, on the highest hill, they'd find a patch of gravesites.

"Most people use Google maps or tell Siri to find a cemetery. But my folks are stuck in the last century. Growing up, we just crowded into our old station wagon and started driving. We've been everywhere from Buffalo to the Shenandoah Valley."

He supposed it started with his dad. Butch served in Desert Storm and never quite recuperated. To this day, his ears buzzed with the sound of shrapnel. He liked to comb the cemeteries for fallen veterans. They always brought with them a box of small American flags.

"My mom won't talk about it. But once I had a baby sister. When she was five months old, Melinda died of crib death."

Now he got Rose's attention. No one would look at his mom and guess the buried pain inside. "So she looks for the old headstones engraved with empty chairs or carved with doves or lambs. That's their way of telling you a child has died."

Rose sat down. All the color had drained from her face. Jackson knew she was taking meds. One day he stole a peek inside her medicine cabinet and saw the shelves of pills. Though he couldn't pronounce their names, he assumed what they were for. Depression or anxiety or whatever you call a nightmare you can't wake up from. He supposed she cared for him. He knew she cared for him. But for Rose, love was an abstract noun that she could spell but not decipher.

"Mom figured I was dyslexic early on. But then a funny thing happened. When I fingered the names on those stones, the words suddenly clicked. Pretty soon I started rubbing."

Together, with his parents, they'd clean a headstone. Then after taping a piece of paper to it, they'd show him how to run a crayon or a piece of charcoal straight across. It was like plumbing hieroglyphics or figuring out a puzzle. They made lists of initials: FLT, GAR, FCB, LOOM, IOOF. They parsed symbols for double meanings. A weeping willow. A broken vine.

"And the best thing of all are the epigraphs." Once again he lowered his voice. *"My dear departed brother Dave. He chased a bear into a cave. Here lies the body of Johnny Blake. Stepped on the gas instead of the brake."*

"Can you get me a drink of water, Jackson?"

What was he thinking? He looked hard into her eyes. "Rose, where's your mother buried? I never asked you about your mother."

Rose snorted. "Cemeteries?" she said. "My God. That's what you do for fun? Go to cemeteries?"

Jackson softened his voice to a whisper. Then he tried again. "Where's your mother, Rose?"

"They cremated her. There was some sort of a mix-up and they just handed me her ashes."

It was his turn to sit. "Jesus. Did you put her in a mausoleum?

She finished the glass, walked to the tap and filled up another. "I'm not tucking my mother into a chifforobe ... like she was some sort of sweater."

"So where is she now?" asked Jackson.

Rose gulped the rest down. "The last time I checked, she was sitting in the trunk of my car."

The following Sunday, the two of them huddled in the last row of his parents' SUV. Jackson's little nieces took the center seats while his mom and dad sat up front. Roy and his sister, as usual, were nowhere to be found.

Butch glanced in the rearview mirror. When he spoke, his voice boomed. "Where are we heading today, kids?"

Doris unfolded a map the size of a tablecloth. Cupping his head, Jackson moaned.

"Rose," boomed Butch, "you are about to undertake a driving adventure."

"Jesus," said Jackson.

"It's a win-win situation. If we run out of gas, Jackson walks. If we get lost, Jackson gets to figure out where we are."

Rose gazed out the window. Clumps of snow still lay on the ground while blades of grass peeked their way through.

"Can we color?" said the nieces.

"Of course," said Doris. "We take the crayons and make the rubbings. It's like magic."

The first place they pulled over was at a small deserted church. In a field behind it, an obelisk was surrounded by a white picket fence.

"This is an old one," said Jackson. "You can tell a lot about a family by the choices they made. The position of the markers, the engravings. These folks were probably Masons. The Masons were into Egyptology, pyramids and stuff."

On the ground beside it, some fallen headstones lay half buried.

"Limestone and sandstone were easy to carve," said Butch. "But the slabs aged poorly. They almost always broke apart."

Rose watched while Jackson brushed his hand over the freezing rock. The name was easy to read: *Ezekial Wainwright. 1853-1892.* But below it, the inscription was in smaller print.

"Stopping the wayside," said Jackson, "... I can't make out the rest."

In the distance, rolling hills were covered with naked trees. Rose knelt down, took off her gloves, and ran her fingers over the depressions. *"Stopping the wayside, the angels took him home."*

"Can we color! Can we color!" shouted the girls.

Under Rose's feet were broken shards of rock. But a few yards off, she spotted another headstone. This one was nearly intact.

Remember reader as you pass by. As you are now so once was I. As I am now so you shall be. Prepare for death and follow me.

"It's like poetry, ain't it?" said Doris.

"It's like pages in a book," said Jackson. "Even though the stories end the same, the difference is what happens in between."

The instructor agonized over her parting words. Outside, magnolia trees were blooming while tulips had come and gone. Some of her students already had their lives mapped out, but a handful always teetered on the cusp. A few clear-headed decisions and a glimpse into the possible often turned a life around.

"For your final paper, I'd like to discuss the work of Robert Frost. 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. ... I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.'"

Here the instructor paused, looked up and down the rows, and waited for the class to quiet. "Consciously, or subconsciously, we all select our paths. Which road will you choose to take?"

By June, the town cemetery was overgrown with weeds and grass, and both Doris and Rose tended it together. They laid fresh flowers at Melinda's feet. They swept the dust off the stone.

"I love this place," said Doris. When it was quiet, you could hear the river rippling. Flowers blossomed in the most unexpected places. Beneath a tree. Under a rock.

"I think my mother would like it here, too," said Rose. "She always liked maple and oak trees. And she wouldn't feel quite so alone."

Doris grinned. She was pleased with the girl's progress. But like her daughter's gravesite, Rose needed tending, too.

"Let's go talk to the guy in charge. The Peters may be large people," said Doris, "But I believe we can clear some space."

Gently, she took Rose's hand while her mind started racing. Roy was leaving for college in the fall, and there'd be a spare room. There was always the basement, but with new curtains and a fresh bedspread, that room could be mighty nice.

"I hear you two signed up for another class in the fall," said Doris.

Rose glanced up. The sun was breaking through the clouds. Everything sparkled. Their hair. Their eyes. "Pre-calculus," she answered. "We must both be crazy."

Once again Doris grinned. "I know I look like the brains in the family, but Butch beat me in math. He'll help. We'll all help."

The lists started piling in her head. *Opportunities like this one,* thought Doris, *don't fall in your lap every day.* There was furniture to move and fabrics to ponder. Menus to plan and food to buy. Somehow she'd get a hold of a textbook. She'd better start studying soon.

4th Runner-Up

Rising to the Surface

By Rachel Elliott Rigolino

It's warm for late October, Amy, and there's a moon, not quite full. The lake is still, no wind, and I can see the Big Dipper. It reminds me of the nights we used to sit out here on the dock and tell stories. Where should I begin tonight? With your mother's news? No, not yet. I will start with the day you were born because I like to go there and stay there, soaking up the wonder of the first minute I saw you, with a pink stocking cap on your head, lying across your mother's lap. I could tell she was scared. The itch was there, too, in the finger stroking back and forth across your cheek.

"Mom, I can't do this," she said, lifting her head. The too-brightness had returned to her eyes.

But I wasn't looking at her. All I could see was you. They say all babies look alike, but not you. Your eyes were dark, dark blue. Sometimes you would ask me, "Nana, how did my eyes go from blue to brown?" I would tell you about the Indian Maiden of the Lake who had visited one night and waved a cattail above your crib, turning your eyes into the golden brown everyone who has ever met you remembers.

"You're a mother now," I told her. "You *have* to do it." She said nothing, and I just kept gazing down at you. I was so angry, angry for you. How, in Lake Shelby, wintertime population 1,500, could a kid get so messed up? Well, your mother did. By the time she was 16, she had been in rehab twice. The only time Poppy and I saw her clean for more than a week was when she got pregnant. At least she gave you that.

My mind always slips past all the good parts of you to the phone call. Nothing else stays in focus anymore. I watch myself screaming until Poppy takes the phone out of my hand to speak to the sheriff. Then, I see him put his green flannel over me and walk me out to the car. He does not speak on the way to the hospital, but I can hear him groaning so deep inside that it isn't even human. This is the place I normally stop. And rewind.

But, now this is the part I haven't told you before. All the rest.

I am grateful that when I finally saw you, lying in the hospital bed, hooked up to the machines, you were beautiful. There was no mark. No blood. Nothing. Before they told us that your heart kept stopping, that you would not last even on the machines, they asked me if I would like to donate your organs. I hope you can forgive this now, but I said *No.* They weren't going to touch you. Nobody was going to touch you.

The man who hit you as you were riding your bike back from the beach was a weekender whose house was one of the ones you used to point out when we trolled the lake in Poppy's bass boat.

"Look at that one. I love log cabins. Can we build a log cabin one day, Nana?" As it turns out, Daniel Wicker is a doctor. When the *Shelby Weekly* found that out, there was a big black headline: "Drunk Pediatrician Arrested for Killing Child."

We finally tracked down your mother, two days later. She was in Brooklyn, sleeping on someone's couch. When she got off the bus, she ran into Poppy's arms, clutching at his shirt and sobbing. She looked, finally, over his shoulder at me. "Mom, I'm sorry." For the first time, Amy, I saw how much she looked like you.

Everyone from the school was at the funeral (I know you know this), everyone from the library, telling me to stay out as long as I needed to, everyone from the Thruway, telling Poppy that he was crazy to come back on Monday, that the road crew didn't need him anyway, but they knew working was the only way he could survive. And your mother was beautiful. Strong. She was the one who took me by the hand, "Mom, I'm going to take care of you and Pop. I'm going to get better. Promise."

But, I didn't feel anything, not even when Father Lutz spoke about Jesus and the little children. *I know all this,* I felt like screaming at him. *That's not the problem. I know where Amy is.* (Of course, I know where you are, how could I not know?) What I did not know was how I was going to get to you with the rock that had settled deep inside of me.

Your mother and Poppy didn't go to the court, but I did. When the officer brought Wicker in, he turned immediately, scanning the rows of folding chairs, quickly past my face to his wife, who was sitting behind his lawyer. He smiled. Smiled. I stared at the back of his head while the lawyers spoke. His hair is turning gray, and I wondered how old he had been when his son was born. Thirty-five? Forty? His wife had her hair in a blond ponytail, and she wore a black jacket with black slacks. Elegant and remorseful.

The prosecutor described you. He even had a copy of your fourth-grade picture that I had given him. The judge didn't look at it but asked whether Wicker had a criminal record or a history of drunk driving. No. No, he didn't. But what was that in the face of such a loss, the lawyer asked. Then, another lawyer read from a list of all the charities Dr. Wicker contributed to. He spoke of all the children with AIDS that Dr. Wicker had treated free of charge, all the money he had raised for the Albany Medical Center. "Responsible member of the community" was repeated seven times — I counted — and "devastated by her death" three times.

But your name was never spoken. Bail was set, and his wife cried into her hands with relief. I left, not waiting to talk to the prosecutor who half-heartedly asked me to come to his table. "The trial will be enough," Poppy said later. "We'll have our day in court." But I could tell by the slight waver of his voice that even he was not sure.

The first trial date was set for August and then moved to September and then moved again to November. After the second postponement, Poppy decided to go to Uncle Bruno's in Canada. Remember the farm? I have a picture of you with Uncle Bruno on the tractor. You're waving at me, and a long piece of hair is whipping across your mouth, opened wide with laughter. Poppy loves that

picture, and I think it was the reason he decided to go. “I’ll be back in a few weeks,” he said to me and your mother.

Amy, you won’t like this next part — but please listen. I have to tell it.

Your mother was focused on being in school and staying sober, so she didn’t ask me about the extra hours I spent at the library. She was trying to keep her promise, I could see that when she registered for classes at Adirondack Community College, but I didn’t trust her. I still don’t. Not yet.

Yesterday, I put Poppy’s shotgun in the trunk of my car before your mother was up. I wrapped it in a blanket first, taking care, for some reason, not to scratch it. Hunting was the only thing you ever hated Poppy for doing. In early November you started. “Poppy, we don’t need any venison. I love hamburger.” (And, then, when Poppy told you where hamburgers came from, you wouldn’t eat any meat until I convinced you that the cows went right to heaven and didn’t mind.) You never let Poppy hang a deer in the yard, and I would sometimes wonder whether you would outgrow your tenderness, as I had done when I moved up here.

As I drove south, I planned what I would do if Wicker wasn’t at home. I would have to wait. Get a hotel room, tell your mother a story, and wait. I didn’t think I’d have to wait, though. I knew he wasn’t working and that he wasn’t allowed to leave the state. The son was away at college. Cornell. His wife was a teacher at a local high school, so I was counting on the fact that she would keep school hours.

When I was within a mile or so of his house, I called. “May I speak to Francine Wicker?”

“No,” he said, “She’s at work. May I ask who’s calling?”

I hung up. Five minutes later, I pulled into his driveway. They live in a white colonial, not as big as I had imagined. My hands shook as I slung the backpack over my shoulder and picked up the blanket. I had not realized how clumsy this part would be. The blanket kept slipping, and I nearly dropped the gun on the porch. Finally, I decided the best thing to do would be to lean the shotgun up against the house where he couldn’t see it and ring the bell.

“Yes?” He opened the door without hesitation. “May I help you?” He grimaced slightly.

“Aren’t you ...?”

Before he could say anything else, I grabbed the gun, pushing him inside with the barrel against his stomach and backing him down the hallway. “No, no, no, please, no ...” he began pleading. I could feel the backpack sliding down around the crook of my elbow, but I was careful to keep the gun steady.

His face was distorted, ugly. Was this the way you looked, Amy? In my nightmares, this is what I see, your surprise, your confusion, your terror. Again and again, until I make myself throw up or I convince myself that it was over so quickly that you did not feel it for long. Or, mercifully, that you never turned your head.

We entered a dining room, and he backed into the table. We stopped. His hands dropped a bit. “Aren’t you ...?”

“Don’t say my name.” I leveled the barrel against his chest. “You may not say my name, Daniel Wicker, graduate of Maryland Park High School class of 1973, graduate of the University of

Maryland class of 1977, Albert Einstein School of Medicine class of 1982. Married to Jennifer Carroll on August 8th of 1982. Divorced in 1984. Married to Sarah Dulles in 1986. Son, Joshua Daniel, born on December 2, 1986, at Albany Medical Center. No, Daniel, you may not say *my* name!"

He was angry. "How did you ...?"

"Sit!" Recovering his fear, he slid onto a chair. "You mean, how could someone who lives in Lake Shelby — actually *lives* there year-round — how could a small-town rube know enough to do research on the internet?"

He looked up at me, searchingly. "I'm so, so sorry. I couldn't save her. I tried to save her."

I said nothing. I felt the rock steady me.

"I tried. I got out of the car and gave her CPR. I tried and tried. That little girl, I held her ..." His voice began to break.

"The little girl has a name. Amy Elizabeth. Do you know why? Amy was my mother's name and Elizabeth was my husband's mother's name." I slung your backpack onto the table. "Recognize the backpack, Daniel?" He shook his head. "You left it on the side of the road ... along with my granddaughter."

He recoiled. "Cerise was her favorite color, not purple, cerise." I unzipped it and took out the photo albums. I flipped back the cover of the first one. "I want you to learn even more about Amy before I kill you." He moaned.

"This is Amy in her crib. See how her eyes were dark blue? They later turned brown, I'm sure you didn't notice that. Here she is sitting in her playpen on the dock. She could swim by the time she was four. Her hair was curly back then and a bit red. People used to ask, 'Where did Amy get that red hair from?' But that went away too. There she is on her third birthday. Look at that smile. And the cake is all over her hands. She smashed her hands into that cake until there was nothing left of it." I saw a tear hit the plastic covering the photographs, but I was solid. Immovable. Strong.

I opened the next album. "Now, here's Amy on the first day of kindergarten with her mother. You know her mother is a meth addict — she left Amy with us to raise and would stop by in moments of sanity. Ironic, isn't it? My parents moved north to get out of the city, away from all the crime. Oh, well. Now look at Amy here with the ribbons. She was an artist and won prizes at school for her drawings. She wanted to illustrate picture books when she grew up. When she visited me at the library, even when she was too old to be reading them, she would sit in the little children's section and look at them. Her favorites were *Madeline*."

"Stop, stop!" He screamed so suddenly that I felt the tremor. I almost dropped the gun.

Then, "No more, please."

But his sobs enraged me. I jumped behind him and shoved the barrel into his back so hard that he fell over, his arms and torso flung out across the table, head to one side. "Had enough? No, not enough, I don't think so. The pain is bad, isn't it? And you know what, Daniel? It will never, ever go away."

He moaned again. I stood there pressing, pressing against his back, hoping, knowing it must hurt. We breathed. Nothing happened. Time passed.

"Go ahead," his voice was so small that I almost didn't hear him at first. "Go ahead," he repeated with more strength.

And, then, Amy, something happened that I didn't expect. I could feel the rock shift a bit inside of me. The rock that has been keeping me from rising to the surface to find you again. It moved. I felt it, and so I decided not to kill him. At least not that day.

I lowered the gun and started for the door, but he didn't move. He didn't seem to understand that I was leaving. "What more? What more?" His question followed me down the hallway and out the front door.

I came home and slept. Slept through dinner. Your mother tried to wake me up, but I said I wasn't feeling well, and slept until the next day, not dreaming, not seeing you, or anyone. There was only the sweet, sweet darkness. Around noon, she came in and sat on the edge of the bed, shaking me gently awake. "Mom, Mom, wake up." She was crying, but smiling too. "The prosecutor's office called. He's pleading guilty."

When I first came out on the dock tonight, I remembered a time when you were four and just learning to swim on your own. Poppy was standing in the water, coaxing you to jump from the dock, and I was sitting next to you. "C'mon, Amy, Poppy'll catch you." Finally, you took a deep breath and jumped, but somehow missed Poppy's arms. Before he could reach you, I leaned over, frantically searching in the dark water, until I felt one of your arms and pulled you out. My heart was beating hard, and I held you next to me, thinking you were as frightened as I was.

Instead of crying, you looked at me seriously with those golden eyes that reflected the sun. "Nana," you said, "I was coming up without you. Next time, let go."

But Amy, I don't think I can come up without you. If I stretch my hand out to the sky tonight and cover the North Star with my palm, do you see it? Does God see it? And if I ask, Amy, will you reach over? Are you strong enough to pull me out?

5th Runner-Up

Immigrant/Emigrant

By James Vescovi

I was the child of Italian immigrants. When I was 11, I realized that I wanted to be an emigrant: I wanted to emigrate from my parents' dark tenement to a place where they couldn't reach me. For that matter, I also wanted to leave behind my older brother, an apathetic rebel.

This revelation arrived in on May 30, 1944, when I returned from school, and my mother asked me to bring a potato torte to the Rakosis, who lived two floors below us.

Why couldn't my brother do it? Because he was playing basketball, or perhaps mooching broken cookies from Zambernadi, the baker; while I, being a girl, I had to come straight home to change my clothes. No costume change was required of boys.

Like our family, Barto and Zera Rakosi were immigrants. They came from Hungary and, while I am making no direct connection, were the ugliest people in New York. In her 50s, Zera had frizzy black hair and a bloodless face. Her teeth looked as if they'd been glazed with caramel. Her nose constantly ran, even during summer, and she wiped it with a rag that looked sodden with snot.

Barto, a decade older, delivered coal for stoves and boilers. The hard labor plus 30 years of inhaling dust forced him to retire early. He spent his days trudging from our block on East 62nd Street to a Hungarian grocerette on 81st, which carried his brand of Turkish cigarettes, called Fatima. The package featured a beautiful woman behind a white veil. At times, I wondered what she thought of Barto, whose cheeks were a mesh of scars from, he told everyone, hand-to-hand combat in World War I with Italians (whom he boasted to have killed mercilessly). My brother, Maurìzio, claimed Barto went into the coal business because by midday black dust covered his "scarecrow face." Poor Barto; his eyes were frozen in a look of bitterness, though what could anyone expect from a man who had to pause every other block to catch his breath?

My brother was three years older than I. An especially chubby toddler, he walked like a seagull, so my father nicknamed him the Italian equivalent, *Gabbiano*. Too long for me to pronounce, I shortened it to Gabbo. The name stuck beyond early childhood because Gabbo continued to gambol like a seabird, was shaped like one, and was known to scavenge uneaten food off restaurant tables.

My English teacher, Mrs. Frye, said I'd one day become a famous and brave journalist like Martha Gellhorn, who reported from war zones. I hoped it was true but, at 11, I was deathly afraid of the Rakosis. They lurked in my head because I had to pass their door whenever I entered or left our building. Sometimes Zera opened her door to see who was passing. Her bony fingers — the color of cinnamon — looked as if they'd sprouted from her sycamore cane.

The Rakosis had no children, thank God, because what kid could grow up in a home where the shades were always drawn and there was no radio? Plus, they lit their apartment with candles, saying it saved on electricity. Their home felt Old World, but not the charming kind. Rather, it was the Old World of high infant mortality and suspicion of outsiders.

My parents — in particular, my mother, Cesira — were Old World, too. For example, they embarrassed me because they were not embarrassed about having a bathtub in the kitchen. I was so chagrined I didn't like inviting friends over. Still, my parents were not as ancient as the Rakosis.

"Mama, I can't take the torte right now," I said. "I told Bruna and Angela I was coming right back out to play."

"*Basta senza senso,*" she said. "It'll take you four minutes to deliver this torte." She shoved it at me.

"I don't want to go."

"Of course you don't. You're afraid. But in their hearts, the Rakosis are kind people."

"Then why does Barto always brag about all the Italians he killed?"

"It was war, Francesca! In war, everyone kills! If you don't kill your enemies, your friends kill you! Now take the torte."

"I have too much homework."

"*Basta senza senso.*"

This stupid term, which escaped her mouth several times a day, means "enough sense without sense" — in other words, "stop the nonsense."

