



2006

CALLIOPE

Calliope

2006

Armstrong Atlantic State University
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Cover art by Mia Montgomery and Allison Walden

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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 an equal opportunity for every student. The Lillian Spencer Awards are presented for outstanding submissions in art, fiction, and poetry. The recipients of this award are chosen by the staff from the student submissions received that year.

For more information on submissions, or if you are interested in working on the 2007 "Calliope" staff, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Languages, Literature, and Philosophy Department located in Gamble Hall.

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. . . [A]rt is not meant to stop the stream of life. Within a narrow span of duration and space the work of art concentrates a view of the human condition; and sometimes it marks the steps of progression, just as a man climbing the dark stairs of a medieval tower assures himself by the changing sights glimpsed through its narrow windows that he is getting somewhere after all.

Rudolf Arnheim, "Entropy and Art"

You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

Mark Twain

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Letter From the Editor

One of the powers of art is its ability to allow us to see through another's eyes. Exciting art contains truths that can only be revealed by viewing life from another's perspective. The goal of this year's "Calliope" staff was to produce a magazine that reflects the creative diversity of the students at AASU, so that the readers can see life through many different perspectives.

The fiction, poetry, and art within this magazine transported this staff to other places and times. From the seat of a wheelchair to behind an arcade counter, the short stories reveals truths through humor and tragedy sometimes within the same piece. The poetry examines topics such as the price of heroism, asking questions not easily answered. The artwork, both striking and subtle, fills the magazine with vibrance and color. Through various mediums such as photography and charcoal, the artwork realizes the world of dreams mingled with reality that the fiction and poetry illustrate with words. Above all, this issue of "Calliope" offers these talented students (many of them, for the first time) to see their ideas realized and most of all, gives others the opportunity to see reality in a new way.

This magazine does not feature art for art's sake nor diversity for diversity's sake. The purpose is for the readers to see the world of truths outside of themselves, if only just for a moment. The art within this year's "Calliope," hopefully, will not only allow its readers to escape but to understand something beyond their own experiences.

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Fiction

Candy Boy

by Paige Washington

There was a reason the women said he was so sweet. I heard that when his mama was carrying him, she had a terrific sweet tooth. Sure, she ate healthy enough to satisfy the old women in starch white uniforms that smelled of liniment and rubbing alcohol. But how would they know that the balanced meals fell somewhere between her round the clock snack time. Gummy bears and chocolate and bubble gum all day long, but she liked nothing more than her sugary sweet gum drops.

A thick layer of sugar on top, gooey sweet through and through was the way he came out. His mama licked her lips every time she planted a kiss on that boy's cheek. As he got older, all the girls did too. Running behind him like he was an ice cream truck, with a magical bell or something just as dooming. The clever little girls called him Candy Boy.

"Candy Boy," they'd whine. "Candy Boy," they'd moan as he kissed them good night on his stoop. Their own special name for him.

I couldn't help but see them from my window. It didn't surprise me how every girl that brought him home seemed unconcerned with Gum Drop's immediate disinterest in them as they furiously waved goodbye. That scene replayed at least three times a week. Each time a different girl.

Of them all, Meka Tanner was the worst. She made me sick walking around with her nose in her behind like she was Gum Drop's only. Like all the other girls knew about her, she had to know about all the other girls.

From my window, I could see the disappointment on Meka's face. The same look every time she dropped him home and wasn't invited in. Gum Drop leaned in and whispered to her and she smiled just a little.

I sighed and walked away from the window. How could these girls let themselves be fooled like that? Every single one of them knew Gum Drop was no good. They had to know they weren't the only ones calling him Candy Boy as they gazed dreamily into those hazelnut eyes beneath thick dark cotton eyebrows.

Something plopped on the bed beside me. A Sugar Daddy sucker. I looked up in time to see another sail through the window at me. Gum Drop stood on his stoop glaring at me.

"Boy, what do you think you're doing?"

"I thought I'd give you something to eat while you spied on me. What's a movie without popcorn?"

I put my hand on my hip and rolled my eyes. "There you go again with that big ol' watermelon head of yours. I come to my window every night to get some air and think."

He sat on the railing closest to my window. From there I could see the icing in his eyes. The yellow of the street lights buttered his skin into a deep milk chocolate. He wasn't all that.

He threw up his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. I was just playing."

I sucked my teeth and threw the candy back to him. "Since you just playing, you can have these suckers back. I don't eat candy. My teeth are too sensitive."

Gum Drop laughed. "Now ain't that a twist. A black woman admitting she's weak. Ain't you a find?"

"Weakness and sensitivity are two separate ideas," I said representing my college education. "And weakness is an idea I know nothing about. I would have guessed you would know the difference by now."

"Why's that?"

"From all your experience, you should know the difference in all class of women."

He shrugged and smiled up at me. "I know a classy lady when I see one. Can I help they usually see me first? Don't roll your eyes at me." He was quiet for a while. I was sure he was trying to decide what to say next. He didn't usually have conversations with women whose heads weren't floating twelve feet above her shoulders. I was the first. He just sat there staring off into a starless sky. I knew that there was something smart he wanted to say. I just knew it wasn't going to be about the #1 book on the bestseller list. Probably more about who was #1 on 106 and Park that night. The views of Ms. Morrison or Mr. Wright had no place in his busy agenda. The last book Gum Drop read was more likely *Hansel and Gretel*.

He leaned against the brick and folded his arms. "What do you mean I'm experienced?"

He knew what I was talking about. Gum Drop was always so cocky. He might have thought that I was going to fall into his mindless crowd of admirers and tell him how much of a Mack he was. But for as

long as we'd been neighbors, he couldn't get it through his head that I wasn't one of the other girls. I preferred Equal to sugar.

I leaned out of the window. "If I have to explain that word to you, I'm giving you more credit than you deserve."

Gum Drop stepped to the other side of the railing and jumped down to the sidewalk. He walked over to my stoop where my mother kept her array of potted flowers and aloe vera, and propped a foot up on the step.

"You know something. When I was young, I used to love fairy tales. Oh yeah. I remember listening to Little Red Riding Hood in Ms. Hurley's kindergarten class. Little Red Riding Hood trying to get to grandma's house. It was the stupidest story I'd ever heard. Even as a little kid, who could believe that nonsense?"

I was appalled at his ignorance. "That is a classic story. What do you mean, it's nonsense? The story has lasted through time. What do you know about classic literature?"

Gum Drop shrugged his shoulders. "All I know is that the little red breezie in the story was asking for trouble. Come on, how gullible can you be? How could she believe this big hairy wolf was anything as sweet as he claimed to be? To make it so bad, she called him on everything and yet she stood there giggling." His voice went up an octave, "Grandma, what big eyes you have -tee hee. Grandma what big teeth you have -tee hee hee."

I couldn't help but laugh at his humorous description. There was some truth to it.

He laughed with me, tilted his head up toward my window and threw the candy back to me. It landed on my bed. "I'm just saying Ma, if she could see the wolf was hairy with huge slobbering teeth, why would she waste another minute in there with him? Ain't no way that wolf smelled like cookies and pies like a grandma is supposed to. That's what I mean when I say women are weak. What's being said to y'all is far too important to pay attention to what's happening. I guess you want what you want too badly to trust your own eyes. And most of the time what you see is what you get."

The street light flickered brightly above his head.

"Can't get mad at me."

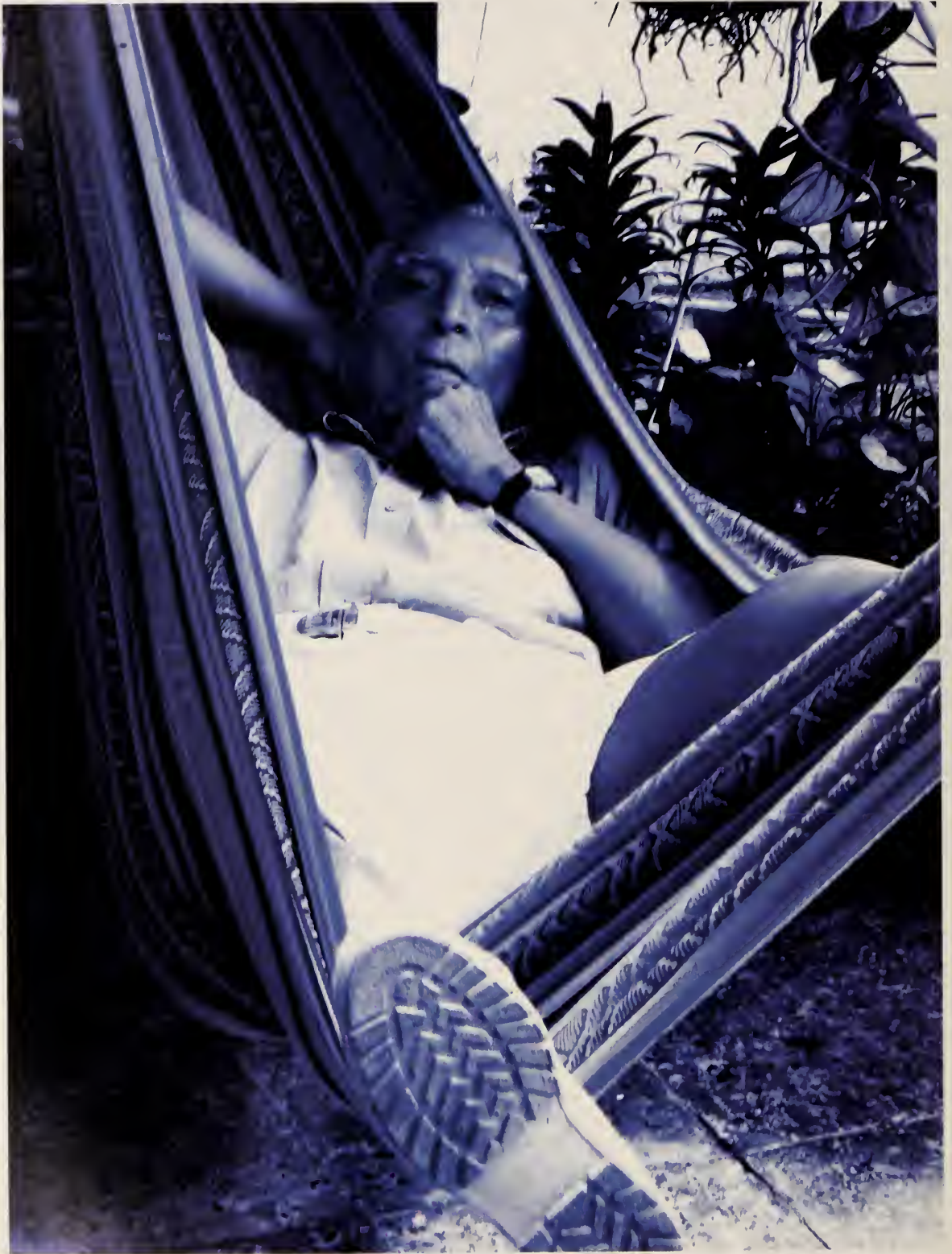
Headlights shined onto our block as a car turned. Gum Drop mumbled a cuss word under his breath. "I told her to go home." Meka's blood red Miata pulled up in front of my stoop. To my surprise and Gum Drop's delight, her outfit had completely morphed into a halter top and the shortest shorts she could cut up in twenty minutes.

Meka wiggled up to him. "Candy Boy," she whimpered when she reached for his arm.

"What's wrong?" He didn't move from his stance on the stoop.

"I went all the way home when I realized I can't get into the house. My sister has my keys and won't be home until tomorrow." She grabbed his hand and tugged. "I need you, Candy Boy."

Gum Drop looked up and smiled his toothy grin. He winked. I watched as they drove off in the Miata. I went to the bed and picked up the Sugar Daddy. I opened it and let it melt on my tongue.



"Pobre Pero Rico," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

Ocean Breathes Salty

by Whitney Hattaway

In a small hut in Sri Lanka, a man is lying on his back on a wooden cot. His skin blends with the darkness of the mahogany wood and he is camouflaged until he opens his eyes. He lies awake for a long time, listening to his family. Quietly, he turns over on his side to get a better view. They do not see him in the hut and he likes it that way.

Outside, his four children are drawing pictures of the ocean in the dirt with a stick. Their collaboration forms a masterpiece of waves and ridges. And next to them is his wife, bent over a basket of laundry. He can see her through the doorway, fishing through the wetness of fabric, pulling each tangled shirt or dress up to the light and shaking the water free. The droplets of water catch the sunlight and illuminate as they fall to the floor and speckle the dirt.

After a while, his arm falls asleep, so he shifts his weight a little. Beneath him, the cot moans and reveals him as a spy. His children abandon their art and come over to his bed where he feigns sleep. His smallest child climbs onto his chest and squeezes his mocha cheeks together. The child's airy laugh fills the hut and he grabs her and begins to tickle her. His wife drops the shirt she was wringing out and watches them. She has always loved his smile; those gaps from the missing teeth and the way his eyes crinkle and light up like crescent moons. The family gathers around their father, all laughing, and the sound drifts out into the village and is carried away by the wind.

. . .

The woman in the second row, window seat, leans her head against the window. For a long time she stares into the emptiness of the clouds, her head vibrating from the velocity of the plane. After a while the dreariness of England begins to fall away, transforming from a dull gray to a warm, exotic paradise. Below the islands float atop the mermaid blue water like weightless stones. Tiny vessels dot the surface like ink droplets. The clouds begin to thin, revealing her destination below. The tear drop of India, Sri Lanka.

The captain comes over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing shortly. Please return all seats and trays to the upright position and fasten your seatbelts. We hope you enjoyed your flight with us. Thank you for flying British Airways and welcome to Sri Lanka." Nervously, the woman drums her fingers on the armrest and sighs. Landing is the worst part, but any minute now, she thinks, we'll be in paradise.

. . .

Raj Shu kisses each child's forehead before he leaves for the day. Then, he kisses his wife and whispers into the shell of her ear that he loves her. When he does this, his hands rove up the side of her body feeling her bones against the softness of her dress and the warmth of her face brushing his.

