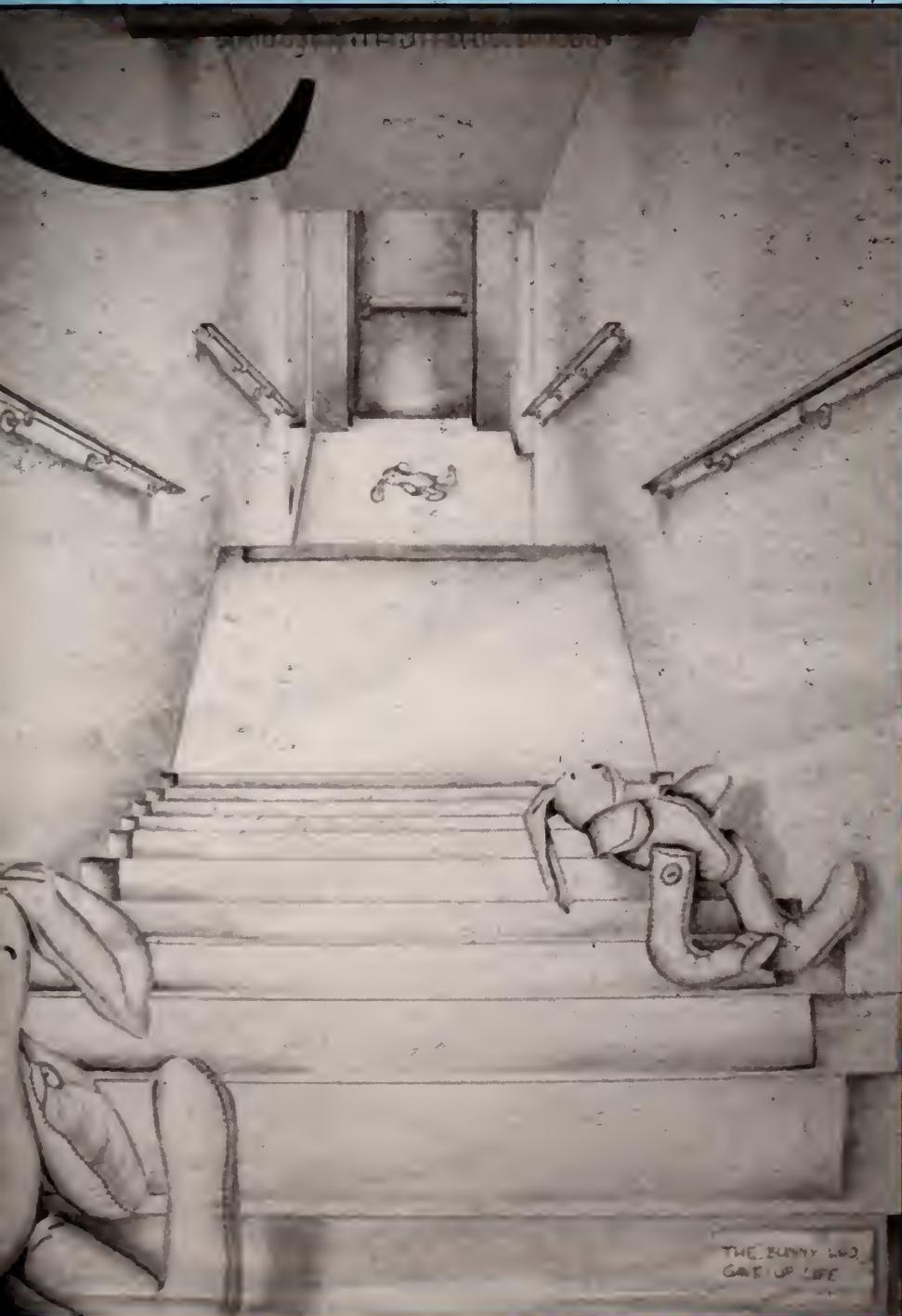


Calliope

2007



Calliope₂₀₀₇

Armstrong Atlantic State University
Volume XXIII

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Calliope is published annually by and for the students of Armstrong Atlantic State University. The Student Government Association of AASU provides funding for each publication. Student submissions are collected through the fall semester for the following year's publication. All submissions are read and chosen through an anonymous process to ensure equal opportunity for every entrant. The Lillian Spencer Awards are presented for outstanding submissions in fiction, poetry, and art. The recipients of this award are chosen by the staff from the student submissions received that year.

Calliope 2007 submission guidelines: Regardless of medium, each entrant is limited to five submissions. Each entry must have a completed submission form. To ensure anonymity during the selection process, the *Calliope* staff asks that you not include your name or any identification on your submitted work. If submitting large art pieces, please attach a removable index card with your information on the back of your work.

For more information, or if interested in working on the 2008 *Calliope* staff, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Languages, Literature and Philosophy department located in Gamble Hall.

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Dagny

Chalk Pastel

Mia Montgomery

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Art

Randall

Dave Williams

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Short Fiction

Me and Randall, we is real good friends. I guess that we been friends since we could barely walk. Both of us grew up off Highway 25. Takes about twenty minutes to walk to his front door and I been making that walk all of my life. When you grow up out in the country, you pretty much latch on to whoever is around. I always known he was a little crazy, but I guess that's 'cause his daddy ain't right. I once saw his daddy shoot one of Bill Johnson's cows in the face with an AK-47 just to do it. Mama says that he sells drugs, but it sure don't seem like it. Seems like they is way too poor to sell drugs. Drug dealers on T.V. drive Bentleys and Mercedes. Randall's daddy drives an old beat up El Camino covered in rust. He used to drive a dune buggy.

Randall stays pretty quiet around other people, but when it's just the two of us he won't shut up. He's always going on and on 'bout hunting and Iron Maiden and stuff. Kids we go to school with don't really care bout that stuff. I suppose some of 'em like hunting but not the way we do it. They hunt deer. Them kids in high school don't always treat us so nice neither. We pretty much keep to ourselves. We used to eat lunch out in the parking lot with the rednecks until Keith Quarrels punched me in the chest. Those boys live in the mill village and they treat us like trash, so Randall and I decided to start eating in the cafeteria with the blacks and the preps. We'd sit by ourselves near the trash cans. That's where Randall loved to sit cause he could stare at Suzi Owens. She sat right in the middle of the preps, and Randall would just stare at her all throughout lunch. I'd try to talk to him about Stone Cold Steve Austin and guns and stuff, but he just kept talking bout Suzi.

"What do you think her pussy tastes like?" he'd ask. "I don't know man. What's wrong with you?" He would just stare at her legs as we ate. "Bet it tastes like muscodines. Bet she uses so many lotions and keeps it so clean and stuff that it tastes like sweet sweet fruit." I had never tasted no girl before. Randall said that he'd had a bunch of girls, but the only girl I ever remember him spending time with was his cousin Chandi and she was just now thirteen. Chandi lost her arm when it got infected. It looked real gross at first. Now it's just a nub.

Randall had found himself obsessed. I'd had a crush on a girl here and there growing up, like Carmen Electra or Chandi, but this was getting out of hand. Me and Randall would still hang out, but he wanted to do all kinds of freaky things. He tried to convince me to drive him over to Suzi's house on my four wheeler at midnight so he could go through their trash. He had himself convinced that if he could find some panties or a tampon or something that he could cast a spell over her. Like, he wanted to start a fire and listen to some Slayer and chant and all that. He was getting all kinds of perverted. I guessed that was 'cause his daddy wasn't right.

I wasn't quite sure that Randall's daddy was selling drugs, but I figured he must have used them. He was up 'til all hours cleaning his guns and yelling at Randall. I found lots of them little flowers that you can get at the gas station all over their house. One

time when my Mama was real sad about my stepdaddy hitting her and all, I brought her one of them flowers on the way home from school. When I gave it to her she explained to me that drug smokers used them little glass pipes that the flowers came in to smoke their drugs. I guess they must make a pretty good pipe. People can be real sneaky like that.

It was a Monday when Principal Wheeler announced over the loud speaker that Suzi had died. Kids was crying in the halls and stuff. I didn't really know her real well. She never talked to me or even looked my way. I could just imagine Randall crying his eyes out like a little baby and everybody wondering what was up. Suzi never talked to him neither. She was a cheerleader. She lived in a neighborhood with a gate. They build them gates to keep people like Randall out. I guess to keep Randall out of their trash.

Suzi's daddy had been drinking and he ran a stop sign near the mall. He drove one of them big SUVs, but it didn't help 'em none when it flipped. He was a city councilman or something. Maybe he was a dentist. They said that Suzi had died on impact. That made everybody feel better that she didn't have to suffer or nothing. People was saying that Suzi's daddy loved to drink. I thought everybody's daddy loved to drink.

They was planning on letting school out early for her funeral. They said that half the town was going to be there. I was gonna stay home and try to watch them dirty channels on the satellite that my stepdaddy kept locked. I knew that if I was alone for a while that I could figure out the code.

When I ran into Randall after shop class, I was pretty sure that he would be sad. Randall wasn't much for crying, but I expected him to seem depressed or something. He didn't seem like it had bothered him at all. In fact, he seemed pretty normal. That day we didn't sit in the cafeteria at lunch. Randall convinced me to skip the rest of the day and go back to my house 'cause my parents wasn't home. We hopped onto the short bus and caught a ride down Highway 25. The retards get out early from school and, if you act real quiet, the bus driver don't ask no questions.

When we got to my house, Randall found my stepdaddy's vodka, Mr. Boston's. Then he got out a bottle of my Mama's Boone's Farm, and we mixed them up and drank some. I tried to figure out the satellite code, but I couldn't. Randall kept making toasts to Suzi Owens. I didn't know what to say to him, so I just kept on drinking. The funeral was going to be the next day, and I thought that Randall would go to it and get all his emotions out there. I told him that the viewing was gonna be that night and that he should go there and pay his respects to the Owens family. I don't really know if it was the Mr. Boston's and Boone's Farm talking, but I figured that they would appreciate Randall's condolences.

"Are you crazy, man? They don't care what I have to say. Them people would look at me like I was some kind of idiot. I might as well be black going up there sayin I'm sorry." I shook my head. "Randall, there's gonna be black people there. Half the town is gonna be there." Randall didn't seem to like what I had said. "Well, that will just make them feel worse to know that she was friends with them blacks anyway. First she dies and now this. They've gone through enough already."

We laid around on the floor like we was good for nothing. The drinking had nearly put us to sleep by 3. At one point I thought I saw a tear running down Randall's cheek, but I was pretty drunk. Most of the day he seemed like he didn't mind at all. It wasn't

like Suzi had ever really even looked in his direction except for to spit. Me and Randall ain't popular or nothing. We was in 4H for a while, but that don't make you popular.

Then all of the sudden Randall jumped up like a ninja. "We gotta go down to that funeral parlor right now." I was stunned that he was even talking, let alone up on his feet and ready for action. "How you suppose we gonna get there, Randall?" I asked, and when I asked I nearly started vomiting all of my breakfast on the carpet. Randall grabbed me by the collar and stood me up. "I need to see her one last time. I suppose you ain't gonna stop me from that are you? We gonna take your four wheeler and some fishing poles, and if we see any police we'll just pretend like we was fishing." Randall has a way of getting real excited about stuff. When he gets all excited, it's hard to say no. It's like you get caught up in the way he is feeling. Like, you get all excited with him and like I said, I had been drinking. "I don't know if I can drive right now, Randall" He gave me a look, and I knew what he was thinking. Before he could call me a sissy or a lightweight, I threw him my keys and within seconds we was slamming that screen door behind us and out on that road.

The fall air always feels so nice. I guess it's kinda chilly but not cold. It just has a way of waking you up and kinda like reminding you that you is alive. It was slapping against the side of my face real fast like, and I was holding onto Randall across his stomach. I always did hate riding on the back. Even when we was just riding bicycles. Randall's daddy used to make fun of us and call us fags 'cause we rode like this. He said that it reminded him of prison. We never found that funny at all. This was the only way we had to get from one place to another, and we didn't like it neither.

I watched the side of Randall's face, and I thought I saw another tear. It could have been cause we was riding so fast, and it could have been a bug or something. Randall wasn't much for crying. For a minute there, I felt real sorry for him. It was like he was something special to me. Like we was family or something. It was kinda like we was, because his daddy ain't right and my stepdaddy is always beating on my mama. For a second there it felt like we was all that the other one had in the whole world. I felt real bad about Randall and about Suzi, and it seemed like it was even sadder that she had never even looked at Randall. Like there was this whole other universe out there somewhere where she had looked at him and they was married with kids, and like they had a nice house, like a double wide or something in one of them gated communities and I bet you that in Randall's dreams they did. Like the world, this world, had snatched that chance away from them, but in some weird way that would always keep it alive too, 'cause now Randall would always have them dreams, forever.

I was feeling real bad for Randall then we stopped at a gas station, and I puked while he hopped off and went inside. It was about five minutes before he had come back, and I had wiped all the sick offa my face with pages of the phonebook attached to the pay phone in the parking lot. "You ready? 'Cause we gotta have a plan." Randall yelled as he cranked my four wheeler back up. "I'm gonna go around back and you can go around front. I know there's a door where they drop off them bodies in the back, and I'm gonna sneak up in it. You go to the front and try to talk to whoever is in there about bodies and death and stuff. Tell them that you is a doctor and you need some brains to experiment on." I knew that this wouldn't work, but I was feeling so bad for Randall that I would have agreed to anything. Remember, I felt like we was family.

When we got to the mortuary, I was convinced that what we was doing was right. Randall hopped off and ran to the back of the building. I was all on my own. I was gonna have to distract the people that deal with them bodies while Randall paid his last respects, and I had no idea what to do. I stumbled to the front of the building and walked right in through the front door. This place had a weird smell like you wouldn't believe. It wasn't dead bodies or nothing, like rotting and all. That would be really gross. No, it smelled more like chemicals and odorizers and stuff. Kinda like that old folks home that my granny used to live in before she passed.

The man at the front of the building was old himself, and he had his hair combed over on the top of his bald head like he was gonna fool people or something. "Hello son, what can I do for you?" He was a big tall fat man, and he was walking at me real quick. Now I don't know whether it was the chemical smell or the thought of all of them bodies, or just the Mr. Boston's, but I started feeling real sick again. I looked that old bald fat man in the eye and I began to say, "I'm a doctOOAAHHH," but I was puking all down the front of his shirt and tie. He looked at me like I was less than garbage, and he called out somebody's name. This old lady came running from the back, and she was pretty disgusted herself because I heard her choking back some vomit.

I put my head down in my hands for a second and then something struck me even funnier. Why would Randall want these people to be distracted? Why did we have to come here anyway? I know that he said that he wanted to say his last goodbyes and all, but why did he have to be alone? I began to think that he was up to something that just wasn't right, and that made me wanna puke even more; I did. It was all beginning to make sense. Randall wasn't sad. I shouldn't have felt sorry for him at all. He wasn't crying. That boy was damn excited. He had just found himself an opportunity to do something nasty to that girl that wouldn't even look at him, and he was gonna take it. I was certain that Randall was back there having sex with that dead girl's body.

I looked up and began running towards the back of the building. I had to stop him before he had gone too far. When we stopped at that gas station, I bet he was buying one of them lubricated condoms. This wasn't all his daddy's doing neither. It was Randall who wasn't right. As I ran down that mortuary hall, I began puking all along the way. I tried yelling Randall's name, but it was all gurgled by vomit. That old fat bald man started running after me, and that lady that must have been his secretary did too.

My mama never did like me hanging out with Randall, and I should have listened to her. I mean, I like Iron Maiden and Hustler magazine and all, but Randall liked it more. It's one thing talking about her pussy and digging in her trash, but this was going too far. I guess that I am a Christian, and Jesus don't want nobody having sex with dead people. Still, you don't need Jesus to tell you that that just ain't right.

Finally I had made it to this little room that was lit all strange and soft, and there must have been flowers everywhere. There stood Randall in the middle of the room next to the casket. I thought that maybe he was applying lubrication or whispering some kind of demon words to the devil or something, but when I got closer I saw that he was crying like a little baby. That old bald man grabbed us both by our collars and started screaming at us at the top of his lungs, "You little bastards better get out of here before I call the cops!" I started puking again, and Randall grabbed something out of his pocket. It was one of them roses that came in the drug pipes. Randall swung his elbow

around quick and caught that fat man in the neck. Then he took that drug pipe rose and placed it on Suzi's chest.

I got to tell you. Suzi looked weird laying there all dead and stuff. She looked like her, but not like her at all. Randall screamed, "Run!" and the two of us took off out of there like a couple of bullets from his daddy's AK-47, aimed right at one of Bill Johnson's cows. We hopped on my 4-wheeler, and we was gone. This time we didn't try to take the main roads. We tried cutting through the woods. There was several times when we almost hit a tree, but we was lucky to find a lot of trails back there and before we knew it we was back on Highway 25.

Police don't usually come out here unless they is trying to catch out-of-towners speeding. You gotta be stupid driving through here. All them cops wanna do is make money off of them tickets. We was lucky that we made it home at all.

Our ride back was real silent. Randall must have been sad, and I was just trying to get all of my thoughts straight. So he wasn't really trying to have sex with Suzi Owen's dead body. He was just trying to pay his respects with that drug pipe flower and all. When we pulled up on my four wheeler at his daddy's house, Randall's daddy was sitting on the porch with a gun. "Don't y'all look fancy," Randall's daddy said as we climbed off into their yard. Randall's daddy had one of them accents that couldn't no one understand, and it was even worse when he was drinking. The only reason that I can decipher it is 'cause I been hearing him speak all of my life. "You boys look like a nice fancy pair of San Francisco faggots," Randall's daddy laughed and pointed his AK-47 in our direction. We both knew that he wasn't going to shoot. He just liked to mess with our minds when he was drinking. "Go on inside and wax your bikini lines, girls. I think Oprah's on." At this point, he was just muttering to himself.

Randall passed by his daddy without even looking. He pushed through the door and stepped on their dog Jasper's tail on his way to his bedroom. Jasper yelped and ran off. I followed Randall to his room. He kicked off his shoes real high. He laid down flat on his bed, and he wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he was crying. "AWW Shoot!" Randall sobbed as he reached into his back pocket. He grabbed the drug pipe that that flower had come in from the back of his jeans, and he looked up at me with these real sad eyes, "Hey Bo, can you put this on the table in there? My daddy likes to save them."

All the nausea had passed through my body with the vomit, and I wasn't going to be sick no more. I looked into Randall's red watery eyes, and I almost wished that he would have done what I thought he was gonna do. That would have given him, at least, a little bit of satisfaction. Not the real him, but the Randall that I had imagined him to be when I thought that he was gonna do it. I almost wished that he would have done it. I figured that it would have been much easier for me to face the sicko dead sex having Randall in the eyes than it was for me seeing him in this condition.

I grabbed the drug flower pipe from his hand and walked into the other room. I saw Randall's daddy, through the window, taking aim at nothing in the darkness as he pretended to pull the trigger. It seemed like for some reason God had just taken a big old dump on Randall and me, and that life wasn't ever going to get much better, but that was just a passing thought. I walked back into Randall's room and picked up one of his ninja stars. I started playing with it in my hand. Me and Randall, we is real good friends.

Pseudonym

Jessica Martinez

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Poetry

If I am Jessica Martínez,
you might say to yourself,
perched in an office high-rise,
sky-blue tie and pen in hand,
“I’m sick of all this Latino crap.”
So, I can be Jessica Martinez
(*sin acento*)
to dodge that.

Or, better still, Jessica Martin—
bastard child of a murky heritage:
thick tongued, imposter—
una gringa, least of all.
Still, “Jessica... Jessica,”
you might say to yourself,
“I have an ex named Jessica.
I don’t like her much.”

So, J.M. Martin
doesn’t sound so bad—
(no “e” no “z”)
J.M. Coetzee may agree.
Besides, there is power
in initials, in becoming
unsexed,
in engendering a new name.

No matter—
when I marry, I shall be
Mrs. William English.
English! (jo of all *apellidos*!)
J.M. English: writer (and/or wife).
I might even have my husband
call me by my pseudonym,
on the days I spend typing,

to remind me who I really am.

For Casey



Geometrical Maze

Drawing
Chad Roberts

Facing the Beast

Mandy Rowe

I stood there with a cold sweat dripping from my hairline just above my temple. I couldn't wipe it away; it would be a sign of weakness. I couldn't allow that, not at a time like this. My very life depended on it. Very slowly, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, and I noticed the Four-Eyed Beast raise an eyebrow giving it an even more terrifying look. I knew, then, that there was no escape; the monster had caught me. I had to face her once and for all.

I opened my mouth to let out a battle cry, but it quickly died on my lips as I heard a strange rumbling. It was coming from all around the monster. I suddenly remembered to my dismay we were not alone. This time she had brought her Hellhounds and demons to torment me. The rumblings were actually scratchy whispers of her demons trying to provoke me into attacking them. If I did that, it would be all over before it even began.

"Look at him," said one demon to my right, "He's scared."

Another laughed and quickly replied, "He should be."

Suddenly laughter rang throughout the enclosed space, and I tried to remember how I had come to such a horrific place. Maybe I did some things I shouldn't have, and maybe I didn't do some things I should have...but that didn't make me a bad person. What did I do to deserve this?

Okay, so maybe I went to school and drove my teachers up the wall. Maybe I did try to get every kind of work possible at home and in school. Maybe I was a jerk to my sisters and peers, but do I really deserve such torment? Such hell? How does this, in any way, make things right? It doesn't make my teachers sane again, and it certainly doesn't take back the awful acts I've committed or the terrible words I said.

I suppose it did bring them some satisfaction. They knew where I'm at now. How could they not? The Four-Eyed Beast wanted a reckoning, and I'm sure her dominions carried her mission and desires far and wide. That's why the rumbling is so loud. They're all here. They have come to witness my downfall, but isn't it too late to learn humility?

As the rumblings grew louder and louder with each passing moment I noticed the Beast becoming more agitated than before. I wished I could run away, but I knew the results would be ten times worse than this if I did.

I looked into the masses around me, trying to find a friendly or understanding voice. Most didn't notice my desperate search. The beast did, and when my eyes met hers, she released a loud snake-like hiss.

Her followers immediately grew silent, and I felt even more sweat roll from my brow. Oh, why did I skip her lecture? Why did I think she would let me get away with avoiding her horrid tests?

"Well," she said, in a remarkably comforting voice. "Are you going to make-up your missed assignment or take a zero?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and, when I finally reopened them, I stuttered out, "My book report is on Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*..."



Altar

Metalwork

Anita Brunner



Wood You Water Me?

High Fired Ceramic Sculpture

Greg Ferrell

Breaching the Gaps

Victoria Miller

The bracken was waist high, swallowing up the forest floor as it twisted itself around the bases of the tightly bunched trees. The beastly weed was everywhere, engulfing anything in its path that dared to grow from the solid ground. Eyker had been walking for days, and not once did the bracken loosen its hold on the forest. Not even when a break in the trees revealed a small, wooden cottage resting alone in the middle of a clearing.

The wooden walls of the minute structure had various small holes and gaps in several places, and the corners of the cottage had been fortified with large, gray stones which were crumbling and covered in a soft greenish moss at the bottoms. The worn and dirty deerskins in the windows were drawn up halfway, and a wooden slab of a door hung slightly ajar both invitingly and mockingly at the same time. From the archway of trees in which Eyker still stood, the partially open door revealed utter blackness like pitch but held the seductive lure of rest.

Eyker slowly drew his longsword from the scabbard at his side. Slivers of sunlight, that had raped its way through the trees, glinted off the cool steel. The golden hilt was chilled but weighed heavily in his palm. It comforted him as though it were an extension of himself, having wielded the weapon from an early age. Cautiously, Eyker stepped out into the small clearing. The bracken brushed against his leather-embraced calves as he walked into the opening. A thrush sang sweetly nearby, but nothing else stirred except for the soft breeze that rustled through the leaves at random intervals.

Eyker called out a greeting to bring out anyone who may live in the cottage, but was welcomed only by silence. There was a faint damp, putrid smell around the outside of the cottage; the wood had been taken over by fungus, which left it green and black in various places near the bottom of its foundation. Keeping his sword in hand, he pushed the rotting door open further with his other. The light spilled inside to illuminate the single room inside that was small but remarkably tidy.

He ducked his head in order to pass through the threshold, but the ceiling was just high enough to let Eyker stand up straight without brushing the top of his helmet along the wood. There was a small bed with a creaseless green blanket, a table with two short, bulky chairs, and a few wooden chests. A pewter water basin sat upon the chest beside the bed. A day's worth of dust clung to the top of the chest, and there were a few small yellow flowers floating innocently on the surface of the water within the basin.

Eyker removed his helmet from his head and ran his hands through the long, golden hair, now matted to his head with sweat. The cool air coming in through the windows caressed his scalp, soothing the discomfort that wearing the helmet brought through its protective confinement. He placed the intricate iron helmet with gold inlays beside the basin, causing the pewter to look dull against the silvery, brushed iron. The flowers appeared vivid with placidity beside the object that had saved him from various head wounds that would have made the Valkyries descend upon him in delight.

His mind lingered on the Valkyries while he sheathed his sword. They were the captivatingly beautiful maidens who came to collect the fiercest of warriors who had

died in battle. Some say that they appear before a warrior is meant to die, an omen that the three Norns had concluded their time was up. Eyker had yet to find a woman he would face death for, let alone Freya's Valkyries. When the need took him, any wench was good enough for that night; not even the Valkyries excited him anymore.

Eyker unfastened the brownish-gray wolf furs he wore for warmth, along with the green wool cloak he wore beneath it, setting both across the foot of the bed. Turning back to the chest, he lifted the pewter basin to his lips and let the shockingly cool water sooth his dry throat. His hands shook when he replaced the basin on the hard wood, spilling water over the rim, which left small puddles on the dark oaken surface.

There was a gasp from behind him, followed by a crash as though the cottage behind him had just crumbled upon itself in freight. Eyker turned to face the woman staring back at him with a startled expression. Her curly red hair was plaited with strands attempting to escape their binds, and she wore a simple gray, wool gown that covered everything from her neck to feet. Her face was pale, though how much was natural and how much came from her apparent fear of him was undetermined at the moment. Two bright green eyes locked with his in stubborn contempt.