Growing up in a desperately poor sharecropping family, my mother was tough and impatient. Her name meant "Caesar," and she lived up to it, lording it over neighborhood merchants with her insistence on discounts and deals. My father, Mario, who'd had a more prosperous, gentle childhood, was a sous-chef at a fancy East Side women's club. He had a soft face and red hair, which he combed over his bald head. He never would've forced me to take a torte down to the Rakosis; then again, he never cooked at home. It was woman's work.

"Please Mama ..."

"Deo te maladisa!" my exasperated mother said. "I ask you to do so little. By the time I was your age, I'd worked so much I'd forgotten how to play. Now *vai!* If I bring it, Zera will insist I stay for coffee, and I'm too busy."

As I descended the stairs, I thought of dropping the torte, but knew it would earn me a slap across the face. There wasn't a parent in the neighborhood that didn't slap their children, with the exception of my father. Nevertheless, every evening before sitting down to supper, he removed his belt and looped it over his chair — which to Gabbo and me seemed as natural as tucking a napkin into a collar. He rarely used it, while my mother's hand was like a holstered gun, and she a sheriff in the Wild West.

I knocked softly on the Rakosis' door. Getting no answer, I laid the torte on the doormat, but not fast enough. Zera appeared, pulled me up, and yanked me inside.

"I've brought you a potato torte, Zera. And my mother wants me back immediately."

"Come in, sweet Franciska," she said, in her thick accent.

I hated when she called me by the Hungarian version of my name. When I complained to Gabbo, he said, "Of course she calls you that. The Rakosis are your godparents."

Seven at the time, I was so petrified I could taste burning sulfur in my mouth. When I finally got the courage to ask my mother, she took me on her lap and said, "*Cara,* Francesca, don't you remember? The Pasquinellis are your godparents." While I exhaled the last of the sulfur, she added, "But, if you don't stop arguing with me all the time, we'll replace them with the Rakosis." She turned her face to hide a grin. No one ever knew what her smiles signified. She was restless and pessimistic. She was never satisfied with America, unlike my father, who thought he'd immigrated to heaven.

Zera led me to the kitchen, where a meat-and-bone-filled pot bubbled with oily broth. The air smelled of frying peppers, chest salve, and cigarette smoke. We then passed through a gloomy sitting room, cutting a path through stacks of Hungarian newspapers. Finally, we entered a bedroom, where a phonograph was playing scratchy military marches. Barto lay in bed, eyes closed and covers pulled to his waist. His hands were clasped together atop a crimson blanket.

"Zera, I have to go home right away ..."

Medals were pinned to Barto's crisp white shirt. A sword with an ornate hilt hung from a bedpost. Beside a sputtering candle on his night table was a pack of Fatimas, with several pulled out at staggered lengths.

"Franciska, Barto would be so disappointed if you don't stay for a moment."

Something seemed different about him: His scars were gone. I blinked my eyes: He was wearing make-up! He looked more peaceful than I'd ever seen him.

"Touch his hand," said Zera.

I didn't want to wake him, so I patted it gently.

From a stained apron pocket, Zera produced a small white bag and pressed it into my hand.

"Marzipan ... from Barto," she whispered. "Doesn't he look beautiful?"

He wasn't beautiful, but certainly looked better without his jagged scars.

But why was he asleep at 4 p.m.? And why was his face cleanly shaven, when he usually shaved on Saturday nights for Sunday mass?

Behind the bedroom shades, cars roared by on 62nd Street; it was like hearing traffic from a distant, modern city.

"Touch his hand again," said Zera.

I did as she asked and snatched my hand back. There was something I hadn't noticed before: The man's skin was cold, but not like chilly hands on a winter day. Rather, it was the cold of a mailbox handle.

I studied Barto's chest: The medals weren't going up and down. The coal dust had won; he was dead.

My scalp tingled; my mouth dried up like water on a burning log. I'd seen dead people before at Manzotti's Funeral Home, but the atmosphere was different. After paying respects to the

deceased, visitors chatted, laughed, and smoked under baroque wall sconces. Children played tag while Mr. Manzotti bustled in with new wreaths.

But for Barto's wake? Where were the silk pillows, prayer cards, and rosaries? He was dead in his bed and within reach of his cigarettes.

"Franciska, say a nice prayer for your uncle Barto," whispered Zera.

I'd never called him "uncle" in my life! Though the warm torte was long gone from my hands, drops of pee trickled into my underwear. How could I think up a prayer? Was I going to have to kiss him after the amen?!

"Francesca, *mangiamo!"*

"Gabbo!" I yelled. "I'm in here! In the bedroom!"

We heard his heavy footsteps. He appeared at the foot of Barto's bed.

"Is he dead, Zera?"

She nodded and cried into her handkerchief.

"I'll tell Mama and Papa," Gabbo said.

He crossed himself and led me out.

"Did Mama send you down to get me?" I whispered. I was still shaking.

"No. As I was coming in, I saw the Rakosis' door was open. I smelled *torta*. I knew it was Mama's, so I followed the smell, hoping Zera might give me a slice."

Saved by my brother's insatiable hunger — a fluke rescue. When I was younger, he'd been my protector, making sure I got home safely from school, or talking my mother out of her wrath.

"Gabbo, why isn't Barto at Manzotti's?" I asked as we mounted the narrow stairs.

"Hungarians do it in their apartments. But it's against the law. Everyone has to use an undertaker."

"Why?"

"Because they know how to drain out the person's blood. If you don't, the stiff can come back to life."

"You're lying!"

"I am not lying, Francesca. Mr. Manzotti's son, Guido, told me there are cases where the heart starts beating. If the blood hasn't been drained, the person can wake up and find himself in a dark casket. Why do you think the Romans poked Jesus in the side? To drain him, of course. Otherwise, he could've come back with his angels and turned the empire to dust."

It took years and tens and tens of such claims — which he told with such authority — until I figured out how little Gabbo really knew.

After washing our hands, I followed him into the kitchen, where my parents sat with solemn faces. Tears filled my mother's eyes.

"So, you heard about Barto?" Gabbo asked, plopping down in a chair.

"What about him?" my father asked.

"*Morto.*"

"Not only that, but he's lying in his bedroom dead!" I added. "And he has his cigarettes."

"*Morto?!* When?! I saw him a week ago!" my mother said. "Why didn't Zera tell me?"

"She's been pretty busy getting him gussied up. He looks better than I've seen him in years," replied Gabbo, reaching for a blue bowl filled with steaming gnocchi. My father banged the side of it with a wooden spoon, and my brother reversed course.

My mother said, "Do you see, Mario, just like my grandmother used to say: 'When bad things happen, they come in pairs.'"

"Oh, no, did someone else die?" Gabbo asked. "No one important, I hope. We went to a funeral two weeks ago."

My mother inquired, "How do you know someone died?"

He motioned towards the Italian postage on an envelope beside her plate. "When they write from over there, it's because they need more money or someone died."

My mother sighed. "*É morto zio Leonardo,*" she said.

"Never heard of him," Gabbo said.

"Uncle Leonardo!" she hollered, disgusted that he could never keep the names of relatives straight. "My mother's brother!"

"Did we ever meet him?" asked Gabbo.

My mother motioned to my father to serve the gnocchi. While pouring everyone but me a glass of red wine, she replied bitterly, "How could you? He never got further than 50 miles from where he was born, poor man."

"How did he die, Mama? Was it his heart?" I asked.

Bad hearts ran in my mother's family.

"No, he was killed."

"By whom? The police?" asked Gabbo, sprinkling Parmesan cheese over his gnocchi.

"*Deo te maladisa!"* my mother hollered. "Police? You think I'm from a family of criminals?!"

Deo te maladisa was my mother's curse of choice and wholly her invention. No one in the neighborhood used it. Vaguely, it means "May Fate damn you to hell," though it was hard to tell whether she meant it figuratively or literally.

Leonardo, she went on to explain, was the oldest son on a farm of seven siblings. After his father died, by rights, he now became head of the family, making decisions about planting, fertilizing, and herding. But Leonardo had never been quite right in the head. An erratic worker, he was industrious and ingenious one day, unmotivated and inebriated the next.

His younger brothers secretly approached the *padrone* who owned the land. They asked that he give them the annual land contract to sign, not Leonardo. He agreed; he wanted no fool tilling his soil; he took half of every family's harvest.

Out of respect, the brothers invited Leonardo to live with them — with no power over their affairs, but with a roof over his head. Cursing them as traitors, he packed up and disappeared over the mountains.

"*Papa, più gnocchi, per favore,*" chirped Gabbo, holding out his bowl.

"Look at this," my mother muttered. "In tragedy, all he can think of are gnocchi."

"I'm growing a lot these days, Mama."

"If you grow much more, you'll bring the building down," she said.

She continued her tale: Leonardo wandered the countryside. He hired himself out for farm work. During colder months, he lived in Parma and did factory work. Occasionally, he returned home, insisting he'd been wronged. When his brothers refused to change the contract, he insulted them and left.

Leonardo met his end in January 1944. He'd wandered into a village newly liberated by Italian partisans, a pro-communist militia that fought the Fascist government. Always short of men, the leader had begun impressing teenagers into his ragtag army, and Leonardo intervened.

"Damn fools! Why drag young men into a war that is practically over?!" he asked.

"Because after we run out the Germans, we'll run out the Catholics and capitalists!" replied the leader.

"You've no right to take away a man's freedom! You're no better than the Fascist thugs!"

The partisans locked him up.

The next day, an explosion occurred outside of town. A squad of partisans had found a cache of German weapons; in their excitement, they failed to see it was booby-trapped. Five men were killed.

In blind revenge, the partisans marched Leonardo and another man accused of aiding the Germans into the main square. They were lined up against the wall of a destroyed hospital.

While the supposed traitor pleaded on his knees for mercy, Leonardo continued to dress down the partisans and, in a final gesture of contempt, kicked over a pot of red roses, a revered communist symbol. He was shot on the spot, without the decency of a blindfold.

"*Poveretto,* Leonardo," my mother lamented, smoothing wrinkles on the white linen tablecloth.

She cleared her throat and said, "*Allora*," which means, "Well, then" or "Now, then." If you're an Italian child, you know something unpleasant is coming. She pointed to our RCA radio on a shelf above the icebox.

"That will stay off for two months, in mourning," she stated.

"*Due mesi?!"* cried Gabbo. "Two months! God have mercy on us!"

"Don't bother asking for God's mercy. If he grants it around here, it'll be with my permission," she said.

"Mama, please, why should children suffer for the death of a relative miles and miles away?!" I asked.

"Finish your gnocchi, Francesca!"

"It's absurd," I said.

"Eat your gnocchi or soon they'll be praying for you in Italy!"

Gabbo slumped in his chair, but he was tapping his foot, which meant he was amassing ideas. My mother dug into her cold gnocchi and rapidly chewed.

"Mama, this custom is for the old country, but not here," he said. "Suffering is not for Americans like us."

"Bah! A little suffering never hurt anybody," she said.

To hear Gabbo praise America was odd. He loved it as a land of plenty, but he hardly embraced American ambition and hard work. He'd been held back once in grammar school, and, to my father's dismay, his current grades were a disaster.

"*Bevi, tutti.* Drink up, everyone," said my father, pouring more wine, which he hoped would divert the brewing storm. He even gave me a splash in my water glass.

"Have you children no respect for your uncle?" asked my mother.

"I never met him. Yet I have mountains of respect for the man," Gabbo replied.

"Then show it."

I asked, "How would our relatives ever know if you didn't take away our radio programs?"

"Stop talking foolishness!"

"Are you going to write and tell them about our great sacrifice?" I mumbled, but she heard me.

"Eat! You're as thin as a rail. The neighbors think I starve you."

"Mama, what are you giving up for this great man?" asked my brother.

"A mother bears her cross every day," she replied.

Gabbo sighed. "Mama, with all due respect, maybe these *campagnoli* don't know what a radio is."

Campagnoli was Italian for "yokels."

"Do you want this?" she asked, raising her hand to strike.

My brother shook his head. He sighed and downed his wine.

"Gabbo, finish these," said my father, pushing the remaining gnocchi towards my brother who — for first time ever — waved them away.

"*Grazie*, no, Papa."

"How about some peaches I took from the club?" continued my father. "They're the sweetest you've ever ..."

"Papa, you're open-minded," Gabbo interrupted. "Please explain to Mama why this makes no sense."

My father took a breath and exhaled through his nose. "Cesira, why follow the old customs? What good does it do?"

"When Papa's aunt died three years ago," I said, "*he* didn't take away any radio from us ..."

"She was a nun in a convent," my mother interjected. "The nuns did more than enough suffering for her there. Besides, that was your father's business."

"Mama, please. Boris Karloff — I can't miss Boris Karloff!" said Gabbo. He threw his heavy arm around my slender shoulders and added, "And poor Francesca will miss Charlie McCarthy."

My mother shrugged. She didn't know Charlie McCarthy from Joe DiMaggio.

"Well, then, I guess we remain a family of *cafoni*," said my brother. The degrading word means "boors" or "barbarians."

"*Basta, finito!"* my father shouted. "Enough! Gabbo, Francesca — you will do as your mother asks!"

"Oh, no, Mario, too late!" cried my mother. "Use the belt!"

She whipped it off his chair and tossed it on the table in front of him. He looked at it as if it were a poisonous snake.

"Mario, did you hear what he said? He called us *cafoni*. *Usalo!* Use it!"

"Cesira, the argument is over."

"All right, if you are afraid, I am not," she cried, jumping up. She grabbed the belt. Gabbo ducked under the table, leaving me the target of wrath. She reared back. I closed my eyes.

Whack!

"*Deo te maladisa!"* cried my mother, who'd swung so hard that the leather missed me and circled around to her buttocks.

My father, his face steaming red, grabbed the belt from her.

"*Siediti!"* he hollered. "Sit down! Everyone!"

Gabbo reared his eyes above the table, then calmly took his seat.

"It's settled," said my father. "This is your mother's family. You both will do as she wishes."

My mother finished her gnocchi and wiped her mouth, not so much for etiquette as to hide a smirk, though my brother caught it.

He tilted his chair on its back legs. "And what, Mama, did you give up as a child when someone died?" he asked. "You had no radio."

She reached for a peach. She cut off slices and ate them off the tip of her knife.

"*Delizioso,* Mario," she said.

"All right. My final offer," Gabbo announced. "Let's meet halfway. No radio for one month instead of two."

She ignored him.

"All right. Two months, but baseball on Saturdays and Sundays."

She leaned towards him and asked, "Now you want to bargain for the memory of my uncle, like he was a goat at the market?!"

My brother knew he was defeated, so he tossed a bomb.

"Mama, *pregherò per i bastardi della famiglia*," he said. "I'll even pray for the family's bastard children."

She lunged at him with her open palm, but he jerked his head back just in time. Screaming voices bounced off the walls.

I got up and scooted for the door. My father ordered me to come back, but his voice had no will behind it.

Down the stairs I went, past the Rakosis who, for some reason, scared me less. I shoved open the front door and stepped outside. Up and down the street people sat on their stoops, enjoying a warm breeze before returning to their airless apartments. I opened the bag Zera had given me. It contained apples, lemons, and pears made of marzipan, except they looked like the sooty samples you see displayed in candy store windows. I walked down to the pharmacy, bought a chocolate ice cream cone, and returned to my stoop.

Gabbo appeared. He sat behind me on the steps, placing his meaty hands on my shoulders. He surveyed the block: the cooks, stonemasons, charwomen, girls with dirty knees playing jacks, and Zeno, the local drunk who slept under the loading dock at Bloomingdale's. He was sifting through a garbage can.

"The great unwashed masses," Gabbo said. "But just think — someday you'll live with the rich people on Sutton Place."

"I don't know anymore."

"Why? What's happened?"

"I can't explain it. I don't want it as badly as before."

"Well, have it your way," said Gabbo. "Now, do you want to know what happened after you flew the coop?"

I didn't respond.

"Mama said now it's not two months without radio. It's three."

I turned around. "For me, too?"

"Alas, yes," he said, with a self-satisfied smirk.

Two cars pulled up to the curb. People in mourning clothes climbed out. They were speaking Hungarian. My brother and I moved closer to the railing to let them pass up the steps.

"Gimme a lick of that cone, Francesca," Gabbo said.

I shook my head.

"*Dai, Piccolina.* C'mon, Little Girl."

"Here," I said, handing him the marzipan.

He poked his nose in the bag. "*Qui schifo.* Disgusting!"

Still, he pulled out a stale piece and tossed it in his mouth.

"Not too bad," he said, crunching away.

"Good," I said. "I knew you'd eat them."

Honorable Mention

Jean and Franklin

By Wendy Sheehan

Jean Castain, a writer of romance novels, watched her neighbor as he cracked the lobster claw, picked out the meat, dipped it in melted butter, and shoved it into his mouth. This time Franklin wiped his spiky mustache with a wet napkin, something he often failed to do. Then he added the claw to the bowl of empty shells and let out a noisy, fetid belch.

Over the years, Jean had been tempted to put Franklin Willoughby into one of her books because she was known for her colorful characters, but he had become a crude old man and she was glad she'd left him out.

However, she wouldn't have to put up with him much longer. Two weeks, and she would leave Birch Island, return to Charleston, and get ready to go to England with Warren, the new and unexpected man in her life.

Jean pushed her own uneaten claw and a few pieces of lettuce to the side of her plate. She'd lost her appetite.

She'd come to dread these Sunday night suppers, but they were a tradition. Ending them would create all sorts of problems. Jean and Franklin each had inherited half of tiny Birch Island off the coast of Maine and had been coming every summer for years. They were now alone, and Franklin had the only reliable boat, Jean's lifeline to groceries and mail. Her own boat was in bad shape. Its upkeep had become too much trouble, and now that she was older, she was uneasy making her way across the sound with its strong current. Lethal rocks lay submerged when the tide was high.

"Anytime you need a lift to the mainland, let me know," Franklin had told her when she arrived in June. "Don't bother fixing up that old wreck of yours. You won't need it."

There had been a time when Franklin was good company, but lately he'd become somewhat of a bully. Alcohol had entered his life again. He often arrived at Jean's Sunday night table mildly drunk. Now she wondered if she could rely on him to get her off the island, if she needed to go.

"Why, you've barely touched your meal, Jean," he said. "And here I am working my way through my second claw."

"Well, you've always had a big appetite," she answered. "Bigger than mine, at any rate. I'm saving the rest for tomorrow's lunch."

"No need for that, my dear. I'll check my trap first thing in the morning, and if one of our little creatures is lurking inside, I'll haul him in and give him to you. I'll even cook him first. I know how you hate to plunge them into the boiling pot. Now, is there any wine left?"

"Don't you remember? You finished it off before we ate."

"Oh, dear, did I?" He looked around her small kitchen, hoping to spot another bottle.

Franklin had once been a dark, handsome devil. Now, with a big, sagging belly and heavily pouched features, he showed the marks of a boozy life. He had been elected to the United States Senate 20 years before, but had served only one term. Scandal involving another senator's daughter had ended his political career.

Jean stood up and began to clear the table, and Franklin pushed back his chair and patted his stomach. "Wonderful meal. What's for dessert?"

"Ice cream. I was going to bake a cake, but it was too hot to put the oven on. Let's go into the living room where it's cooler."

Franklin nodded his big head. "Stinking weather, even on the island. Must be brutal on the mainland. Why don't you let me buy you a fan when I'm over there tomorrow? I've been after you for years." He sat on a chair in front of a window and glanced at the pile of papers stacked on Jean's desk. "Or, are you afraid your manuscript will get blown out the window and be lost to your adoring public?"

Jean laughed. "It'll cool off soon. It always does."

She would have no use for a fan because she'd be leaving the island soon and would not return. In April, she'd sold her half of the island to the Maine Land Trust who would take possession in September and keep it forever wild. Franklin would be furious when he learned about the sale. He'd always hoped to buy the Castain land so that the entire island would belong to the Willoughbys.

She dreaded telling him and kept putting it off.

"Has it occurred to you, Franklin, that you may be getting too old to haul in your trap?" she asked as she handed him a bowl of ice cream.

"Nonsense! I'm still the man I always was, and if you let me take you to bed, I'll prove it."

This was the Franklin Willoughby Jean detested. She had learned to brush off his comments with light-hearted remarks. An offended Franklin was a dangerous man. "I admire your persistence. You're still a rascal, with 50 years of trying to seduce me."

"And I'll keep trying until the day I die."

He finished his ice cream, and wandered over to her desk. "When will your next book come out?"

"My publisher's aiming for Christmas. I'm finishing it now."

"And is it as trashy as the others?"

"It is."

Franklin went to the window and looked out at the sea pounding against the rocks. A bald eagle soared over the island, heading for its nest high in a tree.

"What amazes me, Jean, is that you write so well about the stuff that goes on between the sheets when you live such a virginal life. Where in the world do you get your inspiration?"

Jean was headed for the kitchen to rinse off the dishes. She tensed. "I get it from you, Franklin. For years now, I've been peeking in your window when you have your women guests here. And how do you know my life is virginal when I'm in Charleston? Things may be different there."

Since last winter, things *were* different in Charleston. She had met Warren, a retired attorney, had fallen in love. By the time spring came, her future lay in a new direction. Birch Island had lost its appeal and no longer lured her back.

"Unlikely. I suspect you steal your scenes from other books."

She dried her hands on a dish towel and said, "Enough about my books. Let's walk to Sitting Rock and cool off."

They made their way down a path slippery with pine needles and soon came to a boulder flattened at the top where Jean had put two folding chairs when she'd arrived in June. Years before, as children, they'd named it Sitting Rock.

"A bit cooler here," Franklin said, as he lowered his bulk onto one of the chairs. He stretched his legs and said, "You know, Jean, sometimes I wonder why I return to this desolate island every summer, but whenever I sit here I know the reason. There's no one here to bother me. I'm the king of my kingdom, lord of my realm."