After he does this, he begins travelling down the worn path through the village and down to the ocean. When he gets to the corner of his street, he turns and waves to his family who are standing at the door of the hut, waving back. Here, he pauses one last time. But things look different today. His wife looks more beautiful. His eldest boy, more strong. And the smallest one, he notices, has his smile. In realizing that, Raj decides he will pay more attention next time. And with a sigh, Raj drops his hand and continues down the road.

. . .

The glass doors of the airport slide open and Emily emerges, pushing her sunglasses over her eyes and pulling her curly, chestnut hair into a ponytail. The heat wafts against her face and she recoils for a moment not used to the humidity. Following the locals, through a trail of palm trees she finally sees the village by the sea. Emily smiles and takes a deep breath, tasting the salty ocean air and smelling the fish from one of the fish market stands. All around her the locals were going about their everyday trials, buying food for their families, riding they're bike to work. As they speak, they gesture wildly with their hands and their dark eyes flash in the sunlight. The scenery looks so wonderfully earthy, as if the people sprang forth from

the dark roads of the earth themselves.

Coming around another bend in the road, she finds her hotel. Standing alone next to a group of little bungalows, it looks like a massive, white fortress. It looks out of place. The woman behind the desk asks her her name and gives her a key. Her room is on the fourth floor and when she pushes open the door, she notices that she can see many miles out to sea.

It's perfect, she thinks. Absolutely, perfect.

. . .

Raj has an attraction to the sea. He was born on the beach, in fact. One summer day, his father and mother were having a picnic down by the water when his mother went into labor. A crowd stood around to watch, but Raj's father was alone in delivering him. His father and mother didn't notice that the water kept creeping closer and closer, even though it wasn't high tide, as if the foamy fingers of the sea wanted to steal Raj away and keep him for themselves. The townspeople realized it though and after Raj slipped out of his mother, one of the wise men of the village claimed that Raj had controlled the sea. Confused, his parents turned to the water. As the man had said, the water level was inches from where their bodies lay and was washing away all the blood.

So, everytime Raj had a birthday, his father would tell him the story of the sea and they would go down to the ocean for a picnic just like that day. Raj never believed it, however. But today was different. His parents have long been dead and today is his birthday and he wants to spend it next to the ocean.

. . .

Emily looks over the balcony of her hotel room. The people below look like washed up fish, frying in the noon day sun. She pulls on her black bikini and a pair of khaki shorts. Grabbing her knapsack, she closes her door and locks it.

Instead of taking the elevator, she takes the stairs. Winding her way down as fast as she can, excited to get to the beach. She walks for a while, feeling the grainy sand stick to her toes, sometimes getting close to the water and sometimes walking along in the shade of the palm trees. She finally stops at the north in the beach where most of the locals gather. There, she spreads her beach towel out and it fans around her.

Emily watches the locals who have gathered. To her right, a family of six is having a lunch. They talk rapidly in a language she doesn't understand. Someone has a radio on, playing Western rock n' roll. And to her right, a fragile looking man emerges from one of the waves. She watches him walk, swinging his arms like pendulums. He wrings out his clothes, leaving a trail of water behind him in the sand.

He must sense her watching because he stops to look at her. She waves awkwardly. He smiles. Some of his teeth are missing. He resembles a gap toothed Jack-o-lantern she thinks.

He comes towards her.

. . .

It took Raj an hour to reach the ocean. Halfway through the village he decides to stop at the fish stand. The man behind the rickety, wooden stand wrapped his fish in wax paper and they talked about they're families for a while.

Raj always knows when he is close to the beach because the dirt road begins to thin and through the palm trees you can see the blue of the water. After he jumps over a silvery piece of driftwood, he takes off in a run down to the water. Like a child seeing the ocean for the first time, he throws down his knapsack and jumps into the sea.

Under the water, he opens his eyes. Tiny fish dart in and out of his view as he paddles along. He turns onto his back and floats to the surface. Past all the tidal waves now he is free from the chaos of the beach. He becomes a piece of driftwood, letting the current carry him. After several minutes, Raj cuts into a wave and is thrown back onto shore.

He laughs and lays on the sand for a moment looking up at the sky. From where he is laying he feels the earth move. Raj feels like a tiny grain of sand in the ocean of the universe.

Laying upside down, he can see a woman walking by. She radiates with her pearly skin and dark, brown hair. Raj turns over like he did that morning in his cot. Trying to get a better look, without revealing himself. From her knapsack she pulls a bright, red towel and flings it towards the sky. Raj gets up and begins to walk away, but she is watching him.

Grinning he walks over to her.

Emily didn't notice that she was sitting next to an abandoned knapsack. Not until this man sat next to her and scooped it up into his narrow, bird-like hands. They do not speak the same language, but communicate in gestures and darting eyes. He points to her skin and smiles.

"My skin, yes, very pale," she says. "Your skin is so beautiful, like the color of wood."

They go on like this for several minutes, not knowing that they are both complementing the other. From his bag, he pulls out a small parcel wrapped in wax paper. Inside is some kind of meat, neatly chopped into little, red slivers. The man holds the crinkling package in his open palms and offers it to Emily. She nods and takes a piece of the meat.

The man is always smiling, she thinks. He will probably die smiling, too.

Together on the beach, Emily eats with this stranger. She has no idea where he came from, appearing to be born from the sea itself, not knowing his name or why he's sitting with her, but she eats with him, like she's known him all of her life.

While he is eating, Raj watches the woman's jawbone, the gentle curve of her chin moving up and down. He likes the crystal color of her eyes and the softness of her pale lips. He tells her this in his language, although he knows she will not understand.

When they finish eating the fish, Raj crumples up the wax paper. When he looks up again, the woman is pointing to the sea. The water has disappeared. The abandoned fish lay flopping, their gills trying to collect as much air as they can, opening and closing again and again. All of the tourists have run out to the now dry land, taking pictures of the transformed landscape.

And the woman, reaches out to touch his arm with her cold hands and tells him something that he cannot possibly comprehend, her forehead filled with creases of concern. And then she is gone.

Raj does not move from this spot or go down to the dried up land. Instead he stays seated on the woman's red towel, feeling the earth move again.

Emily had a feeling it was coming. The receding water. The earth shaking. Something massive was coming. She told him to run, to get off the beach as fast as possible, but he only looked at her. As she ran from the beach she shouted at all the people, to anyone who would listen, to get to higher ground. Some followed her. Some simply stared.

As she wound up the stairwell for the second time that morning, she realized she had left everything on the beach. That didn't matter now. She had to get to her video camera.

Every bone in her body shook uncontrollably as she forced the key in the lock and scrambled to get the camera. "Calm down" became her mantra. "Calm down. Calm down," she told herself. Some people came out of their room, they must have heard her shouting. She points the camera out to the sea.

And there it was.

It was as if Poseidon himself had saddled his frothing sea horses and they were coming, waging a war on the people of Sri Lanka.

Or was this the apocalypse?

Was the world going to end today?

Emily prepared herself, there on the fourth floor of the hotel.

There on the horizon, the ocean was building a wall. Raj stands on the bright, red towel and shields his eyes from the sun. He has no idea what is coming. Maybe it was just a small wave, maybe he was dreaming. The woman wasn't real. This day wasn't real. He was asleep in his small hut, next to his wife.

All around him the people were screaming. Fleeing in terror, but all were gone by the time the wave actually hit. Except Raj.

Bracing himself against whatever lay ahead, Raj was to be the first casualty.

. . .

Emily trained her video on the only person left on the beach. He was a speck on her screen and unable to see his face, she didn't know that this was the man she had previously sat with. While everyone else fled, this man remained, walking further out to sea.

. . .

Minutes, then seconds before his death, Raj Shu thought of his family. Of kissing his children's foreheads, of his wife kissing him, their tiny hut, his parents by the ocean, the taste of the fish on his tongue, and the sound of the palm trees scraping together in the wind. All of the things he would never know again.

And Raj laughed.

Thirty seconds before.

He threw up his hands and screamed into the sky.

And it seemed only fitting that the ocean that he controlled when he was born was now swallowing him up and taking him back. And the last thing he saw was the white foam of the sea.

. . .

Two weeks later, they found Raj's body tangled up with a piece of driftwood under a dock. Some of the villagers pulled his body from the water and laid him on the cool wood of the dock. He was still smiling.

When the doctor performing his autopsy pulled off his seeping shoes, they found a picture in one of the soles. A picture of a middle-aged woman and four children.

. . .

Emily went down to the sea after three days. Her things were gone, having been washed away into the sea. But she wasn't here for her things. Instead, she pulled a video camera out of her bag and threw it into the sea.



"Tree," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

Safety Scissors

by Karen White

"Julie, there is something wrong with your child."

Julie had been on her feet all day making glasses in a small optical company. Upon walking through the door, she was hit by a peculiar scene. Her six-year-old daughter who she had named after her favorite Grandmother, Martha, sat on the hardwood stairs, peering from around where the wall joined the black, hard iron railing of stairs. Her mother, Lynn, stared at her, waiting for some sort of an answer to the statement about her daughter's odd appearance. Her father, Jerry, rattled his newspaper in the other room, and ignored the happenings of the women. Julie heard her stomach growl. It is 8 p.m. Her daughter should have been in bed at least an hour ago. Instead, her daughter's eyes were wide open, too wide, naked in fact.

"Mom, Martha seems to have cut her eyelashes off. And her eyebrows. And what looks like a significant chunk of hair from the back of her head," Julie sighed, "again."

Lynn's mouth puckered into its usual tight scowl. She darted her tongue out to the corner of her mouth, tasting the air like a snake. She whipped her head around to peer at the girl on the stairs, the girl with the naked eyes.

"Go to your room. Now. Get your scissors. Now. Bring them to me. Now." Lynn's tone dripped with glee over the soon to be delivered punishment. Lynn liked punishment. Lynn liked chaos. Lynn liked ruling her roost.

Julie looked at her mother, knowing what would probably happen. First, Lynn would grab the scissors, Martha's favorite toy, and break them in front of her daughter's bare face. Then, Lynn would grab the wooden spoon kept lovingly next to the stove for just such occasions. Julie knew and hated this spoon. The spoon had outlived Presidents. The spoon was God's wrath.

Martha shook her head, negating the order. Martha knew Lynn. She knew about spoons. She did not, however, know that Lynn was God.

Martha turned from sitting to leaning on all fours, then climb-crawled up the stairs with her little butt waving in the air. Julie smiled a bit at the action, seeing it for its cuteness. She sighed again.

"Mom, weren't you watching her?"

"Well, considering that you haven't paid me my baby-sitting fee this week, no, I wasn't. She came home, didn't even talk to me, and went straight to her room, where she has been all day, quiet as a church mouse at Easter. In my day, adults only check on kids when they make a ruckus. Apparently, you know different about raising kids. You've been doing a bang-up job so far." Lynn glowered at Julie, hurling a much-overused statement about parenting.

"Mom, I'm doing my best. I'm sorry I haven't paid you, but business has been slow and tips have been drying up at my other job." Julie could almost hear Lynn calculating the lack of beer money in her head instead of considering the well being of her own granddaughter.

Jerry got up from his recliner and came into the hall, clearing his throat to announce his presence. Stone-faced, he looked over at his wife, gauging her emotional barometer, and then he glanced at his daughter, plainly seeing the exhaustion on her face. He stood for a moment, taking in the scene as if it was a much loved and much seen play, breathing in the tension and digesting it slowly. He wanted to stand up for Julie, but he too feared the wrath of his wife. The only solution he had for her drinking was not to give her the money or any hope for money to buy the beer. Otherwise, he stayed out of it because staying out of it was just easier.

"Julie, don't worry about the money for room and board this week. Just make up for it next week," Jerry muttered, glancing sideways at his wife for permission.

"Oh, ho, okay, now we can turn down money in this house. Have you noticed the price of food lately, dear? You don't do the shopping or the cleaning. I do it. You don't see that six-year-old garbage disposal with a penchant for trimming everything in sight as she eats us out of house and home. You don't have to bathe her or put up with her constant silence. All you have to do is go to work, come home to a pleasantly prepared meal, and sit down to your little nightly rituals. I need the money to keep this well-oiled machine going."

Lynn worked herself into a self-imposed tizzy, eyes blazing, spittle drying on the corners of her mouth like the remnants of poison at the bottom of an arsenic suspension. Julie had seen this all before, as had Jerry. Julie responded by going to the kitchen for a hasty meal of condensed cream of eat shit and die soup. Jerry went to the den to begin his Thursday night ritual: network sitcoms until ten, then whatever cop show came on, then the news, then the bathroom, then bed, then sweet, succulent, escapist sleep.

Lynn stood for a moment, chest heaving, nostrils flaring with the stress of breathing, deciding which offending family member deserved her fury first. She looked toward the warm light spilling from the kitchen, hearing her traitor daughter heating up her cheap can of soup, eschewing the guilt ridden leftovers from that night's meal. Then she switched her view to the stark, flickering light from the den, evidence that her weak-minded husband was trying yet again to thwart her with the bland falseness of television. Then she raised her eyes heavenward, as if to query God for advice on the situation or to contemplate just how hard she was going to beat the reticent child located in that direction. She chose the kitchen; vocal guilt trips always warmed her up for physical altercations.

Upstairs, Martha meticulously packed her little purple overnight bag with the picture of Rainbow Brite on the side. First, she carefully rolled up her favorite nightgown, the one with the cartoon duck with an umbrella. The nightgown was once red, but through over-washing, had faded to a dull pinkish, reddish see-through softness. The little duck had started to crack, but Martha loved it just the same.

Next, she rolled up a pair of jeans and her favorite T-shirt, also once red, but now held together by mere threads. She added a pair of socks, two pairs of white underwear with pink flowers, and her pink princess comb and toothbrush set. Finally, she topped her run away from home sundae with a glaringly white washcloth and a small notepad with attached pencil. She walked over to her closet and began the decision-making process surrounding her shoes. She could grab the comfy white sneakers her mom had bought her a month before, or she could go for the supremely uncomfortable brown and cream saddle shoes her grandmother had bought the day before. Surprisingly, she became confused because she thought that maybe breaking in the new shoes might be a good idea, and running away seemed to be a chance to break them in. However, the sneakers were more practical in the case she had to sleep outside or literally run away from anyone. She grabbed the sneakers with a content smile on her face.