Keeping eye contact, she knelt down and grasped one of the small logs she had previously dropped at her feet. She wielded it in front of her with both hands like a sword, daring Eyker to move. When he took a step forward, she swung it at him, shouting "*Sheas! A dhiobhil!*" The log resounded against his shoulder with a thud.

"*Ga leoin!*" Eyker shouted back at her in her own Gaelic, ripping the log out of her grasp and dropping it carelessly behind him. "I'm not here to hurt you!" He rubbed his arm, his lips curling into a frown.

The woman opened her mouth before closing it again. After a few more seconds, she spoke in a strenuous calmness that came through in a hesitant, "Who are ye?" Her voice was slightly husky with steady burr.

"Who are ye?" She says." Eyker muttered under his breath, kicking the log farther behind him and completely out of her grasp. He eyed its companions scattered across the wooden floor with an inward groan.

"Mock me all ye like, I do no' have anything better ta do." She crossed her arms and glared ferociously at him.

He crossed his own arms and glared back, but his patience faltered with every moment that passed by, "My name is Eyker Olafson. My father is Olaf the Feared, Jarl of Tygard. And you, *elskling*? What do I call you?"

She frowned at him, blinking as though he were an apparition. Eyker was rewarded with the satisfaction that she could not understand what he had called her in Norse. If she knew it was a term of endearment, he'd wager she'd fly into a rage. He never thanked his father for taking the time to teach him more than one language growing up, and now he wished he had.

"Marsali," she said, taking in his height. He was taller than most of the men in the village. His hair was kissed by the sun, and even now in the shade of the cottage it shone like spun gold hanging in waves to just past his shoulders. He had a short beard of the same color and the bluest eyes that Marsali had ever seen. He stood regally in a parchment colored wool tunic and trews made out of the brown leather hides of some animal. His tunic didn't cover his arms, displaying two golden arm bands with sharp,

angular symbols carved into them. She thought they were runic inscriptions, perhaps blessings to their pagan gods.

"Ye speak Gaelic; I didna ken the Northmen could speak anything beyond Norse."

Eyker flashed her a smile, "Do not confuse common prattle with truth. Some Norsemen have been well taught in many languages. How else do you think we extend our power over so many countries?"

Marsali's eyes dropped to the sword strapped nonchalantly to his side, and she focused on it for the first time, taking in the sparkling gold hilt and the tiny arrow or spear shaped carving in the base of it, much like the ones that adorned his arm bands.

He looked down at it and chuckled, "That is one way, aye. I do not come to rape and pillage, so you can stop eyeing me like I will attack you at any moment."

Marsali laughed, though it lacked the presence of humor, "Ye expect me to trust a Northman? A Northman that, mind ye, has broken intae my home and willna state his business?"

Eyker scratched his bearded chin. "Have you ever been to Norway, Marsali?"

"Nay. I've lived with . . . here all my life." She looked at the floor then, the first time she had truly removed her gaze from him since she had entered the cottage. Taking it as a sign of reluctant acceptance of his presence in the cottage, Eyker moved toward her.

Marsali remained completely still as Eyker circled her in a long, confident stride. He reminded her of a hawk acknowledging its prey before diving in for the kill. She wanted to see if he would attack her, and if he did, she would be ready for him. He came to a halt behind her. Marsali's right hand fisted around the small dagger that her father had given to her when she reached the age of ten. It would be a shame to cut the throat of such a handsome man. He looked sculpted out of bronze, a statue come to life. Were she to reach out and touch him, she wondered if he would be cool like a statue or warm like any other man. Marsali felt the sliver hilt of her dagger biting into her palm.

"If ye are not going to raid us, then why are ye here?"

His breath was warm on her neck, causing her to flinch. "We came for land," he whispered in her ear before turning away from her and sitting down in one of the chairs, wearing a secretive smirk. "The air is cold here like back home, but we cannot sail to salvage food during the winter, so we were sent to find a better piece of land."

"Kenneth is trying to drive the Northmen out of the lands they have claimed as their own. The Shetlands..."

"The Shetlands are no concern of mine, nor is Kenneth." Eyker waved it aside. "Where is your husband?"

Ifrinn! Marsali had hoped he would not notice she was alone, "I have nay husband."

Eyker crossed his arms again. "Aye? Well, then where is your father, brother, or uncle? Who is protecting you?"

Marsali sighed, "I left my father at home." She peeked at him from under her lashes to find him expressionless. "He wished me to marry, so I left."

"And you traveled alone?" He threw his head back and laughed.

"Get out of here, *A dhiobhill!*" She picked up the nearest log and slung it across the cabin at him.

Eyker scrambled out of the chair quickly enough to avoid being hit, "I am not leaving until my warriors arrive, and when they do we will leave together so that you can

do whatever it is you are doing alone in the forest.” Eyker was amused when Marsali stood on tiptoe to try to see out the window closest to her as though expecting an army of Norsemen to be standing right outside. The light was fading and the sulking shadows were moving slowly towards the center of the cottage.

“Why are they no’ with ye now?” Marsali asked in a calmed tone.

Eyker’s gaze dropped down to the table before him. Marsali started to wonder whether or not he would answer her when his deep voice broke through the chilled silence, “They wished to visit the church.”

Marsali simply stared at him a moment before she could speak again. “Have they converted then? They have become Christians?”

“Mayhap. I wished to be alone for a while and so I left before them, without armor. Except for that.” Eyker pointed at his helmet, staring back with dark eye holes looming like a skull. “I figured I would give Odin his chance to prove to me his existence, to send an army of Scots to challenge me alone, with nothing but my sword.” Eyker drew his sword and laid it across the table. It was at least three feet long before meeting with the gold hilt, which formed a kind of replica cross, but Marsali did not say so outloud. He traced the spear shaped carving absently. “None came. I was denied my passage to Valhalla. Odin has grown weary of us, no longer caring if we convert or not into a religion that would have us bowing down to one God.” Eyker looked up at Marsali before continuing. “Our gods would never have us bow down like a thrall.”

Marsali fiddled with a crease in her dress, looking away from the intensity of Eyker’s stare, “Your god, Odin, he’s forsaken ye, and ye still do not wish to convert?” Eyker’s laugh nearly made Marsali jump out of her skin.

“My father was a known across battlefields as Odin the Feared. He tore through enemy warriors as though they were nothing. They called him a Berserker.” Eyker looked back to his sword, and at the symbol upon it, “He would fight without armor, sometimes without clothing if he felt doing so would strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. He has many scars, but lived through every battle not feeling the wounds he may have received. He told me that our family was in the blessings of the War God, Tyr; this is his symbol.” He traced the carving on the sword again.

“Those blessed by Tyr would be victorious in battle. My father always believed our family would be welcomed into Valhalla, Odin’s Great Hall that houses every fallen warrior who died fighting bravely and were to fight alongside Odin in the final battle of Ragnarok. And then one day my father grew far too old to wield a sword.”

“Did he...” Marsali bit her lip.

“Die? Not before I left, though mayhap he has by now.” Eyker noticed Marsali open her mouth to speak and continued before she could get in a word. “He sent me here. Like so many others, he had been thinking about converting for some time now. He wanted me to leave so I would not see his weakness.”

“Is it weakness to convert to Christianity?” Marsali asked in a bitter tone.

“It is if you wait until you know you are going to die and only do so because you are afraid your own gods have forgotten you.” Eyker had risen to his feet without realizing he had done so. He calmly sat back down. “Now I am to be Jarl and lead my men to do what is right, whatever it may be.”

Marsali’s brow furrowed, and she crossed her arms in front of her. She hadn’t

moved from that one spot since she had come upon Eyker in her cottage, and now she sat down in the chair across from him. "Will you convert?" She wanted to persuade him to do so, but didn't want to pressure him into doing anything he didn't believe in, like her father had tried to do by attempting to convince her that the man he had promised her to would make a good husband.

Eyker sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Time passed before he finally answered, "They say your God is forgiving and not as violent. They call us heathens while we worship the Norse gods but do not fear us any less once we have converted. If your God is so forgiving, why can't his people be as well?" He looked up, eyes pleading.

"We have raided, pillaged, some have raped and killed mercilessly in the names of all of our gods, but have Catholics never used force to extend their rule?"

He reached out over his abandoned sword and gripped her hand which had been resting on the table in one of his. He was warm, shockingly warm, despite the chilled tone of his voice. "If Odin left Asgard and arrived at the gates to Heaven," he continued. "Would God accept him and forgive him for his Blasphemy, or would Odin attempt to slay him since he is barbaric? Is Satan just a new manifestation of Loki, always the trickster, playing a jest upon the world?"

His thumb was stroking the palm of her hand in a gentle caress, disrupting her focus to where she only heard every other word of what he was saying. Marsali tried to pull away but his grip was firm. She looked up from their hands to face him.

"So tell me, Marsali, why change my beliefs if there is nothing to prove that what I am doing is really for the best? If Odin and the other gods can be doubted after our people have lived for them for so long. How can another God be trusted if ours are to be proven false?"

The pain in his eyes moved her, but Marsali didn't know what to say. He loosened his grip on her hand, and she yanked it back, feeling foolish for doing so. Her hand felt as though it had been branded, but her awareness of it was meaningless. His pain moved her, and she couldn't stop herself from stepping away from the table and resting her shaky hand upon his shoulder and watching as he closed his eyes as he exhaled the breath that he had held since his admission. Marsali left him momentarily to gather up some cheese and a loaf of crusty bread out of the chest near the hearth and place them in front of Eyker. "Ye can stay here until yer warriors arrive. God would wish it."

A fortnight passed, and still no warriors arrived. With everyday that passed, Eyker felt Marsali's guard slip more and more. She even quit clutching the dagger she thought he was unaware of, and apologized for having him make his pallet beneath a large tree just outside the cottage using his wolf furs and a blanket Marsali had been kind enough to lend him. When Marsali coyly suggested he move his pallet into the cabin by the door, Eyker refused. It was already too tempting being around her to risk ruining her trust in him by letting himself lay that close to her at night. He had controlled his lust for the past fortnight due to the distance he put between them during the night.

Soft light from daybreak spilled through the trees above him, reminding him that he had many responsibilities he had. He had slept very little the past few nights, disturbed by dreams of acts he had sworn he would not pursue. The dried crunch of footsteps over autumn leaves diverted his attention from the troublesome thoughts the woman inside the cottage had aroused. There was a shuffling rhythm of one foot

followed by another in a slow, precise manner. Whoever it was wanted to be heard.

Eyker leaned over and reached for his sword, which was always close at hand for situations as this, when a cold, sharp poke at his back brought him to a halt.

"The Great Eyker, Jarl and fierce warrior with eyes forged from the great fjords of Norway. Sleeping in the dirt when a cottage lies there? You've lost your helmet, I see."

"Are you a bard now, Gunnar? I have slept on the ground before, sheath your sword. A woman sleeps in the cottage, and I left my helmet there as well. I didn't feel it served much purpose."

"I should have been a bard," Gunnar returned his sword to its leather scabbard and stepped back to allow Eyker room to stand.

"Aye? Why are you not?"

"Singing is not my strong point; besides, I much prefer to run our enemies through than spin tales about it."

Eyker couldn't help but smile. Gunnar stood there before him, standing only slightly shorter than Eyker himself, wearing his chain mail armor that had dulled with wear over a green tunic that clung to his wide, muscled figure, and matching trews. His iron helmet had a dragon welded onto the front of it, whose head formed the plate that covered the bridge of his nose and hiding the nearly-black, straight hair which hung to his shoulders. He had dark brown eyes, the color of his sword belt, and his beard had been braided at the sides, framing his mouth and giving him the appearance of a walrus.

"Did you say a woman?" Gunnar arched a brow.

"Aye."

"Comely?"

"You will not touch her."

Gunnar waved the thought aside, "Do you claim her then?"

"Mayhap. Where are the others?"

Gunnar cocked his head to the side and regarded him silently before answering, "We made camp not far from here. I was hunting." He indicated the wooden bow hanging over his shoulder. "Come with me."

Eyker nodded in consent, and they slunk through the overgrowth of bracken and bushes like two foxes. Some while later, Eyker had gone to remove the arrow from the doe he had struck down, leaving Gunnar to watch for the hare they had seen hop along moments earlier.

Hunching over, Eyker retrieved the broken end of the arrow out of the limp deer carcass. The already reddish brown fur now had mats of a darker crimson smeared within it; the artistry of Eyker's predatory victory.

A soft thump of lifeless weight hitting the ground somewhere behind him caused him to glance up. Gunnar had dropped a large hare at the base of a distorted tree trunk that was bulbous at the base and went upwards in a twisted cacophony of limbs and dying leaves. The sun came through in slivers of vivid warmth that overcame the chilly wind that would occasionally rip through the woods, allowing Eyker to view the brilliant red upon his companion's hands, even from some distance away.

Gunnar looked up to see Eyker staring at his hands "Do you recall the eve of our first battle? You stared at the caked blood on your hands for so long that Old Olaf had to carry you off to the steam bath and bathe you himself."

Eyker tore his gaze away from tiny red smear on his own hand, left from removing the deer's skewer, and wiped his hand on an unsoiled patch of its fur, "That was a long time ago."

"Aye, it was. So what troubles you? The woman in the cottage? Afraid she might run off with a handsome Norseman, other than yourself?"

"Mayhap you credit your ability with the women far more than you should? Did the others convert like they wanted to?"

"Women love me. As for the others, they will not convert unless you give them your blessing. You are our Jarl now, and we will follow your orders no matter what they may be."

"They cannot wish me to carry the burden of our beliefs for them?" Eyker gasped, looking up from the deer carcass.

"Aye, we can," Gunnar said. "A Jarl is never wrong." He snatched up the fat, gray hare. Curling his lip, he dropped it again before expelling a disgusted "Ughhhh."

Eyker raised a brow at his friend's antics before he noticed the brownish glob that had smeared across Gunnar's hand and was also on the matted fur of the hare. "While I pride myself to believe so, my father is still Jarl." He struggled not to laugh.

Gunnar glared at Eyker. "Aye, but he was one foot into his own funeral pyre when our longship took to the sea. If he had wished for you to see him die as an old man rather than as a warrior, we would all be there watching the flames drift out to sea. Laugh all you like, mayhap your friend there left you a gift as well. The black-hearted fiend." Gunnar pointed at the lifeless deer before wiping his hand across the twisted, fat tree behind him. "Let Bjorn have the hare. For the sakes of us all, don't eat this." He kicked the rabbit a few feet ahead of him, where after a few lumpy flops it halted with black eyes gazing straight up at nothing.

"Quit playing with your food. Just because Aud preferred Bjorn over you does not mean he should be given the hare."

"I'll tell him to clean it first!" Picking the hare up by its back feet and holding it out away from him, Gunnar sped up his pace to catch up with Eyker. "Aud would have chosen me," he began as he matched Eyker's stride. "Only there was that one night when I drank so much mead that I spent the night in the stable. Imagine my surprise when I woke to find Bjorn's sister covering me like a warm bear fur. What did Bjorn need with a horse in the middle of the day anyhow?"

"I can only wonder. Considering that she died of some flux not too long after that, you had Loki on your side." Eyker said.

"Ah, well, Loki always did favor me, didn't he? What of this woman you have locked away in your crumbly little cottage? Is she so fair that you do not wish her to be seen by another man in fear that she may prefer him over you? Bjorn could be a problem, that whoreson." He said the last bit to himself. "Could it be that a wench has finally captured your eyes after all this time or maybe she's captured other parts."

Eyker glowered at him. "Jest some more little brother, for your crimes are adding up against you."

As they came to the clearing and the cottage once more, Eyker said, "Wait here." He dropped the deer and made his way in the direction of the cottage.

Marsali paced around the cottage. She had been doing so all morning since she

woke from a troubled sleep, periodically pausing to tidy something up in an attempt to clear her mind. And then she saw the helmet staring ominously at her. He left it there just to taunt her, the wee devil. She snorted when she realized she just described him as small when the man was a giant.

Since her mother's death, her father pushed her to marry. Marsali thought that if she was to marry, she should have some say into who it would be. As payment to a debt her father owed was not her grounds of marriage, and her father had enough wealth to pay them off without sacrificing her happiness to do so. It would be to a man who was braw and passionate about his beliefs. Eyker came to mind immediately and she dismissed it with a laugh. She picked up his helmet and studied the detailed craftsmanship of it with even more runic inscriptions. It looked no different from any other knight's armor other than the runes, but he was still one of the Northmen, making him forbidden to her.

The door crashed open, slamming loudly against the wall. Eyker regarded it for a moment with a frown before turning his attention to her and then stalked in with a determined stride. His chiseled jaw, noticeable even with the beard, was set stubbornly in a fashion that let her know he had come to ask something of her and was determined to get it.

"Sorry for startling you." He said, motioning nonchalantly at the door still ajar.

"Well ye should be, barging in like a savage beastie and all," Marsali said. His pale blue eyes were darker than usual, like a stormy sky.

"My warriors arrived through the night."

Marsali's heart lurched. She looked away from him. "Oh. I see. I guess ye will be needing this back then?" She held the helmet out to him without meeting his eyes.

His fingers brushed hers as he took the helmet. Marsali felt her bottom lip tremble slightly. She bit down on it, hoping Eyker hadn't noticed.

His free hand cupped her cheek. His thumb caressed her lip. "Do not be sad."

"What are y-mmmfh!" His mouth closed on hers and captured her words before she could get them out.

The helmet hit the floor with a clatter, and he fisted his hand in her hair behind her head. His other hand moved from her face, slid down her arm, and pulled her close, splayed against the small of her back. She tasted like she'd been eating warm, sweet berries, and his head swam with it. She pushed at his shoulders and he leaned back, breathing heavily.

"What is wrong with ye?" Marsali gasped out the words, wondering how she had managed to become wedged between the wall and Eyker when she didn't remember moving at all. Her lips tingled, feeling numb and fuller than they had ever felt before.

"I'm sorry; I should not have done that."

Eyker turned, scooped up his fallen helmet, and left without a second glance.

Gunnar sat on a fallen tree at the edge of the clearing, away from the front of the cabin, which was almost invisible due to the wild growth of the swamp of green bracken that surrounded it. With the dead deer and hare at his feet, he had taken his helmet off, and was in the process of braiding a lock of hair at his temple, when Eyker reemerged from the cottage expressionless and walking toward the woods as though he didn't see anything that stood in front of him. Before Eyker had gotten very far,

movement from behind him caught Gunnar's eye; a fiery haired woman was racing after him from the cottage, and she was scowling.

Scowling? Gunnar had never seen a woman scowl at Eyker before. But this one reached out and grabbed Eyker's arm and tugged at it to bring him to a halt. Thor's hammer, the wench was yelling at him. What did he do to her? Deny her his bed? Gunnar rubbed his eyes and looked again. She was still carrying on about something, but he could only hear random words. Gunnar lowered himself into the bracken, carefully avoiding the soiled hare, and inched forward on his elbows and stomach towards Eyker and the woman who was evidently doing nothing more than amusing Eyker. He had taken on the stance and half grin he took when the bards back home began spinning fantastical tales about him in battle that Eyker hated to hear.

"What in God's name was that about?"

"Missing me already?" Eyker asked, smirking to himself.

"Wh-what is..Ye canna go around assuming anything ye like about people!" Marsali shrieked.

"Aye, I can. I'm Jarl." Eyker said as though they were having a normal conversation.

"This is Scotland." She hissed through clenched teeth.

"Mayhap."

"Mayhap? Mayhap! Ye canna barge into a country and act like ye are king!"

"I do not want to rule the country."

"Oh, nay, ye want to rule over me!" Marsali wanted to shake sense into him.

Eyker spun around and reached out for her, but Marsali pulled away from him.

"What gives you that idea? Have I ever demanded anything of you?"

"Nay, but ye are treating me as though I am one of yer subjects that ye are too good to be found with in their private quarters. Ye just kissed me, Eyker. Kissed me! And then ye just prance off to your warriors and leave me behind as ye said ye would."

"Come with me."

"Oh, nay, so ye can rule over me?"

"I want to make you mine is all! You will be my wife, not my thrall."

"Mayhap there is no difference. My father is one of Kenneth's thanes, he would find out eventually and come after us. He'd kill ye without thinking twice about it and proclaim me to be a whore and leave me to who ever would have me."

"If your father is smart, he would see the advantage to having a score of Norse warriors as allies." Eyker scratched his chin as he answered. He grew weary of the dispute.

"Ye kent about my father the whole time, didn't ye? I bet you planned to gain land as a bride price, too. Ye only stayed around on his orders."

"You only just told me about him! Are you daft? I do not care what your father has. I only want you. You!" He reached a hand out to her and she backed up a step.

"Ye are not a Christian. I canna marry ye even if I did want to because of that." She turned away from him.

"And if I converted?"

Marsali whirled back around to face him, gawking at him. "I would never be able to live with myself if ye converted just to get into my bed!"

"If I only wanted to share your bed, I would have taken you on the first night I met

you. Do not dare feign surprise with me; I have wanted you since a full fortnight ago!"

"But ye can't convert over something as unimportant as a woman..."

Eyker threw his helmet down carelessly in exasperation and cupped her face in his palms, holding her gaze. "Not for any woman, for *a* woman. Don't you see? My gods have forsaken me, but your God gave me you. You should have sent me on my way, yet you trusted me to stay with you even though you had no way to defend yourself if I was a real threat to you." His gaze dropped to her delicate, pink lips. "Mayhap I am a threat to you..." He thought he just might kiss her once more when the sound of a throat clearing nearby caught his attention. Marsali heard it too, for she jerked away from him and pulled her dagger from its hidden pocket in her dress.

Gunnar spoke near his feet. "Tell the besom to put the dagger away, Eyker."

"Gunnar, what are you doing hiding in the weeds?" Eyker asked.

"I did not wish to disrupt you..."

"Yet you did" Eyker said through his teeth.

"I admire your desire to make merry in the middle of the bracken, and I mayhap would not have watched, but we have get back...."

Eyker sighed, and motioned for Gunnar to collect the deer. Once he was sure his friend could no longer hear him, he turned back to Marsali who was still clutching her dagger and gawking after Gunnar in disbelief.

"Will you?"

"Did he just say *mayhap* he wouldna watch?"

Eyker chuckled. "Aye, that he did." He took her hand in his to draw her attention back to him. "Will you come with me?"

"And be your wife?"

Eyker nodded, his throat felt like he had swallowed a ball of wool.

Marsali smiled and nodded. "Aye. I supposed I will, but didna be shocked when ye find yourself facing an angry, braw Scot named MacRae sometime soon."

"Don't fash yourself about that now. Go get your cloak and let us go and I will introduce you to my warriors."

Gunnar joined him with the deer over his shoulder, still carrying the hare away from his body. "She's fiery." Gunnar said, eyeing her backside as she entered the cottage.

"Touch her and not even our friendship will save you."

"I do not desire to steal your woman, Eyker."

"Do you think the others will approve?"

"Of her?" Gunnar pointed towards the cottage. "Are you daft? She's got the fury of a Norsewoman within her. You could not have found a better match."

"Nay, not Marsali. I am converting."

"I heard..." He looked thoughtful, gazing at the ground. "I will not."

"Nay?"

"Nay. The others mayhap will, but I kent you since before we had beards. You would blame yourself if the way of our ancestors was lost. I will stay the heathen, if you give me your word not to let the Christians stone me to death."

Eyker smiled but did not look at his friend. "Aye. You have my word."

Gunnar glanced up finally to see that Marsali had rejoined them, stopping firmly at Eyker's side.

Mother Nature's Garden

Elena Fodera

Fruit grew from the Wisdom Tree,
ripe and juicy, starlight grown
from perfect glossy shining seeds,
oh-so-gently sown.

Reaching upwards, mighty, strong,
greater than all trees yet known,
growing tall
by the Garden wall
made of ancient stone.

Mother Nature's garden,
where the Thoughtfulness Fountain flows,
Her place of peace, Her place of rest,
where no one but She ever goes.
She sleeps and breathes, She works and creates,
with never-calloused hands of rose
which move with such grace
as the lips on Her face,
a more radiant smile than any man knows.

I saw her silver turquoise eyes
set above a cheek so fair,
and the chirping crickets ceased their song
whenever her voice floated on the air.
She sang in tune with only the Wind,
as the Garden's other sounds did not dare;
He never stopped blowing
through her long and flowing
windy weeping willow hair.

And I saw never-aging Mother Earth;
who sees all joy and sees all pain:
Winter Spring Summer Fall,
from month to month, from wax to wane.
She watches her garden, morning noon night,
and watches as the clouds bring rain.
She thrives forever in her prime,
ageless and transcending time,
from day to day, not one the same.