"Don't forget the Castain half," Jean reminded him, smiling. "For me, it's the solitude. This is where I write. My winters are for traveling, researching my books, doing some volunteer work, but I rarely write."

A plotting bird flew by and deposited its poop close to Franklin's feet. "Bastards!" He kicked the splatter off the rock. "There's nothing I hate more than gulls. I should shoot them all."

A wave crashed in, spraying the rock with its icy foam, and Jean moved her chair a few inches back. "Don't get too close to the edge, Franklin. It's a sheer drop."

"We've been on this rock hundreds of times and haven't fallen off yet. Now, did I tell you Junior is coming over next week? Actually, he's coming over to see you, Jean. He wants to talk to you about buying you out."

Jean laughed. "Not again! I've told you both, I'm not interested. Tell him not to bother to make the trip over here if that's why he's coming."

She wondered if this might be a good time to tell him she'd already sold it, but he might get so worked up he'd push her off the rock and into the sea.

"Now, Jean, hear me out. Neither of us is getting any younger, and we must plan for the future of our island. It must stay in our families. You have no children. Who's going to get your half once you pass on? Junior will pay you top dollar, you can retire in comfort, and not worry about coming up with a new plot every year or so to crank out another romance novel."

"Franklin, I'm not worried about plots. Maybe I'll switch to travel writing."

That had been Warren's idea, and she thought it made sense. Lately, it had become a struggle to come up with new plots.

"If you don't stop talking about this, I'm going home."

Junior Willoughby would be the last person to get her land. He'd bring over deer and pheasant and turn the island into a hunting camp for his pals. Now, it would soon be safely protected by the Maine Land Trust.

She stood up and said, "Come on, let's go look for whales." She skipped over to the next rock that gave her a wider view of the sea. "Look, we have a visitor."

Fifty yards off shore, a man wearing a black wet suit had tied himself to a boat and was diving under a rock ledge thrusting itself out of the seabed.

"I've seen him before," Franklin said. "He's harvesting kelp. He can cut all he wants over there, but he'd better stay away from Birch."

They watched him resurface with a knife in one hand and long strands of brown kelp in the other. He tossed the kelp into the boat and dove under the ledge again.

"That's a hell of a way to make a living, but there's a big market for seaweed these days. The stuff's supposed to be good for you," Franklin said. "It's the latest hippie food."

"Yes, I've seen it in the markets. Shall we have some for next Sunday night's supper, Franklin?"

"No, thanks. A lobster and your desserts are all I need."

As the day ended, the kelp harvester went under the ledge a few more times, then climbed into his boat, removed his wet suit, and left. He headed west, and the small boat soon became a black dot on the navy sea.

Early evening brought a crimson sunset streaked with shades of tangerine.

"Just look at the colors in the sky, Jean. I'm thinking of taking up painting," Franklin said. "I may buy some water colors and an easel tomorrow."

"Well, that's an idea. It's good to have a hobby."

"Are you sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Yes, I need to work on my manuscript. I'll give you my shopping list and mail in the morning. And I'll put a small amount of trash and a few recyclables into your boat before you leave."

In the morning, Jean was busy working on her manuscript when she heard the rumble of Franklin's outboard motor as he left for the mainland. Yesterday's heat and humidity lingered. She noticed storm clouds gathering, and she hoped for a deluge that would clear the air and bring back the dry breezes she usually found in Maine.

She and Warren planned to travel summers. They had already mapped out distant places that were cool in July and August.

It was too hot to work, so she shut down her computer and walked over to Sitting Rock and unfolded one of the chairs. The sea was a thrashing, angry mountain of water, but that hadn't kept the kelp harvester away. He was back at the ledge with his knife, tightly tethered to his boat.

Franklin, careless as usual, had left the other chair too close to the edge. Jean leaned over to pull it back, but suddenly tripped on one of the legs, lost her footing, and went over the edge and plunged into the sea. The icy salt water sent shock waves right through her body.

She sank beneath the surface. Turbulence churned her back and tossed her against the rocks.

She was struck with terror. *This is how I'll die,* she realized, as the water surged over her head. *I've always wondered. Please God, make it quick.*

Then the instinct for survival kicked in. She wouldn't sink again! Fighting her terror, Jean twisted around, searching for something to grab so she could pull herself out of the water and onto a rock.

A voice cut through the thunder of the surf. "Hang on, lady!"

She looked over the trough of the waves and saw the kelp harvester plow his sturdy little boat toward her. He tossed a bright orange life preserver ring into the sea, and as soon as she clamped her arms around it, he pulled her next to his boat and lifted her in.

Trembling violently, Jean fell onto the deck and burst into tears. He threw a blanket around her and said, "Shock! Does the island have a dock? I need to get you home."

"Yes, over there," she mumbled, spitting water and waving her hand toward Franklin's house.

He tore off his wet suit, turned the boat, and headed east.

"Watch out for rocks," Jean warned.

He was a young man, tall and bearded, and it looked like he'd had a successful morning gathering kelp. Four-foot strands of the slimy seaweed coiled in a basket like dead snakes that had been flattened by an ordeal under the sea. The deck, wet and slippery and smelling of fish and bait, was more precious to her than a floor lined with gold.

The noise of the engine drowned out any conversation. Soon the dock came into view and he gently brought his boat along its side, cut the engine, and tied a rope to one of the pilings.

"I'll make sure you get home okay," he said.

Clutching the blanket that smelled of engine oil, Jean nodded. She led him along the path, and when she entered her cottage, she said, "Maybe you can make us some tea. I need some warm clothes."

Franklin would have scolded her for letting a stranger into her kitchen while she stripped naked, but this man was no stranger. He had saved her life.

A few minutes later, she went into the kitchen, drying her hair with a towel, and she saw he had the kettle on. "I can't thank you enough," she said. "I'm Jean Castain, by the way. I've been on that rock since I was a child and never came even close to falling off. But this time I tripped. If you hadn't been out there and spotted me ..."

"I'm just glad I happened to be there. I'm Brian LaRue. My wife, Leah, will be sorry she didn't come with me today when she hears about this. She's a great fan of yours and has wanted to meet you for years. She has all your books."

"How nice of you to say so. You must bring her out here sometime."

The kettle whistled, and Brian poured the boiling water into two cups and added tea bags. "I've always wondered about this island. It seems so isolated, even though it's close to the mainland."

"It *is* isolated," Jean told him. "Franklin Willoughby and I are the only ones here, and only in the summer. But he's back and forth every few days doing our errands. In fact, he's over there today." She shuddered. "I can't imagine what he would have thought if he came back later and found me gone, or even came across my body floating against the rocks."

"He has a boat, but you don't?"

"Well, I do have one, but I don't use it. Franklin even drained the gas. I don't need it, you see."

The memory of her fall kept crowding out other thoughts, and she forced herself to focus on the safety of her kitchen. "It can be difficult to live here. A lot of people couldn't stand the isolation, but I need it in order to write."

"Like kelp," Brian answered. "It needs a harsh environment, very cold water close to the surface under rock ledges. But there it thrives."

He took his cup to the sink and rinsed it out. "I'd better be getting back."

"Well, thank you again. Please come back anytime, and bring your wife. But come soon, because I'll be leaving any time now."

She felt the sudden urge to tie things up and leave because the island had become a place of danger. On the mainland, the sea couldn't swallow her up. Brian could take her over. She wouldn't need Franklin.

"In fact, let's make a date right now. Will tomorrow work? I realize this is last minute."

"Well, that sounds perfect. My in-laws are coming for a visit tonight, and they'd love to have the kids to themselves for a while."

"That's settled, then. I'll expect you for an early lunch, then I'll give you a tour. And you're welcome to cut kelp on the west side of the island, which is the part I own. There are lots of rocky ledges over here."

After Brian left, Jean had a hot shower and changed her clothes. She was desperate to scrub off any trace of her plunge into the sea. Then she called Warren.

"You're not safe over there, Jean," Warren said after she told him about her fall. "How soon before you finish your manuscript?

"A day or two."

"Good. Then pack up and have your neighbor take you off the island. I'll check into flights to Charleston. When will you leave?"

"I'll be ready tomorrow. But I won't have Franklin take me. I'll ask the kelp harvester, instead."

Franklin arrived in the late afternoon with a bag of groceries and her mail. There was beer on his breath and a stumble in his step. He handed her the receipts and said, "You look a little worse for wear, Jean. Are you coming down with a summer cold?"

"I've had the worst experience while you were away. It was just terrible."

"Oh? What happened?"

"I know you'll find this hard to believe, but I fell off Sitting Rock and went right into the sea. I honestly thought I was drowning."

"Good God!"

"The kelp harvester was close by, and he pulled me into his boat. Franklin, you can't imagine what I went through. It really was a life-changing event."

He stared at her. "How the hell could you fall off the rock? You know the danger."

She turned on him. "And *you* know the danger of leaving your chair too close to the edge. I went over to move it back and I tripped over one of the legs."

Franklin began to pace. "Well, I'm sorry, Jean. I guess we both screwed up. You're okay now? Why don't you come over for a drink? That will calm your nerves. Looks to me like they're all shot."

"No, thank you. I'm fine. I'd like to be alone. Let me pay you so you can be on your way."

She wanted him gone.

He took the crumpled bills and said, "Something to get your mind off your ordeal, Jean. While I was on the mainland today I got in touch with a high-end landscaper. I haven't told you, but I had him over here in April before you came. I'd like to put in a small golf course, and he looked over the island and liked that flat area near the stand of birch, by the brook, because we'd need the water for irrigation. We'd both have to give up part of our properties, and I thought we should split the cost."

Jean stared at him. The last improvement to their island had been when her father installed a tennis court in 1950. Franklin could do what he wanted with the Willoughby land, but now the Castain land was off-limits.

"I want you to leave, Franklin, right now. I'm quite exhausted."

"This means a lot to me, Jean, and to Junior. We're counting on you to do your part."

She wanted to say, "And what if I don't? You'll become ugly and belligerent, won't you?"

Jean fell asleep after a light supper, but she was awake at midnight, her mind clear and with a plan. She made coffee and logged on to her manuscript. By 3 a.m., she'd finished her book and sent it off to her editor. Her resources and references were all on flash drives. There was nothing of her work to leave behind.

Then Jean turned her attention to her closet. The few clothes she wore on the island weren't worth keeping. She shoved a pair of jeans, a sweater, and a light jacket into her backpack. Before September, she and Warren would come back and clean out the cottage completely.

The sky brightened, bringing a day clear and sunny. The heat and humidity had drifted out to sea. It was a perfect morning to pick blueberries and make some muffins for Brian and his wife.

Jean walked through the woods on a path dappled with sunlight. The air was filled with the cries of the gulls, the rustle of chipmunks, and the distant splash of the surf. Nothing would take her back to Sitting Rock, but she would miss this place of pine and spruce and of the sea. She thought back to the many summers she had sailed its waters, pried mussels off its rocks, explored its hidden places. By August, the water had always warmed enough for them to swim. She had spent long hours on the tiny beach they'd fashioned at an opening between the rocks. Her father and Franklin's uncle had arranged for boatloads of sand to be brought over from the mainland.

And every summer she had produced a new book.

Jean picked a quart of berries and began to make her way home. She took the trail that ran along the shore, and there was Franklin, out on his boat, struggling with a trap. He had become an old man with a bent back. He looked up when he heard the sound of another boat approaching: Brian

and Leah, earlier than she had expected. She must get back and get the muffins in the oven. But first she would meet them at the dock. Franklin would surely put up a fuss when he saw they were headed for a landing.

Franklin would put up a fuss about a lot of things. She'd tell him about the sale to the Maine Land Trust before she left, then get on Brian's boat. Franklin would be left alone with his wrath, his dreams of a golf course, his inevitable battles with the Trust people. He would rant against the seagulls. And, outraged at her deceit, he would think of her while he ate his solitary Sunday night suppers. She didn't care. A new chapter in her life had presented itself, and she rushed to the dock with her pail of blueberries.

Honorable Mention

Ernie

By William A. Scally

Kelly Christianschilde was nicknamed Ernie, for Ernest Hemingway. She was a war correspondent in Saudi Arabia during Rommel's campaign; later she covered Japan. After the war, she returned to her Quaker roots, becoming a missionary to a Philippine tribe called the Hukbalahap, Huk or Hap for short. For most of her life, she dressed and presented herself as a man, not because of any sexual preference, but because that was the accepted persona for one determined to do the things she would do. She never actually put "male" on an application or said "I am a man" to anyone, unless the context allowed "man" to be a generic term. But she dressed and acted as one was expected to dress or act in any particular situation, and consistently people assigned her the role she'd adopted.

In February of 1943, she lay in the desert sands west of Libya, several miles ahead of Montgomery's advancing 8th Army, waiting to ambush a troop train carrying retreating members of the Afrika Korps. There was no reason for Ernie or the three others on this adventure to be where they were except for the fact that all had been bored with their lives elsewhere.

Ernie lay next to a man named Woody on one side of the train tracks. On the other side of the tracks lay Hawk, and further up the line, ready to blow it up if Woody, Ernie, and Hawk failed to stop and board the train, was Lopes. The idea was for Ernie and Woody to create a distraction on their side of the tracks while Hawk tried to board the train from the other side. They were laying in the sand about a hundred yards from the train tracks, clear line of sight close to half a mile in both directions. Flat sheets of burlap formed a camouflage net over their rifle barrels in front of them.

A lone British reconnaissance plane flew overhead, obviously checking the same stretch of track. They could have blown the train up anywhere along its expanse of unprotected track, but Hawk thought there might be something worth capturing — mail, maybe, with intelligence worth intercepting — so Hawk was going to jump on board as soon as Ernie and Woody started shooting. If all failed, Lopes was up the track ready to blow it up.

A train pulled into view, slowly leaving the curve some yards up the track, gaining speed as it approached their position. Woody started firing. Ernie could see Hawk jump from under the sand next to the tracks and start to run along the side, reaching for a place to swing up. Suddenly a soldier appeared on the roof of a car just behind the coal car. From that height, he had a clear shot at any of them. Without thinking, Ernie jumped up and shot. The man fell from the roof. Just then a twin-engine British Beau fighter came out of nowhere, machine cannons strafing the train, blowing it off its tracks. Hawk jumped off just in time. Italian soldiers clambered out of the overturned cars. There

weren't a lot of them; 20 or so. They looked dazed and simply stood by the tracks with their hands up. Hawk jumped from where he'd landed and shouted to the others to come forward. They came out pointing their guns at the Italians, and as the fighter started its return pass, Hawk waved at it with his Australian digger hat. The others also waved with their free hands, pointing their guns at the Italian soldiers with their hands in the air. The pilot dipped his wings and flew on.

"Coooee!" shouted Hawk. "We just captured a train and a couple dozen soldiers of the Reich." The group headed southeast and within a couple of hours had reached a forward post of the 8th Army.

No sooner had they handed over their prisoners than Woody passed out. Ernie grabbed him as he started to fall.

"What's the problem?" Hawk was the first to ask.

"I don't know," said Ernie. "He just fainted."

"Was he hit?" asked Lopes.

"There isn't any blood; I don't think so," said Hawk as he opened Woody's shirt and felt along his trousers, looking for a wound.

"He was hiding something while we were out in the desert," said Ernie. "I saw him wince a couple times, and he wouldn't tell me what it was."

It took a while to get him to a field hospital where they figured out he was passing a kidney stone, but they didn't want to operate. A doctor gave them a couple of morphine syrettes to help kill the pain. Woody kept coming to and passing out. He was out most of the time. Hawk got them on a plane to Cairo and into the hospital there. The stone wasn't passing on its own and a doctor decided to operate. Ernie was sitting by his bedside when Woody woke up.

Hawk entered about then. "Hey, you're awake. Nice job, kid. We take out a Nazi supply train, capture a bunch of soldiers, and intercept a couple of interesting communiqués. Not bad for one Australian intelligence officer and three pencil pushers from the other side of the desert."

"Lopes?" Woody asked.

"He's calmed down a lot," said Hawk. "Some of the mail we intercepted was pretty explicit on the 'final solution.' There's one Lehi won't be talking about allying with the Germans anymore, that's for sure. There was actually a letter from Husseini to a Grecian contact asking if something called an 'SS Action Squad' was still stationed in Athens and could it be reactivated if Rommel made a comeback. Apparently," Hawk continued, "this special squad was supposed to follow Rommel into Palestine after taking Egypt and just kill any Jews along the march."

After Hawk left, Woody stayed awake a few minutes longer. Tears were running down Ernie's face. She said, "Woody, I'm sorry. I almost got you killed."

"What are you talking about?" Woody said.

"I wasn't really shooting at anything. When I saw that German on the train, and I knew you were out of ammunition, I started to shoot him, but I just couldn't do it. I only hit him by accident."

"You hit him?"

"By accident. I was just trying to distract him long enough for you to reload, but I guess I must have aimed closer to him than I thought."

"Ernie, you didn't shoot him," Woody said. "I did."

"You were out of ammo. I could see the clip empty."

"I had a new one in my hand already. I knew you weren't going to shoot anyone, so I kept the fresh clip in my hand. I thought for sure you were a goner when you stood up. I just barely got the shot off in time before reaching up to pull you down."

Ernie's face lightened. The thought of having killed someone was even more troubling than the thought she might have lost her friend. "I'm still sorry," said Ernie. "I stood up to draw his fire, but the fact is, I was putting you in danger the whole time."

"You were willing to die for your beliefs," Woody said.

"It's one thing to die for my beliefs. It's another to let you die for them, too. I'm sorry."

"Ernie, I never expected you to shoot anyone. You helped by being there. That's all I expected, and you came through. Thanks for getting me out alive." Woody drifted off.

Ernie illustrated the conflict the world was facing. She was a pacifist — the real kind. She came from a Quaker family that worked a small farm in Northern Pennsylvania, just the other side of the mountains from Corning, New York. She quit the farm when she was 16 years old and went to work in a glass factory. She read widely and occasionally would send in opinion pieces to the local newspaper. One day someone at the paper decided to publish one of them in the letters to the editor section — so she wasn't paid for it, but she got her ideas out.

During the years leading up to the war, there were a lot of different views on why the U.S. shouldn't get into a war. They all called themselves pacifists. There was Lindbergh; there was Coughlin; there was the Workers' Party; and any other number of isolationists arguing that, for one reason or another, the U.S. should not get involved in a war that simply wasn't in its interests. The previous war had left so many dead or wounded for apparently so little cause, people had no stomach for another. Ernie was different, and she pointed this out in her letter to the editor.

Being against any particular war or against war in general because it wasn't in your best interests is not pacifism, she argued. H.G. Wells opposed war because he thought it would destroy humanity. Bertrand Russell opposed it within an ethically relative universe, where situations might change and then what seemed immoral might become moral. Gandhi opposed it as a means to win Indian independence because he thought it wouldn't work; his protégé and presumed successor, Nehru, suggested Britain might be allowed to use Indian troops in exchange for a guarantee of independence.

Ernie argued pacifism meant opposing war — regardless of the consequences. "Thou shalt not kill" was an absolute within the human realm. She wasn't a vegetarian, but as far as human beings were concerned, "thou shalt not kill" meant no killing in self-defense, no killing to defend the country or church, no capital punishment, no war. It wasn't the same as non-violent resistance. Non-violent resistance means choosing not to use violence; it does not necessarily mean one hasn't the right to kill if one chooses. Ernie argued there was no right to kill for a moral person. On this basis, one

might be a pacifist and never have the opportunity to prove it, or might be one of the few German pacifists of the day who had already been given the ultimate opportunity.

The editor of a small Quaker newsletter read Ernie's letter and offered her a job. At first, she did op-ed pieces on the different pacifist groups. The Catholics had Dorothy Day, though her emphasis was as much on social justice as pacifism. The Catholics also had Thomas Aquinas, who had defined the theory of how to conduct a just war; so, while there might have been pacifist representatives of the Catholic Church, the organization was not pacifist in either its dominant practices or public theology.

There was the Peace Pledge Union, which suggested people withhold a portion of their taxes in protest of any military use, which got them arrested for tax evasion, not pacifism, and left any other taxes they did pay more than available for military or any other use the government saw fit for them.

Some Hasidic groups were pacifist. They felt God would defend them if he wanted them to survive. To fight showed a lack of faith. There was a group called the Jewish Peace Fellowship set up in 1941 in New York to support Jewish conscientious objectors seeking exemption from combatant military service.

Ultimately, there were the Quakers, who not only refused military service on moral grounds, but held regular counseling sessions for others in how to obtain conscientious objector status. They didn't proselytize. They just practiced their own beliefs and helped others do the same.

The Quakers weren't all saints. Herbert Hoover was a Quaker, but he was against the war as a Republican politician. His opposition was based more on his perception that Roosevelt was for it than on any moral objection. By the time the war was half done, the Republicans were campaigning on a platform of "Kick the New Dealers Out and Win the War," arguing the Depression would have ended sooner if they'd been left in charge and the war would not have lasted as long as it had.

The Quakers were incarnated as individuals, as all groups are, and some individuals were more representative of the group's values than others. Ernie was one of the pure ones.

When the war came, the newsletter agreed to support Ernie as a foreign correspondent. The goal was to tell people what was happening without taking sides. Killing is killing regardless of who does it, but of course Ernie was also an American. She wanted to do something. Quaker schools in the U.S. were making presents for the troops, conducting paper and aluminum drives. Ernie decided to report on the fighting.

She was given a small bungalow in a Saudi Arabian housing enclave reserved for Westerners, most of whom were attached to the oil refinery just north of them. This is where she met Woody, and through Woody, the others, Hawk and Lopes. The war she'd come to cover, however, was all pretty distant. Most of the action was taking place west of Egypt, in Libya. The news stories referred to it as the war in Africa. References to Rommel's desert campaign were not to the Saudi desert. Saudi Arabia was a neutral country up until almost the end, after the winner had been clearly defined.