Her final missing piece to her much thought out plan for vacating the house was the pair of red safety scissors on her bedside table. She picked them up as delicately as a mother cat grasps her kitten with her teeth. There was a sense of danger when Martha held them, but the danger was overshadowed by pure love. Martha thought about her scissors. She had silently cut things to tatters everyday since she got them when she was four. First, she innocently started with paper dolls and magazines. However, soon after, she attacked household items with a stealthy battle plan that would make any general weep with joy.

The first casualty was a maroon jumper her grandmother had pieced together out of hand-me-down fabric. Martha hated that patchwork dress with the same fervor that she loved her scissors. She was careful to cut only the threads holding the patches together. Snip, one patch fell to the floor. Snip, snip, there goes a big, ugly gold button, how sad.

The only thing Martha destroyed that was a source of regret for her was her mother's hand crocheted afghan. Julie had made it while pregnant with Martha, amidst the constant berating from Lynn about how Julie deserved every pain and drop of sweat caused by the pregnancy. Martha knew this story well enough; at least once a week Lynn would drunkenly remind Martha that she was unplanned and ill gotten. Yes, mother was eighteen when she'd had her, but Martha knew Julie had already finished high school by that point. Yes, the father was unknown to anyone save her mother, and, every Christmas, Lynn demanded that Julie admit to who had knocked her up. Julie never told, which was the only battle she ever won against her tyrant mother. Julie seemed fine with the whole Immaculate Conception idea, so Martha never asked, plus Martha never would deny her mother the one win against grandma. That would be worse than cutting the afghan.

When Julie found the shredded afghan, she cried silently, but held onto her daughter. Martha also cried silently, and tried to apologize with a hug and a snuffle. Julie stroked her daughter's fine, brown hair and simply said, "I'm sorry. I know you didn't mean it. I can make another."

Martha stopped thinking about the afghan, feeling the hot prickles of tears at the corners of her eyes. Instead of succumbing to them, she put the tears back and stashed her scissors in the right pocket of her jeans. She locked her bedroom door as a measure to stall for time. She checked the time, only 8:30, then climbed out the window to the tree by the roof over the porch. She shimmied down the tree, walked to the sidewalk, looked both ways four times, then crossed the street and started walking at an even pace to the left, in the direction of her friend Sue.

Martha had only been to Sue's house once, for a birthday party the year before. Lynn did not like Sue because, as she claimed, Sue's whole family smelled of fish heads and rice. Sue was Vietnamese, a fact that didn't really enter into Martha's estimation, though it did figure into Lynn's decision to keep the girls away from each other, except for at school, a domain where Lynn was not allowed by law. Martha loved school.

Even though Martha had only visited once, she knew the path well, having gone over it again and

again in her mind. Sue lived in a one-story brick house, perfect for sneaking in, as Martha's climbing abilities fell far short of her talent for descending a tree. She knew Sue would let her in because Sue was her best friend. Not her only friend, Martha had tons of superficial friends, but Sue was the best because she never questioned Martha's need to be silent. Sue knew the reason and was quite the chatterbox, so she liked Martha's quiet ways, enjoying the ability to talk unchecked.

Martha walked up to her friend's bedroom window and tapped on the glass. A small light came on, and the window opened out as Sue cranked the handle with all her might. She saw Martha and smiled.

"I just knew you'd come tonight. I told Mom that something big was going to happen tonight. Do you want some food? Come to the front door; mom knew you'd be here; she saw your grandma at the store today. She won't tell anyone."

Martha smiled brightly and ran to the front door. By the time she'd arrived, Sue's mother had begun opening the door. Martha breathed in the house smell fragrant like a summer breeze at the beach, redolent with the salty-greasy smell of fried fish and the smooth-milky smell of coconut. Sue's mother smiled at her and motioned for Martha to come in.

In the living room, the sofa was made up with a sheet and a blanket, like a little bed. Next to the sofa was a small bowl of soup with mysterious noodles and vegetables in a base of coconut milk. Next to that was a small plate with two pieces of fried fish wrapped in a grease catching paper towel. To complete the girl-sized meal was a small mug containing more milk than tea and lots of sugar, which was, in Martha's estimation, perfect little girl nectar. Martha plopped on the sofa, smiled a toothy, excited grin of thanks at Sue's mother, and dug into the feast.

Sue's mother smiled maternally at Martha, taking in her bald eyes and the missing chunk of hair, both of which made her chuckle, knowingly. Sue's mother avidly loved this little girl she saw so rarely, a girl who Sue talked about incessantly after school, a girl who never spoke, but managed to get along just fine with a closed mouth. She stroked Martha's hair, delicately, kissed her forehead, dimmed the light, and left Martha to finish her meal and go to sleep. On her way to the bedroom, she checked on Sue, who had obediently gone straight back to sleep with a satisfied smile on her face. Sue's mother went in, fixed her daughter's covers, kissed her forehead, and finished her journey to her bedroom.

In the bedroom, Sue's mother looked at the phone with a wrinkled brow. She remembered Lynn from the birthday party, a drunken woman who cared about no one except for herself. She had met Julie briefly at an open house the school hosted. Julie and she had gotten along pleasantly, attempting to set up play dates for their children. However, Lynn put a stop to that. Sue's mother reached for the phone book to find Martha's home number. She found it, but hesitated with her hand wavering over the handset. "What's one night?" she thought, "She can sleep here and go home tomorrow."

Sue's mother heard a noise at the door. Sue was standing in the doorway.

"Are you gonna call the cops, Mom?"

Sue's mother shook her head. "No, honey. I think that would cause too much trouble for Martha. I'm just going to call her family so they won't worry."

Sue picked up the handset and dialed. The phone rang, but no one answered. Sue watched, wide-eyed, hoping that Martha could move in with them forever. Her mother hung up the phone, then told her daughter to go to bed.

In the cozy living room, Martha finished her food, drank the last drop of the tea, then unpacked her little bag. She removed her washcloth, comb and toothbrush set, and nightgown. She toddled to the bathroom and readied for bed by brushing her teeth and washing her face, then combing her choppy, short hair into some semblance of smoothness. Then she put on her safety nightgown and went to bed.

As Martha was brushing her teeth in Sue's bathroom, her mother spoke to her closed door at Grandma's. Julie knocked softly, not really expecting any vocal recognition of the entreaty for entrance, but hoping for at least an invitation through a knob turned by small fingers. In the distance, she heard the phone ringing. She didn't get it.

"Honey, I have to go to work. I know you're upset, so is your grandmother, trust me," Julie muttered. "I promise I'll make it better, but you have to try to get along with her until we can leave. I'm trying to save money, but I have to pay her to live here, and she keeps going up on the rent. Can you believe she said I could pay next week, but that I have to pay an extra hundred a month?" Julie said, more to herself than to her absent daughter. "Well, we'll figure something out. Just get some sleep and have fun at school tomorrow. I'll probably be at work before you get up. Try to eat your breakfast; it'll make her happy," Julie finished, voice thick with tears.

Julie backed away from the door, dressed in her humiliating cocktail waitress uniform of a short black skirt, a tight, white button-up shirt, and black pantyhose with the required line up the back of the legs, really

just arrows to her ass. To add further insult to further injury, three-inch vinyl stiletto heels finished the outfit. Her back ached with defeat and the weight of three jobs requiring her to be on her feet every minute. She realized she hadn't actually seen her daughter in two days, except for the drama on the stairs, because of their schedules. She wiped away a tear, her head aching with the knowledge that her daughter was growing up too fast, much like she had to do when she was young.

Downstairs, Jerry sighed. His wife and her vitriol were still at it, a dull drone of hate as a backdrop to the fluffy, lighthearted comedy playing out on the television. Jerry efficiently managed a security office during the day, a place of refuge in the storm of his wife. He remembered the Lynn he married, full of life and smiles, only a social drinker, and always bedecked in a fun wig to top off a wild outfit. Those were the good old days, the sixties. Then she had Julie. At first she loved the child; Julie never really gave them much trouble. Lynn baked her daughter cookies everyday, ironed her sheets, doted on her every move. All the while, Lynn took shots from a not-so-hidden bottle of vodka. Jerry saw the signs; he'd grown up in a small town in Oklahoma. He'd seen women broken by drinking, women who had nothing to live for, displaced women. Lynn was not displaced; she was a bomb waiting to go off. But, Jerry was no bomb specialist; he was just a man who wanted to get through each day.

Lynn glared at her husband, leering with the knowledge that she'd browbeaten him into apathy once again. She stood, then turned to her sewing bag, her hiding place, her altar. She snatched it up and pranced to the kitchen, her harmonious church dedicated to petty tortures. The kitchen was the scene for most of her victories. It housed her wooden spoon, but it also contained a garbage disposal (perfect for paper dolls), a microwave oven (splendid method to melt crayons), and a set of three barstools (made for the express purpose of interrogation).

Lynn lovingly placed the sewing bag beside the refrigerator, then walked over to the utensil caddy and picked up a wooden spoon. She tapped it against the cast iron skillet above her stove, sniffing in the bleach from her sink, listening to the light bonging her tapping was making. She walked to the sink and played the copper molds like drums, ignoring the scrapes they left in the bubble gum pink paint every time they moved when she hit them. She ran the spoon across the counter, and then scraped it against the iron trivets she had on the counter, waiting for hot dishes to rest on them. Lynn smiled; her mother gave her those trivets when she got married. She moved to the refrigerator and opened it. She ran the spoon across the grate of the shelves, then looked for her beer. She was out.

She closed the fridge and looked beside it at her sewing bag. The bag was tapestry, matching the pink walls in the kitchen. She opened the wooden dowels that held it closed and took out a pint of vodka, cheap vodka, rotgut swill. She tapped the spoon against the bottle, took a gulp, then tapped again, listening to the difference in tone when the contents diminished. She thought about watching people who play the glasses, filling each glass to different levels, then running their fingers over the rims. She loved the sound it made, deeper with more liquid, higher with less. She drank more vodka, then sat on her barstool. She tapped the bottle again. This time the tune was different, very high, unlike the level of vodka left in the bottle.

Another sound, shrill, interrupted her dance. Lynn swiveled to look at the blaring phone, perching her lips in thought. She slithered over to the wall phone and lightly tapped the phone off the handset, listening for the slight ping when she then tapped the connection to silence the phone. She grinned, hoping the call had been for Julie, maybe a call telling her daughter that she'd won a million dollars.

Lynn finished her drink. She had punishment to dole out; she needed nourishment. And, she'd earned it. She'd won against a spoiled daughter and spineless husband. All that was left was the reticent brat upstairs. No need to hurry, she sank down onto one of the barstools, put her head on the counter atop her nested arms, and fell asleep, dreaming about spoons and her father.

The next morning, Martha woke up and undid her bedtime ritual. She smelled something sweet frying as she pulled on her jeans in the bathroom. After she rewashed her face, rebrushed her teeth, and recombed her hair, she headed for Sue's kitchen. This kitchen was cozy with a little table set colorfully with orange placemats and a bouquet of daisies. Sue was already at the table digging into a plate of deep fried bananas when Martha walked in.

"Did you sleep okay? I did. I slept forever. I wish you could have slept in my room, but mom thought you'd want to be alone. Did you want to be alone? We get to go to school together on the bus today; won't that be fun?"

As Sue gushed at her, Martha started eating her breakfast. Lynn usually forced Martha into fried eggs, which Martha would forever hate. Sue's mother had deep fried bananas, something that seemed so exotic to Martha, yet comforting. The batter was slightly sweet and had a crispy puffiness. The bananas were warm and creamy, almost buttery. They tasted like love, like when Martha's mom made her favorite soup, French onion with extra cheese and a perfectly toasted round of bread floating over salty heaven.

Sue's mother walked past the girls, noticing Martha raise her eyebrows in thanks for the breakfast. She nodded at the girl, and then continued her path to the bedroom. Once there, she tried calling Martha's family again, but only heard the denial of the busy signal. She wanted to talk to Julie, but could not remember where Julie worked. She went back to the kitchen and asked Martha, who only shrugged her shoulders after encircling her eyes with tiny fingers. Sue's mother chuckled – Julie worked with eyeglasses, but Martha didn't know the name of the company.

After breakfast, the girls got onto the bus and went to school, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. At the moment after they'd sat down together and Sue had opened her mouth to begin a barrage of cheerful sisterly chatter, Lynn woke up. She groggily shook her head to clear the remnants of the vodka dance from the previous night, at least before the tooth-jarring headache set in. It wasn't too late; she could still take her ire out on the child before school, although she'd planned on reserving some punishment for after school, during dinner, after dinner, and before bed.

Lynn stepped jauntily up the stairs, whistling "Can't Buy Me Love." She strode up to Martha's closed door and stopped, confused. Usually the child was up before anyone else, probably to wreak havoc on Lynn's orderly house before anyone could stop her. But, the door remained closed, a fact that infuriated Lynn.

"That child has no right. No right to close the door. In my face. Like she owns the place."

Lynn began beating on the closed door. "Open up! Now! Get your no talking ass out here! It is most definitely time to meet ... your ... Maker!" Lynn bellowed with effort, tired from the alcohol floating in her cells and the exertion necessary to scare the crap out of a small child.

Yet, there was no answering movement, no whimper of fright, nothing. Droplets of sweat ran down the door, catching on the knob, as Lynn suctioned her ear against it in an attempt to hear anything. She quickly stood up and gripped the doorknob, which didn't budge. Instead, her hand slipped around the cold, oily metal coated in her sweat. Lynn remembered the crowbar she kept in her bedroom in case burglars broke into the house. She ran to the room, grabbed the bar, then ran back to pry the door from the frame.



"Playa del Coco," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

Once the door was open, Lynn took stock of the room. Item A: No child. Item B: Open window (inviting burglars). Item C: No overnight bag. Lynn turned and stalked downstairs to the telephone.

"Julie, Martha is missing."

Julie's heart dropped. She'd gone to bed for the few hours between jobs dreading having to make so much up to her child, but this brought spiky tears to her eyes.

"Mom, what do you mean missing? Where is she? She's six for Christ's sakes!" Julie whisper screamed.

"All I know is that your daughter packed a bag and left from the upstairs window. A pedophile probably picked her up and has chopped her to bits. Ironical, really, if you think about it."

Julie slammed the phone down on the trollish glee emitting from the receiver. She called her father's office.

"Hello, Sizemore Security, Jerry speaking."

Her father's business tone calmed Julie. "Dad, Martha's missing."