Lunar Moth

Color Photograph

Luciana Carneiro

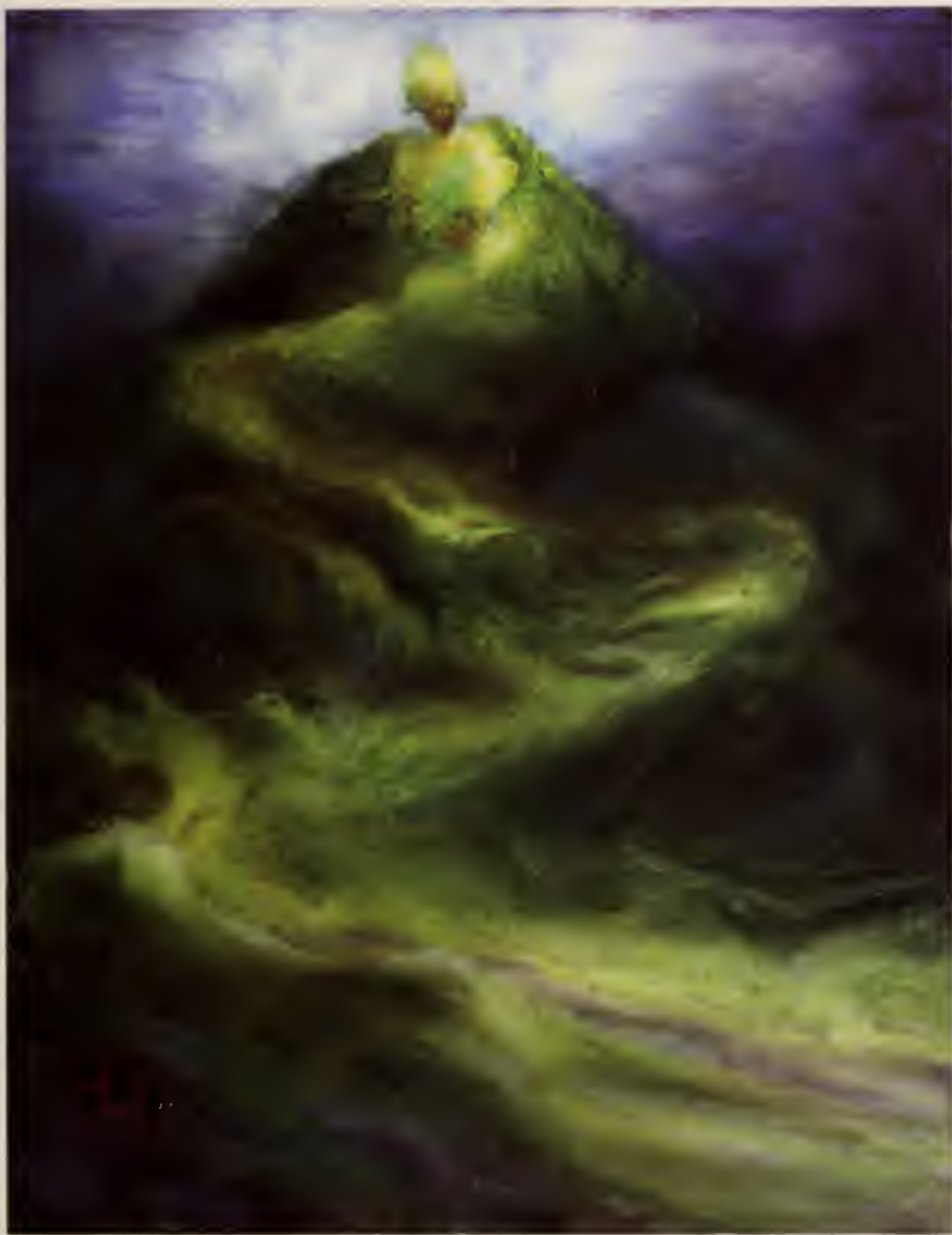
Resistance

Virginia Gribben

Claire has a laundry list of odd tendencies; some may even dare to say that she is a little obsessive-compulsive. For example, if she gets hit on one arm she hits the other to even it out. She's been known to do strange things like zip and unzip her purse in successions of three. She is almost physically incapable of eating any food that has touched another food on her plate. For the most part, she tries to keep these quirks to herself but there is one thing that she cannot stand; it drives her to distraction when a person's tag sticks out of their clothes. If she sees this she has the urgent need to fix it. Once Claire sees a tag, the tag is all that she can focus on, the lights dim, her palms sweat and she has the urge to bend her arms where there are no joints. Until Claire sees that the tag is fixed, there is no other reality, just Claire and the "Made in China." Her tag tucking has gotten her written up at work; her co-worker thought he was being sexually harassed. Claire has also been accused of being a pickpocket. In short, her tag obsession has gotten her into plenty of trouble.

Sunday morning, Claire sits in church and she cannot concentrate on what Father Hess is saying. The only thing Claire can see is a white rectangle taunting her from the waistband of a black Chanel pantsuit. There is no priest, no blood of Christ, no effigy of Jesus, dying for her sins. "Size four, dry clean only, size four, dry clean only" is being chanted instead of "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Claire knows that it's only a matter of time before she reaches forward and really pisses off Mrs. Wicker by tucking her tag. The woman has made it clear that Claire must keep her hands off of her person, or else. Claire is not sure what "else" is, but she doesn't want to find out. Mrs. Wicker has given her plenty of warnings, and she is feisty.

With her hands shaking, tucked in her pockets, Claire focuses on Jesus' face; his forlorn expression seems only to be for her. Claire keeps staring, letting her guilt wash over her. She starts a new chant in her head, "Jesus will be mad, Jesus will be mad, Jesus will be mad." She knows that if she can keep this up for a few more minute, Mrs. Wicker will rise for communion and take her taunting tag with her. Suddenly the tag appears where Jesus was, and then it is gone, off to receive the body of Christ. Claire resumes normal breathing, grabs her purse to go to communion and ducks out of mass before it's over; her pride in resisting overpowers her guilt of leaving. Jesus will understand.



Meagon's Hill

Digital Painting with Photoshop
Greg Ferrell



The Bunny Who Gave Up Life

Charcoal Drawing
Anita Brunner

Baby Doll

Leah DiNatale

Kennedie felt the scorching, yellow rays of the florescent spotlight spilling out over the top of her head and radiating out into the audience. She felt as if she were being cooked slowly from the outside in. Her cerulean crowning dress felt stifling hot, like a large baking bag. She could feel small beads of perspiration forming under the puffy shoulder sleeves of the dress.

Under the sweltering lights, Kennedie could smell the spray tan Miss Barbara had given her yesterday afternoon. It smelled like an overpowering mixture of year old suntan lotion and sweat; Kennedie wanted to throw up all over the shiny, brown hard wood boards covering the broad stage.

I sure do wish those lights weren't so bright. Kennedie was careful not to let her big smile fade.

"Kennedie when you get up there on that stage you better not start fidgeting, you understand me? I paid a dollar for each of them Swarovski crystals on that dress. That's a thousand dollars, Kennedie. Daddy only puts 10,000 dollars in the fund for a whole year. I better see my thousand dollars sparklin' when they put that crown on your head. Stand still. I'm tryin' to make sure this fall doesn't come out. If I don't pin it in tight enough your hair will fall out on the middle of the stage," Angie said in a muffled voice, holding a large, thick bobby pin between her teeth.

"KENNEDIE LYNN JILES DO NOT WALK AWAY FROM ME!" Kennedie winced as she felt the familiar pinch of pins being dug into her scalp.

"Kennedie, don't move away from me when I'm tryin' to fix your hair. I'm only gonna tell you one more time. You understand me? I swear it will fall out if I don't pin it tight enough. We won best hair in Little Miss Peach County with this fall. We want to win best hair again. Taylor Barfield always wins best hair, but we got her with this."

The thick, platinum wig stopped at Kennedie's waist and was well worth Angie's 500 dollars. There was no way Kennedie could ever hope to win the best hair award with her limp hair, much less the title of Little Miss Alabama against Taylor Barfield. Even Angie herself had to admit Taylor's long, glossy black hair was beautiful.

"Ok, there Kennedie. It's in. Now all you got to do is walk to the center of the stage and make sure that you pose the way you've been practicin' with Miss Amy. You understand me, Baby Doll?" Angie held Kennedie tightly by her thin shoulders.

"Kennedie, you don't want that Taylor Barfield to beat you, do you? That snotty little girl and her momma think that they can just steal the title of Little Miss Alabama right out from under us," Angie said as she patted Kennedie's fake yellow curls and smoothed the skirt of her stiff crowning dress.

Angie took a loud gulp of Diet Coke from the can sitting next to her box of bobby pins on the counter in front of the large dressing room mirror. She wished the Diet Coke had a shot of Jim Beam mixed in. The two shots she took at 10:00 that morning were starting to wear off. Kennedie's pageants always made Angie so nervous. It was almost as if she were getting up on the stage herself. Angie never went to any of Kennedie's pageants without Jim Beam; pageants were way too stressful without her old

buddy. She usually snuck a bottle into Kennedie's duffle bag, but she hadn't had time this morning.

Crap. Today is going to be a long day. Angie took another long swig of her Diet Coke.

"Kennedie, I saw Taylor's momma staring at your new crowning dress during dress rehearsals yesterday, Kennedie. She's scared, Baby Doll, real scared. This dress is just gorgeous on you, and she knows it. Blue looks so much better on you than yellow looks on her. Taylor doesn't stand a chance against us, does she, baby?"

"No, Momma," Kennedie said quietly.

Why does Momma hate Taylor so much? Kennedie decided not to ask her momma the question out loud.

"That's my Baby Doll," Angie said with a smile as she popped a peanut M&M into Kennedie's mouth, as if she were an obedient poodle being rewarded for learning a new trick.

As she stood straight with her arms rigidly at her sides, palms facing out and down, left foot pointed forward, and right foot pointed out, Kennedie tried to remember everything her momma had said to her backstage in the dressing room and the way Miss Amy had taught her to stand. It made her head hurt to try to remember so many things at once.

I hate pageants so much. Daddy does, too. He always argues with Momma about how much money they cost. I wonder what would happen if I told him I didn't want to do them anymore. He would probably let me play softball.

The three layers of crinoline under the skirt of her full dress made her legs itch, and Kennedie had to fight the urge to scratch them. Posed so perfectly, she looked like the life sized version of a porcelain doll. It seemed like she had been plucked from a stand off of a little girl's top shelf where collectable items were kept. Onstage, Kennedie really did look just like a doll that was too expensive to touch or ever play with, so delicate she would break if you turned her the wrong way.

Kennedie's left eye started to itch too, but she knew better than to rub it or, even worse, squint. Both of her eyes felt heavy and tired from the thick, false eyelashes and runny black eyeliner that encircled her lids. She hoped the judges didn't notice the small pools of black goo that had begun to cake in the corner of her eyes. Over the years, Kennedie had mastered the art of paralyzing the muscles in her face so that her blue eyes stayed wide and her big, pink grin stayed painted on. It was a difficult task; her mouth felt sore most of the time from the brilliant white flippers that pinched her gums and covered her missing front tooth and permanently crooked left incisor. Consequently, this gave her the dead, emotionless stare of a doll with blank, glass eyes.

Kennedie was glad when the competition was over and it was crowning time. As she stood in line with the other girls, she knew it wouldn't be long before Mr. Burt walked on stage and announced the winner.

Thank goodness. Kennedie kept smiling.

If she looked out of the corner of her eye, she could see Mr. Burt standing just behind the thick, dark velvet curtain at the side of the stage. She sure was glad; soon, she could go home and take her prickly dress off.

Kennedie wanted to turn and see how Taylor looked, but she knew better than to take her eyes off the judges. She couldn't understand why her momma didn't like Taylor.

She was so pretty with her long, straight, dark hair and bright yellow dress. Before they went onstage, Taylor smiled and said, "I like your crowning dress. It sparkles a lot."

Kennedie wanted to tell Taylor that yellow was her favorite color, but instead she just nodded, afraid that her momma could somehow see her talking to Taylor. As Kennedie stood posed onstage, loud music began to play, signaling Burt Edwards' entrance onto the stage to begin the crowning ceremony.

Mr. Burt, the pageant director, dressed in a black tuxedo and shiny black dress shoes, flitted onto the stage in his showy, dramatic way. He walked to the podium and began to speak into the microphone. "Here at the Little Miss Alabama pageant we want to thank everyone for coming out and having fun with us! All of these little girls are just absolutely gorgeous!" Burt said in his loud, sing-song voice.

It was always hard for Kennedie to figure out what exactly Mr. Burt was so excited about; he was always so giggly, whether he was announcing or talking to her and the other girls backstage. Kennedie knew pageants sure didn't make her giggle.

"And now, without further ado, I will begin with the crowning ceremony. Our first award is the Early Bird Award. This award goes to the little girl who got her application turned in the quickest. Our Early Bird Winner is Lindsey Andrews!" Lindsey was standing next to Taylor, who was wearing a deep purple dress. She stiffly raised her arm so that the reigning Miss Alabama, Missy Daniels, would know where to set the small trophy.

I wish he would hurry up. In her anticipation, Kennedie almost forgot to smile.

"We will now give out our awards for prettiest hair, best smile, and best dress! The award for prettiest hair goes to Kennedie Jiles!" As she stiffly raised her arm, Kennedie could feel every pin sticking in her scalp. She could hear her momma's loud hollers from the audience.

I wish Momma would be quiet. It's so embarrassing when she screams like that.

"The award for best smile is awarded to Taylor Barfield! Taylor Barfield is also the recipient of the best dress award!"

"And now, what we've all been waiting for, the crowning of the new Little Miss Alabama! All of these little girls are winners and we just love them so much! Our 3rd runner up is... Miss Laura Matthews! Let's have a big round of applause for Laura ladies and gentlemen," Burt said in a loud voice. "Our 2nd runner up is Alyssa Stevens. Congratulations Alyssa! And finally... Our 1st runner up is Kennedie Jiles. Our new Little Miss Alabama is Taylor Barfield! Congratulations Taylor!"

Kennedie smiled as Burt Edwards placed the silver, cubic zirconium studded crown on Taylor's head. For once, she was thankful that the crown was not being put on her own. "It's shiny and pretty," thought Kennedie, but she knew she had one just like it at home in the big cabinet in the living room. Besides, Taylor looked really excited when Mr. Burt had said she was the winner. Kennedie had decided that since the pageant was over it was o.k. to look beside her.

It's pretty, but it looks heavy, just like my other one. Kennedie was relieved that she did not have to carry the heavy crown on her own head. She could still remember the sharp pain of having bobby pins stuck into her scalp to hold the heavy crown in place so many times before. It made her tired to think about having to hold her neck stiff enough to keep the tiara straight on her head.

After her initial feeling of relief, Kennedie began to feel a sickening guilt rise into her throat. She felt like gagging.

What is momma gonna say? Kennidie began to panic. She knew her momma had spent a lot of money on this pageant.

I bet Momma and Daddy are gonna get in a big fight when we get home.

Kennedie wondered what she could have possibly done wrong in the pageant. She had performed her baton routine perfectly. Not missed a single twirl. She knew she had done her step turns perfect, exactly the way she had practiced them with Miss Amy. As she slowly walked off of the stage, Kennedie stared at her shiny, white, patent-leather Mary Janes. She knew her momma would be waiting as she walked off stage.

"Kennedie Lynn Jiles, I can't believe this! I just can't believe that we lost! It's ok though, Baby Doll. They stole the crown from us this time." Angie fumed in Kennedie's small face after ushering her into one of the only individual dressing rooms located backstage.

She locked the door, even though none of the girls were supposed to have personal dressing rooms. Angie didn't trust the other girls' mothers. She knew they might try to steal Angie's curling iron or, worse yet, the crowning dress before Kennedie had the chance to put it on after her talent routine. Angie began to hastily cram all of Kennedie's eye shadow, blush, pink lipstick, bobby pins, curling irons, and brushes into a large polka dotted duffel bag.

"Get that dress off right now. I paid 1500 dollars for that dress, and I don't want it messed up. I'm gonna have to hear about you losing from Daddy, too. Maybe the judges in the next pageant will have some sense." Kennedie tried to pull the heavy dress over the top of her head.

"NOOO, Kennedie!!!! I've got to take your fall off first and then let you step out of it! You are gonna get makeup all over it!! It costs a hundred dollars to dry clean this dress!"

Angie quickly picked Kennedie up and sat her on top of the counter. Kennedie felt like she was being scalped as Angie pulled the long wig off of the top of her head. Angie didn't bother to take the pins out one at a time.

"Taylor beat us. I just can't believe it. Now we get to see her and her wannabe high class momma strutting around at the Miss Cobb County pageant next month, actin' like they're better than everybody else." Angie said angrily, as she carefully hung the glittering crowning dress inside the plaid garment bag Kennedie had won in the pageant the month before.

Kennedie fought the urge to cry. She knew it would only make her momma get more upset. Crying made her mascara run and eyes burn. Kennedie hated it when her eyes burned; it was worse than when they itched.

"O.K. Kennedie, let's just see what the judges had to say. I am gonna go get those score sheets right now. You stay right back here in this dressing room. You understand me?"

Kennedie saw her momma push the heavy dressing room door open and walk out into the narrow hallway that led to the auditorium entrance. Kennedie watched her walk away with a small sigh of relief, thankful for a temporary reprieve. She scratched her head hard.

At least I have that itchy dress off. Kennedie was thankful to finally be able to scratch her knee in the baggy shorts and T-shirt. She always looked forward to putting on comfortable clothes after one of her pageants was over.

I sure am glad Momma wasn't mad at me. I'm glad I didn't drop my baton or forget to smile when I did my step turn. Sometimes Kennedie's momma got mad at her after she lost a pageant. It didn't happen much at all. Kennedie didn't lose much either; she had learned how to do everything perfect over the past eight years.

I don't know what Momma would do if I told her I didn't want to be in pageants anymore.

After she heard the familiar taps of her momma's black high heels on the tile floor outside the dressing room, Kennedie opened the door. Kennedie felt hot all of a sudden. The room didn't seem large enough for both of them. Kennedie knew her momma took up a lot of the room. "Let's see what the judges had to say, Baby Doll."

As Angie flipped through the judges' notes, she read all the usual remarks Kennedie always received:

"Beautiful!"

"What a gorgeous crowning dress!"

"What a poised little girl!"

It was only on the last sheet that there was any kind of criticism at all. Angie looked at the sheet, puzzled. Kennedie noticed the perplexed look on her mother's face.

"Momma, what does it say?" Kennedie asked.

"Kennedie, Baby Doll, don't even worry about it. That's so ridiculous...." Angie said with a sniff.

Momma never tells me anything. She never really listens to me and she always tells me to be quiet whenever I ask her anything. Pageants always put her in such a bad mood. I wish Daddy would take me to softball games instead.

"Momma, I want to know what it says."

"Fine, Kennedie" Angie said with an exasperated sigh. Pageants always made Angie so exhausted. How could she have forgotten her bottle of Jim Beam on a day like today? It must have been all the stress.

It says, "Your eyes weren't smiling! Try to smile with your eyes!"

"Momma, how do I smile with my eyes?" Kennedie asked in a shaky voice as she gazed at herself in the large floor length mirror across from the counter she was sitting on top of.

Why isn't anything I do ever good enough?

"Baby, I don't know. That judge is crazy, probably just jealous that she doesn't have a little granddaughter as beautiful as you are. You know those judges are just mean ole' ladies tryin' to relive their glory days."

Gazing into the mirror, Kennedie saw that her cherry red lipstick had begun to bleed around the corners of her thin lips. She smiled wide at her own reflection and opened her blue eyes as wide as she could.

Maybe this is how I smile with my eyes. Maybe I can do it good enough if I try really hard. Kennedie silently looked at herself. She tried to look as happy as she could.

I don't look very happy at all. I look scared. No, not scared, I look...sad. Kennedie kept smiling anyway.

As she continued to look into the mirror, Kennedie saw she had lipstick on her teeth and that the black goo that had formed in the corners of her eyes had begun to run; the goo burned as it spilled out and puddled beneath her bottom eyelashes. Her thick foundation had begun to crease and her face looked splotchy and very pale in certain places. Her hair was matted and tangled from scratching her head so hard. Kennedie finally let the corners of her mouth fall, frowning for the first time.

"I look like a clown," Kennedie said out loud, by accident.

"What's that, Baby?" Angie muttered as she reached under the counter to gather a couple of large bobby pins that had fallen out of the box she had placed on the counter while Kennedie was getting ready earlier.

"Kennedie, what did you say? I didn't hear you."

"I said I don't want to be in pageants anymore, Momma." replied Kennedie, continuing to frown.

"Excuse me?"

"Momma, I wanna play softball," Kennedie said looking into the mirror.

"I bet Daddy would take me to the games."

"Absolutely not, Kennedie. You are not going to play softball. You are going to be in more pageants. Little Miss Cobb County is next month. I bet if you practice real hard with Miss Amy you can win that one, that way you'll qualify to be in Little Miss Alabama again next month."

Kennedie watched herself in the mirror as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her makeup across the middle of her round cheeks. She had even managed to get a little bit of the black goo on the tip of her round nose. She looked so silly with black makeup streaked all over her face, definitely not like a contestant in the Little Miss Alabama pageant. Kennedie couldn't help but laugh. As she looked at her face in the mirror, she thought she finally understood what the last judge had been trying to tell her.

I'll ask Daddy if I can play softball when I get home.



Untitled

Color Photograph
Luciana Carneiro

His Protest

Jessica Martinez

On Friday,
when I passed the picketers
and entered,
head hung, low down,
he did not hold my hand.

And when the nurse called
my surname,
asked me to sign,
asked me to undress,
dress, come back again,

he was not there.
But on the third day,
when they draped the sheet
over my white legs,
and my knees rolled

to either side,
as heavy as stone,
wide as the grave,
he was there then—
inside me.

He was the hard thud
of my heart,
he later told me,
slowing as the fluids snaked
through my veins,

slowing so that I did not hear
the slurp and gurgle
of the aspirating machine,
churning as it usurped
will from my body—

he was there then, he said,
when the doctor touched
my shoulder, lied to me,
and told me,
“It’s finished.”



Solitude

Acrylic on Canvas

Greg Ferrell

Die Gurke

Joe O'Connor

“H^{oney . . . ?}”

Oh crap. Ginger, can't you see I'm trying to sleep? Maybe if I just lay here she'll give up after awhile. Just as I thought these words my loving wife began to jab me in the side saying, “Honey, honey I'm hungry. Can you run down to the store and see they have some cucumbers?”

Why the hell does she want cucumbers? Screw this, I'm just gonna pretend like I'm asleep and pray that she'll get over her craving.

“Malcolm, baby, sweetie, honey. Stop playing around please, and just go get me some cucumbers. I'm hungry, and you know I'm not supposed to move around a lot.”

“I know, Ginger, I know. But can it wait 'til ten?” I reached out a stick-like finger to caress her pale face. “We stayed up kinda late last night, and I'm just a little tired. Would that be okay?”

Her nails sunk into my arm, “Malcolm just get your lazy ass out of bed and go get me some damn cucumbers!”

“Jeez, woman,” I said as I ripped my arm out of her grip. “Plan to kiss your baby with that mouth?”

Her blue eyes shot me a glare that said, “Sure, I'll kiss my baby, but I'm not so sure about kissing her daddy.”

“Fine. I'll go. Hope somebody in this town knows English.”

With that, I rolled out of bed and stumbled over to the dresser. I opened the top drawer and pulled on some clean boxers. I pulled open drawer number two to look for a shirt but noticed it was empty. I looked in drawer number three for a pair of pants and found it just as bare.

Looks like I'll be wearing something off the top of hamper today. Joy.

I managed to find a somewhat clean pair of pants and into its pockets went my keys, my cell phone, my English to German dictionary, and my Euro filled wallet. I threw on a paint-stained shirt and walked out the door.

We had only been in Germany for two weeks by that time, and already I was hating it. These people were just so cheerful and happy. It made me sick whenever one of our neighbors would come over with some kind of cake that was made for the sole purpose of clogging my arteries. I mean, I would be in the middle of a perfectly healthy salad when there would be a ringing at the door and, lo and behold, there was Helga Fundermier (sounds like a stereotype doesn't she?) standing at the door holding “ein Willkommenkuchen.” And, of course, my wife just loved it. How could she not? She was pregnant (or so she claimed), and I was trying to diet, so she would be the only one eating that massive heap of transfat and sugar.

Being that we had only just recently moved to Germany, we did not have a car (I took the train into Munich), and so I had to walk half a mile down a dusty country road before I reached the main strip through Karlstadt. The only reason that this street was

the main road in Karlstadt was that it had something special: stop-lights. The main road in Karlstadt, Dudenstrasse, housed the only three stoplights in the whole town (if you can call it that). Yeah, I was in the boonies. To many people this wouldn't be a problem, but I'm not like many people. In fact, I'm not even like most people. After a lifetime of living in a box, seventeen stories above the ground, under a smog filled sky, I found the openness of the country rather imposing. How was I supposed to get anything done with sun shining in my face all day?

You see, back in New Jersey, things were different. There I was the director of creative affairs for the tri-state area (New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania), the one who set employee morale boosting programs, community service programs, and the like. And while I only had to gather together the ideas from my lackeys and sign my name to their ideas, the job was harder than it sounds. At work I was known as a hard-ass, but someone had to keep those hippies to the deadlines. But once I got back home from Smith & Global, Ginger took the reins. And that was the way we liked: I was relieved of all responsibility as soon as I walked in the door and gave Ginger a kiss hello.

But our routine started to change in November when I accepted a top position Munich that would start in February. I had known about the opening for a few months and, after talking it over with the wife, we both decided to jump at the opportunity to live abroad. But what I didn't know was that Ginger would let her excitement about moving overseas get in the way of keeping the house together after I came home from work. I started making our meals and doing the dishes while she sat on the computer looking up stuff that we could do in Germany. I was glad she was excited about the trip, but things were getting out of hand, especially when she decided to rent our house to her brother while we were gone. Apparently, she thought that Smith & Global was going to find and pay for a nice house for us to live in during our stay and that we wouldn't need the money raised in selling our house to help pay for our jaunt in Europe.

I bet we wouldn't be living in the boonies if I had just kicked her brother out and sold the damn house.

That thought hit me just as I walked onto the hard pavement of Dudenstrasse and into the blinding reflection of die Sonne bouncing off the windows of Karlstadt's only grocery store. After walking about halfway across Dudenstrasse, my cell phone rang:

"Hey Malcolm."

"What's up, Ginger? I haven't got the stuff yet, so you just chill out for a little bit."

"Oh that's great. Since you haven't found the cucumbers yet, can you get me some peach ice cream too?"

Why don't you walk down here yourself. You're only two months pregnant.

"Malcolm?"

"Um...sure. I'll pick it up. Okay, I'll see you later. Bye."

I closed my phone, looked up, blinding myself yet again, and, nearly tripping on the sidewalk in the process, made my way over to the front door. The lights were off. But, judging from the sign on the door, Wilhelm's Lebensmittelgeschäft (whatever that hell that meant) would be open in a matter of minutes. So I decided to kill the ten minutes by looking up some key German words.

Cub...Cuba...cubby...Cub Scout...cuckoo...cuddle...cud- wait a second, they skipped over

cucumber. Who skips over cucumber? Fucking bargain bin dictionaries! Let's see if it's got peach...nope. What the hell? Did the people who wrote this cheap piece of crap not eat their fruits and reggies as kids?

Grumbling over this profound lack of anything remotely helpful, I shoved the dictionary into my back pocket and slumped down, past the window, on to the ground. I closed my eyes, stretched my legs across the sidewalk, and thought back to that fateful evening back home.

It was the evening of January 6th and my presentation to the board of directors was due on the morning of the 8th, but I still managed to find enough time to sit down to a healthy dinner before rushing back to my work. As I walked into our dimly lit dining room, I eyed my wife and, noticing that she was glowing, slid down into my chair.