A lot of what Ernie did, what they all did, was look for adventures. They were all there because, in their own ways, for their separate reasons, they wanted to do something, but didn't know how.

From a distance, relying on local reports and information from Hawk, Ernie reported as accurately as she could.

After the Tunisian excursion, Ernie went back to filing reports based on hearsay and stories from Hawk.

It was May 7, 1945, when Woody knocked on her door and asked if she'd like to go sailing. They paid a fisherman in Abu Dhabi to loan them a boat. It was a small skiff.

They were out a good ways when the wind died. Night set in as they sat becalmed in the middle of the Persian Gulf. Suddenly over Bahrain there were fireworks. Explosions. Could the Germans have actually staged some sort of surprise revival? The sudden noise caught both by surprise and they jumped, seriously rocking the little boat. Ernie fell into the water. She flailed about, managing to gargle, "I can't swim," as her head bobbed under the water. She wasn't long under, though, before she felt herself being grabbed under the arms and pulled back to the skiff. Coughing and gasping for air, she pulled herself into the boat. Woody steadied it, then lurched aboard after her.

Ernie sat shaking from the scare and the exertion, but otherwise okay. They didn't talk. They just sat looking at each other, wondering what they would find when they made it back to shore.

It was cold on the water, the way it gets in the desert at night, and their wet clothes were making it worse. The water in the fabric drew heat from their bodies. Ernie was shaking, probably from the tension of nearly drowning and wondering what the explosions meant as much as from the cold. Woody put his arms around her and they sat close in the boat. The feel of another body was comforting, not knowing what they would find in the morning. Tracers shot into the sky and anti-aircraft shells exploded for at least 15 minutes continuously.

There was a glow from the area of the refinery. Maybe the Germans had made a comeback. Maybe they'd invented the superbomb everyone talked about and had used it. Here in the desert would be a good place to set off some kind of superbomb. It wouldn't hurt anything they wanted for themselves, but it would show the rest of the world what they could do if they wanted. Would the world keep fighting a suicide war or would it give up?

A few hours later, around four in the morning, the wind came up and they made their way back to shore. It was then they learned the explosions had been improvised fireworks, celebrating Germany's surrender in France at about 2 a.m. There would be another official surrender ceremony in Germany, and there was still some fighting going on, but the war was over.

Shortly afterwards, Truman revealed that not Germany, but the U.S., had the super-secret superbomb, and V-J Day followed.

After what had happened, after they'd sat so close, so wet, Ernie wasn't sure how much to bring it up. Woody was acting as if he weren't surprised. They each went to their homes, exhausted, but Ernie decided not to let the matter fester. She went to Woody's door and knocked. Woody opened it, still in his wet clothes, and Ernie entered, closing the door behind her and facing him.

"So," she said, "what do I have to do to keep this between us?"

"You mean the fact you can't swim?" he said.

She didn't take it as a joke. She just waited.

"Nothing," he said.

"Really?"

"Really. It's none of my business."

"Interesting," she said. "Why isn't it any of your business?"

"We're friends. You have a right to your privacy."

"You can do that?" she said. "Keep things so separate?" Then she wondered, "Oh, or is it something else?"

"None of your business," he smiled, teasingly. "No, it's not something else. I can think in more than one language at a time," he said. "It's the same thing."

She was quiet for a few minutes, then said, "How well can you keep things separate, I wonder?" She took his hand and walked over to the bed with him. "You can take off your own clothes. I'll do mine," she said sitting down on the bed and untying her shoes.

They fell asleep in a loose embrace, hands resting on each other's hips, but no other part of their bodies touching. They woke before light, dressed, had coffee. She looked at him and asked, "Still friends?"

"Still friends," he said.

Hawk saw them coming out of Woody's place together and smirked. "Woody, here in the desert still gets his woody on; making do with what's available."

She went about her separate business through the rest of the day, wondering a bit at the implied tolerance in Hawk's off-color suggestion. Discretely she continued to share Woody's bed until she left for Japan at the end of the summer.

In Japan, Ernie's stories covered the effects of all the bombs, not just the atomic ones. Before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there had been Toyama, Yokohama, Kobe, and others where massive firebombing campaigns had leveled the areas. Air currents created by the explosions were so fierce, crewmen in the bombers themselves were sometimes tossed violently enough to break limbs. The Mitsubishi steel works in Nagasaki had already been destroyed in the firebombings, and the plan was that, after eliminating heavy manufacturing centers, the U.S. was going after the irrigation system — centuries-old canals that controlled water from the mountains to the towns and rice paddies throughout the country. It would have destroyed any ability of the country to feed itself, in short, to live, much less function. The effect of dropping the atomic bombs was to emphasize the fact that the U.S. could eliminate an entire people with much less effort than it had spent so far and was prepared to do it.

Along with her stories of the military operations, Ernie wrote human interest pieces. In fact, since she did not arrive in Japan until after the bombs had been dropped, her pieces were mostly human interest. Stories of how the war had been fought, in addition to being retrospectives, not current reports, also tended to be colored by the memories of those who told them. Romantic accounts of American heroism were popular back home, and Ernie filed her share of those. Every reporter did. It was part of what she could do to help her own country cope. But she also was keenly aware of the toll taken on the vanquished. People were trying to survive on a diet of 1,300 calories a day. There

were food riots in the cities. The country was struggling to recover not only from the recent catastrophes, but from the centuries-old history leading up to them.

After the surrender, MacArthur ordered an end to the old feudal land ownership. Ernie met a former soldier in Tokyo who had been a farmer before the war. He was going home to pick up his life on some land that would now be his own and Ernie asked to go with him. He wouldn't speak of his time in the war, but he was always deferential in his refusal. "It is difficult," was all he would say. He was happy to show Ernie the country, however.

They took a train as far as Hiroshima, and from there the soldier would make his way as best he could to Izumo, where he lived. Ernie went as far as Hiroshima because she wasn't sure she'd be able to get back from Izumo on her own. They left Tokyo at 8:30 a.m. on two second-class tickets costing about $11.00 each (165 yen). Decommissioned Japanese soldiers in uniform were offered half fare. Japanese civilians had to convince the station master their purposes were necessary. There was no first class, only second and third. Dignitaries such as the royal family were given private coaches.

The train took them past Mount Fuji, through towns of Ofuna, Hamamatsu, and Fukuyama, around the tip of Honshu Island. They stopped several times along the way, so a trip of approximately 550 miles took almost 24 hours. Ernie found it eerie that, so soon after the war, an unarmed American could travel so safely through essentially unoccupied towns and villages and be treated as civilly as she was. At first, she was concerned when people seemed to be deliberately avoiding her, turning their backs as she approached, but her companion explained it was a mark of respect. They would have behaved this way in the presence of the emperor himself.

Seats in the train cars ran lengthwise and could be treated as beds if there was room (which there wasn't). There was a porter of sorts who offered to carry their bags in return for cigarettes.

The waiting room in Kyoto was crowded with a mixture of Australians (former prisoners of war making their way back to Tokyo from their camp in Ofuna) and Japanese soldiers trying to go home. The Australians wore their signature hats, snapped on one side. The Japanese were often shirtless, with their pants rolled up to the knees, their calves more muscular than one would have expected given the almost skeletal appearance of their torsos. Both groups looked like kids glad to be going home.

Kyoto was relatively unscathed, having been spared because, instead of housing military industry, it had been home to numerous Shinto and Buddhist shrines. Hiroshima, on the other hand, was a study in contrasts. On the one hand, it showed all the devastation one would have expected to see. Burn victims lay in fly-infested buildings cared for by untrained attendants. The ashes of the dead lay in boxes, packaged for services to be held in Buddhist temples after their requisite 30 days of mourning.

Yet, in the midst of all the destruction and suffering, school girls made their way to classes, carrying their parasols, wearing their wide-brimmed straw hats, dressed in ankle-length bloomers and dotted cotton shirts, buttoned to the throat. In the Hiroshima train station, tea was served from an improvised wooden tea room.

Before filing her story, Ernie deleted a note she had on the subject of MacArthur's land reform initiative. Technically, the feudal land ownership system was abolished by the Japanese government in the late 1800s, but after taking all the land from the nobility, the government then put those same feudal lords in charge of administering the districts they had formerly owned and tasked them with collecting the taxes which now came to the central government instead. The life of the farmer didn't really change. The hope was that MacArthur's directive would make a difference. Ernie's editor thought it would be too hard to explain all this to the general public, and it didn't hurt to put MacArthur in as favorable a light as possible.

Ernie had her doubts, though. There were too many "collaborators" to kill them all, and many were simply needed to preserve order. Unless the U.S. was willing to do what the Japanese had come to fear when the bombs were dropped, it would be necessary to make pragmatic arrangements to govern the people it had decided not to annihilate. Those arrangements were often confusing and contradictory.

Throughout the Far East, groups of freedom fighters were trying to avoid going back to their former colonial status. In Vietnam, there was opposition to the French return. In Malaya, there was opposition to Britain. In Indonesia, they rejected the Dutch. In some cases, there were Japanese soldiers who continued to fight the war by joining with the revolutionaries. In some cases, because they needed their expertise, the British, French, and Dutch enlisted Japanese soldiers to help them subdue those revolutions. As the old feudal lords had tried to keep control of the lands taken from them years ago, the current captains of industry sought to maintain their influence over the companies they'd built. The victors needed help governing the vanquished. This made for some uncomfortably inconsistent arrangements.

There was also a general move toward making the war seem less brutal and more romantic. Japanese civilians were quoted saying things like, "It was a good thing to bomb us. It shortened the war and saved many lives" — Japanese lives that the Japanese government was preparing to sacrifice to the last woman and child apparently, until it became clear that the U.S. was actually prepared to let them do just that.

"The problem," Ernie editorialized in one of her pieces, "with this kind of rationale is it ignores the flesh-and-blood people who died. It relies on a Toynbee-like history of cyclic, epochal struggle at the expense of every individual life. It ignores what must be the greatest, perhaps only, lesson of Christ on the cross, that the individual victim matters."

When Ernie returned from Japan, she decided to do more than report on the problems of the world. She decided to do something about them. She joined a Quaker mission to the Philippines, to a tribal group called the Hukbalahap, former resistance fighters against the Japanese, living in the hills of Luzon. The Hap were one of the first groups to form a resistance to the Japanese.

The Hap fought fiercely against the Japanese, but they were also openly pro-Communist. Their opposition to the Japanese did not translate into supporting a U.S. occupation. As a result, they were not rewarded for their wartime help. They numbered about 10,000 in 1948, but in six years they were reduced to 1,500, a bounty on their heads, and their leader imprisoned as an outlaw.

Ernie began by getting them medicines and trying to convince them to get their children vaccinated. She became a liaison for the tribe to the medical teams, coordinating visits and lining up people for treatment.

She helped deliver a baby girl whose mother died shortly afterward.

The baby's father had spent so much of his life fighting and watching people die around him, part of him simply dismissed his wife's death as one more piece of bad luck. Another part of him, however, had just started to think life might be more than jungle warfare. When the baby cried, he held her instead of handing her over to his mother or mother-in-law. Ernie got some bottles and nipples from the mission and taught the man how to feed the baby. They named the girl "Christina," and Ernie became her godparent.

When the girl was 15 years old, she confided in Ernie that she had decided to be one of the penitents at Easter. Her father forbade it, of course, but she thought Ernie would understand. It was a folk tradition to reenact the crucifixion at Easter with real-life volunteers. The volunteers were nailed to crosses, and usually survived. Some had taken part more than once. The official church disapproved, but ... Well, one creates an atmosphere and then tries to ignore the consequences; it's hard to know how to lay blame. Adults should be able to distinguish between play and reality, but in a world where constant war and mass deaths are the only reality, maybe one or two crucifixions are a form of play. In any event, that a 15-year-old should be caught up in a fanatic devotion was nothing unusual.

Ernie knew that telling Christina's father would be useless. The girl would find a way to slip out of the house. She might even find relatives who would support her. So, Ernie took her place. The organizers knew one of the penitents would be a woman, so when a woman showed up to take her position, they paid no more attention. When Christina showed up, she was so angry she joined the crowds jeering at the penitents as they carried their crosses to the hill. Ernie heard her in the crowd but was not disturbed. Afterwards, when the wounds became infected and the fever made her confused, it was Christina's father who cared for her, though by then everyone knew and said it wasn't right for him to do so. Christina was still so angry she refused to see her. When Ernie died, then the girl cried at her grave.

Honorable Mention

Touch

By Timothy C. Hobbs

The frequent dream took her to the San Antonio Riverwalk, late fall when Central Texas air is brisk at night but balmy during the day, their habit to stay there at the hotel La Mansion. "Our getaway spot," he'd say. "For romantic weekends." Long, lazy days sleeping late with bouts of lovemaking in between room service espresso, crescent rolls, and scones. Late afternoon strolls down the Riverwalk ending with patio dinners, the man with the violin always targeting their table first, playing Brahms, Saint-Saëns, or, when they felt devilish, Paganini.

And then the last night, at the end of the Riverwalk, their frequenting O'Brian's Pub. Live music, greasy fast food, and worldly beers. The house band playing their favorite song — Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." Laughing and twirling. Dizzy and out of breath his announcing through gasps for air, "You're my brown-eyed girl."

Then, the weekend over, the drive back to a waiting, work-a-day world. She an RN at the Veteran's Hospital, he a water sanitarian for the city.

Those weekends now so distant, real only in dreams, unreal in a way some memories transform after death.

"Damned highway construction!" His last recorded voice mail. "Bitch of a traffic jam at the I-35S cutoff. I'll have to go the back way again. These asshole eighteen-wheeler-can't-slow-down-nimrods blocked everything up. One damned constipated I-35 again. Well, see you in about an hour, I guess."

She played that message at least 10 times a day for these many months just to hear his voice, trying to wipe away the vision of his mangled body when she went to the morgue for positive identification.

"The Explorer hit him broadside at a high rate of speed," the deputy told her as she gaped at what only a few hours before had been her husband. "Hell of a thing, ma'am. Your husband's Fiat didn't stand a chance." Later in the distance she overheard the same deputy talking in a low voice to a fellow officer. "Bastard in the Explorer was drunk. Walked away without a scratch."

The following days tangled her in chaotic webs of coffin selections, burial arrangements — graveside closed casket, his remains unable to be salvaged for public viewing. After the funeral, the front door of their home opening like the mouth of a predatory beast ready to consume. And it did so, their house, their little piece of middle-class heaven, their sanctuary for future children, for security and safety, devouring her with disembodied shadows, distant voices laughing during their

customary Friday night game time, Yahtzee the favorite choice — "Full house!" "Four of a kind" "Small straight" "Large straight" "YAHTZEE!" Her sipping chardonnay, he chilled vodka. Rarely making it to a third game, falling into a frenzied maelstrom of sex, sometimes tender, sometimes rough. Never uncompromising.

She'd taken as much overtime as the hospital would allow, fatiguing herself to escape the haunted house she now occupied. But even fatigue failed after awhile, leaving shadows heavy, recollections malevolent and aching.

"I can't bear it here anymore," she told her family, his family.

"But it was your dream home. Give it time. We'll help. We'll come and stay with you to ease the pain," they said.

She'd already decided though, passing through the next weeks with realtors attached like parasites until finally after work on a late Friday afternoon: "This area usually sells for much higher prices because of land value. Lots of professionals. You know, doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs." The realtor laughing at her own remark. "But, seriously, a great location, no crime to speak of, gated entrance. Very safe for a woman alone." And then the small, brick Tudor. "Not half as much square footage as your current home, but you requested something smaller."

And she liked the look of the house with Old World asymmetrical style sitting pleasantly on a decent-sized lot. The steeply pitched front gabled roof with a smaller copy slightly behind and to its side, casement windows, and an elaborate chimney shadowing the small, front porch, all inviting her to step inside.

She somehow expected to see sheets of ivy creeping over and covering the bricks, but what grew there were thick vines holding violet flowers grouped like grape clusters.

"Wisteria," the realtor said. "Quite beautiful, don't you agree?"

She thought yes it was. Beautiful and also, in a way, mysterious. "Is it hard to control?" she asked the realtor, who shrugged.

"Don't know much about it really other than those vines come from a larger group in the backyard. One of the neighbors told me the growth escalated so, after the couple living here moved to assisted living, that the weight on the roof threatened an actual collapse." The realtor grinned oddly. "But the couple's son managed to get it under control."

"Oh."

"Really isn't a problem now, though. And I have a reputable list of lawn and yard maintenance businesses. Very affordable. You'd have no problem. Could even cut it all away if you so desired."

"Maybe I should have a look at the back before going inside. Just to see."

The realtor took her to the backyard, passing through a six-foot-high wooden gate also partially covered with wisteria vines not flowering as yet.

"The son uses one of the companies I suggested," the realtor said and pointed to trimmed vines covering the wooden fence and gate. "Not certain why he doesn't get rid of the plants altogether since he lives out of town."

"Are his parents still in assisted living?"

"No, they both passed last year. That's why he finally put the house on the market. I suppose he thought one or both might somehow improve and return. They are the original owners. Built this house long before the area became a fashionable neighborhood."

"Well, I'm not much of a gardener. So maybe ..." Her voice caught when the gate swung open, revealing a massive plant covering the yard's back fence, which appeared at least 40 feet in length, the right and left sides spreading diagonally in a triangle toward the house, the entire back portion completely covered in a thick patchwork of woody vines and blooms spreading in finger-like tendrils. No other plants existed, as if the wisteria kept even the heartiest weeds at bay.

The realtor said, "I couldn't quite take it all in the first time I saw it, either. You'll notice the vines on the side fences are thinned down. I imagine the lawn company has trouble keeping the entire plant trimmed. But they do a good job. This wisteria once covered the entire fence as massively as it does the rear section."

"Even the grass stopped growing near the fence."

"I know, but the rest of the yard is quite appealing, don't you agree? Coastal Bermuda's very resilient."

She felt a passing chill. "What type of wisteria spreads like this?"

"I didn't know myself. I asked the son about it, and he told me it was Chinese wisteria, a cutting from a specimen located in Sierra Madre, California, that particular plant being recognized by Guinness World Records as the world's largest blossoming plant. Over an acre, the son said."

She turned and looked at the rear of the Tudor and found the plant spreading over its brick walls, snaking up the roof as it had the front of the home. "I don't know. There's something about it," she said with an involuntary shiver. "A little too weird for me."

"Tell you what, let's go inside. You haven't seen the entire house yet. You might fall in love with it. Besides, as I suggested, you can remove the plant entirely if you so desire." A slight sigh escaped the realtor. "Although it would seem a shame to do so."

She held a cup of hot tea in both hands and cinched her robe against a chilly early spring morning as she stood on the back porch glancing at soft beads of pearly dew covering the lawn, the massive wilderness of wisteria blooms glistening.

Three weeks in the home now and almost unpacked. She'd asked for six weeks' leave from work, and although the leave limit maxed out at four consecutive weeks, her supervisor at the VA worked around it by having her schedule one work day in between and taking sick leave for that.

She walked back in the home and felt, as she had the day the realtor took her inside, an immediate sense of calm security, this detail being what convinced her to buy the Tudor even though the strange and daunting wisteria growth initially repelled her.

Some family members helped her move, she packed very little beyond necessary furniture and her precious keepsakes: photos of him alone or with her, little love notes he'd written — personal things, packing the remainder for Goodwill, her prudence creating a smooth, time-efficient move.

A few items were still unpacked, but nothing of utmost need. She'd arranged the small living room with their simple sofa and one recliner, a rectangular glass coffee table fixed symmetrically in front of them, the wall-mount TV demoted to resting on a media stand, a Blu-ray DVD player and cable box nesting in the stand's lower sections. The home's one bedroom now held their queen bed and nightstand with a lamp on its top, a frugal dresser fitted snugly against a wall near the closet. While ridiculously tiny, she'd managed to arrange the bathroom to give the illusion of more space than existed, but enough for her, the toilet and shower being ample, although she did miss a tub, an obstacle she planned to remedy over time.

She went out rarely, mostly for a few groceries. She ate very little now, so she didn't need much, generally frozen dinners and liquid eggs and cold cuts and peanut butter and jelly. And wine, her nightly sedative.

Afternoons found her in the backyard where she'd started digging a few spots for flower beds. At a local greenhouse, she'd picked up some gardening tools, potting and planting soil, tubs of small flowers, ground plants, and bulbs, storing all neatly in a small storage shed beside the house. "You can't monopolize this yard," she'd told the heavy wisteria blooms. "I'm not much on gardening, but I can see to it a few irises, snapdragons, pansies, and my favorite Mexican heather offer competition." She soon discovered digging in soft, warm earth offered an unexpected therapy for her melancholy, an ancient, eternal scent from the soil beguiling her. Lying in bed at night, she cried herself to sleep less now, but often wished for his warm body there to hold her.

The yard crew the realtor suggested came every other week to mow and trim back the wisteria, but they couldn't seem to keep up with the plant's uncanny growth, especially that on the middle of the back fence. So she decided she'd start trimming back the wisteria herself on the yard crew's off week and work on her flower bed projects in between. She took a heavy-duty pruner from the shed and went to the middle of the back fence. The day was overcast so she decided her garden hat was not needed. "I'll start in the center and work my way left. Then right after that's finished ..." A smile crossed her face as the idea of magic symmetry crossed her mind. "A sly garden witch to trim you down," she said to the wisteria.

But cutting the woody vines proved more difficult than expected, and as morning drifted into afternoon, so the day began to warm, as well as an increasing, fermented grape fragrance from the blooms, heady enough in fact to inspire the dull beginnings of a headache.

Even with gloves on, she felt suggestive blisters forming on her hands from the excessive force needed to cut the vines. When the plant's odor, her throbbing head, and the tingling between her thumb and forefinger became annoying, she decided to quit long enough to drive back to the garden supply and buy a pruner more suited for work on tree limbs. "That ought to take care of you," she said to the vine she'd given up on. And as she wiped a line of collected sweat beads from her forehead, a strange voice intruded.