Jerry sighed. "Where do you think she is?"

Julie sat down on the lab stool by the phone. "Well, I hope she's at school, but if I call them and they find out she ran away, they might take her away. I know Dr. Bartley won't let me leave, and mom is in no shape to look for her."

Jerry thought for a moment. "Call her friend's house. That one down the street that Lynn hates so much, the Vietnamese one. Martha is a smart girl; I bet she went there."

Julie started to cry. "Dad, I don't know her last name. How can I call there?"

Jerry cleared his throat. Julie cringed at the tone in his voice, no longer business like, now suppressing sadness. "Julie, I've never really stuck my nose into how you raise your child. I know your mother is not the best role model. But, I know Martha will be fine. Remember when I took her in the woods to teach her how to camp? She picked it up like she was a little squirrel." Jerry sighed. "Besides, she sneaks over to Sue's house most everyday after dinner, just to get away from Lynn. Her mother's name is Thu Ngyen. She's a very nice woman; you met her at that open house."

Julie's hope woke. "Dad, I'm scared to death. I'll call Thu. Thanks." She hung up, sharply enough to make the phone jingle in the cradle. She swiped at the tears on her face, determined to control her emotions. "This isn't the time," Julie thought, then picked up the phone to call Information for Thu's number.

Meanwhile, the day passed with very little to mention. Jerry dispatched security guards and chewed many Tums. Lynn drank and baked a celebratory chocolate cake for herself, in honor of the brat being eaten by wolves in the wilderness. Julie spent most of her day chewing her bottom lip, trying not to cry as her boss said no to her request to leave work early. Pride kept her from telling him why. She'd finally reached Thu after lunch. Thu told her that Martha was fine and that she had tried calling optical companies all day looking for Julie. "I didn't want you to worry, Julie." Julie finally allowed her tears to fall and told Thu about her mother, the drinking, everything. Thu had only one question for her.

"Will you come tomorrow for dinner?"

"Yes, I have the day off." Julie's tone brightened. She needed a friend in the worst way, anything to get out of Grandma's house.

Martha had a great day. Ms. Manner gave her a new book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, to read, even though it was for bigger boys and girls. During recess, Martha scrutinized the playground, looking for shelter. The thought of staying another night at Sue's made her tummy drop because she knew they'd find her there. She decided on the mound-shaped jungle gym on soft grass. She looked at the sky, playing amateur meteorologist, checking out the cloud patterns for any hint of rain, like her grandpa had taught her. She saw none.

After school ended, as all the kids ran to the line of yellow buses, Martha hid out in the cloakroom of her classroom. She heard Ms. Manner talking to another teacher. Her voice sounded like bells.

"I don't know what to do. She won't speak at all, and the speech-language pathologist is already overloaded as it is. Her mother seems nice, but very tired. She'd very good at communicating through mime, and her mother hinted that stuttering is the underlying problem. I think there is more."

Martha knew she had to change schools. The act of opening her mouth caused her heart to race and sparkles to form in front of her eyes. She couldn't do it. She didn't need to do it.

After a while, Ms. Manner left. Martha sneaked out of the cloakroom, past the janitor's closet, and out the double doors to the playground. She made a beeline in the softening dusk to the monkey bars, like she was rushing for home base in a game of tag. The parking lot was empty. She had thought about just staying inside, but she was worried that late at night, they'd lock her in for the weekend. She had no food or water in there, but she could find something outside, even if she had to find her way back to Sue's.

Martha sat under the peeling, red and gray metal bars, Indian style. She pulled her overnight bag to

her side, clutching it. It felt hard and lumpy, unlike her rolled clothing usually felt in the bag. She opened it up and saw a brown paper bag and a note.

"Little one, here is some food. You can come here anytime, but we understand why you couldn't tonight. We love you. Thu."

"So that's Sue's mom's name," Martha thought. She opened the bag and saw a small bowl of what turned out to be rice and lemony beef, along with two small thermoses. One held more of the broth from the night before; the other held now warm milky tea. Martha ate heartily, tears running down her face. Then she wiped her face off with her washcloth, using the tears as a cleanser. Then she dry-brushed her teeth and went to sleep, using her bag as a pillow. In her midget hand she loosely clasped her scissors like the arm of a teddy bear.

Martha woke up to something banging against her little open-air hut. A squirrel had come out for the night to open a nut above her head. Martha watched it for a while, then looked at her red watch: 2:25 a.m.

"This squirrel should be in bed. I should be in bed," she thought drowsily. Martha considered her grandmother's all encompassing anger.

"Mom calls her God all the time." Martha's thoughts quickly became confusing. She saw the squirrel and thought of her grandfather taking her to the woods to teach her what she could and could not eat in a forest. She looked at the monkey bars and thought of how she climbed the stairs, crawling, because that way she could get to her room quicker to get away from grandma.

She thought about the first time that Grandma had scared her. Martha remembered that her Great-Grandfather was a mean man to her mom, yelling at her when she didn't bring him his drinks. Martha and her mom had lived there when she was little because Grandma was helping take care of him. She was four when he died; a lot of people came to the funeral, but no one cried, except for Martha. She cried because he used to give her candy from the counter at his store in Vermont. She was afraid that she'd never get to come back to Vermont since he died, but then she thought about Great-Grandma Martha still lived in her small house with the garden and knew she would be able to come back a lot.

Grandma was sick at the funeral. She kept trying to walk up to the casket, where Great-Grandpa was, and she kept trying to kick it. She yelled a lot. She kept drinking something from a glass bottle, and Grandpa tried to take it away from her, so she hit him in the head with it. Finally, Great-Grandma Martha walked up and took Grandma out of the room. Baby Martha followed them out to the hall.

In the hall, she saw her Grandma crying. "I can't do this. I'm glad he's dead, Ma. I wish he'd died before I was born."

Great-Grandma Martha, usually sweet and rosy-cheeked, turned pale. "That's an awful thing to say at your own father's funeral. I raised you better. And I raised you better than to be a drunk. Go to that place we took you to after you had Julie. Get cleaned up. You are ruining your family, again."

Baby Martha walked back into the big room with the flowers and the casket. She shuffled to her mother's side, then kissed her on the cheek. Julie looked over at Martha, smoothed her hair, and hugged her. "It'll be okay, honey. Grandma will get better now that he's gone. He was really mean to her."

Grandma had been okay, at least for a little while after that. Then Martha had to lock her out of the house because Grandma kept yelling and hit her with a spoon. Martha waited until Lynn went to get the mail, then locked the door. She couldn't reach the phone to call Grandpa, like Ms. Manner taught her to do if she was scared, call someone to help. After Grandpa came home, Grandma hugged her and cried a lot and said stuff about needing to rest. Martha cried too, scared that Grandpa would be mad. He wasn't, but he buy her a little step stool to reach the phone.

She looked at the stars and remembered her mother cooking a steak for her birthday, special, while she ate stupid noodle soup. She missed her mom. She lifted her chin, looking eerily like a miniature version of her mother, and thought, "I can handle Grandma. Grandpa and mom will help me." She picked up her bag and started walking home.

The school was not far from home. She really didn't need to take a bus in the morning; she mostly did that to see the other kids. She knew the way and tried to whistle like her mom would when she washed her hair in the morning before work. She couldn't quite get it; she was missing a couple of teeth, but she did get a feeble spray of spittle and notes.

While Martha walked home, Jerry sat in his armchair, in a fog. He'd taken Lynn to Tidewater, Virginia's answer to problems that just won't go away. He'd deliberated about it at work, until a dim memory cleared in him mind. He remembered the last time he'd sent Lynn away so he could think. It had been six months before, when Martha locked Lynn out of the house.

In his mind, Jerry walked up to the front door of his house, only to find a very drunk Lynn beating on the door. He tapped her on the shoulder, and she sharply turned to face him.

"She locked me out. Why would she lock me out?"

Jerry worked up some courage when he heard Lynn's tone of confusing rather than anger. "Well, Lynn, she's scared. Last week in school they talked about safety in the home. What did you do?"

Lynn sat on the stoop. "I was making dinner, and she came into the kitchen. When I saw her, I told her to go clean the table for dinner. After that, all I remember is being out here."

Jerry sat next to his wife. She leaned her head against his shoulder, crying. "I can't do it anymore, Jerry. I don't even know what I need anymore. I don't mean to yell at her, but she never says anything back, and then that just makes me madder."

Jerry smoothed his wife's hair. He stood up and pulled her up with him. "Lynn, let's find someone to help. Maybe you need a vacation again."

Lynn just nodded. Jerry unlocked the door; they walked into the house to find the table cleaned for dinner, all of the pot handles turned inward on the stove (to prevent spilling, Martha really took the safety talk seriously), and Martha asleep on the sofa. Jerry called Julie at work to tell her about his decision, and then called Tidewater. Again.

After he cleared the memory, Jerry called Tidewater, but worried about its effectiveness. So far, Lynn had stayed there ten months, off and on, for the past three years. Jerry didn't know what else to do, and he refused to watch Lynn breakdown one more kid, like she had Julie.

Jerry settled more into his armchair, remembering his decision at work earlier that day, not regretting it, exactly, more hoping it mattered at all. He almost stood to go out and look for Martha, street by street. His heart hurt.

When Martha got home, she found her mother dozing on the front step, waiting for her. The exhausted look was gone, tight worry lines around the eyes and dried lines of tears on the cheeks replaced bone-tired and weary. Martha tiptoed up to the window. Inside, her grandfather sat in his chair, reading the paper, smoking. Her grandmother was nowhere to be found.

"Honey, come inside." Her mother had woken. She smiled calmly, no sign of anger, that would come later once the situation sank in to mingle with the fear Julie had felt throughout the day.

"Well, squirt, how was your constitutional? Did you have a bit of a French leave?" Her grandfather's voice sounded like the smoke from a pipe smells: rich, heavy, smooth, but Martha could hear relief, an unraveling of tightness that had been building all day. When she heard the relief in his voice, she looked at her sneakers, trying not to cry, trying to clear the fact she'd scared them out of her mind. "We missed you. Your grandma went on a trip, too."

"Yes, honey, she had to go to the hospital. She's sick, but she will be okay. Do you remember when Great-Grandpa died and she got sick? This is like that," Julie soothed her child, sliding her mother-voice over her child like a warm milk bath.

Martha just nodded, then sat beside her mother. She felt her throat tightening, the tears beginning again, the guilt bubbling up to the surface. She thought about the afghan and decided to throw away her scissors. She didn't need them anymore.

"Come inside, honey. We'll get ready for bed. Tomorrow, we are having dinner at Sue's house; won't that be fun?"

"Okay, mom. That sounds great," Martha croaked.

Camelot

by Carmela Orsini

"Hey, Artie, got any plans this weekend?" Tristan had asked him at the office that Tuesday. Of course he didn't, and Tristan knew it before he ever asked. The group of men sat huddled around files, calculators, and guidebooks. Tax time is always crazy for an accountant, and these guys could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"No, no...I don't think I have anything for sure, you know."

Lance had walked into the cubicle, high-fiving Arthur, like everyone always did. "Did I hear you say that you're free this weekend, pal?"

"Yes."

Lance strutted into his leather seat between Tristan and Arthur. "Well, my friend, there's this girl over in marketing that's been asking us about you. Gavin, you know her?"

"No, I don't believe so."

A broad smile stretched over Tristan's face. "Oh, man. She's great. Maybe we can hook you two up this weekend – you know...blow off all the steam we've worked up this week. You'd have a great time. Whaddya say?"

"Yeah, and she's dying to meet you, Artie," Percy agreed from the coffee maker in the corner.

Arthur smiled, a little shocked at his coworker's enthusiasm for his sake. *They know*, he thought, *they know my longing to find my one true love and sweep her off her feet, just like in the fairy tales. They're looking out for me, trying to help me along on my quest. Gavin: the blind date of my life!* He could tell just by her name that he would love her.

"Are you sure it's *me* she was asking about?"

"Would we lie to you about something like this? I'm telling you, she's dying to meet you." Tristan always was a good young man, very clean.

"Do you know that French place downtown? She loves French food." Percy came from a nice family.

"Easy, guys, I don't know if Artie's got that type of money. What do you say Art?" Everyone loved Lance.

"If you guys think she's worth it, I can manage. Yes, I'll manage just fine."

"That a'boy, Artie. I knew you'd have it in you."

. . .

Arthur rushed home from Landerson Financial Advisory that Friday, one day after the famous April tax deadline. Most of the guys he worked with were temps or interns or entry-level with plans for the big time. Arthur was past that at this point. Too old to be an intern, too young to be the bigwig sitting pretty at the top. His large frame could have been intimidating, but his quite demeanor counter balanced his presence. But he always smiled. Not confidently, but smile he did. Not much got to him on the surface.

I won't call Mother tonight. She'll get over it – that'll give me a few extra minutes. Can't be late.

Arthur climbed the stairs to his third floor apartment, searching for his keys lost in his coat pocket. He placed his briefcase on the island in the kitchen and watered his plant next to the sink. That plant had been with him for two and a half years – ever since those weird people moved into the apartment next to his and started making everything smell funny.

Aren't you supposed to name your plant? I should name my plant. He almost reached out to pet the leaves but pulled his hand back just before it had the chance to make contact. He chuckled at his gesture. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a piece of paper protruding from his briefcase. *Odd*, he thought. Carefully lifting the latches on each side, Arthur proceeded with a hint of excitement. The paper, he discovered, was a black and white photocopy of Richard Simmons with Arthur's face superimposed over the head. Richard, or Arthur, rather, dawned a tight, striped tank top and short shorts, which accentuated the falsely enlarged pouch between the man's legs. Someone had taken a red Sharpie to the picture. "Didn't know you had it in you, Artie!" Arrows pointing the inappropriateness. He stared at the image from his over-worked coworkers, torn as to what to do with it. Part of him wanted to rip it to pieces and burn the shreds. Instead, he hung the image on his empty refrigerator and proceeded to get ready for his blind date.