"What's got you in such a good mood tonight?" I asked as she twirled her auburn hair around a finger like a schoolgirl playing hard to get.

"Oh," she smiled "you'll find out soon enough. Just relax and enjoy your salad and soon everything will be much, much clearer."

"Um...okay." I'm not much for mystery, so I figured I could trust Ginger about telling me everything that was going on. In the meantime, I dove into the mountainous pile of lettuce, carrots, onions, and other assorted vegetables that my doctors had finally succeeded in restricting my diet to after my cholesterol spike in November. Just as I reached out for my glass of water, I noticed something strange.

"Wait a second. You have a steak."

"Yea--"

"But I thought you were going to help me stay on my diet by eating the same stuff I had to? I mean you even said something about needing to drop a few pounds and that it wouldn't be a big deal t--"

"Well, you see, Malcolm, something's come up which," she chewed on her lip, "has ...um complicated the situation."

I cocked my eyebrow toward the ceiling, "Really? What makes it so you can't go on a diet?"

"Honey, I'm still eating a salad," she motioned to the pathetic pile of greens on the tiny plate in front of her, "because I want to help you, but I can't eat only salad anymore. You see, I'm not just eating for myself anymore."

A half-chewed carrot fell from my gaping jaw and bounced off the side of the table.

"Wha?"

"Malcolm, we're going to have a baby!"

The words hung in the air like a trapeze artist caught in a photograph, and I nearly inhaled the rest of the salad that was in my mouth.

"Kaggghlt," I spat a forkful of saliva soaked salad into my napkin. "Oh my God, Ginger. That's wonderful!"

Just as Ginger and I were about to embrace, a shadow came over me and what felt like a small car landed in my lap. The massive weight on my stomach and legs grinded my back against the concrete wall of the store, and when I tried to sit up I was blocked by the mountainous breasts of the obviously obese woman who was now lying on top of me.

“Eselloch! Du stolperst mich.”

Eselloch, now there's a word I know.

“Sorry, lady, but maybe you should watch where you're walking so that you don't trip over people and flatten them like pancakes. And just for your information, that makes you the asshole. Now get off me, you're crushing my spleen.”

She scowled and gritted her teeth at me as she pushed herself up from the ground, making sure to press my legs hard against the pavement as she got up and huffed her way into the now open store. As soon as the door closed, I pulled myself up from the ground, limped inside the store, and let the florescent light wash over me.

I rushed past the ever friendly door greeter and made my way to the fruit and veggie section. It was in the back of the store, and to get there I had to pass through the frozen food aisle so I decided to just grab the peach ice cream right off the bat instead of coming back for it later (that was a mistake). After passing by cases upon cases of Schokolade I finally found a case full of fruit flavored ice cream. I stood there with the door of case hanging wide open for ten minutes or so before I got the idea to stop trying to read the German inscriptions and focus on the pictures.

Okay well we've got banana, cherry, raspberry, orange, some blueberry nut stuff. And aba peach!

I thrust my arm into the freezing case of desserts and, just as I pulled back my arm and slammed the door shut, someone touched my shoulder.

“Herr Ipswich?

Just when I was hoping to get out of here without any hold ups. “Hallo Frau Fundermier. How are you? I mean...uh...uh... wie geht es dir?”

“Es geht ausgezeichnet! Un du?

I lost most of that but I knew she was having a great day and wanted to know how mine was going. Part of me really wanted to say exactly how crappy things were going, but in the end I decided to spare her my troubles.

“Ah... Es geht gut aber I...ich...” I struggled with my dictionary. “Bin...um...eid...dafrig?”

“Was?” She shook her head, oblivious to the fact that most of her grey hair had just fallen out of the bun on the top of her head and was now a tangled mess sitting on her shoulder.

I waved my ice cream at her and said, very slowly, “I'M BUSY I HAVE TO GO.” “Was?”

I waved once more and then sprinted down the rest of the aisle. I was at my final destination; now all I had to do was find a damn cucumber and I could get the hell out of this place. I paced back and forth scanning the wall mounted cases for anything green and, as luck would have it, all things green were lumped together in the far right corner. Eyeing this, I bounded over to the corner and parked myself in front of it. There were green beans, green squash, green apples, green grapes, green peppers, green onions, those funky green banana things that nobody ever buys, lettuce, zucchinis, celery, broccoli, limes, okra, asparagus, avocados, peas and spinach. To be quite honest, I didn't think I had ever seen that much green. But as much as it pleased me to see most of my favorite foods set out before me, I was still dumfounded that amidst this sea of green there were no cucumbers to be found anywhere. Not a single one.

“Shit.”

Any other man would have taken this lack of cucumbers to mean that his wife was just going to be out of luck but, as I have said before, I am not like other men. I was not willing face Ginger without the rather phallic object of her desire. The last time she sent me to hunt down her craving, I “totally ignored” her request to bring back some tilapia. In the past, this slight offense might have resulted in me going back to the store the next day for chocolate and flowers, but three weeks ago it had resulted in me sleeping on the couch for two days (that couch was a piece of shit and my back hurt for the next week after I was forced to sleep on it). I wasn’t going to go through that again. There had to be some fucking cucumbers around here somewhere.

A few feet over, a skinny red-headed boy in his late teens was piling carrots onto a display. I tapped his shoulder.

“Kann ich hefle Sie?”

Realizing that I didn’t know how to ask him about what I needed, I held up a finger hoping he understood that I needed a minute and I pulled out my dictionary. I must have looked like quite the ignorant tourist, with my greasy hair and three day stubble, standing there flipping through a dictionary that had a dog ear on every page. My search for German words must have been taking awhile because after about five minutes he asked:

“Ja, was brauchen Sie?”

“Dude, gimme a second okay? Ah, screw it.” I threw down my dictionary in disgust. “Ich brauchen a cucumber. Where can I find some?”

“Was brauchen Sie zu finden?”

“Like I said: Ich brauchen a cucumber zu finden.”

His fingers slid over his lips, and his eyes looked to the ceiling “A cucumber?”

“Yeah, ya got any?”

He shrugged. “Das tut mir Leid aber ich verstehe nicht.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t really understand you either. Thanks for nothing, Scheisskopf.”

I walked away without even waiting for him to return my insult. I marched back to the stand of greens and began to sift through the piles of fruits and vegetables with the vain hope of finding my salvation. I ransacked every shelf from the avocados to the zucchinis, not caring about the stares of the faceless Germans who were picking out there own vegetables, but fate was still against me. Defeated, with my hands damp from digging through the fruits and vegetables, I walked back through the dessert aisle, where I should have replaced the now melting ice cream but instead made my way to a register.

I guess I’ll be sleeping on the couch again. Chalk one up to German grocery stores. Way to go, guys!

I stepped in line behind an elderly German lady, and began to think up some very elaborate lies to tell my wife upon my return.

Honey, I walked to the store, but when I got there it was on fire. There were firefighters all over the place. I told them about how you were pregnant and just needed a cucumber, but they didn’t understand and just ignored me. I even sneaked in the back, but one of the firefighters grabbed me and dragged me out of the store before I could get to the vegetables.

No, that’s not gonna work; I still have the ice cream. This one might though. Ginger, I got those cucumbers for you, but when I got to the register, the manager came out from the back and told me that I couldn’t buy them because he said there was a recall on them. Yeah, I know it’s weird that they would

keep recalled stuff out on the shelves, but I guess they do stuff differently here. But hey, I was able to get your ice cream.

Hmm...nope that's still too weak. What about thi-- wait a second. What does that old biddy got in her hand?

During my ramblings, I never bothered to look in the basket of the old crone in line in front of me (the only things I had even registered about her were the overpowering smell of the mango perfume and the horribly blue floral dress she was wearing) but as she starting handing over her items to the clerk I shifted my gaze to her hands. As she emptied the contents of the flimsy plastic bin, I noticed something green fall onto the rubber conveyor belt.

Where the fuck did she get a cucumber?

“Uhhh...Frau?”

“Ja. Hast du eine Frage?”

“Ja.” I held up a hand and said, “Ein Moment, bitte,” while my other hand reached into my back pocket for my dictionary. But, of course, I had forgotten to pick it back up after my conversation back at the wall of greens.

Oh shit.

“Hallo?” She waved a boney hand in my face. “Was ist deine Frage?”

“Umm... I need to know where you got that.” I pointed to the cucumber. She picked it up and asked “Sie?”

“Yeah, sure, sie, where did you find sie?”

“Ich finde sie.”

“Yeah I know you found it but where? Where did you find it?”

“I habe schon sagen: Ich finde sie.” And with that she turned her back on me.

What a bitch. I was just looking for some help.

The woman finished checking out and, as she grabbed her bags from the turnstile, she looked at me and, with a sad smile, shook her head. Just as she lifted her bags to leave, the ice cream slid out of my hands and sloshed on to the floor. The woman bent over as if to grab at the now liquefied frozen treat, but I grabbed at her frail age-spot covered arms before she could pick it up.

I looked into her pale, sunken eyes and, remembering the words the red-headed clerk used, said “I...Ich brauchen einem cucumber, bitte.”

The old woman just started at me crinkling her nose as she asked “Was?”

To be all honest, I wasn't sure what I was doing either.

“Cucumbererin. Du hast ein cucumber! Ich...ich... I need that cucumber.”

She struggled with my grip and, using only her eyes, pleaded with me to let go. Finally, those wrinkled old eyes won me over and I let go of her. She gathered up her remaining bags and shot me a nasty glance as I retreated back to the register.

“You know what? Fuck this!” I was getting sick of this shit anyway. Ginger would just have to deal with it because I wasn't going to sleep on the couch again.

I heard a gasp right before the old woman's handbag rattled against my ear. My slush covered hands shot up, shielding the right side of my head, but I was too late.

“Owww! What the fuck was that for, lady?”

It didn't really hurt that much, but being slapped in the face by an elderly German woman was kind of a shock to my system. In my desperate state, I didn't even see the

ancient hag pumping her arm for swing number two, though it did hurt quite a bit more. Now my ear was bleeding and the other customers, many of whom I had bumped into on my quest, began to crowd around and cheer on my attacker.

There I was, in the middle of some god damned Bavarian village, being beaten by someone's grandmother at the local market. This was all Ginger's fault. And now I was going to be chased back to our über (there's a nice German word for ya) expensive, yet very small, house and as soon as I opened the door I was going to be bitched out not only had I brought an angry mob to the door but I had left the cucumbers and peach ice cream back at the store in my mad dash from a bunch of elderly women. Or that's what I thought would happen but as we all know old ladies don't move too quickly so I lost them after running about two blocks in the opposite direction from the house.

Turning the corner put me on Elkstrasse, which ran parallel to the dirt road that led to my house and made me at loss as to where to go from there. I could either go back to Dudenstrasse with the hopes that the lynch mob had dispersed, or I could try and find alternate directions, which would be hard because of the loss of my dictionary but not impossible. I chose option B and proceeded to walk across the street and into the Möbellageraum in hopes of finding someone who could show me how to get back home.

As soon as I walked in the door the musky smell of leather couches greeted me. Apparently this place was furniture store, which gave me an idea.

"Ginger?"

"Yes, dear, did you get lost on the way from the store? I can't really give you any directions or anything, bu--"

"I'm fine Ginger. I was just wondering if you were serious when you said you wanted to replace the couch last week."

"Of course I was. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I'll be back home in a little bit. Bye"

Closing my phone before Ginger had the chance to say goodbye, I smiled. I was bitched-out later over the ice cream and cucumbers, but at least I slept like a king on our new couch.



Classical Martini

Colored Pencil
Chad Roberts

Ode to the Help Desk

Michelle Crabb

The bronze doorknob glistened in the Monday morning sun, giving it a false pretense of glamour and glitz. I closed my eyes, drew a deep breath, and whispered a prayer to whatever deity that happened to be listening. I reached my hand towards it and paused, my fingers just barely touching the cold bronze. I opened my eyes, took another deep breath.

I hated Mondays.

I hated Tuesdays.

In fact, I hated every day that didn't start with an "S." I narrowed my eyes and grasped the dreaded knob. I opened up the heavy door to what would be my doom for the next eight hours (if I was lucky). The door opened up into a large room with carpet that was as hard as cement. I looked down and shuffled my feet. *Nah, it had to be harder than cement.* I lifted my head back up and scanned the room; people were walking slowly with their shoulders slumped in defeat. Whatever happiness and freedom they experienced during their weekends were gone.

I, too, slumped my shoulders and wandered through the cubicle maze to my own small cell in the dreary prison. I sat down in my chair and logged into my computer. As it was booting up, my eyes drifted over to my accursed phone. My body involuntarily shuddered. Any moment, the blasted thing would start ringing non-stop. I looked up at the beloved break room. Perhaps, I could dart in there and grab a soda before the customers would start calling. Just as I was getting out of my seat, my phone rang.

I groaned, took a deep breath, and picked it up.

"Vista Tech Help Desk. How may I help you?" I asked in an overly cheerful voice.

"Oh, um, hi," a nervous sounding lady answered, "I can't get my email." I rolled my eyes when customers claimed that their email didn't work; ninety-nine percent of the time, the problem had nothing to do with the email servers or email itself.

"Alright," I said, straightening up in my chair. Getting the true problem out of them was a delicate art form. "Are you able to log into the network?"

"No," She replied.

"When you log in, what kind of error are you receiving?"

"Um, error?" She asked stupidly. I slapped my forehead in frustration.

"When you try to log in," I said, "And try to type in your password, what does the screen say?"

"Oh!" She exclaimed as if she suddenly understood everything there was to know about the inner workings of computers. "Well, I'm not getting that either."

"Not getting what?"

"The log in screen."

"Oh, well, that's not good," I said with a fake laugh. She laughed along with me.

"What is on your monitor at this very moment?"

"Nothing. It's completely black!"

"Alright. Is the small light in one of the bottom corners of it on?"

"No."

"Okay, the monitor might have been shut off, go ahead and press the power button for it," I instructed.

"Our power is out." She stated matter of factly.

"Beg your pardon?" I leaned forward. *Did she just say what I think she did!?*

"Our entire building cannot get power for some reason. Everyone's computer is dark and the lights are out—"

"Hold on, one second," I moved the phone away from my ear and turned around in my chair. *Was this lady nuts!? What makes her think that computer technicians could fix the bloody power!?* I looked up and noted that one of my coworkers was looking at me weirdly.

"I'll tell you later," I mouthed. I turned back to the phone.

"Well, you need to talk to your building custodian about getting a generator or temporary power until they fix it. If, by that time, you are having network issues, go ahead and give us a call."

"Oh, a generator! That is a good idea, thanks!" She said happily. She hung up. I had the sick feeling that somehow she was the building custodian. I hung the phone up and leaned back in my chair.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said out loud. My coworker came bounding into my cubicle.

"So?" He looked giddy with excitement.

"You won't believe this. In fact, I'm not even sure if I believe it myself," I quickly told him about my phone call. When I was finished, his eyes nearly bulged out of his head.

"Yes, I do not lie!" I stated. His face turned bright red, and he burst into laughter.

"Careful," I said, "Dictator McAdams will come around this corner faster than—" I was already too late. Mr. McAdams came storming around the corner.

"You two," He stated, "are here to work, not to make friends!" He glared at us. "I'm not warning you again." He spun around and marched off to his office, which, unfortunately, wasn't far from where I sat.

"I told you," I sighed. McAdams was the reason I and every one of my coworkers hated the place. He ran it with an iron fist, so much so that he made Iron Maggie look like Mother Theresa. I turned back to my monitor, and I heard my coworker sulk back to his. A sigh escaped my lips as I looked over the paperwork that I had to fill out. Hopefully with that entire building out, there wouldn't be as many people calling today, I thought. With any luck, I might be able to finish the paperwork by noon.

I started on it and answered a few phone calls as I worked. An hour or two passed and a loud noise filled the room. I winced. The noise was McAdams announcing a sudden mandatory meeting of up most importance. I groaned. He *always* made these meetings and anything from a few cookie crumbs left in the break room to someone leaving their lights on outside was mandatory of up most importance. I sighed and lifted the receiver of my phone to prevent anyone from calling during the meeting.

"Everyone!" His loud voice boomed throughout the room. Several people had already gathered around. I swung around in my chair, making no move to get up. *Leave the standing to the brownnosers*, I thought. Once everyone was turned and paying attention to him, he started the meeting.

"It's that time of year," He huffed, "I need four volunteers to stay late all week and help me do inventory. You will be paid overtime," I sank back in my chair and scooted a little into my cubicle. *Don't call my name*, I pleaded, *Don't call my name!* I sank as low as I could without looking weird.

As expected two hands shot up.

"Smith and Erikson," He stated, giving the two most prominent brownnosers curt nods. "I can always count on you two. Now, we need some fresh blood," His dark eyes scanned the room, searching for innocent victims. His eyes came to my side of the room. My heart raced, *hide!* My mind screamed, "*Hide!*" I balled my hands into tight fists, "*Gods, don't pick me!*"

"Jenson!" I swore profusely under my breath and stood up.

"Yes, sir?" I asked slowly. He was already searching for his last victim.

"And . . . O'Brian," He called. O'Brian sat in the cubicle next to me; I could hear him mutter under his breath.

"You four will stay after all week," He snapped his fingers, Smith sprang forward, carrying McAdams's infamous black notebook. Just the sight of that notebook made everyone shudder in fear. He took it and opened it up.

"Today I need everyone to stay late an extra hour to clean up." I scowled.

"We clean up as we go," I snapped, forgetting my place. I immediately regretted my foolishness. McAdams's cold eyes locked mine in a frightening gaze.

"There were four wrappers left in the break room Friday afternoon." He hissed. "And you ALL know what that means. I do not like having to repeat myself everyday! You are all adults and will act like them! Your mommies aren't here to clean up after you. This will happen every time someone leaves their garbage out. And you will all stay the full hour!"

"Not if we clean it up fast enough," I said.

"Oh, yes you will," He stated. "And next time someone decides to leave their wrapper, they will think twice." He clapped his large hands, "Back to work!" He shouted.

"That man is the definition of evil," I hissed. I glanced at O'Brian who was looking at me with curiosity. I gave him a weird look. Usually O'Brian picked on me.

"Gorgon Hunter," He said. I sighed. Gorgon Hunter was the nickname he gave me ever since he found out that I used to play Dungeons and Dragons.

"There's some fire in ya," He stated. "I say," he leaned against his cubicle wall, "I think with you as our ringleader, we can take him,"

"What on Earth are you talking about? I don't know if you're blind, but I'm a small woman of only five feet, three inches! And he is at least 6 feet tall *and* he's got to have two hundred pounds to him!"

"We all hate him. We all despise him. He makes our lives a living hell."

"What are you getting at? We can't exactly do anything"

"We can stick it to him."

"What, by egging his car? That's real creative," I rolled my eyes.

"How do you know about that?" He asked in shock. I shook my head. "Anyways," he went on, "Look at how he torments us as if we were his slaves! I can't take much more of this!"

"So what's your cunning plan?" I asked sarcastically. O'Brian was known for using his fists rather than his brains.

"We write a petition, we all sign it," He spoke as if he were making a glorious battle plan. "Then," he leaned forward, "We send it off to Division!" His fingers dug into the divider that separated our cubicles, "With *all* of our signatures, they will *have* to replace him!"

"Smith and Erikson will never sign it," I said.

"He can't make us work late just because someone forgot to throw away a few candy wrappers," He whined. I looked over my shoulder. Smith was coming towards us.

"Good idea," I said, "That is brilliant for working on inventory." Smith passed us and gave each of us a smile. I sat down at my chair, O'Brian still leaning over the side of the cubicle.

"So, kill any Gorgons last night?" He snickered. "Or catch any wizards?"

"Yes, O'Brian, I caught a dozen wizards and killed a thousand Gorgons." I put my phone back on the receiver.

Another hour went by. I looked at my watch. It was time for my morning soda. I usually got a little cranky if I didn't have any caffeine in my body by ten. I lifted my phone off the receiver

"Taking a ten," I announced, getting out of my chair. I leaned over and opened up one of the drawers to my desk and took out a book. My ten minute break was one of the few moments I could relax. I tucked the book under my arm and strolled to the break room.

"Hey, Mark," I said. Mark worked on the email servers. He ignored me and just stood in front of the door to the break room, looking dazed.

"It's locked—" He whispered.

"What?" I pushed him aside and jiggled the door knob. Sure enough it was locked. I wrapped my fingers tightly around it and forced it down as hard as I could, hoping brute force would somehow unlock it. My cunning plan failed miserably, I snapped back my hand and whimpered. Cold steel hurts when you try to force it, I thought.

"Oh, guys, just in time," Smith came up. He was holding some sort of flyer in his hand.

"Oh," he stated, "Jenson."

"Yes?" I asked, not really caring, I just wanted him to unlock the door to my precious sodas.

"I'm having a party Saturday at noon. You're invited." He leaned closer to me, "It's work only, so please don't bring anyone,"

"Okay," I answered.

"Great! I'll forward you the snappy invitation I made, oh, and we will have plenty of games and prizes." Wait, I thought, what did I just say yes to? I slapped my hand on my forehead. This day was just getting worse and worse.

"Don't worry, everyone wins something in the end, but it's a surprise. Oh," he looked up, "The theme for my party is Hawaii, so dress accordingly, like a Hawaiian shirt." He laughed. The sound was like gurgling mouthwash.

"Hawaii," I mumbled, "Got it—"

"Good, and now," he moved past us and taped the flyer onto the break room door,

"Is it broken or something?" I asked. He smirked.

"Just read," he said. I scowled and looked at it.

"Oh that's uncalled for!"

"Don't kill the messenger!" He lifted his hands, "I'm only a messenger." He backed away and gave me a sheepish smile. If I were O'Brian, I would have punched him.

"Why didn't he say this in the meeting!?" I demanded.

"Hey, I'm only the messenger boy! Now, don't forget my party! Directions will be included in the invitation!"

"I can't believe McAdams would go this far—" Mark sounded like as if he were about to burst into tears any moment.

"This can't be legal," I stated, looking at the flyer. "He can't take our breaks and lunches away from us."

"But most of us are salary—" he whined.

"Even so," I said, "This has to be illegal,"

"It's not," Smith said behind us, "you can look it up in the handbook if you want."

"Gee, thanks for the advice," I snarled. Smith clamped his hand on my shoulder.

"Cheer up, only six more days until Hawaiian fun!" He let go of me and walked off.

"I wasn't even invited," Mark frowned.

"Want my invitation?" I offered.

"I never get invited anywhere," he leaned his head on the door and closed his eyes.

"This can't be in the handbook!" I spun around and marched back to my desk, leaving a very distraught Mark behind. I couldn't believe the flyer. Who did McAdams think he was? Did he take sick pleasure in abusing his position? I made it back to my desk and fumbled through my drawers until I found my handbook. I flipped it open and searched for what Smith was talking about. As I scanned the boring pages, I could hear people groan and swear under their breaths. Evidently, the masses had found the flyer.

"No way," My fingers ran down the long list of rules and regulations. There it was in plain English.

"No way—" I shook my head. I looked at it more closely, then, I remembered something. An evil grin pleaded my lips. A plan was formulating in my mind.

"O'Brian," I stated loudly.

"Yo," He said through his cubicle,

"We are taking back the office," I said. Just as I was about to explain my cunning plan, my phone rang. I blinked and slapped my forehead. Out of habit, I had put it back on the receiver when I got back to my desk.

"Vista Tech Help Desk. How may I help you?"

"I can't get to the internet," a male voice stated.

"Can you log into the network?"

"Network? If you mean can I log into my computer, yes,"

"Is your email working?"

"Hmm," I waited. "Yes," he answered a moment later. I nodded my head.

"Alright, can you pull up Internet Explorer and tell me what you see,"

"What's Internet Explorer?" He asked. I grunted and slapped my forehead. Honestly, how did some of these people dress themselves!?

"It is what you use to surf the internet with."

"Oh, ok," I waited for him to open up his browser. "Hmm, well, it's working now. I don't know what happened earlier. Well, sorry for bothering you."

"It's okay, and if you have anymore problems, don't hesitate to call," I stated. The phone rang several more times, and I had to put aside my plan to knock that no good McAdams out for later. When I got a break in phone calls, I worked on my devious scheme by typing an email to everyone on the floor; save for Smith and Erikson. My fingers lingered over the enter button, I let out a cackle and then pressed it.

"Good bye!" I sneered. The phone rang

"Vista Tech Help Desk. How may I help you?"

"I can't log into my account," An angry voice hissed.

"Oh my," I said.

"Indeed. It keeps saying I'm locked out."

"Can I get your full name and building address?" I asked. He gave me his information and I pulled up his account on my monitor. His account was locked. Likely, he had typed his password in wrong three times.

"I see your account here and yes, it is locked out,"

"Why would it do that!?" He nearly shouted. I could hear him breathing deeply into the phone.

"Well, sir," I started, "The system is automatically set to lock out after three failed password attempts for security purposes."

"That's preposterous!" He cried, "I need to get into my account to work! And I have never typed my password in wrong!"

"Sir, you did because it said so on my log,"

"I certainly did not!" He shouted, "I have that password memorized by heart! There has to be an error in your system!"

"I assure you sir, there isn't. It is possible that you accidentally had caps lock on," I was fighting hard to keep my cool with this guy.

"I did not type my password in wrong! You are just not doing your job! Your system is flawed!"

"Sir, please, just be more careful next time, okay?"

"Careful!? Who is your supervisor!? Who is running things over there!? I happen to have a very busy day and I cannot be held back by trivial inconveniences like this!"

"Sir—" I rolled my eyes and looked at my computer screen. Several people had already responded to my email! I leaned forward and clicked on their replies. They were all positive and agreed to go through with my call to action!

"—You can't expect us to believe that your system is flawless! I know my password!" He went on like this for a good ten minutes. Company policy specifically stated that we could not hang up on customers. I pulled at my hair in frustration. This guy was a real jerk. Perhaps, he was related to McAdams somehow.

"Sir, if you are really worried about missing work," I gathered all the courage I could muster, "Maybe you should stop yelling at me and get back to work."

"What!?"

"I'm not the one who typed my password in wrong and lost my temper about it." The other side of the line got quiet. I knew I was drawing the line, but this guy had nearly called me everything in the book!