"Killed my cat, you know."

She looked through small spaces between the wooden fence slats and found a large eye glaring back. "Beg your pardon?"

The eye moved closer forming a face fragmented by the wooden slats. “Killed my cat.” A broken frown spread and added, “Strangled her.”

“Have we met?” which she knew they hadn’t. She’d avoided meeting any of the neighbors as yet, desiring her privacy for now. She’d seen some in passing — an older couple across the street getting in or out of their car, a younger pair with children two doors down. She’d be hard-pressed to recognize any, though. She didn’t take notice of them long enough. This one on the other side of the fence evidently lived behind her.

A group of fingers strained to reach over the top of the fence, but the arm connected was too short to clear more than fingertips. “Gladys Stone. Been living behind the Stevens for 50-odd years now. I bought my place five years after they built theirs.”

“Stevens?”

“The couple living here before you.” The finger tips receded. “You know it took almost 20 years for this damned plant to start flowering. That’s when it killed my cat.”

“I don’t see how this plant could kill anything. Unless your cat got into the seed pods. Those might be toxic. I’m not certain, though.”

A sneer wasn’t seen but rather felt coming from the other side. “Nope. Found my Serpentina surrounded by vines. Some tight around her throat.” A face moved against the slat spaces again. “Her eyes were all bugged out, her tongue hanging out and blue. Strangled. No doubt about it.”

She felt relieved now she’d not bothered to meet this crazy. “I still don’t see how a grown cat could get entangled here. The vines hug the fence. There’s not enough space between, as proven by the difficulty I’m having trimming them.”

Gladys abruptly moved the subject away from the cat. “Ever notice there’s no insects going after the blooms? No bees, no wasps. No pollinators.”

“No, I haven’t noticed. I’m sure that can’t be, though. The ...” She then saw Gladys walk away from the fence.

“Best keep your guard up. That plant knows what you need,” Gladys said, her words fading as she left. “Stevens gave up fighting it. Let it have its way. Said it’s not of this Earth.”

She looked through the fence slats until Gladys disappeared. “What I need? Not of this Earth? A plant?” she said under her breath. “Poor old thing. Probably senile. Could still be a nuisance, though.”

She was about to go in and then make the trip for a tree-limb pruner when a wayward breeze brushed by, guiding one of the heavy bloom clusters across her forehead where it stopped and rested. She shivered and immediately brushed the cluster off, an unexpected nausea and repugnance shrouding her. But the unpleasant sensations passed, and she moved away saying, “Maybe I should call it quits for now. Start again tomorrow.” The wisteria’s fragrance intensified, prodding her throbbing head. “Yes, tomorrow will be better,” she repeated as she unconsciously brushed her forehead over and over where the bloom had touched her.

With her stomach still a bit queasy from the odors and her headache, she went to bed early deciding against any food that evening. She convinced herself to work in the morning before noon heat intruded, that heat being her conclusion for feeling ill.

After she fell into a restless slumber, dreams came in bursts of black and white, eerie and somehow malevolent. Her husband's face appeared ashen and distressed at times from inside a mist as she walked aimlessly down a path of heavily forested night. Things rustled in the gloom, things seeming to have countless legs tap-tapping on shells of strange flora. Her legs felt weighted and unable to move another inch, unable to run when she heard something moving fast behind her, the grass and trees violently disturbed, night birds screaming.

She woke then, her headache unmerciful now. She knew she was about to vomit and rose on shaky legs to get to the bathroom but fell back down as a wave of vertigo engulfed her. She closed her eyes against the spinning room and clenched her teeth to fight the queasiness. And soon the whirling in her head slowed, the nausea easing a bit as she opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, a sound coming from the roof. A sound of something tap-tapping like an invading insect army, the sound of countless, thin appendages scurrying across shingles.

A thin line of light crept through the windows, filling the bedroom with a soft illuminating haze. "Morning already," she said to herself. "I had no sleep." She pulled herself up and out of bed, the scuttling sound still persisting above her.

She made her way to the back door and opened it, a gasp escaping as she gaped at the tremendous wisteria growth spurt; overnight, the blossom-laden vines reclaimed what had been trimmed away from the side fences and were crawling in massive groupings up the house to the roof. There was no wind and yet the blossoms and vines seemed to move of their own volition with a monstrous purpose, and she knew then where the tapping sound came from, the plant making its way over the roof.

She placed trembling fingers to her forehead. "It touched me here," she whispered. "It touched me."

Oblivious to the chilly morning clutching at her thin nightgown, she stumbled out into the yard and stared at the small flower beds she'd been preparing, the earth dug up and scattered along with bulbs and juvenile plants she'd planted, the wisteria vines burrowed in, stirring like slow, mechanical tillers.

"It touched me," she repeated, walking toward the back section of the fence where the wisteria had tripled in size. And there in the center of the thick blooms, the face of her husband formed, his eyes, nose, and mouth outlined in flower clusters, his lips parting, a strange sound emerging. *IBRONIIRL ...* She moved closer, his face now more animated. *I ... Bron ... I ... irl ...* His features then abruptly calming. *I ... Brown ... I ... Girl.* Warm tears rolled down her cheeks as she embraced the blossoms, covering her face, a soft whisper dancing over her ears. *My brown-eyed girl.*

His arms wrapped around her then, arms that soon became hard and probing, puncturing her flesh. She tensed but her resistance faded quickly, a flood of euphoria filling her as she was pulled

into the heavy blooms, the whisper coming again as she felt herself vanish. *You're my brown-eyed girl.*

The real estate agent considered herself a conscientious soul, always dropping by her clients' a few weeks after they'd moved in.

The first thing she noticed as she pulled by the curb in front of the Tudor was how much the wisteria had grown. "My goodness," she said as she made her way up the walk. "I guess she decided not to trim it back after all."

The agent cringed a bit as she brushed trailing vines away from a doorbell, unconsciously wiping fingers on her blouse, a chill of repulsion momentarily gripping her.

"That plant does need trimming," she said as she rang the bell again.

After a few moments, the agent walked to the back gate. "It's such a lovely day, she's probably in the back." She had to brush clumps of blossoms and vines away from the gate latches, and again a feeling of repugnance filled her. "Ugh," she said as she pushed the gate open. "I wonder if she lost the number of the yard crew I gave her."

As she walked toward the backyard, the agent stopped short, staring at the enormous wisteria vine growth spreading from the fence to the yard, smothering the grass.

"Good Lord," the agent said as she moved ahead slowly, the vines hard and unyielding beneath her shoes, a sense of menace sending shivers over her. "Hello. Anybody here? Anybody ..."

Its arms spread out as if crucified, a form stood flat against the middle of the back fence. Wound tightly within the vines and blossoms wounded flesh appeared a pale mottled purple color, a head barely discernable, thick black hair intermittently visible through grape-like clusters of flowers.

It took a moment for breath to return to the real estate agent's lungs and then only seconds for her scream to rise high and terrible under the gaze of eyes once brown, eyes now violet and burning.

Honorable Mention

Cheap Suit

By Julia Naman

Nelson first noticed it with his hands. Tingles everywhere. It felt like his blood had been replaced with pipe cleaners. *Needley* is the only word he could think of, but if *needley* wasn't even a word, it could hardly be a symptom. He kept quiet that morning when his mother asked him what was up with his calloused behavior, and why aren't you drinking your coffee? Nerves, he let her assume. *Tsk, tsk.* She planted a good-luck kiss on his cheek.

His hands were lit up like fireworks as he waited in the hallway of his alma mater, his old high school. The front-office lady was just as pink as when he graduated 10 years back; pink lipstick, pink pearls, fat pink diamond ring. Nelson wanted to say her name was Sandra, which is fine, because she wanted to say his name was Nicholas. He read the fliers on the bulletin board and scanned them for typos and waited for the principal to emerge from his office. He noted to himself: Normal people walk. Distinguished people emerge.

It was a new principal (Did Vanderwall finally kick the bucket?) who emerged and introduced himself as Gary. If later, someone asked Nelson to describe the man in front of him, Nelson would probably only be able to recall two details:

1. A thick silver pinkie ring.
2. A very thick neck.
3. N/A

"Just washed my hands," Gary said after a wet handshake. As though Nelson would've otherwise assumed he had peed on himself. He thanked Nelson for taking the day off of work to drive down to Menifee and inspire the kids. Nelson brushed off his compliments. Besides, he was distracted. He was: needley.

"I'll walk you to the auditorium." Gary walked fast and didn't look back to see if Nelson kept up pace. "So when was the last time you visited campus?"

"When I graduated. Oh-nine."

"No kidding. Well, it hasn't changed much, I imagine. Trying to put new tennis courts in," Gary added.

Linoleum floors, peeling beige lockers. It hadn't changed at all. Nelson hardly thought about high school after he graduated. College had been so thoroughly distracting. Being back, it felt like he'd been dropped inside a photo; he half expected to run into his less couth, more buff younger self any minute. He wondered if Gary would have asked him to come speak if he knew what Nelson

was really like in high school. Gary held open a door for Nelson and motioned for him to walk through.

"Thanks. Just wondering, Gary," Nelson started. Calling authority figures by first names still unnerved him. "What inspired you to call me up?"

He thought perhaps he'd seen the article about him in the *California Business Journal*. The one with the black-and-white photo spread. The one hanging on his mother's wall in the kitchen. Gary adjusted his tie, which was too short because his neck was so thick.

"Your mother, actually. She gives a monthly donation to our school. Sometimes she writes little notes with her checks — updates, you know — and she told us all about the nonprofit you started. And in high school, I've heard you were quite the student. ASB president, varsity football and everything. We have these school assemblies every week, so we thought why not have you come up?"

It was less than a pep talk. Gary slapped him on the back, introduced him to a weaselly 10th grader who was running sound, and went back to his office with a salute and a *best of luck*.

The needles hadn't gone away. During sound check, Nelson kept shaking his hands around like he was about to do a magic trick, or was threatened by frostbite. *Check one two, check one two. This is your captain speaking.* Weasel boy didn't laugh. The bell rang — was it really that ominous back then? — and students started filing in the dark auditorium. He felt them stare at him from the back of the room like cats. No doubt sizing up how big a waste of time this assembly was about to be on a scale from one to a fire- prevention seminar. Though at least talking about fires meant talking about death, which is interesting, and there are plenty of glorious burn stories that firefighters could throw in as cheap attention-grabbing tricks. Nelson was supposed to engage them in a long, dry- as-the-back-of-his-throat 35-minute talk about nonprofits.

He felt reaffirmed when two girls passed by and one shouted, "She thinks you're cute!" followed by excessive giggles as they sat down in the front row, though he decided not to acknowledge them lest he come across as flirting and, therefore, pedophilic. He tugged at the sleeves of his $30 suit purchased at a second-hand store. It was untailored despite his means to have it tailored. A message to the populace at Menifee High that having a perfectly manicured suit is a waste of money, no matter how successful you are. But there he went with that word again. Successful. It bounced off the walls of his head with a metallic ring. It made him feel nauseous.

Once everyone was herded in, Gary introduced Nelson as an "illustrious alumnus" to a listless crowd of softly creaking metal chairs. Nelson was warming up his tingling hands in the back of the stage like he'd planned something much more involved than the talk he was about to give. He took the mic from Gary, who gave him another generous slap to the back.

"Thanks so much for that introduction," Nelson said. "And thanks for having me here today, guys." Idiot. They clearly had no choice but to have him there. "You know, I used to suffer through these assemblies every week when I was a student here" — he could feel Gary frown at him from the sidelines — "so I'm going to try and keep this interesting for everyone." Idiot and a liar.

"I run a 501-C3 nonprofit called Clean Source," and that's when he knew he lost them; he knew when he said 501-C3 they heard "C-3PO," which meant *nerd talk*. They were all thinking it. *Nerd in a cheap suit.* Their thoughts flew at him from their folding chairs like tomatoes. In reality, the students weren't thinking much, at least not much about him, except maybe: Why is this guest speaker taking such a long pause?

He launched into it: the NGO beginnings, what inspired him, the "daily grind," his stint in Africa, and he could sense their boredom like feedback. Like a toothpick in his ear. Quickly, his hands went from tingling to just plain numb. He picked up his talking pace, as if his hands, like everyone else, were simply bored and he just had to be more entertaining to wake them. He jostled around the stage as though there were a match under his buttocks. Then he tried to motion to the students in the back row, but when he lifted his arm, his hand drooped dead at the end of his limb like a rotten orange.

"That's not right," he said into the microphone. "I ... I can't move my hand ..."

The chairs were silent; even the girls in the front row just stared, wondering if this was a ploy and about to take a theatrical twist. But Nelson did not break into song. Rather, he mumbled "thank you" again, but this time as if it were a question, and he walked off the stage. A thousand pairs of eyes and one very thick neck following him. *Nerdinacheapsuit, nerdinacheapsuit, nerdinacheapsuit!*

The pink front-office lady who may or may not have been named Sandra ushered Nelson into the school sick room. He'd never been in the school sick room. He'd never gotten sick in high school. "I just did push-ups," he said to her, trying to make a joke while also trying to redeem some manhood. She had him lie down. She felt his forehead.

"You feeling queasy?" she asked and, not waiting for his answer, said, "I'll call your mother, poor dear," and left him alone in the small room.

He suddenly felt so fantastically lame that he laughed, and he couldn't even cover his mouth because he couldn't move his hands. Behold! The illustrious alumnus now bellowing laughter in the school sick room, semi-paralytic and alone! And that's how his mother found him: dizzy with laughter, arms flaccid next to him; though clearly, he was maintaining his positivity.

"It's because you're too health-conscious," his mother said. "It gets you in fits." She sat on the edge of his bed in the Menifee Valley Hospital, eyes on the ceiling to avoid looking at the IV stuck in the crook of his arm. Whether or not she acknowledged it, Nelson's mother always drew a straight line from his ailments to his abstinence from butter.

"I'm gonna go check on the doctor," she said when he didn't respond. "He's taking a century."

Nelson breathed a sigh of relief once his mother was gone. It was impossible to feel anxiety about his situation when it was expressed so entirely by someone else. He tried to move his arms, but the numbness had crept all the way up his bicep on the left and to his shoulder on the right. He sighed again. They'd get the blood results the next morning. In the meantime, they were monitoring his levels, which was supposed to be reassuring, though it felt like a Richter scale monitoring inevitable impending doom. *Too dramatic?* he wondered. He closed his eyes. How soon would it be until the

numbness got to his face? Would his mother have to stand by his side indefinitely, fanning his eyelids open and shut like a plastic baby doll?

"Nel ... Nelson?"

A voice in the doorway. Not his mother's. But a woman's. He kept his eyes shut. Whoever it was, it would be better to play dead. Inside his head the circus ran: *Nerdina, cheapsuit? Dernina, seap chuit!* He heard the irate heel clicks of his mother coming down the hallway.

"*There* you are!" she scolded, as though the person in the doorway was an unruly puppy. "I've been up and down these halls looking for you!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the woman said. "I was assisting another patient."

"Is it so. Well, we're just dying for some answers. And I don't use that word lightly. My son literally might be dying, and no one will tell us a thing."

Nelson recoiled at his mother's voice. He kept up his performance, focusing on taking breaths that were deeper, longer, and therefore more convincing.

"The doctor will be here shortly, I promise," the woman said.

"Then who the hell are you?"

"I'm the nurse." She'd hardly said the words before Nelson's mother had turned on her icy heels and took her maternal storm in the opposite direction to search for the real doctor, who was most probably taking shelter in a janitor's closet. Once he sensed safety, Nelson, like a turtle poking its head back out of a shell, cracked open his eyes. But — unbelievable! — the woman was still there, in scrubs, watching him.

"Oh!" he uttered. It was Lara, Lara Something. Something with a K.

"You're quite a sleep actor," she said, leaned against the doorway coolly, as though she were John Wayne and he were some frontier bandit caught in the act and about to have his ass busted. He was pretty sure they'd dated, for a short time, early on in high school. The first adjective to float up from a sea of time-warped memories: She'd been wild. He wondered what terms they were on when they graduated. Given her *how the tables have turned* stance, he guessed they weren't good.

"Lara! It's been a while."

"So what's wrong with you?" she asked.

He tried to shrug, but it was lopsided; his right shoulder was useless. "Don't know," he added, in case she was confused. "Arms stopped working today. Happens."

"You live in Menifee? Still?" she asked it as though it were below her. He felt like she should be smacking bubble gum.

"Just visiting. I've been in L.A. And I was abroad for a few years."

He was getting the sense of what kind of girl Lara was: the kind that asks someone a question and then ignores the answer because she assumes it's a lie. He was the kind that didn't ask questions at all, because he was losing feeling in his extremities and wasn't in the mood to be social.

"I see. Your mother seems very ... involved." She said it politely, though it was clearly meant as an insult.

He tried to remember if and how he hurt her. He recalled she always had her hair in a ponytail and wore thick black eyeliner halfway up her eyelids. She'd had a heinous laugh, and they'd sometimes tease her for it, which would make her laugh louder. And there was some sort of nickname. Yet it made him feel a bit powerful in a way, that she was still angry about something he'd done 10 years before; that he'd had that kind of lasting effect. Or maybe she was just a rude person now.

"Well, she's been a bit on edge since my dad passed," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

That shut her up. He usually played the dad card with suavity, tactfully, but tonight he rang it like a gong. He didn't feel like pulling punches. Mainly because, at the moment, he couldn't punch anything at all.

"Do we know you?"

Nelson's mother materialized from nowhere. She eyed the girl, still languidly reclined against the doorframe, and added with a tone of doctorly superiority: "He should be resting, you know."

"Of course." Lara stood up straight. "Nelson and I went to high school together. I was just checking on him, and we started catching up."

His mother's uneasiness expressed itself as this: tense lips, two squinting eyes, two clenched butt cheeks. "That's nice, old friends," she said. "I guess I don't remember you, though you look a tad familiar. Has Nelson been telling you about his work?"

"Mom."

"He runs a nonprofit helping people in Africa get clean water. He's saved lives. Children's lives." She said it as though the flimsy nurse in front of her would have no idea what saving a child's life might entail.

"Mahhhhhm."

"No, he hasn't had the chance to tell me," Lara said, smiling, which was a new feature.

"Oh, yes. You know, he was nearly listed as a '30 Under 30' in Forbes, if nepotism wasn't as rampant as the flu." She nodded as if it were obvious, so Lara nodded too.

"Mom!"

Attention snapped back to Nelson, who was sweating in his cheap suit. Whose ego had its tail plunged between its legs.

"Well, I'm off to find the *real* doctor. As elusive as a gnat," his mother said. "Keep an eye on him, will you?"

Lara bit her lower lip to keep from laughing.

"She's something," she said once his mother was out of earshot. Then she realized she'd just insulted a widow, and felt bad.

"Something doesn't begin to describe it."

"Didn't know you were such a life-saving emperor." And now she was mocking his vocation. She was mocking cholera.

"My mother likes to exaggerate," he said with modesty. He had saved a lot of lives. Or at least, the NGO had, if not him personally. Or maybe his dad had saved the lives, thanks to that fat portion of his will allotted to "global epidemics."

Lara came in and read the machine next to his bed. Then she checked his clipboard. It was called: stalling. Like she was trying to work the nerve up to say something, but all she said was: "My, my, Nelson Garcia. Nelson Garcia!" She repeated his name as if it were a punch line. There was no one else in the room, and for once, Nelson wished his mother would return. Who knew what kind of medical torture this bird had in mind.

"You still talk to people from high school?" she asked. She was still scanning the clipboard.

"Ha. No. Not really."

"Not even T Dog?"

"Who?"

The numbness had begun in his feet. Now he couldn't even kick. Maybe, if things got ugly, he could knee someone.

"Tyler Dawson. You guys used to call him T Dog."

"Oh gosh, no. I didn't really keep in touch with anyone after graduation. Did you?" Ah! He had meant not to ask any questions.

"I thought football teams were brothers for life."

"Those are fraternities. A bit different."

"Are they, though?" she asked sharply. "Same general concept."

So he had done something. He evaluated her standing there. Hair in a neat braid. Eyeliner just as black as in high school but thankfully less thick. Chunky spot-white nurse shoes. A barren ring finger. A generous rear that was so much larger than it'd been 10 years ago. He hated that he remembered that. He felt a fresh mist of self-loathing. *If I'd been such a jerk in high school, they wouldn't have asked me to speak,* he said to himself. His low morale snapped back: *No, if your mother hadn't called, they wouldn't have asked you to speak. Nerdinacheapsuit!*

"Did I do something to upset you?" he asked.

She shrugged, though the answer was self-evident. Tingles crept up his calves.

"I'm really sorry if I did," he said. "I honestly can't remember. I'm a little distracted right now."

"I have other patients to get to," she said, as though he'd been holding her hostage.

"Of course."

He was alone with the beeping machines. He tried to nap, but then remembered! Smoke Alarm. That's what her nickname had been. A sort of double entendre. Smoke for the crazy eyeliner, Alarm for the crazy laugh.

When the numbness reached his pelvis, he wet himself.

"Shawarma?" Nelson's mother held a Styrofoam box of lamb kebab under his nose. She was less than upset by the fact that she'd have to feed him. But she was very upset by the fact that the doctor

still hadn't given any answers. So all in all, her emotions were somewhat balanced. Lara tapped on the door.

"Mrs. Garcia? Dr. Rosenstein would like to see you."

"Who is he, the Wizard of Oz?" She waved around a forkful of lamb. "Why doesn't he come in here, then?"

"He's just down the hall in his office."

Nelson's mother looked nervous; office meetings couldn't be good. She sighed and set down the food. "I'll feed him when I get back," she said, in case Lara felt tempted to do so.

"Absolutely," Lara answered.

At this point, six hours post Nelson's very public physical breakdown, mobility was limited to his chest upwards. Lara idled at the foot of his bed.

"My shift is over. So I'm going home."