Before leaving, he stole one quick look in the mirror. In spite his best efforts, Arthur's collared shirt and plaid tie screamed straight from the office and his navy blazer was a size too small. His thick glasses resting awkwardly on a round, broad nose didn't help. His whole ensemble was quite inappropriate for such



"Café," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

a fancy French restaurant filled with black ties, black dresses, and white tablecloths. Fine dining was foreign to his type. But Arthur went, regardless. He could just as easily have been at work. His large thigh shook his leg nervously under the little table, making the glow from the candle cast dark shadows over the wall next to him. He reached a hand to his thinning curly hair – giving it a little pat. No gray, thank God. Just a little thin, that's all.

"Won't be long now," he whispered to himself as the waitress approached his table. "Uh, miss, I've decided on a wine for my special lady friend and myself. I think I'll go with the house suggestion of the La Mission Haut Brion 1990 Pinot Noir. Spare no cost for my lady friend." The waitress gave a grin. *Of course she would. I just ordered a three hundred dollar bottle of wine.* If he was ordering for his wife, he might have been cute, but he wasn't ordering for his wife. He pulled out his wallet and grabbed one of his business cards. When he started at Landerson's Financial Advisory eleven years earlier, straight out of school, they had ordered him five hundred business cards. He mailed one to his mom, kept a dozen in a rack on his desk and a few in his wallet. The other 469 of them rested in their original box in the top drawer of his filing cabinet. He was secure and comfortable in his little job – no threat of being replaced, but no hope of a raise. He wrote his home phone number on the back of the card in his best handwriting with his black felt pen. After approving the work, he tucked it in his shirt pocket and nodded his head with a smile.

Yes, tonight would be the night he would find his soul mate. It didn't matter that he couldn't really afford the outrageous prices at Chez Français: his lady would surely be worth every penny. He would spend every dime and every breath he had for her, this woman he has created in his mind—an illusion fabricated from the tales of his co-workers. The waitress returned with the wine, opening it and replacing the cork.

"Thank you."

Arthur picked up his menu, filled with words that meant little to him. Fish, not steak. Steak would be too uncouth with his fancy wine. "French. I wish I spoke French. Then, I could actually pronounce what I'm ordering. Wouldn't that be something?" Arthur chuckled to himself. He glanced at his watch. She was fashionably late. Of course she was. His lady had to be fashionable. Thirty minutes is far more than fashion-

able. *Should I wait to pour the wine until she gets here? I'm awful thirsty now, and that little taste the waitress gave me was such a tease. No, what am I saying. Of course I can wait. If she got here and saw I already drank her bottle of wine, she'd turn right back around and leave.*

Arthur quickly downed his decorative glass of water, little dribbles dampening his tie in between his large gulps. Sweat drops were slowly starting to appear on his broad forehead. An old distinguished gentleman crossed the dance floor and sat at the piano, smoothly removing his white gloves. The tune, although quite foreign to Arthur, pleased him nonetheless. Tapping his fingers to the rhythm, although off slightly, calmed his nerves, but the sweat stains could not be stopped from forming. Small rings were beginning to penetrate his underarms. Smaller drops were faintly noticeable on his back, despite the protection of his coat.

Without thinking, Arthur reached across the table and snatched the glass of water in front of the other seat. He downed it with as much fortitude as he had the first. A small drop of sweat rolled down his face. His tongue rudely reached towards it. *Perhaps I'll have just one glass of wine. If I'm sipping the wine then it might look like I've done this before, like I'm suave and collected.*

The cork was stuck. Arthur resorted to his napkin to help him pull it out, spilling a few of the dark contents onto his white table cloth. *Just one glass.* His moist hand reached for the wine glass in front of him but wavered. The red liquid spilt into his empty water glass. *It still only counts as one. I guess I'm more nervous than I thought.*

He checked his watch again. The nine o'clock hour approached like a bad omen. *An hour late. She could be lost. Or worse. What if she got hurt in some sort of accident? Or maybe there was some sort of emergency. Surely Tristan and the other guys would have given her my cell number. She would call if there was a problem.* The pianist began playing a tune Arthur recognized. His kid sister obsessed over Fredrick Chopin. The quartet for her wedding played *A Nocturne* as an overture. Morbid, but soothingly unnoticeable. Arthur poured another water glass of wine. The waitress returned.

"No, thank you, miss, I'm not ready to order," Arthur rushed.

"Excuse me, sir. I apologize for interrupting, but the gentlemen at that table over there asked me to give you this." She pointed across the dance floor to a larger table. Arthur gasped as Tristan, Percy, and Lance waved at him jovially. She placed a white note card on the table and left. Arthur could feel his heart beat against his temple. His sweaty hand tried not to shake as he picked the card up to read, hoping not to look too frazzled in front of the guys:

Artie! Hope you liked our little joke. Why don't you come over and join us? We'll even buy you another bottle. ~The Guys.

Once again, Arthur played the fool. A jester in a court of young, rich princes with nothing more to do than torment him. He read the note four times. He watched the guys happy smiles turn to looks of concern. He threw some money on the table, grabbed his bottle of wine, and walked out the door in search of a cab.

. . .

The neon yellow of the Waffle House sign reflected in Arthur's glasses. *I wonder, is this the Waffle House out by the interstate or that one over on Tribut Street?*

"You can let me off here." The cab stopped and Arthur paid. He was pretty sure he left an excessively large tip, but he didn't have the energy to argue with himself. He tried to take a step forward, but his leg gave way a little. He couldn't hold red wine like he could ten years ago.

"Welcome to Waffle House." The third shift's unenthusiastic. With a wave of his hand, Arthur landed hard into the first booth he came. Without thinking he grabbed the ashtray at the end of the table and flipped it over repeatedly in his hand, refusing to yield his eyes from its glare.

"Hi, I'm Ginger. I'll be your waitress. Are you ready to order?"

Good God, *this girl talks way too fast.* "Just coffee for now thanks. Regular with lots of cream." He refused to look up. She walked away as bored as she had approached. "Lots of cream," he repeated to himself. His fingertips drummed the bottom of the ashtray. *I should have been a smoker. Smokers wouldn't let people push them around, like some dumb idiot -*

A gloriously adorned hand with perfectly manicured fingernails reached across his line of vision interrupting his thought. The hand carrying a plain mug retracted only to return once more with a hand full of cream. Lots of cream. Two large gold rings, one with a green jewel, and one with a turquoise gem, graced her thumb and forefinger. Her bright red fingernail polish screamed, "I'm not really a waitress." Seven gold jangles clanked at her wrists. Clank. Clank. Beautiful. Harmonious. Her skin, the color of his cream. He couldn't help but stare at it and nothing else as the hand retracted to a uniformed hem.

Arthur's hand flinched. He wanted to grab that glorious hand and hold it tenderly. Kiss it - as a knight would have when he greeted his lady in waiting. Gavin who? His one true love was being held captive by the night shift at the Waffle House. Arthur was her knight in shining armor, ready to rescue her from her evil captors.

"You gonna want anything else?"

Arthur's eyes could not move from her hand. *Stall, keep her coming back. You love her.* "Yes, as a matter of fact, I would love a glass of chocolate milk as well, please."

She turned without a word. That hand, no, that hand must return. *It will, you fool. She must get the drink you ordered. A cigarette, a cigarette would impress her. Make me more mysterious. With the long, white stick hanging from my lips at a funny angle. Like I've got something heavy on mind or some stress that can only be eased by a puff. It'd give me a real hard edge. Show her I'm not as soft as I look.*

The hand returned with the clear glass of brown. This time, she said nothing. Arthur moved his glaze up her arm, toned but not muscular. Perfect.

"Uh, Ginger was it? Can I trouble you for some toast as well?"

"Anything else."

"Well, no, I suppose toast will just about cover it. Thank you."

She left quickly. Toast would clearly delay her a few moments longer than the drinks had, so Arthur distracted himself with his coffee. His pudgy little fingers picked up a cream and smoothly decapitated it, spilling its contents into the murky waters. And then another. And another. And another, until all the creams Lady Ginger had brought him had served their sentence. He thought he was angry with the gang from work, but the helpless little creams seemed to release the stress. Both the mug of coffee and the glass of chocolate milk were filled to the rim, threatening to overflow. *Can't have this.* He carefully brought each glass to the edge of the table and leaned his head down until his lips were on the rim of the chocolate milk.

"Um, here's your toast."

He straightened up too quickly, certainly beyond disgraced, too embarrassed to look in her direction. His ears lit up, turning as red as her beautiful fingernails. Her bracelets jangled as she reached in front of him with the little plate. Their ringing hit him like a light bulb. He'll show those jerks at work. He'll come in with stories of his real hot date - Ginger, the veela from Waffle House. *They think they're so cute, what would they do if they saw me with her?* Yes, he, Arthur, would prove they could not get to him. He could be in on the joke. He could love her like he loved her hand, even if it were for one night.

"Will this be all?"

"For now, yes ma'am. Thank you." *No, don't let this be her last look. You must get her attention. But you can't possibly order anything else now. You just said you didn't need anything else. Think, Arthur. Think. Make eye contact. Look at her face at least. No. You big coward. Just finish your coffee and go home. Don't stoop to this level.*

Arthur obediently began sipping his cream filled mug. The ashtray stared at him mockingly. "Yes, I know." The coffee did not warm his throat, did not stop his large thigh from shaking beneath the table, did not ease the heavy weight in his stomach. Yet Arthur drank, he drank with as much gusto as he had with the three hundred dollar bottle of wine earlier that night. A dollar twenty, three hundred dollars, made no difference now. He glanced down the line of tables. A grizzled, elderly man sat at the bar in dirty overalls and a hunting cap, great mobs of gray hair poking out from underneath the dirty hat. His nose was too crooked for his face, but it matched his teeth quite nicely. His hands shook a little with each bite of waffle he brought to his dried out lips. He was tan, wrinkled, smelly, and remarkable. *Everything I'll never be. No one could trick him like they trick me.*

"More coffee?"

What? Can this be? She returns on her own free will.

"Yes, please."

"And cream?"

"When you get the chance, it's not important."

"Sure, no prob."

"Can I trouble you for some breakfast?" He turned back to the hand on the hip, moving this time past the niceness of her arm, towards the plump, yet firm chest hiding behind the dirty buttoned up Waffle House shirt.

"Uh, yeah, that's what I'm here for."

"Yes, yes. Of course. Forgive me. How about that All-Star Breakfast combo? With scrambled eggs, not fried." He was captivated by the image.

"Bacon or sausage?"

"How about both?" Both indeed.

"Sure." As she turned to leave, Arthur caught a glimpse of the other key body part. Perfect, yet again. He smiled and turned back to his ash tray.

"Geenger, bring me another one of them little cartons of milk, will ya girl?" the old man's voice grumbled.

"Sure, sweetie. Being adventurous tonight aren't you?"

"I have to come home with something on my breath or Nina will think I weren't out with some pretty little thing."

"You mean you tell her about me?"

"Girl, she told me to invite her to the weddin." The old man chuckled with difficulty. Arthur's revenge laughed back.

Enraged, Arthur devoured his toast, unaware of his own famine. He was betrayed. Besides, he had not eaten dinner. He had no chance. She was sweet and flirted with older men that possessed all the qualities Arthur knew did not exist within himself. *I'm just a fool. I'll always be the butt of the joke.*

Ginger returned to his table with the combo. He turned his head, unable to look at her gorgeous hand. He just stared at his new rival. His hangover began to set in already. "Need anything else?"

"Not right now," he said coolly. As soon as her footsteps had lessened in his ears, Arthur tore into his food. He didn't stop to syrup the waffle; he didn't stop to pepper the eggs; he didn't stop to butter the toast. He ate like a madman, though he felt sick. For every slow, shaky bite the old man forced to his lips, Arthur took ten. He ate until there was nothing left.

"Wow, you must have been really hungry!"

"Yes, I was. Two more waffles, please."

"Okay." He still could not look at her. His gaze could not let go of the old man. He just wanted to eat and eat and eat until he exploded. Then he would go home and finally name his damn plant, finally become the pathetic being his friends wanted him to be, finally stoop to the old, lonely crazy man – having never known his own true love.

The old man started pulling dollar bills out of his scruffy plastic wallet. He had not waited for a check. He knew his order well. The five one-dollar bills stood remarkably on their side just as he had tossed them down. Simply putting his wallet back in his pocket was a momentous task for his old hands. He reached over and grabbed his cane that had been hanging on the stool next to his.

"So long Ray, Burt, Geenger. I'll see y'all tomorrow night."

Two men replied various remarks of "See ya, Merle." "Bye, Merle."

"Play me a good one on your way out, sweetie," Ginger's voice hung in the air like the scent of perfume amongst all the grease.

"You know I will."

The old man's legs stepped just a few inches in front of one another. As he passed Arthur's table, the old man gave him a wink and a little wave, tapping his cane loudly on the floor with the other hand. By the time he reached the jukebox by the door, Ginger had cleared the money and dishes and wiped the surface clean. Arthur couldn't watch him anymore. He returned his attention to the ashtray. The music started and the bells on the door jingled, signifying his enemy's departure from the scene. *What the hell was that little wink thing about? Who does he think he is? At least he played a good song; I love Bruce Springsteen.*

"Okay, here are your waffles. Are you going to order anything else?"

"No, this will do it."

"Well, I brought your check. Do you mind paying out? I can't take my cigarette break until all my customers have paid."

The jukebox sang, *"I just can't face my self alone again."*

Arthur started sweating all over again. His heart pounded at his temples, in his ears, in his throat. He felt a new wave of confidence, but he couldn't tell if it was from the old man's wink or the fact that the old man was now gone. *Be brave, Arthur. You need to do this. What will those guys do to you if you don't! You can't be pathetic forever. Enough.* "How about this? If I pay now, then you lend me a cigarette and let me join you on your break." *Are you insane! You sound like a babbling fool. Besides, a cigarette, you'll just go out there and make a fool of yourself. She just thinks you're some dumb customer, Arthur.*

"Sure, I guess." *Could it be...* Arthur stared out the door for a few moments, unable to move for his shock. The old man was inching his way down a dirt road just beyond the sidewalk encircling the parking lot.

"Alright, how much do I owe you?"

"\$18.43." *How the hell does one person spend eighteen dollars at a Waffle House?* He could hear her tapping her foot to the music.

"You ain't a beauty but, yeah, you're alright, and that's alright with me."