“Well, I—”

“Good day.” I hung up and then called him a few colorful metaphors. I heard someone shouting in the distance. I stood up and could see McAdams screaming at Mark. Mark was literally cowering in fear. I clenched my fists. *That does it.* I cleared my throat.

“Comrades,” I shouted as loud as I could. “The time is now!” I lifted my fist in the air. “We walk!” I shouted triumphantly. I heard a roar from O’Brian.

“Good day to you, McAdams and we shall never see your fat pathetic face again!” I marched towards the door, proud with my army of coworkers in toe behind me. I lifted both my hands up and gave McAdams the Bird as I stormed past him. I kicked open the metallic door that held us prisoner every day and walked straight to the parking lot. When I was outside, I whirled around to face my troops.

“Eh!?” O’Brian was the only one in the parking lot. “O’Brian, did anyone follow?”

“Not that I saw,” He stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“What!? But I saw a lot of their replies and they all agreed!” I pulled at my hair. O’Brian looked up at the tall building,

“People will say a lot of things,” he said, “but most of the time, they don’t go through with it,” he looked at me, “I’m surprised in ya, didn’t know you had such spirit in that Gorgon infested heart of yours.”

“I *hate* McAdams,” I growled. “I can’t believe this—they didn’t come! I was so sure they would! Especially after they read my email, where I pointed out that McAdams himself added that bull about the taking away lunches and breaks!” I started pacing back and forth. “Man, he’s gonna fire us... I told him I never had to see his fat face again! To his face!”

“Don’t worry about it,” O’Brian sat down on the sidewalk and pulled out a pack of smokes. He extended it to me, and I shook my head. He shrugged and stuck one in his mouth.

“I flipped him off...with both hands! We are going to be fired and he will write bad reviews about us so that no one else will hire us!” I put my hand to my forehead. “What was I thinking!?”

“You wanted lunch.”

“Man—” I sighed, “I am *not* brownnosing to get back in good graces...”

“Don’t worry about it,” He said, lighting his cigarette. I glared at him. How could he be so calm at a time like this!? I continued pacing and fretting. I had never done something so bold and stupid in my entire life! I wrung my hands together and bit my lower lip. I wasn’t sure how long I had been pacing, but it must have been awhile because my legs were getting tired, and O’Brian was on his second cigarette. I stopped and sat down on the sidewalk next to him.

“Just wait,” he said calmly. I looked at him.

“For what?” I was honestly surprised that McAdams hadn’t come out here yet to scream at us or send either Smith or Erikson in his place. A sleek black Sedan drove into the parking lot. O’Brian put his cigarette out and stood up. The black Sedan pulled into an empty parking space. A man and a woman in their mid forties dressed in business attire walked out of the Sedan towards us. O’Brian met them midway,

“We got your call,” the woman said. “The nerve of that boss of yours!” She folded

her arms.

"Thank you for coming, I wouldn't have called if it wasn't important—"

"Oh, I know, dear," She said, waving him off. "But in less than ten minutes, he will be walking out this door unemployed." She narrowed her eyes, "That's what he gets for messing with our son!" The man next to her nodded in agreement. I stood up and silently observed their conversation. The couple was obviously O'Brian's parents; they had the same curly hair he did, and his father had the same sky blue eyes.

"Oh, dear me," the woman huffed, "Still smoking?" She shook her head, "That stuff is rotten for you."

"I tried to quit, but McAdams was so horrible—I just—" She patted his shoulder.

"There, there, it's alright now." The door to the building slammed open and a very red McAdams came storming out. He was instantly intercepted by Mr. and Mrs.

O'Brian.

"A foul creature like you deserves to be in prison," Mrs. O'Brian stated. "You treat your employees as if they are chattel!" McAdams balled his fists and did not reply. She spun on her heels.

"Come, husband, we have more important matters to attend to," Her husband obeyed and followed her off into black sedan. Meanwhile, McAdams managed to disappear.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"I called my parents," he replied.

"Tell me something I don't know, Captain Obvious." I folded my arms.

"My parents made a considerable donation to Division and mentioned that McAdams was running his section like a sweatshop." He snapped his fingers, "And McAdams was fired."

"Wha—" I scratched my head.

"Veronica," he stated, "In this world, money is everything." He turned towards the building,

"But we were supposed to defeat him with our iron wills and determination!" I cried.

"Meh," he shrugged and opened the door for me to enter.

"Well," I sighed, "I wonder what the new boss will be like..."

Warsaw, 1943

Kevin Daiss

And that was the last of her I'd ever see.

(I made sure that my suit was clean pressed,
I was my best dressed, I was clean-shaven
After months of nothingness, wanting,
N'more than a soft hand's final caress.)

The blood boiled over,
One evening, 1943.
The wives and the children
All shookshuddered and screamed.
The men were all but too reticent;
A mess of bones. Shoeless shuffling feet.

And that was the last of her I'd ever see.
My not-yet wife, buried beneath,

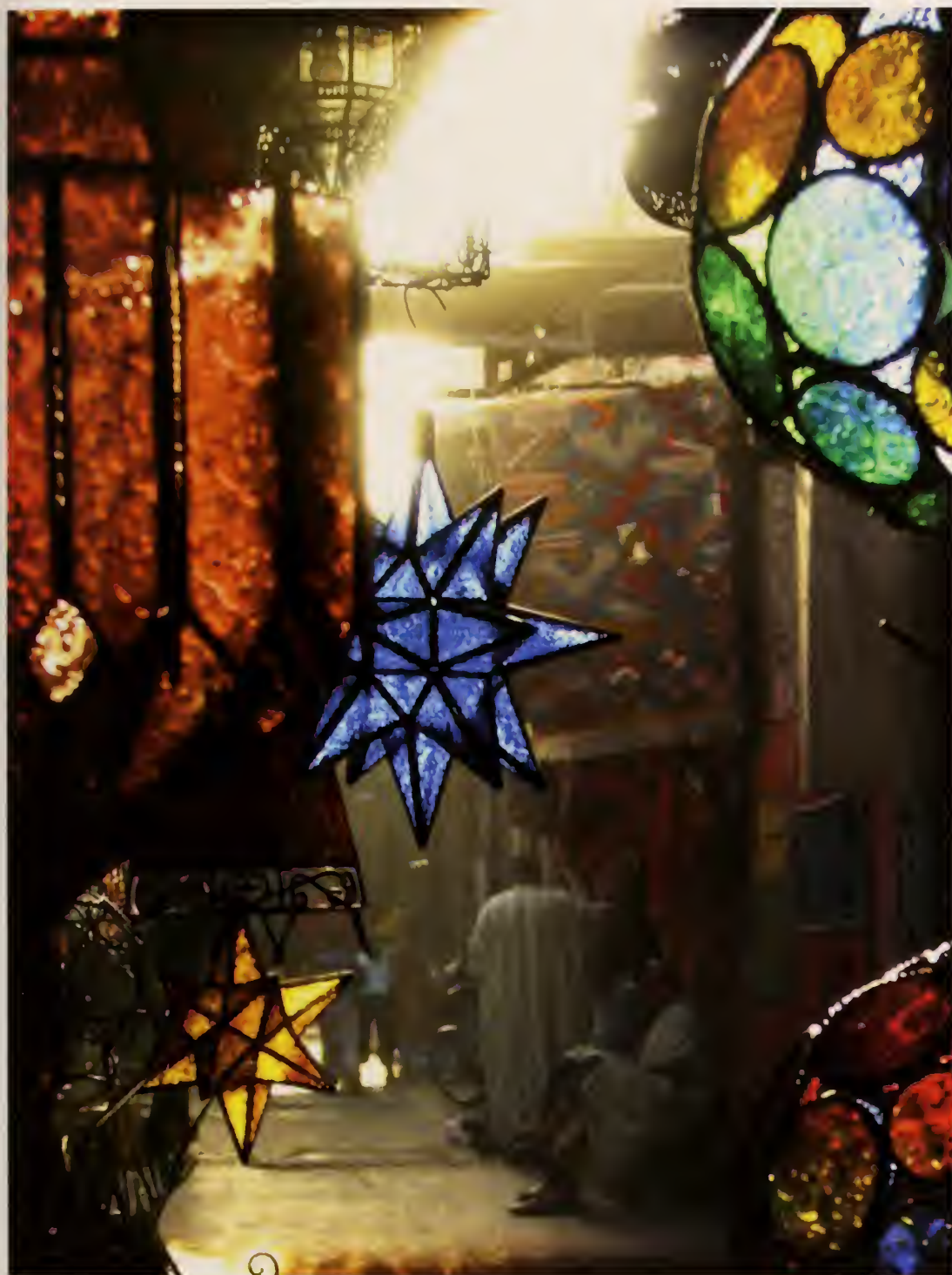
A heap of rubbish—our neighbors turn'd ash—

And taken down with her a seedling of me,
Our unborn child, face ever unseen.

The voices that raked hot coals on our feet
Were not hard to distinguish once I myself was tossed to the heap:
I never did die, but I grew into not me.
Charred ruins of soul, turn'd outward for all to see,
I tossed to the heap my faith and my kind,
And flushed the ghettos 'til the stars blinded my eyes
With the brilliant blues, and the gushing of white.

I avoided the rape of David cemetery,
By trading life for lust
Of more air to breathe.

And that was the last of her I ever did see.



al-Maghribiyyah 2

Color Photograph
Jeremy Windus

Tom's Wigs

Jie Chen

1.

If you walked through this small campus, sometimes you could meet a boy. His name was Tom. He was 19 years old. People thought that he was weird because he liked wearing wigs. Someone said that he had fallen in love with a Chinese girl, but this girl left him at last. He was still waiting for her to come back because this girl never thought Tom was weird, and she loved him, too.

2.

This Chinese girl's name was Chyi. She was a runaway wife. She escaped from her family in New Mexico where she had been living with her white husband for three years. Her husband was a selfish and wicked man. Since they got married, she was confined by her husband in that big ranch house and was not allowed to work or to get in touch with any men. He beat her and abused her when he was in a bad mood. Chyi was a fragile and sensitive woman. She did not know how to use the law to protect herself. The only thing that she could do was to flee, to hide herself from her husband.

She came to New York. She got a job as a caretaker for a 90 year old woman. She lived with the elderly woman for two years. And then she suddenly realized that her life could not be like the dead water without ripple. After all, she was just thirty years old. She was a singer in China seven years ago. Many people adored her. However, her current situation was quite different. She felt depressed as if she became the dead leaves floating down to the ground, never alive again.

Alive, she needed to be alive. She told herself: life could not be like this.

She decided to go to college to learn how to play piano. Piano could help her cope with the tedious and monotonous life. At least she could forget her unfortunate marriage, her suffering and her distress.

3.

There she came. She came to a small campus in Savannah where people could easily meet repetitiously. She liked to meet people. Since her life was isolated in New Mexico and New York, her world was dark and narrow, and she felt suffocated as if she lived in a wild desert, no fresh air, no water. She was looking for something, something that might make her breathe again.

There he came. He came like refreshing and clean water flowing down from the tranquil river. His name was Tom. He was Chyi's piano classmate. Tom was a silent boy and did not like to talk. He was sitting opposite to her in the piano class, like a feather slightly and gently, flying down in front of her.

The classroom was small. It could accommodate just six students. They needed to play the piano face to face. Tom sat before Chyi. Thus, she could not avoid seeing him. She felt awkward when their eyes caught each other at the same time. She tried to smile at him to break the embarrassing situation. She did not expect him to react, but he did smile back, gently and sweetly.

She noticed that Tom was playing very well. He was always absorbed in playing his

piano like a good-tempered dog concentrating on what he is doing. His fingers were slim and long like skinny bamboo. They were dancing on the keyboard, sometimes touching the keyboard softly and tenderly, and sometimes jumping quickly and strongly.

Although she could not hear what he was playing because they had their headphones on, she could feel it was a vivid piece. A special feeling arose from her heart. She could not explain it, but she might be drawn by something, something coming from a quiet boy, Tom. Was it envy? Or affection? Or something else...?

She started to observe him.

Tom was very tall and quite skinny like a lone pine tree standing upright. He had an Asian face mixed with Spanish disposition. His eyes were black deep water. You never knew what he was thinking when he was staring at you. He had a well-shaped nose that stood straight forward, and it framed his small and thin lips. His hair was dark black like the exuberant forest, deep and mysterious.

4.

Tom was always late. When he entered the classroom, Chyi would catch a glimpse of him. She even knew how he dressed up and what kind of perfume he used. One time, to her curiosity, she found out that Tom's hair became golden and curly, which was in sharp contrast with his black and dense eyebrows. Chyi thought that he might have dyed his hair, but the next day it became dark black and straight again.

Tom wore wigs.

Chyi was a little surprised, because his appearance was traditional and conservative. His wigs did not quite fit his dressing: he liked wearing dark blue cotton jackets with neat cotton shirts inside. If it was cold, he would dress in a well-knitted light gray wool sweater. He liked wearing Tommy cloth shoes.

"Who was he? Why did this elegant boy have wigs on his head?" Chyi wondered.

5.

Everyone has a story. If you did not know him, he would never tell you what happened to him. Tom and Chyi were like two straight lines parallel to each other. Silence made them keep a distance, as if they would never care about each other. As a matter of fact, Tom was also observing Chyi.

Tom was a southern boy, son of a single mother. He was born near-sighted. When he was five years old, the doctor found out that he had bad sight, which could even cause him to be blind. His mother prepared him thick glasses, and he was laughed at by all his little classmates. From that time on, he lost self-confidence. He became silent and conservative. He did not like to talk, but he was quite strong. He was struggling to study hard, and he told himself, "I can do it." He was good at playing piano; then he was sent into a gifted class.

When he grew up, he knew how to hide himself. He wore wigs to cover his handicap, his near blind eyes. Through playing piano, he could temporarily forget his sorrow, his abnormality, his difference from others. He never looked at people, not because of his shyness but of his self-denial. He was afraid that people would laugh at him. Although he wore contact lenses, his eyes had no expression and could not say anything: joy or sorrow.

Since he met Chyi, he felt that she was smiling at him honestly and naturally. He knew that she was not teasing him. He did not feel uncomfortable when he faced Chyi. He realized that he might fall in love with this mysterious girl. He began to put on elegant perfume, and he made himself neat and beautiful. He always came to the class very late, because he wanted her to notice him. However, he did not know how to tell her, how to break the silence down between them.

Chyi was also quiet to Tom. Yes, she was silent because she was quite paradoxical: a married woman should be responsible for her family and her husband. Did she still love her husband? No, she did not think so, but at least she did not divorce him. As an Asian girl, she was conservative. There was always a voice in her heart saying: "You are not a simple woman. How can you allow yourself to love some one? Do you think that you can afford it, if you let him know your complicated situation?"

She felt guilty. She never observed a man like this. However, she could not stop caring about him as if the boat lost the oar, being out of control.

She wanted to see him. She wanted to talk to him, but she did not know how to start it because she was not sure whether he could understand her and whether he would laugh at her.

Thus, they were two straight lines never being crossed.

6.

Parallel lines could not be crossed, but they were real people, not real lines. They could think, and they could move. Sometimes things happened without sign.

They happened to meet on a special occasion.

It was a Sunday morning, and Chyi decided to go shopping in a big mall. When she was wandering around the hallway, she heard piano music coming from a shop. She was quite familiar with the music: "Comptine d'un autre ete: l'apres-midi." She was compelled to enter this store. There were many pianos displayed in this store. Someone was playing the piano. The music sounded elegant and sorrowful as if someone was trying to tell a story, an endearing and sad story.

Chyi went toward him. She recognized him, and he saw her. There he was, Tom. They never talked, but they felt excited in a special environment. It looked like that they were telling people that they knew each other.

Naturally, they started to talk.

"Why are you here?" Chyi was smiling.

"Working?" Tom stood up, and his face blushed with red.

"I love this music ...from the movie *Amelie*." Chyi combed her straight long black hair with her small hand, looking at him with her black and bright eyes.

"Yeah, I watched that movie, too." Tom moved a chair for Chyi.

"I tried to play it, but it was hard." She sat on the chair and used her small fingers to touch the keyboard.

"Yeah, I have been practicing for several weeks." Tom sat down and smiled at Chyi, and he caught a sight at her with his deep-water eyes.

"Could you teach me?" Chyi looked at his music sheet and asked naturally.

"Yeah..." Tom did not look at her, but he seemed a little bit embarrassed.

At last, Chyi found the chance to know him, to know a silent boy that she was

eager to know.

7.

From then on, they always stayed together in the practice room. Tom taught Chyi to play piano. Sometimes she asked him questions about the sheet. He did not have a lot of words but showed her patiently.

Little by little, Chyi knew Tom's story. She even understood why Tom wore wigs, although Tom did not mention that. However, Chyi still did not let Tom know her story, because she was afraid of something. Something might drag her to leave him and to lose him forever. She was not courageous enough to tell him the truth. Tom respected Chyi; he never urged her to tell him about her.

The practice room was quite small, which can only contain two or three people. The black piano stood against the wall. A long bench was set in front of the piano, and behind it was standing another small chair. When playing piano, one would sit on the bench with his back toward the door. There were no windows in this room, which made the room quite private. Chyi liked to sit behind him and watch him playing piano. One day, she, like before, pinned herself on the chair, trying to pay attention to his work, but she could not concentrate. She was staring at him, his straight back, his curly golden wig, his thin and long hands. His legs were so long that they could not pose themselves right under the piano. His cotton pants were a little bit short that she could see his black socks. His black Tommy cloth shoes were neat and decent. He felt that she was observing him, so he turned around to look at her and gave her a gentle smile.

He taught her a piece and wanted her to show him. He turned the sheet and sat beside her. She was trying, but she hit the wrong keys. She knew she could not be right on, and she did not know the reason. She was quite embarrassed, and she looked at him. Tom was smiling. He used his thin and slim fingers and pulled her fingers to the right key. His fingers were beautiful, soft and tender as if he was touching a small baby. Chyi's face suddenly blushed with red. Her heart was beating fast. She dared not to see him. She could feel his skinny and thin fingers were a little bit cool and wet. He felt what Chyi felt. He put his hand back, lowering his head, pretending to look at the music sheet. His face was red like Chyi's. He said nothing and turned around, and looked at her. His deep-water eyes said nothing, but Chyi could feel him.

Then, he turned back suddenly and said, "Chyi, thank you."

"Why?" Chyi was wondering.

"You make me feel that I am important." Tom kept his eyes looking at the front of the room.

"Well ..." Chyi felt happy when hearing his words. "Thank you too."

Tom turned, and he gazed at some place as if he was thinking about something. "Why?"

"Because you help me find myself back..." Chyi did not continue, and she seemed to hide herself. She was conflicted.

That was Tom. He respected her and never urged her. Chyi touched his curly hair with her small fingers. Tom was frozen and silent.

The power of love could change a person.

Tom never knew that he could change himself for someone.

There he changed. He took off his wigs. He shaved his side hair and cut his black hair short and neat. He looked handsome, energetic and healthy. It was the first time that Chyi saw his real hair. In fact, his own hair was beautiful. Although his eyes could not say anything, Chyi indeed felt him, his honest and pure soul, which was like the refreshing and clean water flowing down to the desert to Chyi's heart.

She wrote a poem for Tom and gave it to him:

My friend
You are the water
Soft and tender
As the silk
Touching my soul
Silent and gentle

However, the more she loved him, the more she felt guilty. She was so conflicted. She persuaded herself to tell him the truth, but she was worried about something. Could Tom, a beautiful and young soul, accept such a miserable and complicated girl? Would he understand her? Yes, he would, but he might subconsciously hate her for not telling him earlier. Tom was young, and it would be difficult for him to bear the burden of her worse story on his shoulder. Tom might be crazy and might be depressed again. She felt that she was selfish. She hated herself.

She loved him so deeply. She was afraid of hurting him, and she would not like to see him depressed, but she had already hurt him.

What should she do? She hid herself in her room, crying. She drove to the beach at night, shouting at the deep and dark sea. Why was she different from the other girls? Why did she suffer like that? What did she do to deserve to be tortured like that? Such a young and decent soul had been tortured like that? She cried out at the dark sky, "Tom, Tom, Tom..."

Her tears were flowing down from her face, but nobody could see her and her voice was devoured by the loud and billowy sound of the surge of the sea. Her white dress was wet; her long and straight hair was crazily dancing with the wind.

She was standing there, like a small white bird standing on the riddle, frozen ...

Several days later, Tom received a letter from Chyi:

Tom,

I don't care that your eyes cannot say anything. I know that you want to say something from your eyes, but they were not able to express your feelings. You have no choice, but I don't care. Even if you are blind as a blowing wind, I still love you.

But, Tom, I should go. I am not the good girl worthy to be loved by

a beautiful boy. I hide myself from you because I have no enough courage to tell you the truth. Tom, I have already been married. I am a runaway wife. My husband beat me and tortured me. I could not stand him, so I escaped.

I am young, but I suffered too much, which makes me feel unconfident. I cannot be like the other girls, living the way that they like, loving the one whom they love.

Tom, good Tom. Forgive me for not telling you earlier, because I am afraid of losing you, because I love you so deeply.

*Tom, I cannot love you, but I love you.
Do not hate me, Tom. Remember what we had before. And forget me from then on, and it will be good for you.*

Bye, Tom.

*Yours
Chyi*

10.

Chyi was gone. She never said good-bye to Tom, gone with the wind without any trails. Tom did not believe it. He could not accept it. He stubbornly kept waiting for her in the practice room from morning to afternoon, from afternoon to evening, but Chyi did not show up.

One year and two year, winter came and came another winter. Chyi still did not show up.

From then on, Tom became more silent.

Again, he put his wigs on, that dark black hair or that golden curly hair, covering his real handsome short black hair.



Blues Guitar in Red

Color Photograph

Luciana Carneiro

Gretel

Chris Bruchette

Gretel remembered the witch, snarling mouth and sharp claws, but it was the house she remembered the most, the House of Confection. The mere fact that she could eat anything (the pictures on the wall, the spoons in the kitchen) *amazed* her. Hansel had been weary, at first, but then hunger controlled and sugar was plenty.

Outside the church, a crowd of people gathered, lamenting or rejoicing, or both. Death was abundant and only certain officials had proper funerals. Hansel was now dead, sixty years after the witch's home had melted away, sixty years to the date. Both had marked the day in their minds.

Hansel, longing to forget his birth but never forgetting the witch, had become a Bishop. Power bought by the witch's jewels and gold. Gretel, twice-married and twice a widow, had done well for herself, both her husbands were of noble birth and each one richer than the monarch.

They were twins. Their mother died in the throes of childbirth, naming her twins before she passed on. Their father, a woodsman, a farmer, and slave to a manor, had married quickly, scared of two children with hungry mouths and eager fingers; of course, their stepmother was cold, as were all stepmothers.

Hansel the Great or Hansel the Wicked, depending on your politics, never told his story, never let anyone know of the horrors endured by the witch. "Never," he had whispered to Gretel days after escaping. Only their father knew.

The church incense mixed with the smells of a hot summer and the stench clouded Gretel's mind. Her thoughts ran to the day their father died, to the stench of vomit and pus and regret. It had been four years after the incident, four years of her and Hansel living life to the fullest. To their father, it had been four years of guilt, of bleeding inside from remorse. Gretel had cried knowing that he loved them, knowing that he was already in hell for allowing his second wife to banish them to the woods. Hansel, now the Cold-Hearted, looked at their father, skin and bones, veins enlarged by fever and said, "When you see the witch in hell, tell her I send my love." Their father died two hours later.

As she sat listening to the chants and prayers for her dead brother, Gretel thought about the years that they had lived, thought of her children and then thought of her role in the story, her place. She had always been second, second to be born, second to receive love, second to the witch, and now the second to die. But her being second had saved Hansel. She never told him. Never, even in their most heated arguments, that she, Gretel the Meek, almost let the witch eat him. Almost.

The service had taken longer than necessary and storm clouds had gathered, as if Hansel had ordered it from God. Gretel made her way to her gilded carriage—the best that jewels from a dead witch and two dead husbands could buy—just in time before the rain became a flood. Lightening flashed followed by the clap of thunder and somewhere someone shouted her name, and, for a moment, her thoughts went back to the house, to Hansel screaming her name from the elaborate iron cage while the witch gathered herbs in the woods.

“Just eat it Hansel, just eat the damn cage.”

“Has sugar made you stupid as well as fat? I can’t. It’s iron.” She cried because his words cut her spirit, cut to the bone, for she was fat now and her mind was fuzzy from being full and scared.

After Gretel had pushed the witch into the oven, they ran. Rain began to fall, melting the sugared house while the witch, still trapped, screamed.

In the carriage Gretel pulled the black book from the many folds of funeral garb.

It was a simple book on the outside, no writing, just black leather. Several days after they had escaped they both returned to the witches’ house. Hansel had to see if she really was dead, Gretel needed to see if the sweet house with its sweet taste was really gone. And both had been curious, both needed to see if it was a dream-mare, fueled by hunger. Neither would know that their return would reward them with riches abundant in gold and jewels. Yet more importantly than the desire to know the outcome they needed desperately to know if the ending was really happily ever after. Hansel had found the wooden chest full of gold and jewels of every color and shape. Gretel had found something too, in what was left of the kitchen. She had found the witches cook book. Her grimoire. She never told Hansel what she had found.

Gretel turned to the page on gingerbread houses. The recipe was simple. Now that Hansel was gone, she thought about making her own house, a house of confection, and smiled.

Fireflies

Hai Dang

I remember when I was 10, and we would run out into the field behind my house. On cool mid-summer nights, trying to see how many fireflies we could catch before bedtime. And I remember how their light would dance across your grinning face.

I remember when I was 16, and I asked you out for the first time. I remember how I almost threw up on your shoes once and mine twice. We had iced chai lattes that night like we always did. 2%, with whip cream and cinnamon, but no nutmeg. God help Tad if he put nutmeg on it again. I remember how the light from the neon sign made your smile brighter.

I remember when I was 22, and I asked you to marry me. I hid the ring in a shrimp shell in your pasta that night. You found it and were about to make fun of me like always for somehow leaving at least one shell in the pasta. But when you looked at it and realize what I was asking, you said yes, and the glow from the candlelight danced across your smiling face.