"Congratulations." Why did she feel the need to tell him?

"Are you in any pain?" she asked him.

"No. Are you?" He didn't know why he asked that. It just kind of slipped out, a free radical that spun out from their surface-level-conversation orbit. She just stared at him.

"I know you don't remember what you did," she said finally. "It was a long time ago. And seeing you here, all neutered, pissing yourself. Well, it's kind of what I needed. I think it's time for me to let it go."

He couldn't believe it. He'd survived two years in villages in Cameroon, sans plumbing, sans hospitals. Now he was drowning inside his body in Menifee, California. He'd done the math: He had two more hours to speak until his face would be petrified. And he had to spend them getting fed by his mother and nursing ancient enigmatic grudges.

"Is this what you get paid for?" he asked incredulously. "To kick 'em while they're down?"

"Reverse psychology," she joked. "Anyways, I just wanted to say you don't have to feel bad anymore, because I forgive you. Not that you can feel anything right now."

It was mean, so mean that it shocked her, and she gave out a cockeyed laugh. Less crazy than in high school. Still weird.

"That's big of you," Nelson said.

"Sorry. Okay, well, get better, Nelson."

"Yep."

Lara bumped into his mother who came storming back in the room, slightly contorted, eyes bugged as though she'd received an electric shock in Dr. Rosenstein's office. She began spilling out a torrent of words. Nelson feigned sleepiness.

"Mom, please, I'm tired," he said, stripping all luster from his voice. He closed his eyes.

"Oh baby, of course." She took his hand and her tears fell on it, which he didn't notice.

He tried to sleep; it'd be easier to ease into paralysis that way. Lara. Smoke Alarm Lara. He pictured her back in high school, raccoon eyes squinting as she let out an ear-splitting laugh. Drunk.

So was the whole team. Though T Dog had done something. Dropped something in her drink maybe. Nelson couldn't exactly remember. Where were they? Some dark house.

Lara tripping over herself. Lara laying down. Oh, God, Lara. Still laughing. Vomit on her lips. Black eyes closed. Someone took a picture. What an audience she had, in that dark room.

His mother stroked his hand, and he didn't feel it. He didn't feel anything except a blanket of numbness creeping up his sternum. He'd held a lot of dying hands in Cameroon.

Honorable Mention

Joan

By Noah Broyles

November 11th

Joan has been dead for a week. It's raining hard. The rectangle of orange dirt is pooling with water — the coffin lies beneath. I hope it's waterproof. I did order a better headstone, of course, but it'll be another week before it's here. In the meantime, she'll just have to do with that little nub of gray stone. I could take her with me and have her reinterred, but I know she'd hate that. She'd hate a metropolitan cemetery, where the graves are wrapped in smog instead of fog.

I look at the flowers in my hand — woody stems and tiny purple blossoms. There's no flower shop in Ely; I cut these up in the meadow behind the house just an hour ago, before it started raining. They're already wilted. I ordered some hothouse bouquets, but they haven't arrived yet. I'm not sure I'll be here when they do. Tomorrow afternoon I depart – back to the big city. I wonder, how long will it be before I forget? Already her face is fading. I knew her so short a time I never bothered to have photographs made. Like a star, the harder I try to see her the more she fades, and the more I grieve the less I feel.

November 9th

Joan has been dead for five entire days. It's raining, and the diner windows are blurry. Four o'clock in the afternoon and the streetlights are already on. I must go to Joan's grave, but the cold's made me a coward. I'm soaked from an afternoon in her garden. All she ever wanted was a neat garden — how can I bear to see a single leaf or twig in it? They fall almost as fast as the rain — I must be just as fast. But I can't leave her alone in that silent tract of land, either. I will cut some pine — she loved pine — and take it to her grave. I will then —

"Sir?"

There is a waitress at my elbow. "Just coffee."

"Sure."

She sees I want to be left alone. She retreats and I try to recover my train of thought, but it's all a jumble, a mess of things to do, none of them with an ounce of meaning. I rock slowly back and forth. When the coffee comes I try to sip it, but it is scalding, and my throat is tight. I spill it on the table and use my sleeve to mop it up, as there are no napkins. My hands shake as I wait for it to

cool. I pull out my silver cigarette case and take a cigarette. I light it and inhale slowly, closing my eyes. I feel around for the cup and take it up, holding it in my hands, absorbing the warmth.

"Sir?"

The waitress again.

"I'm sorry, sir, you aren't allowed to smoke in here."

Something snaps and I drop the cup. It shatters and the liquid flows across the table. The waitress lets out a little scream. I rise, walk quickly to the door, kick it open, and stalk out into the rain. I throw aside the cigarette and light a new one, but it will not burn. A single raindrop quenches it.

November 8th

I wake from a dream where Joan is still alive but I do not love her. I turn over in bed and slide my hand to the cold side of the mattress. My old teddy sits there now. In the silent lightning of the fading thunderstorm, I see myself in his glassy eyes. I have carried him with me for luck since the car wreck when I was 10. He sat on my lap and stared at me while the hood crumpled and the windshield exploded. He watched while the firemen sawed through the collapsed door. I held him next to me at the funeral. We both looked at the two sleek caskets.

But I had left him in my suitcase when I came to Ely. He had been shut in the darkness, crammed among my socks and underwear. He sat in that wardrobe across the room, blind, the two times Joan and I made love. He never saw her chestnut hair, or candlelight on her skin. He had never seen her at all.

Now he sits in her place. I take the tiny bear in my arms and listen to the rain. I wonder, if I had shown him to Joan ... would she still have died?

November 7th

They didn't have to tell me I was a disgrace at the funeral, they just had to look at me. Condemnation had replaced consolation in their eyes. Had Joan loved a tramp? I examine the razor. I should use a smaller one, friends tell me, a safer one. This large, naked blade is a thing of past centuries and horror tales. I could as easily cut my throat with it. The shave cream waits in the cup. The brush stands beside it.

Joan.

I write a 3 on the steam-drenched mirror. Three days. Seventy-two hours. Cold body beneath cold ground. Could she really have been warm and alive three days ago?

Water gathers at the bottom of the 3. A drop streaks down the mirror and glimmers on the countertop. In its track, I can see a sliver of myself. They were right. They said nothing, but they were right. I am haggard and hideous. I pick up the brush and dash the foam across my face. Then the razor. It gleams in the radiance of the bulbs that line the top of the mirror.

When I last used this sink, she stood beside me at her sink. The lights above her mirror are dark now. Her toothbrush stands in its holder, waiting.

November 5th

Rain rattles against the tall windows.

This morning I had thought it would be sunny. Frost had glittered on the roses outside the front door as if a light was shining down on them through the gray clouds – a light that I could not yet see. A heap of those frozen roses rest now on the plain wooden coffin, tied hastily with a ribbon. The thorn wounds itch on my fingers. I press my fingers harder against my legs and stare ahead. Words echo through the little gray building, spoken by a little gray man.

"Joan was loved by all of us. She brought her own ... special kind of joy to our lives. A daughter, a friend, a wife. Different to each of us, yet the same sparkle of hope we held in our hearts. Each day, as I drove in, I would pass her on the road. She would wave. Only a wave, and yet it lifted my heart each time. That was her way. Quiet, but with an abundance of friendship. I am sure none of us ever took that for granted. But if we did, even for a moment, I am sure we regret it now. And that ache, that *ache*, may grow stronger each day. But she won't be coming back, this time. She's gone on a little walk from which there's no return. We will go to her, but she will not return to us."

It goes on for an hour.

As I depart behind the coffin bearers, the entire three-person congregation watches me with hollow eyes. Then they rise and follow us out into the rain.

November 4th

When light slipped into the room alone that morning, it found the frantic inability of some, and the useless tears of others, and quivering breaths of one, all still and laid aside. We slept.

Even as I woke, I knew. I lifted my head from the sheets. Her hand lay before me on the coverlet, white and still. A scratch on the back of her middle finger stood out starkly on her dry skin. My hand was just beyond her reach.

I covered the little hand with my own and kissed it reverently. It was not too cold yet. It still moved freely with mine.

I had gone to sleep knowing what I might find when I woke. I had readied myself for the pain. I was almost proud of the manner in which I could absorb shock and remain level-headed. It was what came after that which caused trouble. Not the dead hand in mine, but the fact that the dead hand did not come back to life. The fact that the joke did not have a punch line. That the dream did not have an end. Slowly, like thick oil, *understanding* gathered in my stomach.

Before I looked at her silent face, I said aloud, "Nurse."

The woman came awake and rose from her chair.

"She has gone?" I said. I didn't like the way it came out, like a question.

November 2nd

It was in the dreary twilight of a dreary day that I came back to the house. The first raindrops of the nightly storm were beginning to fall as I climbed out of the car and trudged up the walk. The front door was unlocked. Inside, all the lights were off and the clocks ticked loudly. After the months of cold, the air was thick and stale, longing for an open window and a breath of spring.

"I'm home," I called up the stairs. In the kitchen the stove was cold. I frowned into the empty oven, then flicked on a light and examined the bare countertops. All the utensils sat idle. In the blue-dark window above the sink, her collection of porcelain pigs sat with their backs to the increasing rain and watched me.

I went back into the hall and climbed the stairs. She couldn't still be in bed. True, she'd been sneezing more than usual that morning, but a little cold wouldn't keep her in bed. The bedroom was still and quiet. The bed was unbearably smooth. The curtains were still drawn for the day. I pulled them together and turned on the lamp on her nightstand. Her rooster clock stood there, *tick-tick-tick*.

"Are you here?" I called, going back downstairs. Half taking off my coat, I decided to leave it on in case I had to look for her outside. The living room sat waiting, and the pantry was asleep. I poked around in the room in the back of the house that she had set her heart on converting into a library. Odds and ends were stacked everywhere and spilled into the hall a bit, but she was nowhere among them.

When an ill-placed encyclopedia tripped me up, I leaned against the wall and worked my hands, hissing breath through my teeth. She could have at least told me this morning if she was planning to go out. But where on earth would she go? Certainly not to a tea or anything. And she didn't take long walks anymore. I shoved my hands into my pockets and returned to the hall.

Then I noticed the light. It was the unfiltered white kind that comes from a naked bulb. It squeezed through a gap beside the door to the basement, which was ajar just a hairbreadth.

I sniffed for chemicals as I approached the door. Sure enough, an acrid whiff was detectible. She would be down there refinishing some great ugly desk or table, having lost track of time in the windowless room.

I sucked in a clean breath and opened the door. That grimy industrial light revealed the steep staircase and some sort of blockage in the doorway at the bottom. Pulling the collar of my shirt over my nose, I went down. It was some sort of wooden bureau blocking the steps. Oak, by the look of it. I bent down and tried to peer over it into the room. "Are you down here?"

And finally, an answer came. A little muffled whimper.

Something cold touched me. "What's wrong?" I shoved at the piece of furniture. "It's time to stop work now. It's late."

A ragged breath was all the response at first. Then, "Don't push on it, darling."

I realized the situation. She was trapped. Trapped beneath this ugly hunk of wood. Pulling off the restricting coat, I tossed it away. I took hold of either side of the thing and pulled. But there was nothing to hold and the weight was too great. It didn't budge. "I'm coming," I said. I grabbed the lintel above the door, which was at chest height from my place on the stairs, and swung my legs above

the bureau. My heels thumped against its smooth top. Pictures and figurines would sit there, were it in some upstairs room.

I knew I would not be able to throw myself across it onto the floor below because of the restrictive latitude of the staircase. "I'm coming," I said again. "Some of my weight might rest on this for a second." Then I heaved myself forward.

My back clipped the thing and jarred it before I crash-landed in the basement below. Joan lay beside me on her back, her lower body trapped beneath the edge of the piece of furniture. I got beside her on my knees and took her hand, which lay on the cold concrete. She was very white. Her eyes were only partially open, and glassy. Her nose was runny. I touched her face. She was cold. Cold all over. How long had she been like this?

"Listen to me. When I lift this, can you push yourself out from under it?"

"I —" She coughed. "I'll try."

"Okay." I placed my back against the bureau and got hold beneath it. I hoisted it up and Joan struggled. But her strength was long gone. Her hands brushed on the floor, but she did not move. I grunted, steadied myself on one foot, then used the other to shove her body across the floor. I let go. The thing slammed down. I turned, seized it, and dragged it out of the staircase and out of the way.

Then I ran to Joan and lifted her, carrying her up out of the chemical smell and dead light of the basement and into the dark house. I held her close and climbed the steps to our bedroom. She lay limply on the coverlet in very much the same position she had lain on the floor below. A cold sweat stood out on her forehead.

"What were you thinking, trying to get that thing up here without me?" I demanded. "Why didn't you wait for me to return? I could have managed it easily. You're much too small to do such things."

"Cold," she replied in a tiny voice. She said it again and again, "So cold."

I lit the fire, but the room remained chilly. "Would you like some dinner? I'll heat some soup."

She struggled to rise in a delirious burst of strength. "I can get it."

"Nonsense! You stay where you are." I needn't have spoken, she could not rise. I rummaged in the closet and found another quilt and placed it across her. "Just rest, I'll be right back."

In the kitchen icebox, I found the remains of a chili from two nights before. I hadn't thought it appetizing at the time — too watery, too little meat — but as I heated it now, my stomach growled. I would find something for myself as soon as she was warmed and filled. Foolish girl! Trying to do so much, not pacing herself, not waiting for help. I would have helped, if she'd just given me time.

The bowl slipped from my clammy hands and shattered on the tile. I cursed aloud and kicked the largest shard into a corner where it splintered even further against the baseboard. Taking out another bowl, I filled it with soup and grabbed a hunk of stale bread.

She was shivering violently when I returned to the bedroom. Her eyes were closed, her breathing rapid. I hurriedly set the food aside and reached for her hand. "Are you still so cold?" She felt warm enough.

"I ..." Her teeth chattered.

"What is wrong with this fire?" I went to it and poked it savagely. "I'll get you warm, I promise." Seizing a heap of blankets from the hall closet, I bundled them into the room and mounded them up on the bed. Her eyes fluttered and she tried to speak, tried to smile. I knelt by her and held her hand again, wiping sweat from her brow. Her lips pressed together as she tried to form a word. I leaned closer and repeated what I heard. "Bath?"

She managed a nod.

I went to the bathroom and turned on the tap. The iron tub filled slowly. Back in the bedroom, I stoked the fire, then lifted her from the den of blankets and carried her to the room of swirling steam. She didn't try to send me away; if she could have, she would have. She leaned heavily on me, and I held her as I undressed her. She wasn't able to step in, of course. My skin burned as I set her in, but she sank into the scalding water with a sigh.

I pulled a stool close and stretched my arm across the tub to give her a headrest. The water was milky and opaque. I pulled the few pins from her hair and let her head sink back just far enough so the water turned her hair deep brown. I found the shampoo and worked it through the hair, washing the sweat away. I cleaned the dirt from her face with a cloth and worked a lather of soap across her arms and hands. I cleaned the dirt from beneath her bitten-off nails.

Her shallow breath and the oppressive warmth of the room lulled me into a sort of limbo-state where the stroking of her hair became as automatic as a swinging pendulum. The day repeated itself before my staring eyes, and in the back of my mind I asked myself which step, which glance, which gesture during those thoughtless hours had led me to this endless moment in this silent room?

My exhausted arm fell into the water. It was icy. I sprang up and pulled her from the tub and held her close. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I whispered. She was limp and still and cold as an autumn leaf. "I didn't realize ... I'm sorry."

But she couldn't hear.

October 23rd

"The rains will start soon, dear. And then the snow will come."

I looked over my paper at Joan. She sat before me, her plate pushed away, her hands folded around her coffee mug. "What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Well, I thought it might be a good idea to clean the garden out."

She was wearing her hair back in a way she knew I didn't like. "The garden is half an acre, dearest one."

"I know that, but I've done more than half of it already. It's mostly just a lot of vines that need to be pulled up."

"You don't want to do it? I mean, since you say you've done most of the job already ..."

"I would, darling," she let one hand drop beneath the table. "But I have this ... this ..." Her hand came back up quickly, holding a handkerchief. She sneezed into it explosively.

"Oh, for God's sake, stop. You did that while you were making breakfast, too, and made it rather unpalatable."

"I'm sorry, darling. But what would we have eaten?"

"I would have made it. You need simply have asked me."

"I would have, but I wasn't sure you knew how."

"Nonsense. Of course I know how to make breakfast. I cooked my own breakfast in the city for years."

"I only meant to say—"

"And don't get that quavery, phlegmy sound in your voice, dearest one. It's both dishonest and disgusting. Clear your throat when you speak."

"But darling, I truly do have a cold."

"Cold, my foot! You've been sneezing and coughing since last Wednesday. No cold lasts that long."

She dropped the handkerchief into her lap. "I suppose I can do the rest of the garden."

I folded the paper. "You shall not. I would do it, but the weather is abysmal. It'll start raining any minute now."

"That's why it should be done. Once it starts, it won't stop for a while."

"No work shall be done today, dearest one. It's Monday. The whole week lies ahead. We should take advantage of this dreary day by going to town. There's a rather fine-looking picture playing."

She sighed and stood up. "You go, darling. I'll stay here."

"You must promise me not to work while I'm gone. How can I enjoy myself if I know you are toiling away here?"

"I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself."

"We went to dinner at your parents' house a few nights ago and what did you do? You worked there also. You cooked, you cleaned, you did everything."

"They're old."

"Your only idea of recreation seems to be strenuous hikes in the hills. It really is too much."

She came around the table to collect my plate.

"Don't mistake me, I understand the value of work. I've worked like a dog, too. I've done it for years. How do you think I have the luck to relax now but thanks to a great deal of dedicated work and sweat of my brow?" I touched her hand. "Think of me as your luck, dearest one. You can afford to relax."

"That's the hand I sneezed on, darling."

I quickly took my hand away, then rolled my eyes. "Don't be cruel that way."

"I am sorry. But I believe our souls are too different to understand one another."

"Try, dearest one."

"I love you, darling. Of course I try." She went toward the kitchen. "You have a nice time at the movies."

I went out into the dull autumn morning shaking my head. As I walked to the garage, I spared the garden a glance. It lay a short distance off, a muddy patch on the edge of the forest.

September 1st

I drove the little road to Ely on the last night of summer.

It was getting late to be out — around seven — and a thunderstorm was sweeping across the wilderness, chasing my day of wanderings towards its close. Lightning danced across the low hills and thunder echoed in the forests. The lakes vibrated in their basins. It was a landscape to run home from. This tract of country, which had served as a fairyland in the afternoon, with deep creeks for children to hunt for gold in, and hidden glens with beds of moss for lovers to lie in, and still coves for men to fish in, and placid islets for women to row out to, and sit on, and paint the world from, was now driving the scattered rovers home to their beds. There they could sink into a warm cocoon of dreams and relive the perfect day, while the world outside changed from day to night and from one season to the next.

I didn't turn the headlights on until the first raindrops spattered on the windshield. By then it was almost too late. The shrouded figure appeared on the road like one of the twilight shadows taking human form. I caught a glimpse of a startled face as I slammed on the brakes and spun the wheel. A hundred feet later, I was stopped and climbing out of the car. The shape stood motionless off in the gloom, and the pursuing curtain of rain washed over it. I squinted, then pulled my hat lower and jogged down the road. "Hey! Come on, you'll be soaked."

It was a young woman I had nearly killed. She stood stock-still, a bunch of woody stems covered with leaves and little purple flowers clutched in her hands. Her hair was already wet and hung around her face. Her lips were delicate and smooth and her eyes were blue. "I'm sorry," she said. "I should have known."

"It's my fault." I rushed to her and put my arm around her and drew her toward the car. "Quickly, you'll catch your death." The rain made my skin tingle. But what was the explanation for the lightness in my heart?

I helped her into the car, then ran around and climbed in, pulling the door shut. "As I say, I'm sorry. I was no-doubt going too fast. I'm used to the city, not these little roads a hundred miles from anywhere."

"I assure you, we're both to blame." She looked down at the twiggy heap in her lap. "I was cutting these in the meadow, and I didn't realize how late it was. Forgive me, I shouldn't have them in your car."

"No!" I stopped her as she reached for the door handle. "They're lovely."

"Oh," she smiled. "Well then, would you like to have them? Nobody really needs them, I just like to imagine that somebody does."

Something was slightly off about her two front teeth that made her smile even lovelier. And her voice — both breathless and subdued, like an endless afternoon.

"I was wrong about you just now, back there on the road," I said suddenly. "I thought you were just some young woman."

"Oh — but ... that's what I am."

“No. You are the most beautiful woman in all the world.”
She let her eyes drop. “You’re very kind. Everyone else just calls me Joan.”

Honorable Mention

The Blazer

By Ross G. Pinsky

Last weekend I was down in Washington for the wedding of a friend's son. I guess that makes me sound older than I am, but my friend, Richard, was actually my 12th-grade English teacher. I'd been scheduled to have Mr. Barrett, a venerable school institution. Scheduled, but not destined, for Mr. Barrett sustained a heart attack Labor Day weekend, just before the start of my senior year, and retired promptly on disability. Richard was hardly next in line for the plum assignment of honors 12th-grade English — it was only his second year at our prep school, and he had yet to turn 30. But none of the other English teachers relished tackling a demanding course last-minute, so the job was passed on to him.

Richard, or Mr. Becker, as we called him back then, had an uncanny knack of making us want to please him, and most of us made an extra effort to satisfy his high standards.

That June, he bought 25 copies of Alfred Kazin's *Bright Book of Life*, inscribing a personal send-off to each of us. If we could empathize with the author's eternally boyish enthusiasm, he told us, then he'd done his job of making the literary tradition come alive. I still feel Richard's influence when I read good literature, although I have little time for that these days, with my practice and my kids.