Arthur moved his glance from her hand to her face for the first time. My god, she was beautiful. Her dazzling red hair was styled frizzy beyond any point of natural. Her long, thin eyebrows arched like the back of a scared cat with a cute little mole just under her left eye. The red from her fingernails echoed in the red of her lips. Purple eye shadow and bright pink blush stained her creamy skin. And then she smiled at him. Her parted lips revealed the most glamorous smile in the whole restaurant. She had the face of a celebrity – a Garbo sitting in a diner just waiting to be discovered, and Arthur was feeling like an explorer. Without lowering his stare, Arthur pulled out his wallet and handed her one of the fifties he had planned to use for Gavin.

"Keep the change," he said with out a thought. She was truly spectacular. What a story she would make.

"Geez, thanks, mister." She could be bought, if it came to that. She had her price. She would be worth it, too.

"Sure. No problem."

"The door's open but the ride ain't free." Arthur thought back to the beginning of the night. He saw Richard with a fake penis and his face. He saw his plant, his only companion in an empty room. He saw his clean, little apartment. The white tablecloths. The red wine. The three hundred dollars he spent there. Tristan's teeth as he smiled. Percy's head turning red from laughter. Lance waving politely. The yellow cab. The yellow Waffle House sign. The red fingernails. The red lips. His fifty he spent here.

"Is menthol okay? That's all I have."

Arthur took a sip of his cream filled chocolate milk. He turned from her to look at the door. About a quarter a mile down the road, he could see the old man struggling towards home. He looked at the bells on the door. Then at the jukebox. He brought his hands together and rubbed his palms. He wasn't sweating anymore. He had lost so much already that night, money the least of his losses. He suddenly felt the urge to talk to Merle. How could he come here every night and face this life? It was a lesson Arthur was willing to learn. He had lost a lot, alright. But for the first time in a long time, he didn't feel like a loser.

"It's a town of losers. We're pulling out of here to win."

"Actually, Ginger. I don't smoke." With a burst, he was out the door, the bells clattering loudly against the glass. He ran as fast and awkwardly as he could towards the old man, nearly stumbling to the ground just past the parking lot. As he reached the dirt road, he started calling.

"Hey, excuse me." He was breathing heavily, gasping for enough air to call out. "Sir, excuse me."

Merle stopped, turned to face Arthur, and smiled and toothless grin. Arthur stopped just short of where the old man stood and bent over, grabbing his knees and gasping for breath. Merle just brought his cane together, grasping it gently with both hands, waiting patiently.

Still struggling, Arthur stood up slowly. He reached a hand over to the old man's hands, using the cane for support.

"I just have to ask – do you regret it? Do you feel like you missed anything by not selling out? I gotta know." Arthur could stand now, on his own.

The old man turned back down the road and began walking, Arthur trudging along just at his heels. Merle tuned and said with confidence, "Young man, you're going to be just fine." And the two men struggled side by side down the seldom-used road, each journeying home.



"No Parking," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

The Case of the Rotten Potato

by Dave Williams

When I was a kid this would have seemed like a dream job. Nearly every day some goofy looking teenager comes in here and asks for an application. "Uh...is y'all hiring?" We aren't hiring of course. It really doesn't take much to keep this place running. Everything kind of works on its own. I have actually left hours early without anyone ever figuring it out. Then that bell rings. They say that soldiers, after returning from war can still hear the gunshots or the bombs exploding. This is how I feel about that God forsaken bell. It isn't so much a bell as an electronic whistling sound. If there is an actual gate to Hell, this would be the doorbell. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! The tone has to be louder and higher pitched than the other machines to ensure that it is heard over everything else and that is quite an accomplishment in this place. If Satan has an alarm clock this is what it sounds like.

The noise, that noise, will eventually be the death of me. I have been working in this place for nearly a year now and I still haven't gotten used to it. Of course the headaches are a little less frequent now, but I still wake up in the middle of the night hearing those sounds. The beeps, the bells, and the blasts. How could anyone ever get used to this? I come here six days a week and hide out in my little room, away from all of the beeps, the bells, and the blasts. One positive aspect of working here is that it has gotten me even deeper into music. I play CDs at full volume just to drown out that God-awful noise. I listen to music and read. I have read more in the past year than I read in the first twenty-three years of my life combined. So it isn't all bad, just most of it.

The mall is often packed on Saturdays, so that is when we are most crowded, especially around the holidays. Teenagers in ridiculous hip-hop clothes encircle the dancing game like vultures around a fallen gazelle. This game wasn't around when I was their age so I really don't understand the draw. People look so stupid when they dance. That is why most people do it in dark nightclubs and not in the middle of a bright neon-lit arcade. Still, they circle that thing in groups ranging from four to thirty, depending on what time of day, every single day. It costs them fifty cents to dance twice. Some of these kids must spend up to fifty bucks in here on any given day. These machines aren't cheap. They say that children are our future. Well, the future looks pretty bleak.

Often fathers bring their children in, either when Mommy is shopping, or when Daddy has weekend custody. The fathers gravitate towards skee-ball or air hockey. They were born in a much simpler time, but the kids want to dance or ride simulated race horses. Some fathers are dignified and play video games with their children to win tickets and buy toys. These are the fathers who rarely give me much trouble. They are content to spend quality time with the fruits of their loins, but then there are the other kinds of fathers. These fathers give their children eight tokens each and keep twenty for themselves. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! "Yo, that football game ate my token." There have been so many moments when I wanted to grab these men by their faces and say, "If you were throwing a real football outside, you wouldn't have these problems and your children might not end up as brain dead as you." They pose as loving fathers, enjoying their children's interest, but they are really just full-grown children wasting my time. Their kids are the kids that grow up to be the guys talking on a cell phones in the movie theater, or the ladies in the front of the checkout line who refuse to accept that a coupon has expired. These are the morons of the future.

Then there are the mothers who just didn't know when to quit. They walk in with seven kids, probably each with his or her own missing paternal influence. It never fails that one of these little rug rats tries to rip me off. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! "That clown game took my twenty dollars." Then their younger, stickier sibling corroborates immediately, "Yeah, it took ten from me." When I first started I would grant any request as long as they would leave me alone, but lately I have found that confronting ten-year-olds and catching them in their lies is a great way to pass the time. "Kid, that clown game has been unplugged since Ronald Reagan was in office. If you put twenty bucks in there, you deserved to lose it." This only makes me happy for a short period of time because, within seconds, here comes Big Mama. "Sir." Using a formal address like "Sir" is intended to prove that this woman is indeed high class and not just some bloated baby factory looking for a new way to ignore her many, many kids while she shops for a brand new pair of soon to be stained sweatpants. It isn't all her fault though. Somewhere there are seven dead beat dads who were once desperate enough to buy her a bottle of Boons Farm and spend ten to thirty minutes alone with her. "That machine took my daughter's tokens and she wants them back." It is one thing when a kid tries to get a free game. It simply means that they are mischievous; lots of kids are like that. However, it is truly pathetic when a middle aged woman tries to rip off a video game arcade for quarters. These are the women in my life.

We also have regulars. Bars have regulars. It would be quite the sociological experiment to find out

how many arcade regulars become bar regulars later on in life. How many make the transition from simply numbing their brains into actually killing them? I used to work at a bar where the same ten guys came in everyday for happy hour. Arcade regulars come in every day, but there is no happy hour. In my opinion, every hour is as miserable as the next. Our regulars play the fighting games. Four or five of them at a time surround the screen and cheer each other on. A couple of times I have had to break up an actual fight, which wasn't extremely hard, since the only parts of their bodies that received any exercise at all were their fingers and wrists. On the nights that I was forced to work a double shift and close the place, they wouldn't leave until I turned off the games. These zombies sat there playing these ridiculous fighting games until I shut off the lights. Then they simultaneously yelled "AWWW." When I was their age I was out partying and trying to get laid. These guys are standing around in a distant corner of the mall tapping buttons and talking trash. My two employees are both regulars. They were just regulars who happened to get a job. The only difference between them and the other four guys sitting around the machine is that they are making six dollars every hour. I truly pitied these people. Though, as time has passed, I really don't think that I am much different than them at all. They are people just like you and me. They have the same wants and needs as most of us. They have dreams and aspirations. It is just that they like to watch cartoon characters beat each other silly for five hours a day every day.

No matter how hard I fought it, I had to concede to the fact that I was no better than any of these freaks. It is funny how, as a kid in Sunday school, I learned to "Judge not lest ye be judged," yet churches are gossip central. The preacher may be saying "Judge not lest ye be judged," but the conversations in the pews are all about how Mrs. Johnson's hat looks tacky, or "That is Loretta's fourth husband. Bless her heart." I received far too many mixed moral messages growing up, so I had to figure it out for myself. I saw it as a choice. I could have judged not and not been judged, but I decided to go with judge and be judged. It just seemed a lot more natural. So, I look at my customers as drooling idiots, with the occasional psychopath mixed in, and they look at me as the creepy, surly, ever fattening, loser managing the arcade. The situation isn't pretty, but there is a comfort in its bitter honesty.



"Untitled," Elizabeth Bedell, Acrylic

I used to be such a kindhearted person. I loved people. I respected people. I truly cared for my fellow human beings. After working here for a while, I am beginning to loathe humanity and it scares me. The next thing you know I will be voting Republican. Every once in a blue moon a sweet family will walk in. I'll stand there like a stalker and watch them play. The children aren't very familiar with the controls and the parents usually stick to skee-ball. I used to be around people like them all of the time instead of the cross eyed, brain dead lot that surrounds me these days. The only problem is that they never stick around. They play a couple of games and then they are gone. They are off to go play outside or visit their grandmother, or whatever it is that healthy, happy, respectable, American families do on a Saturday afternoon. I miss normal people. I miss people who read magazines that aren't about gaming and shower once a day.

Todd doesn't look like he puts too much stock into personal hygiene. Todd is one of my regulars and I have grown a wee bit fond of him in many ways. The way that someone in solitary confinement would become fond of a cockroach. Todd is twenty years old and works at a fast food joint across the street. Some days he brings in a bag full of burgers and offers me some. Most of the time I am repulsed by the idea of actually ingesting anything that sweaty Todd put his hands on, but when I am really hungry I take a chicken sandwich. I hope that I don't come off as being too harsh when I say that Todd is one of our future homeless members of society. He is quite convincing when he begs for a free game and he has this preacher quality to his speech. Todd couldn't really be a preacher because he mumbles his words like Dustin Hoffman's character in "Dick Tracy," but I can definitely picture him downtown in fifteen years pestering tourists. "Ma'am, I...I...I'm a good Christian man. I just need a couple of dollars to get something to eat." Maybe this won't happen because Todd does go to college.

I'll bet that one of his sweetheart grandparents had blown all of their hard earned savings to send him to our local college and he ditches class everyday to come here and play video games. One afternoon, when I had read an especially heart wrenching article about *Brown V the Board Of Education*, in the New Yorker, I actually gave Todd a long winded speech about how great it was that he was in school and how important it was that he cherished it and did a good job. After this conversation I was quite proud of young Todd and for a while there I had a newfound faith in humanity. It felt like the ending of an after school special. Then, later on that week, I was slightly disappointed when he handed me a sheet to fill out concerning one of his classes. Apparently, as a project, his class had to be involved in some kind of community service project. They could volunteer at the library, or work at the humane society walking the dogs. They could help build houses with Habitat For Humanity. They could even volunteer at their own church. So, Todd asked me if I would fill out a form that logged all of the hours of "community service" that he had done here at the arcade. "Man, you know I is always helping you move machines around and stuff. I gave him a long and disgusted look, filled out the form, and went back in to my room to listen to the Shins. Good luck finding adequate shelter in fifteen years Todd. The winters can be quite brisk.

My other favorite regular is a sixteen year old kid named Jeremy. Jeremy is really into the dancing game but he still plays the fighting games whenever the mood strikes him. I knew kids like Jeremy growing up, hip hop kids who walked around the mall hitting on teen-age girls and giving out high fives left and right. For me, that kid was Craig Tolbert. He wore baggy clothes and had grotesque acne. Craig was about sixteen when I was twelve, and he would stroll around the mall all day in a gang of cigarette smoking pre-teens, shoplifting and hustling in the arcade. Craig still haunts the mall in my hometown, but now he manages the arcade. Don't think that the irony in that last sentence escapes me. I get it alright. I'm a loser just like him. Whatever, shut up.

Jeremy startled me in my first week at work by being extremely forward. He would walk into my back room and tell me about his mall adventures. I would usually sit there and read while he went on and on about who got jumped and who couldn't dance. I thought that if I ignored him that he would go away, but that never happened. Every day Jeremy would walk in and hang out in the back room, talking about teen-agers and shoplifting. Some of his stories were quite compelling and after a while I would actually miss him on the days that he did not come by. Jeremy had been expelled from school for fighting, so he really had no other place to be. He would hop a bus from his grandma's place everyday and come hang out with me. I started to look at Jeremy as some kind of weird juvenile delinquent little brother that I had to look out for. I would hand him the keys to the games and let him do my job on Saturdays. It really worked out great for the both of us. He could impress all of his little friends by playing free games and I could go into the back and sleep off my hangover.

I am twenty four years old and I manage the arcade in the mall. I have to be here seven days a week. On Tuesdays I do collections. I have to be here at six in the morning to crack open all of the machines and count all of the tokens from the previous week. That noise is not something that you want to hear ever, let alone at six in the morning. I count all of the tokens and then I go to the bank. The only reason that I have

not been fired yet is that no one else, outside of teen-age creeps, would ever take this job. The last two managers were caught stealing within a month of being hired. One of them was selling weed out of the back. Oddly enough, working at a video game arcade is appealing to people who smoke marijuana. Imagine that.

My boss is the regional general manager. I think that he is Indian, but I have not yet been able to get an honest answer out of him. Out of pointless, obsessive curiosity, I have been trying to pin down where he was born. Once, on a truck ride to a hardware store, he mentioned that his father was from the Caribbean. I once knew a girl from Barbados who had very Indian features and an Indian accent. Every time I see Maurice I ask sly questions like, "Will you be going home for the holiday? How long is the flight?" and, "Y'all must have terribly hot summers, huh?" I could just ask him, but where is the fun in that? His name is Maurice, so maybe he's French. Isn't Maurice a French name? Maurice Chevallier, he was French right?