I remember when I was 28, and you told me that you cared for me. But you didn't love me anymore; I remember the street light shining as you try to force a smile across your face.

I went to visit my mother last weekend and went for a walk after dinner. The fireflies were out and about; I began trying to catch as many as I could. But I stopped when I looked behind me and saw that their light was dancing across an empty space. And I remembered that somewhere a light was dancing across your smiling face for someone else.



light

Silver Gelatin Print

Jennifer Henderson

For Better or For Worse

Erin Christian

It wriggled about under the confines of my seatbelt, yanking at the hem of my dress. It was one of those frilly numbers, with a layer of solid reddish brown underneath a sheer mottled print, which never seemed to want to stay aligned. All of my squirming, combined with breeze from the windows due to the car's lack of AC, caused my sweaty nest of hair to escape from its bun. My feet were aching hostages in two clunky brown heels against the gray floorboard, and my ankles remained limp for a few precious moments before they would have to support my body on those heinous inventions of man. My dress seemed to have declared mutiny, because the more I tugged and picked at it, the more spitefully twisted it became.

"Shit...shitshitshit." In the midst of my struggle, a notch in my little silver bracelet caught on a loose strand in the bottom hem. With the intensity and frustration of a convict picking a lock, I hunched over and fidgeted with the trapped jewelry.

"You know Julia, you didn't have to come today," Alan said as he took his green eyes off the traffic and allowed them to smile warmly over at me. "You're not obligated like family or anything..."

I grinned as I freed my bracelet with a crisp snap, "Not yet, and maybe not ever if my dress unravels in front of your whole family."

I had never seen Alan look so sharp in our entire three years together; with his usual reddish-brown stubble clean-shaven, his hair actually trimmed, and a neatly pressed tuxedo hugging his slender frame, he reminded me of a tap dancer in a Fred Astaire film. We had started the day fresh and pristine images of classy youth, with not a hair out of place, and only my awkward stride in alien heels and Alan's occasional tugging at his tie betrayed any hint that we weren't aristocratic socialites off to yet another night at the opera. Well that and our arrival behind the Our Lady Full of Grace Catholic church in a two-seater red Civic, missing three hubcaps and some paint near the trunk, windows down and Zeppelin's "Black Dog" roaring into the open air.

The small parking lot was packed, and I combed my hair back into submission with my fingers as we slid into a space near the alley in the far back. At the death of the sputtering engine, I turned wide-eyed to the back door of the church. I couldn't, for the life of me, figure out what the hell I was doing there.

"It's ok, we're not late. It's only 12:30, so we've still got a whole half-hour." Alan reassuringly pressed my hand into his.

"There isn't any chance we could spend that half-hour out here, and then sneak in just as the ceremony starts, is there? I've waited this long to meet the rest of your family. I'm sure they won't mind waiting a little longer." I said while unbuckling my seatbelt. With one hand on the door handle, I glanced back at Alan and, when I saw his brows furrowed in concern, I began to giggle.

"Oh my God, I am just kidding, Alan! C'mon, let's get this over with."

Our shoes crunched and slid across the white gravel; I walked in exaggerated stork-like steps, and Alan hid a smile. We had started dating young, at 17 in fact, and we learned that we would most likely not be taken seriously because of that. I was paranoid

that Alan's dad only invited me to the wedding to be polite and, possibly because of that, I was terrified that I wouldn't make a good impression, that the family wouldn't like me.

When we walked through the smooth oak doors to the back of the church, I caught my breath at the wall of people blocking our path. We wedged ourselves into the room, closing the door behind us, and I immediately felt the heat from all of the bodies pressed close together.

"Heellooo! Oh jeez, Will, your son is here! Why look at you, Alan! The last time I saw you, you were a tiny thing covered in pickle juice on your father's kitchen floor! Your uncle Ted will be so glad you've come today!" A red flush crept up Alan's throat and devoured some of his freckles as a rotund woman in a brilliant blue rhinestone dress enveloped him into her.

The woman winked an eye encrusted with midnight blue eye shadow at me and said with a twitter, "Don't ask about the pickle juice dear, it's a terribly long story!" With a squeal, and without even pausing to be introduced to me, the formidable woman bounded over to her next victim. Alan, I reminded myself, I was there for Alan.

"That's my aunt Edith. We never see her since she lives in Maine and hates Tennessee. Thank God," Alan whispered. To get my bearings, I scanned the room we had entered where everyone was gathered before being ushered to their seats in the chapel. The carpet seemed like it was once burgundy, but it had become faded and flattened by the pounding of feet attending countless weddings and funerals; I had serious doubts over whether this room was used during regular masses. The ivory walls would have been barren had they not been appointed the duty of hosting the most garish brass sconces with the most obviously fake candles that I had ever seen. In my humble opinion, I mean I'm no decorator or anything, they were better off vacant and plain rather than just tacky. Fake flower arrangements, each with a layer of dust as light as snow, sat forsaken on small wooden tables astride pictures of nameless saints and pamphlets about youth group summer camps. If there was anything else notable about the room, it was lost to me in the masses that had gathered for the wedding.

Alan and I stood on the fringe of the crowd, watching the fluctuations that gave the group before us the appearance of a unified organism in the face of which cookies and finger sandwiches stood no chance. I tried my best to ignore the alternating roars and murmurs of the herd while I bounced on my tip toes like a wind-up toy. Alan, who had been trying to keep hold of my hand, along with his suave composure, hissed at me to stop.

"What on earth are you doing? It isn't time to dance yet, y'know."

"I only know three people here. Three. Your mom, your dad, and your grandmother, and I want to find them. I hate standing here like a couple of wallflowers around people I don't know," I said.

Alan rolled his eyes, and I kept on bopping and weaving in vain when I thought I recognized a familiar face. After several minutes of my new dance, I finally spotted Alan's parents.

"There they are! Can we go over to say hi to your mom?"

"Yeah, I don't really know many of these people, so there's no point in trying to mingle. I'll just be told a thousand times how cute I was then with looks that say how

disappointing I am now," Alan replied with a smirk.

I gripped his hand, and we began to weave through the thick crowd. I held my breath once we were submerged in the sea of bodies, only to let it out in little burning puffs each time I had to mutter "Sorry" or "scuse me" at an indecent brush or abrupt bump. Few even took note of our passage, only those who once knew Alan as a child, or who felt that it was vital that Alan know that they once knew his uncle, spared a moment to speak to him. Never once was I addressed; my spirits began to sink, and I started to lag behind Alan and let him pull me along through the irreverent herd. However, before I lost all hope, I caught again the beaming green eyes of Alan's mother, next to the gray hair of his father, and gave her a wave. The press of the crowd forced the four of us practically toe to toe, and the scent of Mrs. Schup's lavender perfume stung my nostrils.

"Julia! It's so great you see you again!"

Mrs. Schup was always so enthusiastic, and I sighed from relief when she gave me an eager hug. As I made small talk with Alan's mother, Alan shook his father's hand and gave him a brief update on his life since the last time we saw them. Our pleasantries were interrupted by sudden silence and the migrating of the herd into the main chapel. While I had never even met neither Alan's uncle John nor his soon to be wife, I had heard stories. Apparently, his future wife was also his last one; they were married years ago, had a rocky go of it, divorced, and were now getting back together for what was rumored in Alan's family doomed to be another rocky go of it.

"Are you *sure* I should be up there with you? Like you said earlier...I'm not *really* family," I whispered as we navigated our way to the third pew from the front. All I got for a response from Alan was a bone crushing grip and an impish smile as he tugged me along by the hand. As we passed through the rows, I gazed through the pews that were beginning to fill and gulped down my resentment for the sea of eyes that seemed to be asking in a resounding chorus who I was.

Alan and I settled into the middle of the third pew, between beloved aunt Edith and her prepubescent son William. Edith's face lit up when she saw Alan, and she made her son scoot to make room so that Alan could sit next to her. Much to my delight, that arrangement placed me next to young William. Every 30 seconds, William felt it absolutely necessary to let a honking snort, or a wet and gooey gurgle, escape from his crusty nose. Also, between his charming snorts and gurgles, he seemed to deem it necessary to allow his red-rimmed rheumy blue eyes to peruse unmentionable regions of my dress. I had just finished finding a comfortable spot on the wooden seat when I felt a soft brush against my knee. I glanced to my left to see William hunched over and grinning at me.

"Sorry, I was just reaching over here to grab this hymnal. I used to sing in church y'know," he said.

"Uh huh."

"I was an altar boy too, until last year"

"Greeaat..."

William eased back into his seat, and I felt his hand graze my knee again. Desperate for escape, I looked to Alan on my right and inched a little toward him, but he'd become entwined in conversation with aunt Edith. In order to avoid William's focus on

me, I scooted over as close to Alan as I could and became suddenly interested in the church décor.

The decorations weren't spectacular. There were white flower bouquets erupting out of the edge of every 4th pew and some fancy white streamers around the altar, which the church itself would have been much prettier without, and my bare arms were covered in chill bumps from the arctic air conditioning. Even though the actual chapel was small and intimate, it had high arching ceilings that reminded me of the inside of a cathedral, and hanging along the walls were statues depicting various scenes from the life of Jesus. These statues stood vigil over the smattering of about 80 people throughout the church, and the one that loomed over our pew was that of Jesus being taken down from the cross.

The ceremony itself was short and sweet, quite literally, and only the three teenaged children of the couple were in the wedding party: two young and shiny blonde girls grinning like mad in bright pink taffeta and a somber older blonde boy who periodically fiddled with his bow tie. This was my first glimpse at Alan's uncle John. After hearing all of the various stories that circulated through the family like a pestilence about him, I found him to be surprisingly handsome.

The mysterious uncle John stood erect and beaming throughout the ceremony, his sandy blonde hair illuminated by the light pouring in through the few windows that weren't stained glass, and his angular face grinning. I didn't see the delinquent black sheep of a family, but simply a loving father with three beautiful, yet awkward, children supporting him. His wife Sara, whose name I still did not learn until later, apparently cleaned up well. Her image as the uneducated barefoot and pregnant young girl prior to her first wedding to John, painted by some in Alan's family, fell far short of appealing. However, on this second wedding day, her light brown hair was braided and held up a delicate veil that shimmered around her ageless face, and I could not imagine the woman standing before us ever stepping foot inside a trailer. She had to have been at least forty, judging by the appearances of her children, but she looked no more than thirty-three. As I watched them say their "I Dos" in their second go round newlywed bliss, I felt a pang of something like sympathy for the wife. Maybe she once felt as awkward and out of place as I; maybe she still did.

Right after the kiss, the wedding party departed from the altar to yet another section of the church, and soon enough Alan and I were caught up in the noisy migrating herd again. Initially, I thought that the church was composed of the small cramped room we started off in and the chapel, but much to my surprise there was also a large kitchen and dining area hidden off to the side. The kitchen itself was separated from the vast dining area by a wall with a moderately sized slit to pass food through. Due to the bright yellow flowered '70s wallpaper and puke green stove, I thought this separation was a wise choice. But oh, how different the vast dining area was. The walls were a rich ivory, mounted in an even pattern with golden sconces holding light bulbs that flickered like real candles, and the lush green carpet looked as if it had never seen the bottom of a human foot. As we filed in I gaped at the five tables lining one of the walls: all elegantly decked with white tablecloths that supported mounds of finger sandwiches, little chicken wings, vegetable and fruit platters, deli meat platters adorned with a variety of colorful cheeses, and an entire table devoted to desserts arranged on

tiered silver serving trays; I could smell warm brownies as soon as we wandered in.

"Alan, look!" I said as I grabbed his elbow. "Look at those *éclairs*! Oh! And the brownies!"

Alan began to laugh and he stuck his tongue out a little between his teeth in a playful smile,

"You should probably calm down and eat some *real food* first," he said.

"I see nothing fake about those freaking *éclairs*, but those little chicken wings look decent too I guess..."

"Hah, leave it to chocolate to make you more comfortable."

"I'd hardly call myself comfortable right now, but chocolate never hurts," I replied. "Now hurry up before the herd devours everything."

I blushed hot and cleared my throat when I realized I had said "the herd" aloud, and Alan shot me a sideways glance.

"Before the *what* devours everything?"

"Uh, I meant that as a joke, I really did. Alan, I am so sorry I referred to your family—"

I attempted to stammer out an apology, but Alan just roared in laughter and we practically sprinted hand in hand through the empty tables to the banquet. We entered the back of the line, right behind Alan's grandparents, and held our empty plates in a very *Oliver Twist* fashion as the procession inched forward. So far I had succeeded in managing to stay in my comfort zone regarding the relatives and, while I had met his grandmother before, my uncertainty as to how that first meeting went over left me feeling insecure and small standing there with my little plastic plate. What if she remembered the ballerina figurine whose pointed toe I severed forever? Echoes of her screech when she saw me holding the crippled dancer permeated my thoughts. *Oh God*, I thought, *the super glue we used to fix it might not have held! What if the toe popped back off?* I immediately became certain that, should his grandmother turn around to talk to me, my heart would burst out of my chest and into the wavy mound of gray hair atop her unsuspecting head. Her muted silver dress stiffly turned when she caught sight of Alan, and my heart jumped a hurdle.

"Alan, you look so handsome. I'm *truly* glad you could come. And Julia, it's delightful to see you again," she said.

"It's great seeing you too, Mrs. Schup."

"Please, call me Anne. You know, Julia, it's wonderful that you came today so that you can meet more of the family." And then she said with a more relaxed and sly smile, "You may become a part of this crazy bunch one of these days."

"Oh, well...ummm... thank you, Mrs. Schup..."

Aunt Edith touched her elbow and drew her attention to the vegetable platter we were approaching, and I withered under Alan's gushing gaze. Once our clear plastic plates were laden with the finger foods, and a bit of chocolate here and there, we found an empty table off to the side to sit at since Alan's grandparents drifted over to the table with the bride and groom.

"Are you ok with sitting over here?" I asked with a hand to my face to mask my mouthful of sliced ham. "We could go find your parents and sit with them if you want to be with family."

"Naw, I'm fine. See them over there?" Alan pointed to the opposite side of the room, "My parents are at that table with the bride and groom and their kids. We'd have to make more small chatter than should be humanly possible. I'd much rather sit here with you and actually talk."

I gave Alan's hand a squeeze and watched the tables fill with the nameless faces. Waiters and waitresses in black and white tuxedos with golden name tags bustled through the crowd to serve drinks, and I felt rather fancy getting my sweet tea dutifully refilled every 5 minutes. The tables all had white tablecloths, little tea lights quivering like virgin brides, and little single white rose and baby's breath centerpieces in clear glass vases, topped with a freakishly happy plastic bride and groom.

Each time I glanced at my plate, I was surprised to see how my mound of food was shrinking considering my mood. I wasn't even registering what I ate; like an automaton, I devoured what lay before me. The chicken wings might as well have been the moist deli meats, and the sharp cheddar tasted no different than the little *éclairs*. However, once I saw Alan's aunt Edith bounding her way to our table, blue rhinestones glittering, bitter bile rose up behind my last plump *éclair*.

"Oh God Alan, here *she* comes..."

"Alan!" Edith screeched, "You two look so alone! No worries, William and I will keep you company. William! Won't you hurry it up?"

Edith plopped down in the seat to my right, the unfortunate rhinestones to the rear of her dress crunching against the hard plastic chair, and William sat down across from me with a whisper as his suit jacket grazed the edge of the table. As Edith prattled on with her questions regarding Alan's schooling, boasting of William's success in soccer, and gushing over her love of cats, I found it difficult not to stare at the thick blue eye shadow that was globbing up at the corners of her eyes; it was hypnotizing. I allowed myself to run on autopilot, answering appropriately when addressed but not investing in the discussion, and I daydreamed about my plans with Alan later that weekend.

Yet before my mental escape could get me very far, I was startled out of a lakeside picnic lunch by a sharp kick to my ankle. I looked around with a glare to see William beaming at me, and I felt his rough shoe scraping up my shin. He seemed to notice that, whatever he was trying to do, he was doing it wrong, and his face became all stoic concentration. I stared incredulously as I felt his feet fumbling around my ankles, trying to either bruise me or initiate a game of footsie. Snatching my legs away, I sent a fierce glower from underneath my furrowed eyebrows and backed my chair up a few inches to place myself out of his reach.

Before I knew it, the dining area became cleared of food as the servers took uneaten leftovers away and calls rang out for group pictures with the bride's family. An empty table was cleared of all plates and silverware, candles, and happy flower arrangements and then moved to clear a space in front of the wall for photos. The herd shifted, undulated, chattered, and settled in front of the happy family of the bride; I couldn't help but think of what a sequel that must have been for them. The photographer, who I believe was a cousin of someone's, flashed that poor group of people like a camera zealot, crying with ecstasy, "Just *one more* folks! That was beautiful! We wanna remember this *forever*, don't we? Then I promise this time, just *one more*!"

The flash reflected off the faces of the bride and groom's shiny daughters one too many times, and I began to see black dots swimming before me. The somber blonde son of uncle John seemed to be suffering as well because, when the torrent of flashes was all over, he ambled to the back of the crowd and faded away. The herd shifted again, and I gripped Alan's arm to avoid being lost in the stampede. A roar of murmurs dissolved any individual voices into a twittering chorus over how beautiful the bride's dress was, and how darling the bridesmaids were, and I broke into a sweat.

I knew that the picture assault for the groom's family was going to come up next and, to save Alan's family the awkwardness of telling me I couldn't be in the photo, I told Alan I was going for another éclair plate and escaped into the crowd. As the table with desserts loomed larger in my horizon of bobbing heads, I could hear the photo zealot calling Alan's family to come to attention in front of his shutter click assault weapon. I kept my head down and face concealed behind my unraveling hair and attempted to look engrossed in the éclair pyramid I built onto my plate.

The murmuring of the crowd lulled me in my éclair orgy, but I began to fidget when I realized that I hadn't heard the camera snap its first blinding photo. I froze at the dessert table, with sugary cream and chocolaty dough bounding about on my tongue, until I heard what sounded like a secret message float through the mob. It started off as a soft sigh from the photo area and grew into an echoing call of "Julia? Who's Julia? Where's Julia?" I hesitated, still demolishing my pyramid of pastry, until a lady standing beside me tapped my shoulder and asked if I was the Julia everyone was looking for. I ate my last éclair and sheepishly put my plate down on a nearby table.

"I...I'm Julia." The woman who tapped me merely pointed toward the cluster of Alan's family waiting for their picture. I snatched a napkin from the table next to my bursting plate of sweating pastries and shoved it up to my mouth while checking my hands and dress for carnage. It seemed as if all of the blood in my entire body rushed to my face in that moment, and I shuffled my way back through the crowd. As I passed, I asked, "Me? Are they sure they want me? Julia, right?" and I was answered by consistent affirmatives, warm smiles, and kind nods that I didn't remember noticing before; my throat stung with shame each time I remembered referring to these people as "the herd."

When I reached the front of the mass, I saw Alan standing with green eyes glowing and one arm held out waiting to fit me under it. I turned my head and glanced at the photo zealot, who only smiled with pleading eyes for me to cooperate and nodded me forward into Alan's arm. Standing there, waiting for the photographer to finish adjusting his frame to add me in, I whispered to Alan.

"Are you sure I am supposed to be here? I went back there so you guys could take your family picture."

"You're supposed to be here."

"Are you sure?" I asked again. This time Alan only placed his hand against the small of my back as his grandmother chimed in.

"We were waiting for you," Mrs. Schup said.

The camera flashed and, with the sharp clack of the shutter, the black swimming dots returned to my eyes and blotted out everything save the warmth I could feel in the press of Alan's hand.



Day One (Stuck in a Box Series)

Colored Pencil

Mia Montgomery



Day Two (Stuck in a Box Series)

Colored Pencil

Mia Montgomery



Day Three (Stuck in a Box Series)

Colored Pencil

Mia Montgomery

First to Burn, Then to Freeze

Stephanie Roberts

I can't get any lower than this.

Lying on the ground in cold defeat, Quentin Miller stared at a wad of gray gum that melded unnaturally with the brown blades of grass peeking through the concrete. He was dizzy from the fall. He knew he couldn't move too quickly. The blood would surge to his throbbing head and make it worse. The dull lights from the street lamps didn't help. Neither did the maniacal laugh in front of him. He felt like he was at a carnival, passed out from one too many rides or freakish side shows. He felt his father's torn jacket in his hands. The frays of the patches were soft beneath his fingertips. The worn threads brought back his father's memory. Before he could brush his unruly brown hair from his eyes and get up to stare down the laughter, a Dunkin Donuts wrapper slapped his red, wind-broken face.

What in the hell? Never in my wildest dreams. Never. In. My. Wildest. Dreams. Bribing toothless men with dimes and fighting with old pieces of shit in the cold. Now a crusty donut wrapper. Well, maybe I can do something with this.

*

Boston's frosty streets forced Quentin to be a trash leech. On his walks from the Mullen Shelter for his daily grub to his makeshift abode on Woodward, he kept his milky blue eyes peeled for any scrap he could take back and make his own. He wasn't one to rummage through the barrels on the roadside or wait behind third-rate delis for leftover rancid roast beef and rye bread crusted in mold. When he was twelve, his father once told him, "You gotta hold you head higher than the rest of them losers. You gotta. Gotta fake it 'til you make it. Otherwise you'll feel like you one of them. Then you'll be your old man. Who wants that?"

When Quentin became a part of the Woodward community, he resolved to have more self-respect than his fellow tramps and panhandlers with their begging bags and squeaky shopping carts. Instead, he'd casually pick up trash he deemed useful, walk towards an available barrel, often in the Common—looking as though he were a good citizen discarding the abandoned litter—and then tuck it away in his Primatic Dental laptop bag. Empty water bottles coated in films of grease made fine candles holders. Used Styrofoam cups served as ashtrays for his occasional cigarette smoking. Endless scraps of cardboard and aluminum foil reinforced and insulated his hovel. He was an innovator of litter, making one man's trash his treasure.

When October came and Woodward Street turned colder than what was bearable, his hoarding went into full force. Elastics. Plastic bags. Broken beer bottles. Flyers crushed by the soles of men's shoes. Everything his eyes spied was necessary, even if he didn't have room in his prized 47 cubic feet Coldtech refrigerator box, lined with tinfoil and packaging tape, retrofitted for his comfort and extra security. Duct tape and garbage bags decorated the front. When he first built this hovel, he weatherproofed the outside with as much tape and mismatched bags he could get his hands on. And every

night, when he returned home in the late hours, with his discovered goods in tow, he'd sit Indian style, crossing his already cramped legs, search for his matches to light his candles, and lay out the day's finds.

He prided himself for not being like the rest of those sketchy figures, stuffing garbage into carts like the starving misers that he thought they were. His father taught him better. One by one, he'd place the bent plastic utensils, the discarded inks pens, abandoned issues of the *Boston Globe* in a straight formation, ready for examination. He would take his alcohol wipes from the health clinic to sterilize the forks and knives that narrowly missed the trash cans. He would scrub until the grime of dried spaghetti sauce disappeared. He would unscrew the caps of the pens, remove the springs and ink inserts, and sterilize to have straws for his morning coffee. He would take the paper to pad his bed, lying on images of Mit Romney in crisis or the Sox losing to the Yankees—again. Every night for six years, this was his way of life.

One evening that October, he returned to what he playfully considered *Chez Miller*, in all its cardboard and tinfoil glory. Before he could begin his evening ritual, he went into a panic. *Where's it?* As tiny as his place was, he kept everything in particular spot. *I never take it out.* His eyes darted all over, from top to bottom and left to right of the cardboard shack. *It's not cold enough.* Beads of perspiration formed. *I'd wait 'til mid November when I can't feel my feet.* Heart raced. *Or when the snow hits.* He felt a numbness overwhelm his body. *Why isn't it here?* A cold, still numbness that quickly dissolved into a sick sensation until the heat of his apprehension surfaced. *Wait.* His toes first felt a tingle that stalked up his legs. *That stack wasn't there.* It made its way to his stomach, then his head. *No. No. No.* The room tilted. *It was ova' there. With my pens.* It could have been from the shock of violation or the sheen from streetlights on the tinfoil. *And my bags.* The one item he salvaged from his former home, his former life, what were both now ashes, was missing. *No sir. No.*

Some lousy skidder's been in my place. Touching my stuff. Moving my stuff. Wearing my stuff. Who do these rats think they are?

He had made sure to hide his father's military jacket under the stack of July's papers in the far right corner. It was his pillow. It was his blanket. It was his reminder of his fatal mistake.

*

He inherited that ratty prize when he was twelve and careless, smoking a cigarette, his act of defiance. After Dad lost his piss-poor job, the Millers moved out of their apartment and into their '87 rusty red Chevrolet. There were no breaks for any of them. His mom made enough at Roscoe's Diner to keep gas in the car and food in their mouths. There was never enough room for all three of them at the different shelters they would float from daily. They could never stay longer than for a night and a meal. When the copper banged his flashlight against the driver's window to wake them for the fourth time in three weeks and tell them about their vagrancy, Quentin's dad scouted for places to live, rent-free and hassle-free from men dressed in blue.

"Come on, Quentin."

His father's shrill whistle got his attention. Quentin dropped the red straw he used to prod the ants devouring a glazed donut in the Stop N' Shop parking lot and ran to his father.

"Dad, they looked like sprinkles. I want a donut. Can we get donuts?"

"What? Come on. We gotta go."

"The ants were attacking the donut. You know what would be funnier? Sprinkles attacking the donuts they were on. That'd be awesome. They'd be destroyers." Quentin's grin grew wide until his dimples formed—just like his father's.

"Son, your mom gets off from work in about two hours. We need to find this place. I wanna see there's any space for us. We can't live in this damn car anymore. We're not living in the Common. Your mom made that suggestion. Ha!"

His father's search took them to the old Combat Zone, the tacky red light district, glamorous for the Sixties, pathetic, dirty, and scandal free for the nineties. As they drove through the abandoned neighborhood, through the passenger window, Quentin saw men pushing carriages filled with soda cans and faded posters on brick buildings advertising the Two O'clock Club. The one poster that caught his eye featured Busty Russell. His eyes clung onto her statuesque image until his father turned the Chevrolet around the corner and Busty disappeared. Three blocks later his family took residency in a nameless, faceless warehouse. There his father began to set up house, beginning with the mattress found behind an apartment dumpster that night.