During college on winter break, we always came back to rap with Richard at the high school, and each summer he'd make a big Fourth of July barbecue for all his "exies," as he called us. Through the grapevine, I hear that Richard's still well regarded as a teacher; however, the unique relationship he maintained during my senior year lasted only briefly. That was borne out at the wedding Saturday evening, where the youngest exie in attendance graduated just three years after I did.

We exies and our spouses were seated at two adjacent tables along the periphery of the spacious banquet hall. Almost 20 years had passed since I'd graduated, and many of us had been out of touch for a long time already. I was the sole exie from out of town, as well as the only one sans spouse. At our table, drinks flowed freely and the conversation was intimate in a way I rarely find these days. The more I basked in the nostalgia, the sorrier I was that Leslie had remained home in Boston with the kids. None of my classmates had ever met her.

After the main course, everyone else at our two tables got up to dance. I remained seated. I felt a little awkward, and eventually stood up to watch. Looking around at my classmates, snuggled up against their stranger-spouses as the band played a slow Billy Joel tune, I tried to remember who

they'd all taken to the senior prom. The opening riff of the Rolling Stones' tune "Satisfaction" put an abrupt end to my reveries. Everyone on the dance floor started moving furiously.

"Care to dance, Mr. Lonely Heart?"

Startled, I turned around. It was Beth Goldin. Barely did I have time to remove my sports jacket and drape it over the back of a vacant chair before Beth pulled me into the fray.

"I can't get no — SATISFACTION!" she yelled over the sound of the band. I smiled and we started moving.

Beth and I had gone steady the second half of 11th grade, but she broke up with me a week after school ended. She'd been my first girlfriend, and I'd remained indescribably bleak until September.

As we danced, I took notice of Beth. She wore a short black felt jacket over a white halter, revealing, just barely, her ample cleavage, already fully asserted in my day. She must have been wearing something super-firm underneath, because her bust remained immobile through all her contortions. Short and cute, she could've easily passed for under 30. In fact, with her wispy bangs and light freckles, and her girlish clothes — her skirt was corduroy — Beth almost could've been back in high school. My wife, Leslie, an attorney, has a model's build, looks stylish and sophisticated, and is just starting to gray. She's 39, two years older than me.

The song ended and the band started another slow dance, the Irish ballad "Red Is the Rose."

"Oh, that's one of my favorites, Ted."

I hesitated and looked over my shoulder for Beth's husband.

"Mike's at the bar — par for the course," she said.

We held each other and danced.

"I really like this song too," I said.

It felt so different having my chin above a woman's head. Her hair was thick, tangly, and dark brown, very unlike Leslie's fine, soft chestnut hair. For a while, we danced silently.

"Like old times," said Beth finally.

"Yes, indeed," I replied. Feeling a bit intoxicated, partly from several glasses of wine and partly from the tangy scent of her perfume, I had an urge to dig my chin gently into her scalp and nuzzle my nose into her wild, thick locks. I was feeling cocky.

"Remember how devastated I was when you broke up with me?"

"Yeah, and I ditched you for Berman. Yuk! I must have been out of my mind."

"Andrew Berman," we said simultaneously. We laughed.

"But you got over it pretty quickly, right?"

"Sure, it took an hour or so."

"Ted!"

I winked at her.

The dance ended and we returned to our tables. Several times during dessert I sneaked a glance at the next table where Beth sat. I watched her laugh. I watched her speak, one arm draped carelessly around the back of her husband's chair. I learned from Beth that he's a doctor as am I, and that they have two kids, as do we.

It was time to leave. I felt half-dazed. It took me a minute to recall what I'd done with my sports jacket. Four or five chairs were scattered randomly about the dance floor, but they were bare. The large hall was a tumult with 200 people in various stages of departure. I began to search for my navy blazer, chair by chair. Navy blazers are quite popular. Noticing one draped on the back of a vacated chair at a table where a number of people were still seated, I asked if the jacket belonged to someone and was told, with raised eyebrows, that it did. Continuing my search more tactfully, I discovered two other unattended navy blazers that looked like they could be mine. Glancing around surreptitiously, I poked my hand into the pockets of one of these jackets. They were empty, just like my jacket pockets were. I came up empty on the second blazer too. At least one of them wasn't mine, so perhaps neither of them was mine, I reasoned unhelpfully. I was getting impatient, so I decided to leave without my jacket and give the hotel a call in the morning.

I picked up my overcoat from the cloakroom and waited my turn in a line of guests to say goodbye to Richard and his wife, Carol.

"Thanks *so* much for coming, Ted. It was very sweet of you," said Carol.

I smiled blankly.

"You look a little woozy. Are you okay to drive, Ted?" asked Richard.

"I guess I *did* have one too many, but that was all before the main course. And I just had coffee. I'll be fine."

"Well, be sure to take Connecticut Avenue home rather than the park. And give me a call next time you're in town. You came all the way from Boston, and I hardly exchanged a word with you all night. I feel bad."

"Don't worry. That's how it's supposed to be at your child's wedding."

It was getting on toward midnight as I drove through Rock Creek Park, headed for my parents' home in Chevy Chase. There were very few streetlights and my high beams cut through a swath of frosty December air along the pitch-black and empty road. The radio in my parents' car was on the blink, so I drove in silence. When I passed the Chinese restaurant at the entrance to our neighborhood, it suddenly struck me. My father's navy blazer — Gavrilides'! I smiled inwardly. I still knew the streets of Washington better than those of Boston or any other place I'd lived as an adult. So many blocks evoked a memory, retained a story.

For many years, my parents brought our good clothing to Gavrilides', the local dry-cleaning establishment. The store was part of a quaint, truncated commercial row, tucked away neatly in a neighborhood of sturdy ivy-covered brick colonials. Mrs. Gavrilides was a nervous woman in her 50s with a perpetually preoccupied air and a peculiar talent — she possessed a photographic memory for the layout of the establishment's constantly changing contents, freshly pressed by a Vietnamese assistant and encased in transparent plastic, and then hung from two tiers of metal frame racks crisscrossing the shop from end to end.

Before my mother could pull out her receipt, Mrs. Gavrilides would throw her a bizarre glance, and after an instant of conjuring, she'd say, "Oh, Mrs. Levin — two skirts, one sports jacket, and three pairs of trousers." Disappearing among the racks to the rustle of cellophane, she'd emerge shortly

with our garments. On occasion, my mother had no receipt at all, as Mrs. Gavrilides conducted business orally when things got busy.

While Mrs. Gavrilides performed her mental feats, two Vietnamese employees did all the physical work, leaving complacent Mr. Gavrilides plenty of time to sit idly by the cash register in his tweed jacket, smoking a pipe, welcoming each customer with a distracted nod or a perfunctory smile, and ringing up the accounts.

The Gavrilides, Holocaust refugees from Greece, were a bit of a mystery. We once heard that Mrs. Gavrilides had lost a husband and child in one of the concentration camps, but no one in the neighborhood seemed to know for sure. My parents had always liked to patronize their shop because of their past, and then all the more so when the Gavrilides were quick to hire Vietnamese boat people, who came to our shores after the fall of Saigon ended the Vietnam War in 1975.

The Gavrilides lived above the shop with their daughter, Sara, who was two grades above me and attended the Jewish Day School. She was the first girl I ever had a crush on, but I never uttered even a syllable to her. On Saturdays, she would frequently take over for her father at the cash register. As I approached my parents' house, it occurred to me that Sara had borne a physical resemblance to Beth — short and cute, large bust, thick brown hair. I'd never made that connection before.

For a long time, Mrs. Gavrilides' feats pleased her customers. Her abilities even entered into the neighborhood lexicon, and the weekly community newspaper once alluded to her talent in a clever cartoon. But no one was too pleased in the end. The woman suffered a minor stroke, sending her flustered husband, so used to idling, into a tizzy. Not daring to remove the clean clothing from the racks, lest it confuse his wife upon her return, he placed a sign in the shop window asking his customers' consideration, and requesting they pray for his wife's recovery and delay their pickup for two weeks. In the meantime, he hired another Vietnamese refugee to record all incoming clothing. It was around then that I developed my little crush on Sara. I remember her seated at the cash register on a cold winter day, dressed in a plaid skirt and a sweater, with a red scarf tied at her neck. She was engrossed in a French textbook and didn't hear me come in, so I shuffled my feet until she looked up. She smiled and I smiled back. Too nervous to speak, I just passed her the laundry slip. I watched her walk a few paces down an aisle, go up on her tiptoes and stretch out her arm to retrieve the clothing. Her back was to me, and I stared as her sweater pulled up to reveal a thin line of tender white skin.

When Mrs. Gavrilides was well enough to return to the store, her husband sat her in the middle of the racks and racks of clothing, and pulled down garment after garment, one at a time. Mrs. Gavrilides would specify the owner of each item, and the new clerk would tag it and make a record. But the stroke must have short-circuited something in her brain, misaligning all those precious bits of information. Her indications were replete with errors. Hapless Mr. Gavrilides was forced to sort out hundreds of untagged garments, whose configuration along the racks, once known uniquely to his wife, was now known to no one.

In the end, he set up several stands of unidentified clothing, relying on the goodwill of his customers.

My father's navy blazer fell victim to this jumbled mess. He searched the stands unsuccessfully on two successive Saturdays. Mr. Gavrilides was guardedly optimistic. People had been mistaking men's trousers and shirts left and right, and then returning them to the stands, he told my father. Perhaps someone would return the jacket. He suggested my father put a note on the store bulletin board. Mr. Gavrilides had installed the bulletin board years before as a community service, and it usually contained private ads for babysitters, music lessons, and used cars. But for weeks after Mrs. Gavrilides' stroke, it served exclusively for clothing queries and swapping. My father placed a note and the following Saturday morning received a call from the new Vietnamese clerk.

"Hello, Levin? We find your sport coat. Drop in and pick up."

By noon, my father had reacquired his blazer. Later that day, I was home alone when the newspaper boy came to collect. I fumbled through my father's jackets because he had the habit of leaving small bills in the pockets. That's how I found the little red heart-shaped slip of paper in my father's navy blazer. It said, *When you're away and you see this note, think of me. I'm lovesick and lonely.*

The handwriting was feminine, but it wasn't my mother's. I was 14 years old. The thought of one of my parents engaging in marital infidelity had never entered my head. I decided the slip of paper probably belonged to the guy who returned my father's jacket.

Still, I felt a little uncomfortable, especially since Monday morning my father *was* going away on a business trip. My father was handsome and youthful, and my mother was showing her age more than he was, I had thought to myself then.

When my father returned home later that day, I cornered him privately, bringing him the jacket and showing him the slip of paper. "What in hell's name?" he said. He was flustered and he blushed. Then he just stood there staring at the piece of paper. I was amazed. My father was a trial lawyer who prided himself on his sangfroid, and I'd never seen him lose his composure before. Nor have I seen him lose it since, until this past Sunday, the morning after the wedding I attended.

Eventually, my father picked up the jacket, scanned the inside lining, and said, "Ted, this isn't my jacket. This isn't my jacket after all." Before I knew it, he was out the door. He returned home shortly, telling me he'd replaced the jacket on Mr. Gavrilides' stand. We never spoke another word about it. For several weeks afterward, I would check the stands at Gavrilides' on my way home from school, hoping not to see the blazer, but I was always disappointed.

The incident troubled me for a number of months, but eventually its effect on me faded. I suppose I believed my father. If he had wanted to lie, it would have been simpler for him to suggest that the slip belonged to the person who had mistakenly taken his jacket. On the other hand, why had he looked so flustered? And why didn't anyone else ever come to reclaim the jacket?

During my college years, the Gavrilides' building was sold to new owners who turned the property into a Chinese restaurant. The Gavrilides moved out to a new location 25 minutes away in Wheaton. It was too inconvenient to continue patronizing the store.

When I got home after midnight, my parents were asleep. I slept well and dreamed a lot, but I don't remember the details. All I can say is that many of the exies I'd seen at the wedding made their appearance, as did Mr. and Mrs. Gavrilides and Sara; however, Beth was the chief protagonist.

On Sunday morning, I phoned the hotel, but they said I'd have to call back Monday and speak to the people from the banquet hall. That was no good because my flight back to Boston was leaving Sunday afternoon. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd have simply asked my parents to call for me and pick up the jacket if it were found. But I was afraid that mention of the misplaced blazer would trigger my father's memory of his own blazer story 23 years ago. I preferred to go out and buy a new sports jacket.

My mother made pancakes for breakfast, and my parents and I spent a lazy morning around the breakfast table, drinking coffee and reading the Sunday *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. The quiet was punctuated only infrequently by a stray comment.

"I wager this Y2K computer threat is just a lot of hot air," said my father.

"We'll know before long, Dad. The new millennium's just two weeks away."

After a long spell of silence, it was my mother who uttered the word.

"Gavrilides."

I was stunned to hear the name. I looked at her. The obituary page was in her hand. The image of an elderly, widowed Mr. Gavrilides, expiring in a decrepit tweed jacket, flashed through my head.

"Sara Gavrilides. She was only 39. Breast cancer. Oh, dear."

It took my breath away.

"Oh my God," said my father. "She was a sweet girl. We used to talk sometimes."

"Sara?" I mumbled. "She was the first girl I ever had a crush on."

"Really, Ted?" said my mother. "I didn't know that. How come you didn't ... oh what am I saying? Gosh, we don't even know what goes on with our own children."

"What's it say?" my father asked.

"She was a high-school French teacher. She leaves a husband and two kids. What a tragedy."

We were all quiet. I didn't realize my mother was still reading.

"Oh my God. That's just *horrible*!"

"What?"

"The Gavrilides — they're both still alive, even her mother. Losing their only daughter after what they went through. I can't imagine. It's not fair, it's just not ..."

My mother's voice broke and her eyes welled up. I looked over at my father. He'd picked up his coffee mug and was bringing it to his lips. His eyes were watery. When he realized I was watching him, he replaced the mug without drinking and got up from the table. I heard the soft tap of his slippers recede down the hallway. Then the door to the powder room shut and the lock clicked.

Honorable Mention

The Post-it Poet

By Sarah Richards

At 32, DeeDee Lee felt like Mary Richards, leaving Roseburg, Minnesota, to move to Minneapolis, when she enrolled at Pensacola State College, just 17 miles from the town of Mandrake Forge, Florida, population 250.

Dissatisfied with the direction of her life, working behind the register at Mr. Flowers' Flowers while living at home (still), she took the step that would get her out of her parents' house. She'd been running her blog, MissDeeGoesToTown.com, with her "50 Characters or Less Poetry," in her downtime.

DeeDee also had a YouTube channel of the same name, reciting her poetry in various places in Mandrake Forge, which the Chamber of Commerce appreciated, even though they wouldn't consent to having a Poet Laureate. They said not enough people read poetry unless it rhymed and was put to music, but she didn't know a D minor from a hole in her head.

Writing was her way of taking her away from a fun but dead-end job, a family that was the better side of dysfunctional, and a nonexistent love life. The only date she'd ever get was with Derby Dave from the Frosty Queen, who always gave her an extra brownie in her Brownie Delish. He was 40, and had an on-again, off-again romance with Alice from Fran's Diner. Only when she was off-again with her beau did Dave try to get on with her.

"When Alice finally ditches Jimmy Johns for good, you'll lose your chance at me forever," he liked to say.

"I'm okay with forever," she'd say as she polished off her sundae, but the day he'd asked to marry her, over a Triple Dog Dare Brownie Delish, she'd registered as a first-time student at PSC.

She'd chosen to major in English, because she wasn't good at math, science, history, or social studies — anything that was "STEM-y" (even history had all those dates to keep up with), but the language arts, that was her forte. She would get that job at the *Mandrake Forge/Certainty/Payton Park Press* as a copy editor, with its circulation of about 900, even though "The Full-Court Press" (as it was known colloquially) was always apologizing for misspellings (like pubic health instead of public health). They had Dilbert Sullivan working for them — a formal juvenile delinquent who'd participated in criminal mischief, like spray-painting "Meat is Second-Degree Murder" on Hack's Butcher Shop. (Dilbert always was a bit wordy.)

She would bounce Dilly out of his job so fast, his head would spin like the carrot top it was.

As DeeDee drove in her flower-patterned mini-Cooper, having only been in Pensacola a handful of times with her mom to go extreme couponing at Walmart, she felt she was home.

The red-brick buildings of PSC looked so collegiate, its windows reflecting the sky, the magnolia trees with their fat white blooms inviting.

DeeDee was going to eat cheap pizza and ramen noodles and meet classmates in the library, collaborating on projects. She had set her heart on being a barista, but instead she was thrilled when Christopher Cross, the editor of the local newspaper in Mandrake, said she'd get paid 10 hours a week writing stories for *The Corsair* — the student newspaper.

I'm on my way, Full-Court Press, even though you suck for not hiring me because I didn't have a degree. Dilbert's degree had been from DeVry, which really rubbed salt in the wound.

DeeDee signed up for all prerequisites — English Comp I, College Algebra, Computer Concepts, as well as Poetry and College Publications; College Pub was a one-credit-hour workshopping class for those who wanted to learn how to write stories for *The Corsair*.

She'd show that Dilly Sullivan a *who* from a *what* if it was the last thing she ever did.

When she walked into Dr. Steven Reed's English Comp I class, she looked around and saw all the 20-somethings, as well as a 40ish veteran in camouflage and combat boots, and a 60ish woman who was crocheting while everyone else was scrolling on their cell phones, sort of zombie-like.

It had been 15 years since she'd set foot in a classroom. She'd graduated at 17 with honors, had poetry published in several magazines, but time had gotten away from her.

"Good morning, everyone," Dr. Reed said as he walked in, and DeeDee smiled. Dr. Reed was a youthful man with a paunch, wearing a red, white, and blue pinstriped shirt and white seersucker pants. There was a crispness, a cleanness about him that appealed to her.

"Okay, class, we're going to break the ice a bit." His voice was velvet-soft, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He passed out some index cards and said, "Now write two things, one true and one false, about yourself. The class will decide what is true and what is not."

I must make myself stand out. "I have no piercings or tattoos" and "I have written over 1,000 poems," she wrote on the card.

"Well, you look like the girl next door, so I say you have no puncture wounds or body graffiti," the vet said, and so everyone went with him.

"I'm a one-percenter that way," DeeDee said with a wink at Dr. Reed, and the vet snorted. It was still too early in the morning for most of these kids to laugh at anything.

"So, how many poems have you written?" Dr. Reed asked, leaning against his desk and crossing his arms.

"Ah, just over 700," she said, warming at his attention.

"Well, now that's quite impressive," he said. She didn't tell him that about half of those were limericks, which were written as "drunk texts" to her brothers when she needed a ride home, and who were the best guy-friends a girl could ever have.

"I killed a man just to watch him die" and "I like daffodils" came from the vet. "I've spent 100 straight hours gaming" and "My favorite snack is peanut butter and Cheez Whiz on toast" from one of the class nerds. The older woman, whose name was MiMi, shared "I enjoy knitting" and "I don't enjoy knitting."

DeeDee had to roll her eyes at that one, for some people had no imagination.

Her next class that day was College Algebra with Mr. Mather. After one of the students in her Comp I class had suggested she'd better check out his rating on ratemyprofessors.com, she read that he threw cell phones out of windows. That had closed the deal for her.

"Good afternoon, y'all," said Mather, a 50ish man with Santa Claus glasses, sweat rolling down his face. "Just ran across campus to get here on time. What's your excuse?"

The room went silent.

"Let's get started, shall we?"

He seemed like what her father would call a hard-ass, and that wasn't what she needed when it came to math, but her ears perked up at the mention of "extra credit."

Class was about 15 minutes gone when someone darted in. Mather halted and crossed his arms, waiting till the person sat down, shaking his head the entire time. "After you," he said with mock politeness once the student had gotten situated. Not even 10 minutes later, someone's cell phone went off and he stopped. Looking everyone in the eye, he asked, "Now just whose was that?"

Another guy grabbed his book bag and left without a word.

Mather huffed and puffed and almost blew his stack, it seemed. "Those who stay for the entire class get another extra credit opportunity. And by the way, there's no sense in those who come in late trying to find out what it was from one of your betters. I know who you are."

DeeDee was glad her ringer was always turned off. Otherwise, her mom would be calling, complaining on her dad, her dad, asking her if she knew where such-and-such was because he'd set it down somewhere and couldn't remember where. Her brothers, Mayday and Mayhem (born Matthew and Michael), and her little sister Gigi, who'd just turned 20, would be calling — Mayday and Mayhem wanting her to write a poem for their girlfriends or Gigi lamenting about her own beau.

At least they had love lives.

She'd had two boyfriends in her 20s — a Catholic whom she'd dated for a year until he went all priestly on her, and a Mormon from Pace — whom she'd dated for four years, until he decided he wanted to marry in the temple, and have her wear the famous Mormon underwear forever. "I sleep raw," she'd told Ammon Nielson, and so he'd married another girl a few months later.

She'd been willing to bend, even going so far as to repent of premarital relations in front of his bishop, which she'd found embarrassing and a bit creepy — telling some old guy she didn't know, about her sex life. "You were so perfect, DeeDee," Ammon had said when she'd broken up with him. "You'd be satisfied being a wife and mother because you don't have a career."

She'd been 29 when they'd parted, and those words had cut her. It had taken three years to realize there was more to life than living with her parents indefinitely and working long hours in the floral shop, even if she did get to write poetry on the side.

Mr. Flowers had been sad to see her go, for he'd been like a grandfather, but he'd given her enough severance for first and last month's rent. She could drive back home every night, but he told her there was nothing like the college experience of living far enough away "where your mother couldn't wash your underwear."

"You must come home for Sunday supper," her mother had said. It was a tradition in their family to go to The Good Shepherd Church for services, sing a barnyard version of "The 12 Days of Christmas" in the Christmas choir, and have whole roast chickens (including one for each of her brothers) for Sunday dinner. "Pastor Pringle will be disappointed if you don't."