Maurice pops in every once in a while to see how I'm doing and help me fix the machines. On Tuesdays he comes by to check my numbers for the week. At first he would drop by to help out, but lately he has been popping in just to catch me sleeping. His accent has become unbearable. I'm no racist, so I won't let my hatred of the sound of Maurice's voice initiate a sweeping hatred for all people of western Asian descent, but I hate the sound of that man's voice. "Timothy, what are you doing?" Are you back here sleeping, man?" He knows the answer to that question. He shouldn't have to ask. "I pay you to manage this store and you are back here reading and listening to music." This isn't a store. This is Hell, and you sir are beginning to look like you are growing horns. "These games are falling apart, man. You should put down the magazine and go fix the games." I would love to Maurice, it is just that if I turn off this CD player and walk outside onto the arcade floor and hear that noise, those beeps, and bells, and blasts, I might lose my mind and end up pistol whipping a thirteen year old Eminem fan with a plastic gun. Maurice doesn't seem to mind the noise and those awful lights. He could sit around the arcade all day with a screwdriver and a set of keys. I, on the other hand, wish I was dead after only ten minutes. Maybe it is a cultural thing.

Maurice is going through a divorce and where, at first I felt sorry for him, now I find it hilarious. Sure, it makes him crabby, but I kind of enjoy those days when he comes in and yells at me because I get to yell back and most days I need to blow off some steam. He can't fire me since I am the first manager that he has had in two years that doesn't steal. The story is that his wife began seeing another man nearly a year ago and now she wants a divorce. They have two teen-age daughters and he remains in close contact with her. He is trying to win her back. One thing that is certain about Maurice is that he loves the ladies. On Tuesdays when he comes by and we are not yelling at each other he likes to tell me all about his personal life. "I watch a lot of porno movies to pick up new moves, man. My wife she knows that no one is better, because I know new moves." The combination of his accent and the ridiculous things that he says makes him one of the most entertaining people that I have ever met. If he could learn to leave me alone more often we could really get along.

Todd once told me that he stood outside of the mall entrance with Maurice once and watched him work. Apparently, Maurice believes that the best way to meet women is to stare at them and then do that hissing thing to get their attention. "Pssstttt," this is his intro. Todd didn't make clear whether this actually worked or not, but I don't see how it couldn't. A forty three year old arcade manager "psssstttt" ing at fourteen through twenty year old girls at the entrance to the mall. If that isn't a recipe for sexual success I don't know what is. His wife is divorcing him and he has no chance of meeting anyone else.

The reason that she is leaving him is pretty obvious. It's funny how we can never understand what goes wrong in our lives when it is so obvious to everyone around us. We just can't see what makes us the jerks that we are when it is pretty clear to the rest of the world. All Maurice would have to do is ask me just once, "Timothy, why is my wife leaving me, man?" I would reply, "Well Maurice, you are a pigheaded control freak with a short temper and you watch a lot of porno. Try being a little nicer and cleaning out your underwear drawer and you just might reconcile." The hilarity is that his wife and this man were only friends when Maurice found out. The two of them had only had lunch together once. Maurice found out about it and he went crazy. He began treating his wife like dirt and calling her names, in that awful accent no less, in front of their kids. She probably wanted to leave him before that because he is an idiot who listens to Christmas music and wears windbreaker jumpsuits. Still, she probably wouldn't have cheated on him if he had not become such a jerk. I would have left him too. Strike that. I never would have married him in the first place. Unless... Wait... What are the laws like in Massachusetts again?

The guy is a wreck and he takes it out on me. I don't mind so much. Maurice's visits are the pepper in my otherwise bland Caesar salad of a life. Binge drinking helps out a lot too. The guy busts in every once in a while and gives me a tongue lashing. He threatens to fire me sometimes but I know that he is bluffing.

What Maurice doesn't understand is that this place doesn't need me. This place doesn't even need him. The arcade will make just as much money whether I am even present or not. Brain dead teens and

children will drop coins in the slots just as long as there is a light on the other end. They react like moths to a flame. They don't need me. They don't need him. They don't even need their parents. All they need are quarters, fingers, and simulated violence and they will be happy for the rest of their lives. I have never seen "The Matrix," but I think that was sort of what it was about, a bunch of idiots hooked up to machines. Maybe I should rent that sometime.

Todd and Maurice have gotten pretty tight in the past few months. One night after closing, Maurice came by with a new game strapped to the back of his truck and Todd stuck around to help us move it in. I couldn't have cared less either way, but Maurice must have seen something special in that big fat rhinoceros, so he offered him a job. I wasn't upset that I would be working with Todd. I really didn't care at all. I knew that there was a twelve pack and an episode of "Jerry Springer" waiting for me at home so I agreed that Todd should be hired at once. Lately, Maurice has been inviting Todd to join him on his trips to Orlando and Jacksonville, which are the other arcades in his region. I could just picture the expressions on Todd's face as Maurice tells him lurid details of his once great sex life on those long car rides in to Florida: "That position is called the Friendly Assassin, man."

All of this back story is really just preface to what happened to me today. It was a day like any other. I woke up with a splitting headache and beer spilled all over the carpet. The little television that I keep beside my bed had fallen over and cracked just a bit on the right side of the screen. I rolled out of bed and lit a cigarette, then tossed on my jeans and a t-shirt before hopping in the car and stumbling in to work. Showering is for people who want to be alive. Maurice was there to meet me at the door. He had come in early to check the safe, just to make sure that I wasn't stealing. He really wants to fire me. "What's up Maurice?" The guy rarely looks at me when we talk to each other, he just kind of runs around like a rat after the smell of distant vomit. Maurice jumps right in, "It stinks in here, man." I shouldn't have expected a greeting. To be treated with respect is not a part of the arcade community. "You need to go behind the games and sweep up today." I told him that I would so that he would go away, then I turned on that awful noise, opened the gate, and locked myself in the back room to take a nap.

REEE-REEE-REEE!!! No, not now, please don't let this be a customer. I opened up the door and it was Jeremy. "Whassup, man?" He peers in the room and walks right past me. This has been our routine nearly every day for the past year and I am kind of glad to see him. "Listen Jeremy, I've got a pretty bad headache. Do you think that you could mind the store for me today?" I toss him my keys and his face lights up. Jeremy's fashion sense is remarkable. He wears these gigantic black pants that you find in the goth store here at the mall. Usually, he has on a wife beater or jersey and then a skull cap under a baby blue hat that has Eminem's logo on it. Eminem was the best thing that ever happened to young Jeremy. He validated his lifestyle somehow and made it alright to be who he is. No more must boys like Jeremy receive that classic tag of Vanilla Ice.

Jeremy was more than happy to do my job for me after I listened to him tell a story about a twelve year old girl that he has been dating. I don't think that they date. They just walk around the mall together. They walk from one end to the other, stopping in random stores, followed by some homely kid in a backwards cap with a southern accent that would make the cast of "HEE-HAW" ask "Isn't that a bit much?" They laugh, they hit each other, and they hand out high fives to kids walking with their parents. It would be kind of cute if they didn't smoke and curse like sailors. Jeremy's girls always seem to dress like him. They are all fanatics about that dancing game and they have their own style of dress. It is like a weird mix between hip hop, goth, rave, and punk rock. All of the "alternative" styles of my youth rolled into one.

An hour or two passes by and I get my desperately needed nap. I still had the runs, but the headache was gone. Now I'm wide awake and ready to read. Jeremy pops in sporadically to sit down and grab some free candy, but otherwise I'm alone and that is the way that I like it. Then REEE-REEE-REEE!!! Jeremy slipped and let this one get by, so he jumps up as if to help them. "No, I've got this one." I don't mind doing my job after a nap. It takes a while for the beeps, and bells, and blasts to completely kill my spirit. "I wants dat radio." There stands a four year old child pointing at my prize shelf without a parent in sight. Without a word I turn off that hideous bell and walk back into my little room. Before I close the door I notice something rank. Maurice wasn't just being a jerk, this place really stinks.

I weighed my options. I could either look for the smell or I could go back into my little room and hide out until Todd gets here. Which option do you think that I chose? Todd came bopping in excited about working in his favorite place around three. The rule is that there is one hour of overlap between my shift and the employees intended for instruction, but I usually just throw them the keys and run. "Todd listen, here is the deal. If you can find that smell I'll be your best friend forever." Todd has a very comical face. He often overreacts in his facial expressions like some kind of silent movie actor. "That smell is just nasty, man. Let

me get a game in and then I'll check it out." Todd doesn't do anything until he has played at least twenty minutes of his fighting game. Now I'm intrigued. I want to know what is causing that hideous smell. I have located the general location as being behind the basketball shooting game. This is one of the games where you actually shoot the ball into a hoop at the back of the game. There is a large open space behind the machine.

Jeremy and I were discussing possible causes for the repulsive odor coming from behind the game. Jeremy said, "I think it's a dead rat." There was a possibility that a rat had died there, but the mall is usually pretty good about extermination. They would have trapped the rats or sprayed them or something. I knew better. "It is probably just an old soda can that someone threw back there." Jeremy didn't buy that for a second. "Soda don't smell like that." After that we lost interest and I walked back into my room and put my nose in a book.

Thirty minutes passed and I heard a knock at the door. Todd was ready to begin his shift and he needed my keys, so I decided to pretend to be a good manager and delegate the job of finding the smell. "Todd, here is a broom and a trash can. Let's push the game out a bit and you pick up whatever it is that is causing that stench." Todd and I unplugged the game and pushed it forward a couple of feet. "Alrighty Todd, get back there and do your thing." Todd ran into the back room for a moment to grab a flashlight. While walking toward the game he held up the flash light and gave me one of his silent movie actor looks as if to tell me that he was always one step ahead. Jeremy strutted over to see what all of the commotion was about. He and I stood there together and awaited Todd's discovery.

I have to admit that I was hoping for a dead animal, something really disgusting that would freak Todd out and cause him to distort his face to express his disgust. Boy, did I get more than I had bargained for. Jeremy and I watched the flashlight disappear behind the game. The anticipation was almost too much to bear until we hear, "EEEEWWWWW!!!" Todd came charging from behind the game yelling and frantically waving his arms. "NNNAAWWW MAN!!! HELL NO! THAT AIN'T RIGHT!!!" Jeremy stepped towards Todd as if to calm him down. "What is it?" For a brief second I thought that it must have been a human head. What else could possibly elicit such a reaction? I was seconds away from dialing 911. "What is it, Todd?" Todd continued jumping around and waving his arms. His face was contorting in dramatic ways that we had never witnessed before. "That is disgusting. I think I'm bout to throw up man, for real." Todd is a drama queen. That is an element of his personality that goes hand in hand with his mugging and his preachy conversational style. After a few seconds my cynical nature kicked in and I lost all hope that it was anything truly revolting. I calmly spoke in order to let Todd know that I wasn't buying his act. "Todd what is it?"

Todd continued his melodramatic overreaction until I grabbed him by the shoulders. "Todd, what is it?" He looked me in the eye and behind those big goofy eyes I could see that he was truly mortified. "I ain't touching that, man. No way." I had to calm him down, "Todd you have to tell me what that was." Todd went silent all of the sudden and lowered his head, as if for a moment of silent meditation before he spoke. "Man, Timothy, that's doonky back there." His eyes opened wide when he said the word "doonky," for emphasis of course. I was stunned. Not only by the thought of solid human waste on the floor of my arcade, but also because he used the word "doonky," which is hilarious in and of itself. Jeremy snatched the flashlight out of Todd's trembling hand and ran to the back of the game to take a look. Ten seconds later I heard him scream. "Dang, that is SHHH..." I cut him off just in time to preserve the innocence of my youthful clientele. "Dude, you have to be kidding me." I grabbed the flashlight out of Jeremy's hand as he ran out holding his nose. I walked slowly and cautiously to the back of the game, pointing the flashlight toward the carpet. Then, there it was in the beam of my flashlight, like a big brown potato in the middle of a spotlight: a human turd.

I could feel the vomit rising to the edge of my throat and I tasted just a bit before I swallowed. I knew that the combination of feces and vomit would be too much to clean. Then I shouted, "That is @\$%ing disgusting!!!" Well, there goes my clientele's innocence. I could not believe what I was seeing. Many questions came to mind immediately. How could this be? Who would have done such a thing? Is that a peanut? Why am I staring at it? It was all too much.

True leadership is defined by how one acts in a crisis situation. "Todd, clean that @\$% up. I'm going home to take a shower." Jeremy started laughing and Todd stood there with his jaw on the floor. "Man, Timothy, I ain't about to touch that thing." I stood there silently pondering for just a second. I couldn't ask Todd to do this alone. Sure, my job title did include the authority to delegate work to my employees, but this just wasn't right. I had worked for far too many tyrannical, power mad bosses in cheesey positions of authority to make Todd do a job that I wasn't willing to do myself. I didn't want to be "The Man." For one brief moment I saw a little bit of myself in Todd and I decided we should handle this as a team. So, all three of us walked into the back room and shut the door.

There was another moment of silence as we all considered our options. After all, there was a lot to

think about. I could tell that Todd was relieved that he wasn't going to be left to deal with this dilemma alone. For the first time in the year that I had worked there, I felt like a good manager. Jeremy was the first to break the silence. "That is @\$%ed up!" I began pacing and asked, "Who could have done this? What kind of freakish pig would drop trou and plop one out on the floor of an arcade?" The three of us fell back into silence until Jeremy spoke up again. "I bet it was them kids that you got onto last Saturday." He might have been right. Last Saturday there was a group of young kids playing games without any parents around. They kept ringing the bell and asking me to come help them with jammed tokens. Then they would walk up to the prize counter with an ungodly amount of tickets to get prizes. They played for several hours until I began to wonder where they were getting all of this money. Usually, three eleven year old boys, alone in the mall do no carry sixty bucks apiece. So, I started watching them through the peephole to the door of my little room. I noticed they were walking behind the basketball game, I popped out and caught them stealing tokens from the coin pan. I told them to leave and made them give back all of their tokens. That was it. I was convinced that I had triumphed so I went back into my room and read an article about global warming. While pondering the turd behind my game, I could almost hear them laughing at me and it really stung.