"Quentin, get me that box with the tape and wires."

When he brought the broken toolbox over to his father, he watched him disinfect and cover the exposed metal springs.

"You gotta be resourceful, son. Living out here. You can't depend on anyone but yourself when you get out there by yourself. Remember that, Quentin. You gotta do that much for yourself."

While his father spoke, Quentin's eyes drifted to his mother as she unpacked her four chipped porcelain cups, the sterilized utensils, the Styrofoam cups his father prepared for them. Her light brown hair fell out of her bun and covered her weary hazel eyes. She was still wearing her Roscoe's Diner apron, stained with spaghetti sauce and mustard. She brought her worn hands to her forehead and massaged her headache.

"Quentin. Are you paying attention 'cause you need to. Hand me those blankets."

*

Three months after moving into that warehouse, settling in and trying to make the cold concrete feel like home, Quentin discovered three cigarettes, delicately cradled in the red and white Marlboro package. He assumed it to be tossed by a philandering husband with his belt mislooped and shirt casually tucked or by a hooker with neon green eye shadow and two missing teeth. The young boy slipped the package into his plastic bag and rushed home for beans and whatever canned goods his mother could sneak from the diner.

Later that night, when the cold wind sneaked under the door, his dad placed his jacket on Quentin's shoulders to keep him warm before finally heading to bed.

"Son, you coming? It's getting late. We gotta go and look for supplies."

"Dad? I wanna stay up longer. Lemme read. I'm almost finished this comic."

"Quentin. What about the candles? What if you forget to blow them out? You know how your mom gets when the candles are still on when she goes to bed."

"Dad. Trust me. I promise. I'll blow 'em out before I sleep."

With a sigh, his father said, "Ok. Try not to stay up too late."

The one thing his parents feared was fire. They couldn't afford the luxury of a smoke detector, only a fire extinguisher from the back of their abandoned jalopy.

Quentin was aware of this fear and took caution. At least he thought he did. He took the candles to the far end of the warehouse, away from his parents' noses. He didn't want them to detect the cigarette fumes. He knew his father kept a lighter in his jacket. Rummaging through the left pocket, full of receipts and gum wrappers, he located the cheap red plastic tube between his fingers. His grubby thumb found a place on the lighter's flint wheel. He flicked. Nothing. Again, and nothing gave. His thumb would move (thanks to the sweat on his palm) but the wheel refused to budge. On the fifth try, a flame burst before his face. He stared at the glow, forgetting his original intentions to be an adult and puff away at what his mother considered "coffin nails." He dropped the lighter as he fumbled through his plastic bag, searching for those nails. He was unsure how to do this, how to hold the cigarette, how to breathe in the smoke and blow out puffs. He'd practiced with his breath and a dismantled pen in the colder months, inhaling slowly through the pen and pulling away to puff out failed rings. He watched his father do this smoking trick countless times.

Now was his chance to do it. Silence settled over the warehouse, save the clicks and flicks of the lighter, the rustle of the bag and the Marlboro package. Once he lit the cigarette, after several attempts, he sucked in the smoke and nicotine, only to gag. He had to stifle his coughs to avoid disturbing his parents. That grimy first taste made him desire the look and feel of the cigarette less. He tossed it aside, not realizing that it landed on a pile of construction debris, leftover from some years ago. The paint, the tarps, the newspapers ignited.

He heard a crack from behind. It was the heat from the cigarette and the debris marrying together to make fire. Before he had a chance to contain the fire, the small flames grew into larger ones, rising up to lick the ceiling and turn it black. The flames ran from one end of the warehouse to the next.

"Mom! Dad!"

Though he called their names, no words came out. He stood there and stared, watching the flames engulf his home and his family. He remembered his voice going dry, the heat bringing saline to his eyes and running. The sound of sirens, cops, fire engines, ambulances maybe, made him run with only his father's jacket and two cigarettes.

Years following the fire, Quentin drifted in and out of homeless shelters, never begging once, always under the radar, never smiling, avoiding eye contact. These were the rules. His father taught him better. First, he slept on grates to keep warm on freezing nights. Then, he discovered a goldmine collecting cans, cashing in empty Diet Coke and Budweiser cans for food vouchers at the Stop N' Shop.

Somewhere between the can hunt and the grate slumber, he stumbled into this quiet community on Woodward. They were reluctant to let him have a space to call his own. He was an outsider—silent, well kept, but miserly. And miserly worked for him. And six years later Quentin still didn't know who his neighboring vagrants were. He watched them but refused to speak to them. He knew their habits so well but never knew their names. But now he was stuck between a cardboard box and a hard place. He would have to break code, look these dirty pack rat tramps in the eye and make conver-

sation.

I've no clue. I don't know these people. I don't want to. They smell like moldy grinders. They don't bathe. They smell like fishy bastards. All these wicked gross skidders. I'd better figure it out. Can't let them get their mits on my stuff. My stuff. My jacket.

Contemplating his next move, Quentin heard the squeaks from Winnie's carriage to his left. Just as she entered her home, maneuvering her five bags of clutter, he thought,

"Well, here goes nothing."

"Hey, Winnie. Need some help with that?"

With her cloudy green eyes, the elderly woman stared through him as if he were translucent. Her face broke into a wide grin, certainly comical and almost maniacal.

"Oh, sonny. Bless your heart!"

"No worries. Where ya want it?"

"Over there will do just fine. Will ya be havin' a spot of tea with me?"

The question caught him off guard. The friendly voice was foreign to his ears. No one offers anyone anything. *That accent changed. Why is she Irish all of a sudden?*

"Please say ya will? I so wish to have the company."

"Sure." *What do I've to lose? Maybe she saw one of them guys in my place.*

Quentin sat as Winnie lit a match to the light her stolen Bunsen burner for their tea. She was a chemistry teacher decades ago until the whiskey got the better of her and her husband. They lived on Woodward for twenty years. No children. No home. But then Joseph died and Winnie was alone, collecting garbage and trading her wares for survival. Glass test tubes, petri dishes, pipettes, hotplates were the most popular items on the street. She knew her market well.

Waiting for the water filled beaker to boil, Quentin broke the awkward silence between him and his neighbor.

"So. Uh. Listen, Winnie. Did ya see anyone 'round here, I don't know, skulking about like they had no business bein' here? Because I'm missing something very, very important to me. An heirloom, ya know? It's something my father left me."

"Oh, back in Donegal, me father gave me the most precious ring. Right before he died, he did. Last summer, I took a trip with me sons to visit his grave. In Donegal. Oh, my. What a trip that was!" She slapped her knee and chuckled.

What does this have to do with anything? I wanna know where my damn jacket is and the old bat's talking about rings and graves?

"You know, sonny? I got me some of the finest jam over at the Kilmore Abbey in Connemara."

"I feel like killing something," Quentin muttered under his breath.

"Wha? Do ya know the place? The sisters there, God bless 'em, they hand grow all the fruit. Smash 'em up to make jam that melts in your mouth. Melts!"

You're gonna need them sisters and that God you're blessin' if you don't help me out.

"Oh, the old country. I miss me family there."

Before he could interrupt, the loud crackle of heat on the glass beaker interrupted Quentin's stream of thought.

"I'll getcha a cup. Then we can have our tea and talk a bit longer. I'll tell ya some more about Donegal and me father."

Winnie dug through her bag of odds and ends, finally pulling two cups with great

triumph. She then placed an expired tea bag in each cup, poured the water, and waited for it to brew. She handed a steaming cup of bitter tea to him.

"You know, there's a saying me father used to say: 'Health and a long life to you. Land without rent to you. A child every year to you. And if you can't go to heaven, may you at least die in Ireland.' Here's to ya, me boy."

He gulped the bitter brew. His throat burned to the point of numbness. His tongue couldn't feel anymore. With resignation, he said, "Well, I gotta book. I'll catch you 'round these parts." He left Winnie to further wax nostalgic of fathers and old countries. He was sure she didn't notice his hasty departure.

No.

She continued to blather to no one.

*

I'll walk 'round. Maybe I can get me mind—my mind—damn her—going. Maybe that'll do it. Maybe I did take it. No. No, that can't be. I never take it out. Well, but if I did, I wouldn't of taken it off. Lemme retrace my steps. It was there last night but not tonight. That's what I'll do. Walk backwards, remember what happened today. Anything that was out of sorts.

As he walked from Woodward back to Mullen, he saw Rory. At five foot nothing and nearly toothless, he was a man who made poverty his profession. To fool the businessmen and bleeding heart co-eds, Rory had all the signature pieces: dirty wool knit cap, stringy hair matted with dirt, faded layers of flannel and fleece, and Charlie, man's best friend in tow. The dog and that eager, helpless look in his eye sealed the deal with most people. Quentin learned this the hard way.

*

It was his second week on Woodward. It was August, and the heat from the midday sun was blinding and painful. He worked on building his cardboard home when a golden retriever panted up to him.

"Hey, buddy. Whatcha doing around these parts? You need to be in the shade. It's too hot with all that fur."

A man's voice interrupted Quentin's conversation with the canine.

"Charlie. Come here, boy. Where are ya?"

Quentin turned around to see a short, squat man with ratty hair. He had a broomstick in hand, using it to guide his way to Quentin and Charlie.

"Come here, boy. I need you. Charlie."

The way he walked in slow, jaunty steps, the way he looked off to the side made Quentin realize the man was blind.

"Hey! Your dog's here. No. Ova' here. Straight ahead. There ya go."

When the man reached Quentin, he said, "Boy, thank you for watching Charlie. He is my eyes. The name's Rory." He stuck his hand to the left of Quentin's face.

"Do ya have some change on ya? I want to get me and Charlie some water. Ya know this heat. It gets to ya. I just need a dollar."

Quentin was taken aback by his demand. But the dog's panting got increasingly harder. The sound of his heavy breaths, the look in his pitiful eyes softened his resolve.

"I've only got a dollar but I'll give it to ya because of ya dog."

Quentin reached into the pocket of his faded blue jeans and pulled out a crumpled one dollar bill. Two shiny quarters fell and hit the pavement.

He noticed Rory's eyes dart down to the ground and stare intently at the quarters.

"Here ya go. Take care, Charlie. Make sure ya get plenty to drink."

After thrusting the dollar in Rory's rough hands, Quentin walked away. When he heard the broomstick hit the ground, he turned around to see Rory crouched down picking up the abandoned quarters.

Quentin's eyes widened as he clenched both teeth and fists in anger. "I knew it! You lying midget. You were faking it and using ya dog to boot! Gimme my dollar back" he said, signaling with his left palm to give up the dollar.

"Sorry. Game over. Ya lose. Ya gotta learn the rules of this place or get out."

"But—"

"Thanks for the dollar. Me and Charlie really appreciate it."

*

With the sting of that memory still present, when Quentin saw him coming with his spare change cup, he was in no mood to deal with Rory's foolishness.

"Hey, buddy. Got some dimes on ya? Can ya help me out?"

I'm not your buddy. I got no dimes.

Although ready to discard him, Quentin stopped and realized that he had a resource at his disposal. Rory knew everything and everybody. He was as nosy as they came. In fact, it was how he weaseled money out of the poorest of the poor.

"Hey, Rory, tell me something. Did ya see anyone that may of gone in my place?"

"Well, I'd like to help ya out but my mind seems to be fading. Age, ya know." With that said, Rory began to shake his cup of coins and looked away from Quentin's penetrating stare.

"Will two dimes do ya good? Tell me whatcha know."

"I ain't seen no one 'round your business. What's it to ya?"

As Quentin dug for dimes, he said, "My dad's jacket's missing. Some bum took it."

"Waitaminute. Is it that ratty thing with the patches and the missin' buttons? The one you were wearin' this mornin'?"

"Wha—what are you yappin' about?"

"The jacket. I saw youse with it. In the Common. In the bathroom going in you're wearin' it. Then you weren't when ya left. I saws it with my own eyes." He pointed at those glazed over beads for emphasis.

"But I nev—" He stopped himself short when he realized Rory was right. He had taken the jacket with him. The sharp wind of that morning made it unbearable to walk out and over to Mullen and the Common.

"But it's gone. Someone's got it now. For a quarter, I can get ya a hint."

Quentin glared. "Who has it?"

"Can I see some shiny quarters? I'll answer yours questions soon enough."

Quentin grabbed a pocketful of changes. "Look. No more games. I'll gives ya all this change if ya give me one name."

"Perkins. Now hand them over." Those rough hands of his motioned for Quentin to hurry. Time was money for this panhandler and he didn't have much of either.

Quentin tossed the coins and headed for Perkins.

"Glad to be of service!" Rory shouted to the determined man as he picked up the shiny nickels and dimes on the pavement.

As Quentin traced his steps from taking the jacket off in that men's restroom to washing up, he caught a glance at what looked to be his father's ghost in the abandoned Stop N' Shop parking lot. The grizzly beard, the broad shoulders, the fabric of a lost jacket compelled Quentin look twice. But it wasn't him. It was Perkins, a veteran of a destitute circle of men. Quentin felt a wave of dread wash over him when he realized his mistake; he had left the jacket on the edge of the grimy men's room sink. His cloudy memory soon became clearer as he remembered the order of events. His memory took him back to this morning.

Entering the restroom.

Disrobing

Feeling the warmth of the running water against his smoke stained skin.

Listening to other fellow men turn on the water and clean in silence.

Perkins hacking and coughing, making the noises of a choking beast in a stall.

Dressing quietly.

Leaving quietly, eyes downcast.

Perkins must have seen the jacket, lying there vulnerable and for the taking.

And take he did.

An unspoken adage governed the men Quentin knew. Every man for himself. His piece of the parking lot, his cardboard shack, his heap of junk were all left to the discretion of each man. If he proved irresponsible, such as leaving the only item from his past on a sink within eyeshot of Perkins, then it was his loss, his fault. Quentin was well aware of the rules of survival. Especially if it involved Perkins. No one took from him, even if what he had belonged to somebody else. Any man who shared a meal or cardboard space with him would know that he was among the revered. He offered protection to the men of his parking lot community. However, it only applied to men who had his trust and didn't question his authority.

But Quentin couldn't stand by and watch Perkins soil what was rightful his. The desire to reclaim his father's jacket, a piece of his now lost past, was much stronger than any rules or assumed power. He composed himself, wiping the sweat from his brow and releasing his clenched fists. He marched directly to Perkins who was making his way back to his own cardboard hovel.

"Hey. Perkins? Where'd ya get the ratty jacket?"

"It's mine. Didn't get it anywhere."

Quentin felt the blood rise to his cheeks. He knew Perkins would feign ignorance, play dumb to convince him otherwise. He needed to stay calm for the time being. To shoot accusations at him would jeopardize his chance at getting his father's jacket.

"Listen, you gotta help me out. I believe this is mine. I left it behind by mistake. Listen, I'll trade ya. I've got a carton of cigarettes back at my place. It's good quality. Unopened. I got it from the Tuesday delivery truck over at the Amoco on Stevens. Your favorite—Marlboro. You can have that as long as you hand the jacket over to me."

He was bluffing. Quite poorly, in fact. He couldn't lie to save his life. His father tried to teach him that rule but to no avail. But if he could just get his hands on that jacket. However, the bearded man didn't budge.

"Fraid not, son."

Feeling the bitter sting of those words, Quentin reached over and grabbed the jacket's collar. "See this? It says 'David Miller.' That's my dad. This is his. Now it's mine." With that, Quentin grabbed at the left sleeve hoping to yank the old man to the ground, grab the jacket, and make a run for it.

"It's mine. Give it back now," he gritted through his teeth. He latched onto the sleeve until his fingernails dug into the fabric and his knuckles turned white.

But Perkins wouldn't give. His grip was ironclad. "No. Get away from me ya sorry ass punk," he growled and pulled harder. Quentin, refusing defeat, dug his heels into the dead grass, planting himself into the ground, hoping to be as immovable as possible.

"I'm not going anywhere without this. It's mine, you old piece of shit. Give it up!"

Perkins leaned closer to the ground, hoping to counter Quentin's weight, hoping his own bulbous body would work with gravity and take the jacket down.

"No. No. No. Youse need to get away from me. Youse know who I am?"

It looked like two dogs fighting over a dried up, meatless bone. Neither one wanted to concede defeat. With each pull, there was an even more forceful one given back. They worked themselves into exhaustion. Just when it felt like one loosened his grip, the other would yank as hard as possible, wishing it into his possession. However, the other wouldn't let go.

Perkins went closer to the ground until he started walking heavily, looking quite the caveman dragging the day's remains. He hoped to pull his weight far enough to undermine Quentin's resistance. As they pulled, he heard a sharp rip. The jacket tore in half as both men fell to the ground from the sheer force of gravity.

It can't get any lower than this.

Lying on the ground in cold defeat, he stared at a wad of gray gum that melded unnaturally with the brown blades of grass peeking through the concrete. He was dizzy from the fall. He knew he couldn't move too quickly. The blood would surge to his throbbing head and make it worse. The dull lights from the street lamps didn't help. Neither did the maniacal laugh in front of him. He felt like he was at a carnival, passed out from one too many rides or freakish side shows. He felt his father's torn jacket in his hands. The frays of the patches were soft beneath his fingertips. The worn threads brought back his father's memory. Before he could brush his unruly brown hair from his eyes and get up to stare down the laughter, a Dunkin Donuts wrapper slapped his red, wind-broken face.

What in the hell? Never in my wildest dreams. Never. In. My. Wildest. Dreams. Bribing toothless men with dimes and fighting with old pieces of shit in the cold. Now a crusty donut wrapper. Well, maybe I can do something with this.

He stood up slowly and just as he walked away with only part of what belonged to him, the left sleeve of his father's jacket, he felt an aggressive jerk at his shoulder. From the look in his eyes and the pull at Quentin's attention, he could tell that Perkins wouldn't surrender to defeat.

"Here." He thrust the torn fabric into Quentin's hands. "I have no use for it now."

"Umm. Thanks."

"Now where's my cigarettes, you lousy punk?"

Quentin turned around and smirked. "My place. You stay here I'll get 'em for ya."

His father taught him better.



Dead Tree on Jekyll

Color Photograph
Chris McCormick

My Gramma's Kitchen

Kelly Arno

My Gramma's chair squeaks
And loses a little bit of stuffing
From between the yellowed seams
As I stand up,
Her award-winning pecan pie
Still melts on my lips.
"Watch your head!"
I almost knock the spoons
Off of their rack on the wall.
Oklahoma and South Dakota
Tremble, threaten to fall, then
Settle again in their dusty slots.
My Gramma's curtains float
On a lazy Ozark breath,
The blue and yellow lace
Reaching, trying to tickle my nose
As my Gramma so often did.
Whinnying from the next pasture,
Old Smoky begs for the sweets
From my Gramma's garden;
My Gramma's carrots and
My Gramma's lettuce and
The apples from my Gramma's tree.
My Gramma's oak tree,
Planted the day my Gramma
And my Grampa got married,
Marks the spot where
My Gramma now lays,
And I watch the grass grow
Down from the foothills,
As "Call me Granny Margaret" washes
My Gramma's dishes.



Thanksgiving

Color Photograph

Luciana Carnerio

Queen Wasp

Virginia Gribben

Why in the hell do I do this to myself? I feel like Charlie Brown running to kick the football; every time I believe something will be different, and every time I fall on my ass! Izzy Wheeler was curled in a dark leather wing chair in the corner of her Grandmother's cavernous living room, which was once again filled with at least three generations of Wheelers. There was a low hum of multiple, hushed conversations, and the lush, gold wallpaper reflected the fireplace giving everything a honey colored quality. Family members scurried from one pod to the next. *They look like a bunch of honey bees in a hive instead of a bunch of WASPs in Edgewood.*

Izzy felt the heat from the fireplace to the right, but that heat was nothing like the heat coming from the conversations; conversations that she was not being included in—*again. I can't believe that I fell for it again. No one talks to me; only at and around me. Jeff keeps telling me that I can't make something from nothing. I hate that he is always right when it comes to my family. He told me that nothing would be the same after my Grandpa died. "They don't get you honey, I don't think that they ever will." That's what he said but I still try. They are my family and my link to Big Ed. When I tried to explain this to him, he said, "If you'd just marry me, we could start our own family; one that actually likes each other! You don't need big Ed's study to remember him. I promise!" Could he be right?*

Since the death of her Grandpa Ed, she had been virtually invisible to her family. Before he died, she and her cousin Blaine had a place in the family, Grandpa Ed made sure of it. *God, I miss Big Ed, he was the heart of this family, just look at them all, the women in knee length skirt suits and the men in business suits, they look like they are ready for a fucking funeral! Well, I guess they could be; Buffy wasn't exactly specific in her message. "Family meeting, Edgewood Estate, 7:00, Saturday."*

The Wheelers had not called a family meeting since Grandpa Ed gathered the clan to announce his impending death. He had arranged for a party to be held, and then when it came time for his usual speech, instead of a simple joke and well wishes, he announced, "Family, my time has come!" They responded with polite laughter, expecting him to follow up with something crass, or silly; but instead he finished with "The doctors say that I'm a goner! They have given me three months until I kick the bucket! If I can make one request before I die, it would be that you all just unclench your asses a bit." Taking his bow, he winked at Izzy, Jeff and Blaine. They knew what he was talking about.

Izzy and Blaine had spent countless hours in Big Ed's study with him. That room was *theirs*; they used it as a playroom, a disco, a confessional or a hideout. Years later, Blaine described it to Jeff as the room that they could let their "freak flag" fly. Ed had told the cousins, countless times in the privacy of the study that he had no clue how every one of his children had taken after his wife Victoria. "You would think that one of these sons of bitches would be like me. I guess that it skipped them and was passed to you two."

I wonder what it could be this time. I see most of the usual suspects. Jackson and his family aren't here, but they never are. I don't see Rose. I'm sure that Blaine is back in New York. He never

leaves Manhattan! Jeff said that he called the other day, I should call him back soon.

Interrupting her thoughts, Izzy's mom sidled up to her, leading with her glass of Chardonnay. "When was the last time that you talked to him? Uncle Geoff said that you probably know where he is."

Looking at Izzy and her mother Elizabeth was like looking at Goofus and Gallant from a Highlights Magazine found in a doctor's waiting room. They could be the same person, but Goofus looked unkempt and Gallant shined. Elizabeth and most of the Wheeler family looked like shiny people from a toothpaste commercial: straight teeth, a perfect helmet of blonde hair and not a wrinkle on clothing or skin. Izzy shared a resemblance with her mother and aunts: blonde hair, green eyes, porcelain skin and a nice build, not too tall, not too thin. The resemblance ended with genetics however. The Wheeler women were devoted to Anne Taylor and were walking shrines dedicated to Sax Fifth Avenue; casual to them meant flats. Each woman had a weekly hair and nail appointment; only death or dismemberment could keep them from it.

Izzy, on the other hand, liked her clothes to have a past. Her job as an assistant director for an off-Broadway theater rarely called for more than jeans and a T-shirt. She scoured thrift shops looking for well-worn jeans and off the wall T-shirts, the stranger the better.

"Izzy, did you hear what I said? When did you last talk to him? Elizabeth repeated.

"Who?" was all she could get out before her mom's sisters, Gracie and Genevieve slid in next to her mother completing the green-eyed, Anne Taylored, can-can line of inquisition.

"How can you just sit there? Izzy, do you know anything about him, have you spoken to Blaine? Elizabeth, she's your daughter, ask her." Genevieve said, using her Scotch on the rocks like a boxing glove.

"Gen, darling, I'm trying to, but you know how she can be, drama, drama, drama, I should have put my foot down when she took that ridiculous job! I mean, really, what am I supposed to tell the rest of the family and our friends when they ask me what Isabelle is doing with herself. I would be mortified to admit that she directs those vulgar plays. Did I tell you that the last one had a man standing completely nude, in the center of the stage, talking about the war in Iraq? What does nudity have to do with war?"

"The writer was trying to..."

Gracie interrupted, "Oh, Elizabeth, I feel so badly for you. Izzy does love to keep us guessing. Has she told you any more about, what's his name, Jeff? My daughter Rose tells me just everything. Did I tell you that she got another promotion? They've sent her to Paris for a month for training. Wait, I have a postcard in my purse."

Genevieve, not to be outdone, interrupted, "Gracie, get my purse while you're at it, I have new pictures of Jackson's children. They couldn't be here today because his oldest, Winter, is competing in the Junior Olympics; golf, you know, she's a prodigy according to her coach."

Izzy watched to verbal sparring of her relatives with a smirk. *I'm sitting right here, I love how they talk about me like I'm the chair or the sofa. Every time I try to answer them, they talk over me like I'm an annoying child. I never noticed it until Jeff pointed it out to me. I think that I*

focused on Grandpa Ed and Blaine so much that the others just didn't register. Izzy re-adjusted her black-rimmed glasses that hide her green eyes and toyed with the fraying hem of her jeans, just waiting for her mother to take control once again.

"Gracie, I've seen the postcard. I've got a copy of the picture, Genevieve. Let's get back to the issue at hand. Now, Izzy, can you please just tell us what you know so we can figure out what to do. You may not care about the reputation of this family, but we do," said Elizabeth, in her patented chairwoman in charge voice.

Before Izzy responded to anyone, they turned to each other and started their own conversation pod centering on Izzy's stubbornness, crassness and lack of family pride.

Fuck this; I'm not sticking around to hear another round of the "Izzy Sucks" tune. Genevieve will start the song with her disgust of my job. Grace will harmonize with how I could be so pretty if I just took an interest in myself. Genevieve will come back with that strange boyfriend of hers and then Mom will really bring it home with the chorus of She's just like Dad. Now, where is my purse?

Izzy walked into her Grandpa's old study to find her purse. The moment she opened the door, she was engulfed in the black-licorice smell of old books mixed with the smell of wood smoke-her Grandpa's signature scent. *God, I love the smell of this room, it smells safe.* Izzy nestled into the oversized desk chair and looked around the room. On one side of the room was a stage-like black marble fireplace and dark wood mantle and on the opposite side of the room were floor to ceiling books of all shapes and sizes. Near the fireplace was a comfy love seat; it was well worn from the rear-ends of her Grandpa's friends and business associates as well as her very own rear and of course Blaine's. *Everyone seems to be very concerned with something that has to do with Blaine. I wonder if that's why he called.*

Izzy stared at the fireplace with Blaine and Big Ed on her mind. *We did have some fun in here.*

"Grandpa, are you ready for the show?" Izzy asked through the cracked door.