DeeDee had lived all her life trying never to disappoint anyone, though she inevitably did. She'd disappointed herself, waiting for a man to take her away from it all, and when she'd found the one who could, she'd disappointed him. She'd stayed as long as she had at the shop because she hadn't wanted to disappoint Mr. Flowers. She'd stayed in a dead-end town because she hadn't wanted to disappoint her parents, who'd been crushed when Gigi had moved to Andalusia to follow her high school boyfriend, who'd broken up with her before graduation.

Mayday and Mayhem were still in Mandrake, working with their dad, who was the president of the Mandrake Forge Savings & Loan (which was so *It's a Wonderful Life*-ish).

"All my girls are leaving me," her mother had lamented, so DeeDee had agreed to come "home" every Saturday night and leave Sunday afternoon. It was the least she could do, since they had let her live with them practically forever.

Tomorrow were her other three classes — Computer Concepts (online) and Poetry with Jamey Jones, as well as College Pub.

She spent that afternoon in the Drowsy Poet coffee shop in the library, doodling "Mrs. DeeDee Reed" on his syllabus.

The highlight of every Monday and Wednesday became listening to Dr. Reed talk about, well, anything.

"So, could I make an appointment with you sometime to go over my paper?" she asked after class. He smelled like Eternity. She swore it was a sign.

"You make me earn my pay, DeeDee. Looking for mistakes in your work is quite a scavenger hunt."

DeeDee blushed. "Even good writers need good editors, and I'm more of a creative writer than the kind of writer I need to be for this class."

"Meet me in my office at three tomorrow. By the way, I'm sort of helping Dr. Ingram out with the newspaper this year, and I loved the piece you submitted for the September issue."

"Thank you, Dr. Reed!" She'd used Professor Jones' playful syllabus as inspiration.

"I think you'd make a great humor columnist. You certainly have the knack." He leaned in closer. "Even though I feel I should be pushing you towards academic writing."

She'd left his class glowing, because only her parents and a few teachers had ever praised her work.

That night, she looked up Dr. Reed and found out that he was 49. A little older than she'd thought, but then, her dad was 11 years older than her mom, so by that logic, he was only 6 years more than the difference between them.

Georgann Johnson, a 40ish woman, twice-divorced, with four children, whom she'd met at *The Corsair* staff orientation, instant messaged her on Facebook. Over two cups of "tuxedos," they sat on overstuffed chairs, sounding more like giggly 20-year-olds gushing over their "hot" professors.

Georgann had brought a few single shots of brandy as sweetener, and DeeDee felt herself loosening up. "You know, I've just realized this is the first time I've felt like a grown-up, and I'm 32 freaking years old," DeeDee found herself saying.

"Hey, I felt 32 when I was 17," Georgann said, "and lemme tell you, it sucked. I've done the grown-up thing. Now I'm ready to be a college kid."

Starbucks was closing, and DeeDee was tipsy, swaying as her friend helped her up. "But Mom wanted me home ... church tomorrow, you know."

"Oh, just text her when you get home."

When DeeDee got back to the apartment she shared with Jennifer and Kayla, who worked at the PSC Writing Lab, she crashed, dreaming of dear Dr. Reed, forgetting, for the duration, about texting her mother, when all her life, she'd checked in with her.

She woke up to several voicemails from Mom, and called immediately. As she was checking her student email, she saw a message from one of the administrators:

> *Active shooter situation. Classes are canceled for the remainder of the week. Stay off campus until further details. Check your PirateMail hourly for more updates.*

"Mom, I have to go," DeeDee said, feeling sick.

Georgann was messaging her repeatedly, and DeeDee called back as she pieced the story together between sobs. Dr. Kim Swatek, a social sciences professor, had been shot during a Philosophy Club meeting by a student who'd been offended by one of Kim's lectures.

The three students present had been shot as well, but no one knew of their prognoses. DeeDee knew her mom, who was always glued to the local news, would see it and demand she come home immediately, saying that Pensacola was no better than Mobile.

That night, DeeDee, Jennifer, and Kayla curled up in their jammies with bowls of chicken noodle soup, which DeeDee's mother had brought, while they watched the news.

Dr. Swatek, they'd heard, was in surgery; two of the students had passed away. Georgann was distraught, for she'd been friends with two of them from The Parnassus Club. The third had survived with a punctured lung.

DeeDee had convinced her mother to leave before it became too late. She fell asleep on the loveseat while Jen and Kay crashed on the floor. In the middle of the night, DeeDee checked her phone to see that Georgann had texted her. Kim Swatek had passed away just after midnight.

DeeDee wrote a note on the house whiteboard, propping it up in front of the television so the others would see. She went to bed, curling into a ball under her satin-edged blanket.

She thought about life and poetry, and it occurred to her that whether someone believed life had meaning, it was up to every person to either find it or make it. Dr. Swatek had just been trying to help her students find theirs by asking questions for which there were a hundred answers.

Life didn't end with a period, but rather a question mark. It was a question she would be asking her entire life.

School next week was somber, with moments of silences commencing every class. An anonymous donation box in the English Department office stood in place of the rubber plant and candy bowl that were usually there.

She was broke, but there was one thing she could give, which she slipped into her signature lavender envelope, unsigned. She just prayed it would bring Dr. Swatek's family some comfort.

As the fall deadened into winter, the magnolia trees dropped what looked like baby pinecones, and a tree in the center of the courtyard left a circle of golden leaves around it, like a protective halo. She hated this time of year when it got dark early and she had to wear her Christmas toe socks with her flip-flops. Hell, or Mobile, according to her mom, would freeze over before DeeDee ever wore closed-toed shoes.

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Reed," she said at the end of class, when she reached into her bag, handing him a poetry chapbook she'd had printed, then wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string.

"Why thank you, DeeDee," he said as he opened the book and read the first page of her manifesto *Mormons on the Beach: "Through Mormonism, I attempted perfection, but pre- and post-Mormonism, I accepted The One who defined it."*

There was more, but Dr. Reed looked at her and said, "This is beautiful, DeeDee."

And it was in that moment that DeeDee saw in Dr. Reed everything she'd ever wanted.

"Thank you, and you're welcome," she said, and kissed him.

And ran.

A few days later, she got a package, the return address making her heart beat like summer raindrops on a hot tin roof. A green Celtic cross with a rose-gold chain in a white box was inside, along with a tiny card that one would get with a dozen roses.

> *My sweet DeeDee, this was my mother's, who told me to save it for a special lady. It only took 14 years for her to find me, but my entire life thus far to become the kind of man worthy for her.*

DeeDee's heart soared. After a few sprays of Lady Stetson and a swipe of Barbecued Potato Chip lipstick by Glossy Little Liars, she drove to his house — a nice piece of property in Cantonment — where the primrose path led to a red front door. There was something welcoming about a red

front door, especially one with an oval glass and an evergreen wreath. She could hear Dean Martin crooning, the aroma of a microwaveable TV dinner familiar, for her brothers lived on the things between meals.

Dr. Reed answered in a PSC sweatshirt and jeans. "Take me to heaven," she said.

"Two golden tickets, coming up." He slipped his shoes on by the door, and he took her to the Cactus Flower Café past the colonnade on 12th Avenue. As she sipped her sangria, she said, "I didn't quite mean gastronomical heaven."

He laughed. "This is simply fuel for the ride to the other."

As she undressed for bed that night, she asked, "Would it turn you off if I wore this necklace to bed, having belonged to your mother and all?"

"Of course not," he said, and she curled up into him, remembering how Ammon had told her she couldn't wear White Shoulders anymore because it made her smell like *his* mother.

She spent her first night away from Jennifer and Kayla, texting them that she was home, spending the night.

And she was.

When school started back, a bunch of stuffed animals lay at the door of Dr. Swatek's old classroom. DeeDee had come to pay her respects, and that's when the idea came.

She stayed up all night, poring over her Bible, taking all the "happy texts" Pollyanna spoke of, writing a poem for each of them. She enlisted Jamey Jones, the current Poet Laureate of Northwest Florida and her poetry professor, to help "wake the world up to poetry," à la Anne Waldman, and they went to work making poetry bookmarks from back issues of *Hurricane Review*, PSC's literary arts journal. They told Georgann of her plan, and the three of them left their "marks" in random books, like prayer tracts, on bathroom mirrors, bulletin boards, and anywhere else students might stop to smell the coffee (or see where they could get a free meal).

That week, during study breaks, she went through Kim Swatek's Facebook friends list, finding their addresses through the PeopleofPensacola.com online phonebook. She didn't sign her name, but after about five weeks of sending out little cards of good cheer, some reporter from the *Pensacola News Journal* started writing a recurring column on "The Poetry Revival" that was sweeping the PSC campus. At least a dozen notes had been forwarded to him by recipients, and it happened that he came across DeeDee's poetry blog, where he was able to piece it all together from one word: anni — her abbreviation for anniversary.

"Ms. Lee?" A man who looked like an aging hippie came running up to her as she was crossing campus. "I'm Trey Mann, and I know who you are."

"Who do you think I am?" she asked, looking around, wondering why this guy in a gray tee and sweatpants was approaching her.

"You're the Post-it Poetess who's been sending poetry all over town." He hesitated, then added, "I've seen your blog."

She exhaled. “Poet,” she said, preferring the gender-neutral noun.

“Poet?

She nodded. “Poet.”

“Tell me, Post-it Poet, why the big secret?”

“I guess I just wanted it to be a beautiful mystery. Unsolved mysteries are the most compelling, are they not? I wanted my work to be remembered — not necessarily my name.”

His gray eyes met hers. “I am a journalist — an investigative one — and I’d be remiss if I didn’t write this story.”

DeeDee nodded, understanding. “Well, I’m glad you gave me the heads-up.”

“Sure,” he said. As she started to walk away, he called, “Care for a cuppa coffee? My treat.”

“Are you trying to warm me up?”

He grinned. “A little. And I’d like to know more about you. Feature article stuff.”

“I never could turn down free java,” she said, and they spent the rest of the afternoon chatting in Barnes & Noble over cheesecake like a couple of golden girls.

When Mr. Mann’s article was published, the press back home contacted her with congratulations. Then Jennifer’s cousin, who worked for *Lavender’s Blue* — a higher-end version of Hallmark that specialized in minimalist-style cards — offered her a three-month creative writing internship in the summer, so she would be back in time for the fall semester.

Steven would be disappointed, as would Dr. Ingram, who said she was the best copy editor she’d ever had. “I’m grooming you to be editor in chief,” she’d told her the other day, with the promise of a scholarship.

DeeDee called Georgann, telling her everything.

“If he loves you, he’ll wait for you,” she said. “School can wait. I know you wanted to take a full load this summer, but you can make it up later.”

“I don’t like the feeling that I’m putting everything on hold.”

“Just think of it as a gap year, or better yet, a gap semester.”

“Except that I’ve had 15 gap years already. And Steven —”

“He’s been on the market 49 years, DeeDee. Don’t worry. You’re made for each other, because if your names were a *Wheel of Fortune* puzzle, they’d get cleaned out of vowels on one turn.”

DeeDee laughed. “I guess so.”

Once she hung up, she realized she was going to have to disappoint someone she’d fallen in love with — someone who thought greeting cards were shit.

“I was offered a summer creative writing internship,” she said that night over Swedish tamales.

“That’s wonderful,” he said with a half-smile. “I’ll miss you, though.” He reached across to hold her hands, rubbing their tops with his thumbs. “Where will you be going?”

“Danville, Ohio.”

He frowned. “I don’t believe I’m familiar with a creative writing program there. Who sponsors it?”

“I’ll tell you when I get back. I, um, want it to be a surprise.” A part of her was ashamed, for here was a man who’d written academic papers on Shakespeare, who’d read every book Hemingway had ever written, and who was lauded as an intellectual on all things pertaining to world literature. He thought she was a great writer, and she wanted to keep it that way, but she really wanted this.

Perhaps it would be this silly thing that led to a serious thing.

“I see,” he said, and for the first time, she couldn’t read him. He’d encrypted his feelings.

“You’ll wait for me, won’t you?” she asked, unsure now, for there’d never been any secrets between them.

“Where else would I go?” he said, and, with a heart as heavy as *Don Quixote*, she said goodbye and slept at Jennifer and Kayla’s.

While in Ohio, DeeDee focused on her craft, thinking about Steven, asking about him from Georgann, who was in one of his lit classes. She kept up with his life on Facebook, but never liked or commented on anything he posted. Though she blogged daily about her experience, she hid her posts from showing up in his feed. She had to prove herself to him, that she was a real writer, first, and then she could tell him all about her experience writing greeting cards like Longfellow Deeds.

And it was when she received a package from him that she realized someone, probably Georgann, had spilled the Mexican jumping beans.

A vintage greeting card in a yellowing envelope fell out, which had been addressed to an Amy Rose Reed.

His mother had been named Amy.

She opened the card and read the verse written inside, then the handwritten letter enclosed. She read it aloud, as she read anything she wrote aloud, for doing so brought the words to life.

> *Dearest DeeDee,*
>
> *My mother received this card a few days after my father passed away. It was on the refrigerator for as long as I can remember, and it meant more to her than any book she had ever received.*
>
> *You’re a great writer, my sweet DeeDee. Please know that no talent which brings joy to another is ever wasted. You illuminated our world here with your optimism, so well-versed.*
>
> *Yours through prose (purple and otherwise),*
>
> *Steven*

She texted Georgann: *I misjudged him. Thank you ... for everything.*

Georgann texted back immediately. *Anytime, chica.*

When her internship was over, the manager of the flagship office offered her a full-time job once she finished school. "I'll think about it," she said, knowing it would have to be remote, because everything that mattered was in Pensacola.

Steven met her at the airport, and over coffee, she told him her news as he told her that Dr. Ingram had won the Powerball — with "three other assholes," as she'd called them, and was moving to Australia where people were more "chill" and where news wasn't fake.

"Just tell me, what is it that you want to do?" Steven asked, and DeeDee answered.

DeeDee Lee never became a humor columnist, but rather a humor blogger, with a readership far exceeding 900. She taught journalism at Pensacola State, and when this Post-it Poet had her baby in her 37th year, she received 300 cards from people in town, including her hometown. One of the cards came from Maren Swatek, who'd been 12 when her mother had died.

"Your little poetry card meant so much — saying that every time we talk about someone we love, they're there with us. It was so strange, because when my dad opened it, it was like Mom was with us again. It even smelled like her."

A tear fell from DeeDee's eye, for she'd sprayed that card with her Lady Stetson as an afterthought. What had become her trademark scent had served as Kim Swatek's spirit.

"Oh, Hanne, my love," DeeDee said as she picked up her child, "don't you know you're here because I had to disappoint everyone I loved? I don't know if you'll be into athletics, the arts, or academics, but whatever you are and whatever you choose to become, I will support you. Know that you don't have to change the world, but you can make it a better place by being in it."

DeeDee looked up at her husband then, at the threads of gray in his sandy hair, at the beautiful, character-driven lines in his face, and said, "Do you really think poetry changes the world, Steven?"

"Of course, it does, my love," he said, putting his arm around her shoulders, "for after all, was not the Bible a book of poetry?"

"You hear that, bebe?" DeeDee said, then looked back at the man who'd been with her through it all. "Your father has spoken the truth."

In the "Hallway of Notables," as it's called, hangs a portrait of a youthful, silver-haired woman. Below that is a brass plaque and then a bronze one with a longer inscription:

> *DeeDee Lee Reed*
>
> *1983-2065*
>
> She lit up the campus with her limericks, this Post-it Poet. A revivalist of words, she brought healing and humor to many. She changed lives, including her own, becoming the Poet Laureate of Northwest Florida in 2050. She taught at Pensacola State College for 27 years, publishing several books, including *Pig Tales of a Cracked Southern Belle*, which won the Rick Flagg award for poetry.
>
> The Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Ambrose Keating credits her with helping him become the writer he became, and many others are a testament to her teaching.

The limerick below, in the spirit that was DeeDee, was written by her daughter, Hanne Lee O'Connor, in remembrance of the woman she knew, and many more who felt they did.

DeeDee Reed was known as The Post-it Poet,

who livened up everything from epitaphs to obits.

A collegiate Miss Deeds,

she fulfilled many a literary need,

and never told it, but showed it.

About the Authors

Winner

Michael Caleb Tasker ("Mount to the Sky")

Michael Caleb Tasker began his university education at the University of New Orleans, studying classical piano, but graduated with a degree in English and writing, and he is currently working on his Ph.D. in creative writing. Winner of the Ernest Hemingway Flash Fiction Award, Tasker has published his work in many literary journals, and also Ellery Queen's *Mystery Magazine*. For more, visit michaelcalebtasker.com.

Runners-Up

Jeffrey Ricker ("Charlotte's Mother")

Jeffrey Ricker is the author of *Detours* (2011) and the YA fantasy *The Unwanted* (2014). His stories and essays have appeared in anthologies and magazines, including *Foglifter*, *Phoebe*, *Little Fiction*, *The Citron Review*, and *UNBUILD walls*. A 2014 Lambda Literary Fellow and recipient of a 2015 Vermont Studio Center residency, Ricker has an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia. "Charlotte's Mother" is his first short story published by a national consumer magazine. For more, visit jeffrey-ricker.com or follow him on Twitter @rickerje or on Instagram @jeffreyricker.

Aimee Parkison ("Fishing for Owls")

Aimee Parkison is the author of four books of fiction, *Refrigerated Music for a Gleaming Woman*, *Woman with Dark Horses*, *The Innocent Party*, and *The Petals of Your Eyes*. Her newest book, *Girl Zoo*, will be published by FC2 (University of Alabama) in 2019. Parkison has won the FC2 Catherine Doctorow Innovative Fiction Prize and the North American Review Kurt Vonnegut Fiction Prize. She directs the creative writing program at Oklahoma State University. "Fishing for Owls" is her first short story published by a national consumer magazine. For more, visit aimeeparkison.com or follow her on Twitter @AimeeParkison.

Marlene Olin ("Parting")

Marlene Olin was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. Her short stories have been published or are forthcoming in journals such as *The Massachusetts*

Review, *Eclectica*, *The American Literary Review*, and *Arts and Letters*. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of The Net, Best Small Fictions, and for inclusion in Best American Short Stories. She is the winner of the 2015 Rick DeMarinis Short Fiction Award and the 2018 So To Speak Fiction Prize. For more, follow her on Twitter @writestuffmiami.

Rachel Elliott Rigolino ("Rising to the Surface")

Rachel Elliott Rigolino teaches first-year composition at the State University of New York at New Paltz, where she is the coordinator of the Supplemental Writing Workshop Program. She holds a B.A. from Vassar College and an M.A. from SUNY New Paltz. When not preparing lessons, teaching, and providing feedback on student assignments, Rigolino carves out time for writing fiction. In 2003, she won the *Poughkeepsie Journal*'s Talespinner's award for her short story "The Hunt." Other short fiction have appeared in regional anthologies. This past summer, Elliott Rigolino completed the final draft of her first novel, a murder mystery set in the 1980s at an elite private college in the Hudson Valley. She lives with her husband, Joseph, in Highland, New York. "Rising to the Surface" is her first short story published by a national magazine. For more, visit hawksites.newpaltz.edu/rigolinr.

James Vescovi ("Immigrant/Emigrant")

James Vescovi was a writer and editor for 25 years before becoming an English teacher. He is a graduate of Miami University (Ohio) and Columbia University. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Georgetown Review*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. His books include *The USS Essex: And the Birth of the American Navy* (1999) and *Eat Now; Talk Later: 52 True Tales of Family, Feasting and the American Dream* (2014). "Immigrant/Emigrant" is his first short story published by a national magazine. For more visit his website, eatnowtalklater.com or follow him on Twitter @eatnowtalklater.

Honorable Mentions

Wendy Sheehan ("Jean and Franklin")

Wendy Sheehan has been writing short fiction for several years. Though she has published poetry in *Lyric Magazine*, "Jean and Franklin" is her first short story published by a national magazine. Most of her writings reflect her love of the sea.

William A. Scally ("Ernie")

William A. Scally has spent the greater part of his career as a technical writer, covering topics from how to remotely jumpstart a UNIX computer to how to pour reinforced concrete. Scally has a Ph.D.

in English and a B.A. in philosophy and divides his time between Maryland and Arizona. “Ernie” is his first nationally accepted work of fiction.

Timothy C. Hobbs (“Touch”)

A retired medical technologist living in Temple, Texas, Timothy C. Hobbs began writing horror and supernatural stories while in the sixth grade. In addition to numerous short stories and poems published in national and international anthologies, he is the author of four novels, two novellas, and two short-story collections. His literary novella *Molly’s Hope* was short listed for the 2016 Pirate’s Alley Faulkner-Wisdom award, and his short story “Trust” won the 2017 Golden Stake at the International Vampire Film and Arts festival. For more, visit his author page on Amazon.com.

Julia Naman (“Cheap Suit”)

Julia Naman is a California-based writer and musician. After graduating from Pepperdine University in 2017 with a creative writing degree, Julia received a Fulbright Scholarship to West Bengal, India, where she spent the past year teaching English. She now works as a performing/recording artist and freelance journalist. “Cheap Suit” is her first work of published fiction. For more, visit julia-naman.com.

Noah Broyles (“Joan”)

A current undergraduate at Carson-Newman University, Noah Broyles has been writing since 2012. While his early efforts focused on fantasy novels, he has since begun to explore other forms and genres. Broyles has received four honorable mentions for his short stories from *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*. “Joan” is his first story published by a national consumer magazine.

Ross G. Pinsky (“The Blazer”)

Ross G. Pinsky received his B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and his Ph.D. from New York University. A mathematics professor at the Technion in Haifa, Israel, Pinsky has authored two books and published over 70 papers in scholarly journals. He is also seeking a publisher for a completed novel. “The Blazer” is his first published work of fiction.

Sarah Richards (“The Post-it Poet”)

Sarah Richards’ work has been published in *Bella Grace* magazine and *Writer’s Digest Magazine* online. She won Honorable Mention in the 2016 Great American Fiction Contest.