"Ready and waiting Boo Boo."

Blaine entered the study first, wearing an old scarf on his head, followed by Izzy who was adorned with a scarf and a shawl. They solemnly walked to the fireplace whose marble slab doubles as their performance area. Blaine holds his hands behind his back with his shoulders shrugged girlishly and turns to Izzy.

"Well, somebody has to arrange the matches. Young people can't decide these things themselves." With this intro, Izzy and Blaine launch into their performance of Matchmaker, Matchmaker, from A Fiddler on the Roof. They twirl and sing, giving it their all, never have two little WASP's so convincingly played poor Jewish girls wishing for a husband.

Blaine has thrown himself into the performance. He takes Izzy's prop shawl and makes a veil from it singing, "Matchmaker, Matchmaker, I'll bring the veil, you bring the groom, slender and pale..."

In their mind, it was the performance of all performances; they had practiced in the playroom for hours to perfect it. Grandpa was swaying to the slightly tuneless song the kids were singing; a proud grin was on his round face. Victoria had walked in the study mid performance and watched for only a moment before Blaine had started the finale, "Playing with matches a girl can get burned.."

Before Izzy could sing her line to finish the song, Grandmother Victoria brought

down the curtain, so to speak. "Children, this is entirely inappropriate! You Grandfather is a busy man, I recall telling you NOT to disturb him!"

"Vic, honey, I love the children's show. I'm not too busy to watch it. They have been practicing all morning long!"

"Edward, do not call me Vic." Victoria hissed quietly, "I told Buffy and Elizabeth that the children could spend the afternoon with the maid as long as they did not get in the way. I could hear the screeching from my dressing room, it entirely interrupted MY day."

"I don't consider the children an interruption. They know that they are welcome in here any time." Turning to the kids with a wink in his sparkling eyes, he grandly shouted, "The show must go on! Sing away my poor husbandless Jews." That was the first time that Izzy or Blaine had seen anyone stand up to their Grandmother, they were unsure of what to do next, so they just stood there, gaping, Blaine in his veil and Izzy in her scarf. Before walking stiffly out of the room, Victoria turned to her husband and whispered, "Edward, could you at least censor their song choices, Blaine is playing a damned girl! Do you want him to turn queer?"

Izzy saw a look pass over her Grandpa's face that she couldn't name, but knew wasn't a good one. He rose from his chair, walked to his wife and through his clenched teeth, growled, "I think that his overbearing mother can claim that victory. I don't care what he turns into, as long as he stays as happy as he looks right now. Please leave my study."

Grandpa must have had balls made of steel; balls of steel and the patience of a saint. How did he ever end up with a woman like Grandmother Victoria? With a smile, Izzy returned to her purse hunt, finding it on the love seat. She grabbed a lighter and cigarette and turned back towards the door.

That was the first time I had heard the word queer in regards to Blaine. I wasn't sure what it meant and Grandpa didn't seem concerned so we sang on, just like he taught us. Shit, without him, I'd probably be as repressed as the rest of chicks in this family.

Slipping out of the study and down the dark, wooden hall, Izzy headed towards the French doors that led to a brick patio at the back of the house. She chose this spot because it was rarely used anymore; the outdoors wasn't climate controlled, hence the Wheelers tended to avoid it.

The patio was cool and dark. The night felt like, what she and Jeff like to call "make-out weather;" cool enough for a jacket but not enough for a coat, perfect for a blanket on the grass in a park, with a radio and a couple of beers. She was sure no one in the house would understand her if she tried to explain make-out weather, no one but her cousin Blaine, who was obvious in his absence, as usual.

"I thought I might find you out here-smoking." says a nasal voice from the door. Her cousin Diana stepped out closing the door haughtily behind her. "Mother said that you won't tell them anything. I thought maybe I could get it out of you. This is important to all of us. I mean, how embarrassing, I can't even imagine what the people at the club would say if they knew."

"Knew what Di? Your mom only left the time and place on my voice mail. I get the feeling that everyone thinks that I should know what's going on. I--"

Before she could even finish her last sentence Diana came back with, "You two

are always in on the jokes, but this is no joke! This is serious.” With her hands on hips with her head jutting forward like a hen’s she cackled on, “Don’t think that I didn’t hear about the last play that you worked on! I heard that there was a character named Diana who had a stick in her ass throughout the entire play. I’m sure that the two of you giggled for hours over that one, but do not think that it bothered me in the least, no one that I know would be caught dead in that theater that you work in! You are crass, and common. How we can be related is beyond me. You and my brother don’t even deserve to have the Wheeler name. I can’t even stand to look at you!” The hands that were just at her hips now fly heavenward and with a final theatrical flair Diana spins on her pink kitten-heels sending her blonde hair flying in a judgmental arc, leaving Izzy standing in a cloud of her own smoke.

“Up you dosage, Diana.” She murmured to no one; or so she thought. From the dark corner of the porch she heard a laugh and a snort. Dropping her cigarette, she turned slowly toward the laugh. The man behind the laugh was her Uncle Geoff. Geoff was usually as stiff the Washington Monument and as humorous as a root canal. Tonight, however, he was rumpled and a little blurry around the edges; his entire body was slurring to match his words.

“Do you know when it happened?”

“Uncle Geoff, what’s happened to Blaine? Everyone in there seems to think that I’m in on something, or that I even know what’s going on. Is he ok, I haven’t seen or talked to him in wee—?”

“No, he’s not *ok* you liberal hippie bitch. He’s my only son, the one to carry on the Wheeler name and now... I can’t say it; it makes me want to throw up.” Just like that, his wants became a reality and Uncle Geoff turned slightly on the stone bench and heaved toward the flowerbed. In an instant, brie and crackers and Dewar’s and water replaced the insults coming from her uncle’s mouth. *What in the hell is going on here. Has Blaine been hurt? Oh, shit, could he be HIV positive? Our friend just tested positive, could he be next. I hope I’m overreacting!*

Now, more confused than ever, Izzy slipped back in the house to alert Geoff’s wife, Buffy that her husband was, well, barfing. Buffy, however, was nowhere to be found. *He’s a grown man; he can take care of himself. Let him tell the maid about the mess. I need to find my cell, Blaine needs to tell me what in the hell is going on with the drama kings and queens of Edgewood.*

Before Izzy could return to the study for her phone, she encountered the grand-dame of the Wheelers: her Grandmother Victoria, in the expansive hallway near the bathroom. The hugeness of the hallway made her grandmother look even smaller in comparison. Victoria Wheeler was a small and secretly imposing woman. The silver bun on top of her head could be the wick to a very volatile bomb, but her slight figure and soft green eyes always tricked Izzy into forgetting that her grandmother had the power to detonate her own bomb and an itchy trigger finger. “Hey, Gram, you look great! Where have you been?”

“Please do not call me Gram; I’ve told you before, Gram sounds so vile. You may call me Grandmother, Mrs. Wheeler, or Grandmother Victoria, you may choose. As to where I have been, I do not think that you are in any place to question me, young lady. I have put up with enough from the two of you. Your grandfather ruined any glimmer

of decorum that you may have learned from your parents or myself. Blaine has shown that he has no regard for the reputation of the family, but I had always hoped that you would become more like your mother once your grandfather stopped influencing you, but instead you seem to have found a man that is just like him!"

She thinks that Jeff is like Big Ed? Good. I think so too. Maybe that's why they liked each other so much. Oh, wait, I think that she's waiting for an apology.

"Sorry Grandmother", she said in a semi-robotic voice. *I feel like I'm going crazy. Someone would have told me by now if Blaine was hurt, I hope. What in the hell has their panties in a wad? What's that in the hag's hands?*

Grandmother Victoria was grasping a newspaper clipping in her dusty hands. Everything that Izzy pondered flew right out of her head as she focused on her grandmother's hands. Izzy tried to catch a look at the clipping, but before she could get a good look at it, out of nowhere, Aunt Buffy tore out of the coat room; in one hand she had a bottle of beer and in the other, an orange prescription bottle. She lunged at Grandmother Victoria and tore the paper from her hand screaming, "Give me that you wretched bitch!" and with the grace of a drunken ballerina, plowed past the women and into the bathroom. Buffy had a slurred look, not unlike her husband's, but with a more dramatic edge. *Shit, she looks like a heroine-chic raccoon.* There were tear trails running the length of her nipped and tucked face. The theatrics of the evening were coming to a climax for Izzy. *Aunt Buffy had a beer. Aunt Buffy was carrying a real-live, hops and barley beer.*" No one in Izzy's family drank beer. To them, beer was as white trash as NASCAR and airbrushing. The beer was more of a surprise than the guerilla style attack or the fitting epithet.

Izzy looked to her grandmother for a reaction. Buffy's rampage knocked Victoria right out of one of her Chanel pumps and she looked quite vulnerable, for the moment. In a moment of tenderness, Izzy tried to assist her grandmother in righting herself.

"Gram, you OK?" *What kind of rabbit hole have I fallen down?*

"You insubordinate girl! Do you listen to anything that I say? I don't know where we went wrong with you. I suppose that we should have forced you into finishing school, but your grandfather wouldn't hear of it! I am through with you too! I am taking you and that Blaine, yes, Blaine from my will." She turned and limped down the hall still wearing just one shoe, but as haughty as ever.

Watching her grandmother retreat, Izzy just stood there shaking her head with her mouth gaping like a fish on land. *I guess that's what I get for trying to help. Maybe if I punch her, she'll put me back in the will. Jeff was right, it's useless to try and figure them out. I do need to figure out why Buffy seems to have lost her mind though. OK, I need to see that paper.*

"Aunt Buffy, honey, is there anything that you need?" She simpered through the door. "I'm worried about you."

Ha! If I can't shock it out of them, I'll southern bell it out of them. I learned a trick or two in college; I knew there had to be some benefit of having a debutant as a college roommate! Watch out Buffy, I'm coming for your secrets.

With a *don't scare the loony smile*, Izzy slides open the heavy door to find Buffy, slumped in a pile on the bathroom floor. Green eyes meet raccoon and Izzy swoops to grab the paper from her aunt's hand.

Izzy's mind went blank for a moment and when she came to she found herself

sitting on cold Italian marble with tears running down her face and an aching in her middle. Through her tears of amusement and relief she re-read the newspaper clipping in her hand. There, in full regalia was a picture of her cousin Blaine, or as the caption read, "Miss Gay New York-Blaire Wheeler of Edgewood." The picture next to the caption was at first glance, her aunt Buffy in a sequence gown, only on second glance could she see that it looked like aunt Buffy with an Adam's apple.

With a tuck of his penis, a slip of a dress and the change of a letter, Blaire-nee-Blaine had finally found a way to carry on the family name, just not in the fashion that was expected. *His dad was whining about Blaine carrying on the family name, man, he made sure that the Wheeler name would not only be carried on, but that it would live in infamy in the town of Edgewood. I wonder what the most upsetting part about this is for them. Is it that he's gay? That he's a drag queen? That he used the family name? Damn, I just assumed that everyone had figured him out; once again I gave my family more credit than they deserve. They acted like something really bad happened to Blaine. I actually thought that they cared. Stupid me!*

Wiping away her tears of laughter, Izzy pulled herself off of the cold bathroom floor and offered a hand to Buffy. Buffy, in turn, looked into Izzy's eyes and then slowly raised her middle finger and passed out. The evening was finally complete. *I've been ignored, insulted, thrown up at, screamed at, and dis-inherited in the span of an hour. Charlie Brown running after the football-that's me!*

Izzy shrugged her shoulders and turned to leave. *Mom's wrong, I'm not just like Grandpa. He stuck it out in this family until the day he died. I'm not going to last that long. I can't.*

Izzy left the house in Edgewood without even a good-bye. She returned home to Jeff and as she crawled into their cozy bed she leaned over and whispered into Jeff's ear, "You're right, I don't need them, I have all the family I need right here."



Overlooking the Peloponnese

Color Photograph

Chris McCormick

Appendix #1 – Fear Of Stocking

Alex J. Sandoval

Yes, constantly.

I HATE it. It drives me mad. Every time that big, hairy, hot, sweaty

arm reaches down in the box and systematically removes me and my family and friends from our home. Place us on a cold steel prison floor, with a view to all the other captive prisoners, and no way to help them. Every once and a while, one of us'll escape.

Once, Chef-boy and Ohs ran away with one of the smaller fleshlings. A week later, Ohs was back...but Chef-boy was nowhere to be seen. I inquired as to where he might be, so I could bring him up to date on the next suicide revolt and escape run. They were always painful and gory, but it usually ended up that those of us who survived to the checkered hell would get picked up by one of the fleshlings and nurtured.

So I thought.

Ohs told me a horror story about what had happened that week. Apparently, he and Chef-boy were able to escape the Red Dragon of Light that guarded our exit. Ohs theorized that if one was able to get close enough to obtain the sacred light of the dragon without coming face to face with it, access was granted into the great beyond. I didn't believe him. I was sure that staying away from the Dragon was the key, infact, I had once heard a fable by the back row with the Elders...that if one was able to shed his outer prison garb and strip down to nothing, one could easily go beyond the mirrored gates into the Great Beyond...

...but I'm straying. According to Ohs, the Great Beyond was all but "great". After an excruciating and lengthy voyage through the Sea of Light Blue Cotton, Ohs was finally freed from the weight of Loaf above him. That stupid bastard refused to stop taking Yeast Steroids, and it invariably made him very fat.

Once inside, Ohs and Chef-Boy were locked away in the Dark Dungeon for several days, until finally the fleshy hand reached in their direction. It picked up both him and Chef-boy... the Fleshy began to examine him, and then chose Chef-Boy.

What came next was sickening. Ohs was left on a blinding white table for later sorting, but he was given a CLEAR view of Chefies torture...almost as if to say, "Remember this, for you are next." First, they tore open his head, and shook him by his rear until his innards had plopped into a scorching hot disk, where he was burned and then (the most shocking part) the Fleshies distributed his essence, and DEVoured HIM. It was here that I and other listeners vomited and lost consciousness.

Ohs was in a state of panic, and in the confusion of what had happened, he lost control

of his bowels, and...well, needless to say, the Fleshies no longer had use of him. He was “tainted”, he heard them comment.

Ohs retold the tale countless times, and eventually shared with us his return when he felt able. After more examination, and a close-call with the Ripping Mechanism, he retraveled the Journey, and emerged again through the Gates.

There, he was tossed about violently, and seemed to be exchanged for something of greater taste...crumpled green labels. I imagined these were the skins of old comrades to be used as garnish for some diabolic “meal”. The Fleshies I had once beckoned to with my silent screams had become the subject of my nightmares.

Ohs came and went, as did many others, whom I pray encountered better fates than poor Chef-boy. But I, now an Elder in the back row, tell my horror stories to the children who have come after me.

Despite my age, I too, fear being stocked...



Still Life

Charcoal Drawing
Anita Brunner



Self Portrait

Charcoal Drawing
Anita Brunner

Salt

Jessica Martinez

The table
—long sigh of heavy oak—
my father sits at
its top,
is seated to my right,
will not abdicate.

My brother
fumbles with his fork,
moving
strategically
between green beans
and mashed potatoes—

Mother makes no petition:
pecking at her plate,
bird bites
in between
slow, shallow sips—
staring down

into bone white china.
(I am not
my mother's daughter.)
Across the table,
he has now annexed
the hominy dish.

Tomorrow,
this table will seat one less.
He
will no longer
command me
to "pass the salt."

And six months later,
I will not write home
to tell him, folded
white napkin in my lap,
"I am eating cans of corn
for dinner, Dad."



World

Acrylic Jet Painting

Jie Chen

Mirror

Elena Fodera

*I am a butterfly with orange wings.
I am the only one.
I am a waterfall.
A thoughtful spirit resides within words
flowing
from one line
to the next.*

*I love,
hard and genuine,
and I feel the seasons
with all my heart.
I am a leaf, or a star in the night.
I am balanced.
I am not the full moon, and I am not the sun.
I dance to sweet music and wind in the trees,
free.*

*I am a fading memory,
a yellowing photograph of
anything beautiful,
once the eye of somebody's universe.*

*I am barefoot on the dock and peering over the edge.
I've known for sure and been mistaken,
both times at once and each a thousand.
I reach and twist and grow with the vines
up,
along and
over the fence,
sometimes uninvited.*

*I am something to this world though,
a child of earth and stone, love and wisdom,
holding a candle and walking out into darkness.*

*I am a cold, clear night.
I am the calm that awaits you
underwater.*

Contributors

Kelly Arno is a Junior majoring in English with Teacher Certification Major. Regarding the inspiration for "My Gramma's Kitchen," Kelly notes, "My gramma has been gone for years now, but my grampa remarried quickly to a woman who insisted that we call her 'Granny Margaret.' I resented her for a long time for the way she used my gramma's possessions as though they were her own. 'Granny Margaret' would never be my gramma, and I would never call her my gramma or my 'granny.'"

Anita Brunner is an exchange student from Austria. Her major at her home university is Art History and for her two semesters at AASU it is Fine Arts. She believes that for an Art Historian it is important not only to know about the artists, but also to be familiar with techniques and materials. Her favorite techniques are drawing and sculpting. She says, "I like to experiment and to meet a challenge, pushing assignments as far as possible. It is a great experience to get to know my own limits and overcome them."

Luciana Carneiro is a Senior graduating in December 2007 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. She hopes to be able to open her own photography studio in Atlanta following graduation. Of her art, she says, "Sometimes I simply document the world around me; other times I create my own. The inspiration for my art comes from the need to express a mood or capture a look. I try to see the things that others glance over, and make them stand out."

Jie Chen is a Freshman majoring in English. After meeting a Chinese girl who escaped from her family in Colorado, where she was confined by her white husband for three years, Jie felt compelled to write "Tom's Wig" and tell her story. Jie reflects, "I still remember the lonely and miserable girl was so timid and so weak. And actually, this story is written for her and I wish she is getting better now." "Tom's Wig" has also been accepted for presentation at this year's Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Erin Christian is a Junior and English major pursuing a minor in Writing, and she plans to pursue graduate studies in Literature after graduating Armstrong. Erin wrote "For Better or For Worse" as a comic story to explore the feelings of awkwardness common to everyone when placed in unfamiliar social situations. Weddings are just occasional, and intimate, enough so that they drift around the margins of most young people's comfort zones, and when attending a wedding as the young girlfriend of a member of the involved family, the feeling of intrusion into a private ceremony can be simultaneously amusingly gut-wrenching.

Michelle Crabb is a Junior majoring in Information Technology. She previously spent five years in the US Air Force. Since high school, writing has always been one of her favorite hobbies. Her short term goals are to finish her degree and to get a nice steady job while writing on the side. "Ode to the Help Desk" was based on a mixture of personal

experience and ill wishes for a cruel boss she once had. All of the user phone calls in her story were based on actual calls that she received when she worked at a network help desk.

Hai Dang is a graduating senior dual majoring in information technology and theatre. The inspiration for "Fireflies" came from an auditions class that he took in the Fall 2006 semester. After a fellow classmate performed a heartfelt and emotional monologue, he decided that he needed to find a monologue like that for his repertory. About 80% of the content in "Fireflies" is based on events that occurred in his personal life.

Although the piece is about what one gains and loses in love, the overtone of it is that memories can be triggered by the slightest stimuli. The piece was chosen and featured in this year's "New Voices" production.

Leah DiNatale is a Junior majoring in English Literature. After graduation, she plans to obtain a MAT degree and teach English composition to high school students. She wants her students to understand why literature matters. Leah is a closet fiction writer. Inspired by her experience with the craziness that is the pageant world, "Baby Doll" explores the darker side of pageantry.

Elena Fodera is a freshman majoring in English and minoring in Philosophy. In the future, she plans to finish at Armstrong and possibly go on to graduate school at UGA to major in Creative Writing. The poem "Mirror" is a literary self-portrait with each image as a reference to her qualities and experiences. "Mother Nature's Garden" was written when she was sixteen, and was inspired by a dream in which she visited an exquisite garden. She was compelled to capture its beauty in words and make it the home of Nature herself.

Jennifer Henderson is a Junior majoring in Art Education. "Light" was inspired by the life inside everyday objects. Finding the energy in inanimate objects is one of her passions in photography. She says, "I try to see things like this broken lamp as part of a bigger picture, not just as trash. My goal for my photography is to try to show others what I see and to expand their view beyond traditional beauty."

Jessica Martinez considers herself indebted to the Language, Literature, and Philosophy Department at Gamble Hall (especially, Dr. James Smith). She is this year's recipient of the Lillian Spencer Award for Poetry. She will graduate from Armstrong in May 2007 with a BA in English, a BA in Spanish, and a certificate in Latin American Studies. Jessica has recently accepted an offer of admission to the Graduate School from the Department of English at the University of Notre Dame, where she will study poetry in the Creative Writing Program. Upon completion of her MFA, she plans to return to Savannah to write and teach.

Chris McCormick is a graduating senior majoring in English and minoring in Art. Last summer he studied abroad in Greece. He currently works as a tutor at AASU's Writing Center. Chris states, "I simply love art. I find great joy in photography. It is a passion I hope to take with me through my future adventures. Many of my photographs are

inspired by my love for the outdoors. I aim for what I have pre-visualized and try to welcome what I have not. I try to capture what words can't, and I have a great time doing it."

Victoria Miller is a Junior majoring in English. "Breaching the Gaps" was written for a creative writing class but had been formulating itself in her mind for a while prior to that. Victoria notes, "I only needed an excuse to start writing it out and bringing the nameless characters in my head to life of paper. Inspirations to my writing come from authors I enjoy to read. Among these I should reference L. J. Smith whose series *The Forbidden Game* initiated my love of Norse mythology. It is Sherrilyn Kenyon's wit and Diana Gabaldon's historical details that serve to remind me why I love to read, and therefore I always try to channel them when I am writing myself."

Mia Montgomery is a Sophomore majoring in Art Education and this year's recipient of the Lillian Spencer Award for Art. The "Stuck in a Box" series was inspired by last semester's overwhelming feeling of everything happening at once. Mia describes, "On the outside I looked normal and dressed nice, but on the inside I felt trapped and was panicking. I showed the progression of my anger and frustration through my colors getting darker in each piece. I went through over 300 images until I had the perfect 3 pictures to complete my piece, and I would like to thank Jim Kincaid for taking about 250 of those images for me." She plans on furthering her "Stuck in a Box" series by hopefully finding other models that are willing to contort their bodies into awkward and painful poses.

Joe O'Connor is a Junior majoring in history. He wrote "Die Gurke" because he has taken five years of German and has always wondered if he could survive Germany with what he knew. According to Joe, "I have a feeling that I would speak just like Malcolm, though I would have conjugated most of my verbs correctly."

Chad Roberts is an eight year resident of Savannah who recently received an honorable discharge from the Army after serving on active duty for eight years. He plunged into college life in August 2006 and is currently seeking a Bachelor's Degree in Radiology. Both works featured in *Calliope* were inspired by his role as a Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) in the Army. Having no formal painting instructions or training, he paints mostly for enjoyment, and it serves as an outlet from stress. Chad says, "I painted Geometrical Maze after a stressful day of dealing with soldiers, it made me think of the different directions we are all pulled in throughout our lives. Classical Martini was actually inspired by a woman I knew; she thought her outlet was alcohol until it proved to be unsafe."

Stephanie Roberts is a graduating senior majoring in English and minoring in gender and women's studies. Regarding her story, Stephanie says, "This was my first attempt at creative fiction. I began writing this story with this image of a man walking by and watching two homeless men fight like dogs over a jacket in the cold. However, I recognized the limitations of this particular third person perspective; if I funneled all

the events through the eyes of the outsider, I would not have the opportunity to reveal any backstory of the fighting men to my readers. Once I figured out that I wanted my story to explore the issues of the homeless subculture and the rules for survival, I shifted gears and focused on Quentin Miller, a young homeless man who is cynical and elitist about his standing in the Woodward homeless community, as my protagonist.”

Mandy Rowe is a senior graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. “Facing the Beast” was inspired by her own fears of getting in front of the classroom and speaking in front of her peers. Mandy reflects, “It had always been a fear I had since I was a small child, and when the story came about, I was enrolled in an Education class where I had to do Practicum, which included teaching two lessons to middle school students. While my fear is not as profound as my character’s, I feel it truly expresses how hard it can be for anyone to overcome his or her fears but that it is possible.”

Alex J. Sandoval is an art major with an emphasis on graphic design. He plans to do his best to become a jack of all trades, working on movies, TV, games and anything he can get his hands on. “Appendix #1: The Fear of Stocking” comes from an internet message board wherein the topic was “Are you afraid of S-T-A-L-K-I-N-G.” He read it, and saw S-T-O-C-K-I-N-G. His imagination went off without him, and he just wrote down what came to him.

Dave Williams is an English major and this year’s recipient of the Lillian Spencer Award for Fiction. Speaking on what inspired “Randall,” Dave states, “I heard a news story on NPR about several young men being arrested after seeing a picture of a beautiful woman in the obituaries and attempting to dig up the body for their own personal needs. Needless to say, this was revolting, but it made me wonder what kind of mind set would someone have to be in, in order to do such a thing. Still, “Randall” isn’t a morbid story about necrophilia intended to shock people. It is really a story about friendship, unrequited love, and kindness in the worst of situations. So crank up some Slayer, watch a little wrestling, have a sip of some Boone’s farm mixed with cheap vodka, buy yourself a little plastic flower in a conspicuous container at a gas station, and enjoy ‘Randall.’”

Jeremy Windus is a recent 2006 graduate of AASU’s history department. He took “al-Maghribiyyah 2” in the souks of the Jamaa’al Fina in Marrakech, Morocco.” Jeremy asserts, “There is no deeper meaning; I imagine that if you were you to go there and catch the light at exactly the right moment, you might see something similar. The purpose of a good photo is to see something amazing and then document it. Mundane or the exotic, high or low brow, one can find epiphanies anywhere. I don’t claim to be using some special technique (it’s digital and edited)—I found an extraordinary image and captured it. Perhaps if artists genuinely cared more about making something both beautiful and accessible than they do about the artistic and intellectual one-up-man-ship that presently pervades the plastic arts, they would find audiences in their galleries. Until then—see you at the movies.”



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