Then there was this dad that was playing the basketball game and his tokens kept getting stuck. Over and over the bell kept ringing and each time I stumbled out to give him a free game. It must have happened twelve times before I became upset. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! "What?" This guy couldn't believe my nerve. "What you mean 'What'? The game keeps taking my tokens. That is what." He was nearly screaming at me. I stopped and turned to face him. There he was, this father of three children, who couldn't have been more than a few years older than me, ignoring his little seed and harassing me on a Saturday. There was a lot of rage in his eyes and you could tell that the world had been dumping on this guy for a long time. I stood there staring at him. Of course, I was hungover and only three seconds from letting this freak have it until his toddler son walked over and hugged his leg. The guy was a jerk and I would have loved to have put him in his place. Still, I'm no monster. I turned away and unlocked the machine. The man had become quiet as I was staring at him. I could tell that he thought that I was about to deck him. He was a little guy and must have been slightly intimidated. I wasn't going to hit him. I was only going to tell him what I really thought. He had shut up, but as I walked a way I put my hand behind my back and flipped him off. He didn't bother me for the rest of the day, but he was definitely a suspect in the case of the rotten potato.

There was no telling who it could have been. I left the floor unattended all of the time and I was pretty rude to nearly everyone. I wasn't aggressive or snotty but my apathy shined through in almost every encounter. I hated my job and everyone who became a part of it. Why *wouldn't* someone squeeze one out on my floor should have been the real question. I pictured that hundred pound dad squatting behind the machine with those big eyes bulging, mutterin, "I'll show that honkey not to mess with me," as he unloaded behind my game. Besides, it must have been a full grown man that dropped it because that thing was massive.

Maurice was a pretty unstable person. Maybe he was the culprit. He could have done it just to teach me a lesson. Then I went into leader mode, "Todd, here is what we are going to do." I grabbed the small plastic trashcan and my Rolling Stone magazine with Jessica Simpson on the cover. "Take this magazine and place it next to the turd. Then sweep it onto the magazine and throw them both into the trashcan. Hand the trashcan over to Jeremy, and Jeremy, you go toss them both into the dumpster outside." Jessica Simpson didn't deserve a cover anyway.

Before we got started, I walked back there one more time to see what we were up against. It was long and brown with white spots of mold. If I was Batman I would have taken it to the Batcave and scraped it for DNA, "Robin, this is the feces of none other than the Joker." I wonder how many people have to clean up human waste in their profession? Sure, sanitation workers, janitors, and porto-potty owners, but what about congressmen and leaders of industry? Do they ever handle poop?

The absurdity of the situation overcame me as I heard Todd preparing to sweep the turd. I started cracking up when I heard him scream, "It's rolling, man! I got it rolling!" When Jeremy heard me laughing, he began laughing as well. Then he decided to make Todd feel worse, "Todd, how you like your job now?" Todd was focused, so he didn't respond at first. Then he threatened to toss the turd in Jeremy's face. Jeremy and I kept laughing as we listened to Todd squeal in a high pitched manner. After about a minute his hand reached out with the trashcan and broom. It was time for Jeremy to take over. Todd yelled at him, "Grab this @\$% boy!" Jeremy must have been offended by Todd's commanding tone and he slapped the trashcan out of Todd's hand, spilling its contents back onto the floor. Although I was amused by Jeremy had done, I was the authority figure and I had to step in. I said, "Jeremy, you have to sweep it back into the trashcan."

Jeremy didn't actually work for the arcade. I gave him free candy and let him play free games but he wasn't getting paid or anything. I had no right to tell him to dispose of a turd and he knew it. Jeremy decided to politely decline my request, "I ain't cleaning that @\$% up." I was still laughing hysterically so I couldn't

speaking up to stop him from walking away. Jeremy took off strutting away from the arcade to the goth store to steal a wrist band. That only left myself and Todd and there was no way that I was going near that thing again. I told Todd what to do, "Todd you have to try it again. This time, take the magazine and grab it with your hand, then run to the dumpster and toss it in." Todd had done what I had asked him the first time, but his faith in the chain of command was dwindling. He stopped and stared at me. The expression on his goofy face told me exactly what I had to do.

Todd had made the attempt to dispose of the thing and had been thwarted. He had been a good soldier once but this time I was asking far too much. We stood there looking at each other for a moment. I wanted to ask him to pick it up again but his eyes were pleading with me. He had only wanted to play video games for six bucks an hour. He never signed up for this. If I would have asked him again he would have done it. Todd would have grabbed the thing with his teeth if I would have threatened to fire him. I looked into his big brown eyes and I just couldn't do it. It was time for me to prove that I was a far better boss than Maurice. It was time for me to do the right thing.

I went back into my little room and I grabbed another broom. I took some plastic wrap that we used to wrap the glass monitors in transit and I wrapped the end of the broom. Then I grabbed a Time magazine that proclaimed George W. Bush the man of the year and I laid it face up beside the turd. It was about to get nasty.

I have often heard that it is a man's actions that define his character in the end. Some men find glory on the battlefield. Some men march for freedom. Some men triumph over injustice and change the world. I swept a turd onto a magazine and tossed it into a plastic trashcan. I sprinted outside, then I tossed the brooms and trashcan into the dumpster, ran back to the arcade and washed my hands repeatedly. After washing my hands for fifteen minutes I picked up the phone and called Maurice. "Consider this my two weeks notice." I said, "This job is @\$%!"



"Incredible Hulk," Dean Miller, Ink and Color Pencil

A Hero's Welcome

by Sean Kymalainen

A sliver of light could be seen between the two large oak doors that held back my greatest fear. I sat in a stiff, metal chair staring at their heavy presence, pondering the depths of irony. I am just an average, non-descript man meandering through life. Few know or care about Jonathan Rice, a city cab driver who works the shifts of the night owls. Today, however, I am something more. I am a witness in a fantastic murder trial. Unfortunately, what I have to say is not what everyone would like to hear. It is this fact that makes me want to crawl in the hole of some dark, dank cave where the light cannot reach. Ironically, though, darkness is nowhere to be seen. My day is full of light, shining on me as if someone needed to watch me closely. The thought brought me back to the sun I saw this morning.

My morning started with a sunrise. I would like to say that I woke up to a beautiful sight, inspired by romantic allusions, but I cannot. In fact, the reason that I saw the sunrise was because I never fell asleep. Perhaps that is why I felt the sun watched me with its blood red eye accusing me with its horrible sight. An image from the past screamed its way into my present. An apple, slowly expanding burst in my mind. In my dream this vision became so real that I would find myself crying out in the dark night of the moonless alleyway behind my apartment. For that reason I decided to stay awake for as long as I can. Could anyone blame me?

It had been two days since I last found comfort in the depths of any slumber. I knew, in my mind, that all my horrors were related to my dilemma of truth or lies. I had walked to the courthouse from my apartment. It was only a short walk and I liked crossing the park along the way. Somehow it had made me feel calmer. Of course I was not alone. A member of the world famous "Hall" had escorted me there for my own protection. This superhero was idolized by many in the city. He was, in fact, Black Night, the founder of the Hall almost thirty years ago. He was incredibly tall, at over seven and a half feet, and although he no longer fought as a superhero, he still inspired awe in the many people who witnessed his immense capacity for strength.

We had walked over to the courthouse in a leisurely manner in which little was said between us. Upon reaching the courthouse, Black Night had stopped me with his arm and turned me around with the ease of a child playing with a plastic doll. When I had looked up into his face I knew my future was at a crossroads. His voice is still ringing in my ears, even though his words were spoken over two hours ago. He said to me that he had fought for the city and the "Hall" for his entire life. He had given everything to it. Keep that in mind, he had said, when on the witness stand. He and the rest of the "Hall" will not let what they have built be destroyed. Be a part of the team and be a hero. He had then left me to walk the last flight of steps to my waiting room.

It had seemed so simple at first. Tell a lie so that the world would be free of an evil entity and thereby keep the honor and integrity of the "Hall" intact. No stain must be allowed to tarnish the image of purity and justice or the people will lose hope. Resolutely I had walked up those stairs until I was greeted by the twin statues of the Guardian Twins who framed the entrance to the courthouse. These two legendary heroes lost their lives to Dr. Pestilence many years before when he had first come to prominence. Black Night had written the epitaphs on the bottom of each statue himself. I had paused long enough to read each one. On the statue to the left was written "Let truth and honor be the virtues we hold" while the statue on the right had the words "Let justice be fair and true to all, whoever they may be." Underneath each epitaph was a signed pledge by every member of the "Hall." I had stared a long time before I finally entered the courthouse and was led to the waiting room, which is where I find myself now.

My lone window is small as if there was a fear that I would fly away from all this attention. I would if I could. The sky beckons with a heavenly shade of blue, the light puffs of white thirsting with nectar. The bright sun, though, mocks me with its fire on my brow. It's the light that hurts me. It blazes in fury in its effort to deny the grace of my peace. Unable to maintain a gaze with such a forceful eye, I turn my attention to the floor as I consider the depths of my dilemma.

Should the truth be told? The consequences of such an act seem too horrible to contemplate. Horror, revulsion, despair and disgust would no doubt be results. Hatred, the pure hatred of an entire society, though, would be laid on my shoulders. I am not sure if I can deal with that. Why does truth have to have such a terrible price tag? That part wasn't written on either epitaph I noticed. There are, of course, none of these terrible consequences if I lie. Only two other people will know the truth and they will never say anything. I will not have to fear any retribution. I will be seen as a hero by all. Jonathan Rice will be seen by many as a great man doing his civic duty with none the wiser... I would know though.

Growing up I remember worshiping every member of the "Hall" as an idol. The one superhero that

stood out the most for me, though, was Molecularman. I was sick myself during that terrible epidemic of wasting disease which Dr. Pestilence inflicted upon us. It was Molecularman who found a way to save us and I was indebted to him. That was nearly fifteen years ago. I watched his career religiously from that point on, saving every newspaper clipping of his exploits. It was my desire to see him in action once in my life. Never did I think it would be like this. I never knew how lonely it can be with the truth.

It is lonely in this room. The walls are barren of any stimulation which leaves one with nothing but thoughts. I see by my watch that I have been in here for over two hours. Each minute, though, feels like an eternity. A fly, God only knows why, keeps going through the motions of flying through the small window. Will it never learn that, for all its transparency, the window will not budge? For I know that the world out there is not the same as the one in here. But, I can't help think, that it should be.

The floors have been waxed recently I think. Why do they insist on squeaky floors? Is it so that we can hear the footsteps of doom which increasingly thunder with each maddening clomp? I can hear a light murmuring on the other side of the doors. I feel myself straining to hear but I cannot catch any words. Are they talking of me, I wonder? The murmuring continues like a low hum until it suddenly pauses. In a loud booming voice, I clearly hear the prosecutor say "Cindy Davis!"

That was her name, the girl that was murdered that is. I have only seen her that one night but that was enough to etch her in my mind forever. She wore a white sundress when I saw her. What stood out, though, was the print of an apple on her chest that was large and deeply hued. It was dark in the alley, lit by a few overhead street lights that made the scene appear quite hazy. Her hair was a raven black, straight, with a clean, medium length cut that framed a pale, very pretty face. Her lips contrasted with the paleness of her skin by matching the rich hue of the apple on her dress. From my vantage point, about thirty feet away, she appeared to be asleep. I knew as I had inched closer, though, that it was just the sleep of eternity.

I did not want to believe my eyes, but the evidence could not be erased from sight. The girl was dead, murdered before me in gruesome fashion. The apple on her breast was larger now, so large in fact that I realized her heart had been torn out. I trembled from the top of my head to the very tip of my toes. The tumult that I had witnessed only a few minutes before gave way to an eerie silence that was now only broken by the chirping of a single cricket. I heard sirens nearing and when I looked down the long blocks of alleys in the distance I saw the familiar flashes of blue and red. No doubt Molecularman had raised the alarm. As soon as I had risen my arm in an effort to attract their notice a steel grip tore through my shoulder.

I looked up into the kind, simple eyes of the bailiff, a large white man with a puffy red face. His hand, resting on my shoulder, softly shook me from my hellish thoughts. "It's time, Jonathan," he said.

His words filled my body with a sudden rush of adrenaline. My hands began to shake so badly that I balled them into fists and released them several times in a quick attempt at regaining my composure. I made to rise from my seat but my legs would not obey. Breathing deeply, I stared at the floor and then at the bailiff. "I'm scared," I told him.

The bailiff pursed his lips and looked at the twin doors. "Don't be, Jonathan. The Hall will protect you. He will never be able to hurt anyone again after this."

"What if The Hall will not protect me?" I asked. "What will I do then?"

"Nonsense," said the bailiff. "The Hall has always protected us. They will protect you as well. You have nothing to fear, so let's go."

The bailiff opened the doors and led me into the courtroom. I had a sensation of falling as bright flashes blinded me. Through the stars I could still make out the imposing presences of The Hall, encircling the courtroom with their solidly set expressions. They were a closely knit group that fought side by side on many occasions. Half the members of the Hall owed their lives in some fashion to Molecularman. Each of them also had a secret identity that they cherished as well. The weight of their collective stares dragged me further into an abyss. I never thought, in all my years of idol worship, that one day these superheroes would inspire fear in my bones. I made my way to the witness stand next to the judge, a seventy year old woman with glasses, with a stern stiffness about her that immediately pressed the conscience of my mind. "Swear the witness in," she instructed and with that I was solemnly doomed.

With a tremendous effort of will I looked at the defendant's table. There, in all his evil, sat the ominous presence of Dr. Pestilence. Forty nine years of age and yet he had the youthful appearance of an Adonis. He appeared to be about six feet tall and weigh a fit one hundred and eighty pounds. His blond, wavy hair did not show even a trace of white. His eyes, however, were blazing with burning hues that seemed to morph as he scanned the room. The sheer evil of his existence exuded from his seat and wafted throughout the room. My teeth began to slowly grind together as I wringed my hands. The chains that held him in place seemed too inadequate for the task. It was, after all, this man who discovered the secret to the cause and cure of all disease. What this man could have become, I can only hazard to guess. What he did become was a scourge

on humanity.

I felt light headed and ill. The room was spinning and my mind would not focus. Out of this haze I heard a voice. It was the voice of Dr. Pestilence. "Are we sick, Mr. Rice? If you need any assistance you may rest assured that I will be at your service."

Before I had any chance to reply the judge said "The defendant will refrain from speaking. Is that understood, Doctor?"

Dr. Pestilence, with a devious smirk, nodded his head and replied "of course, your honor. I would never think of offending a proceeding in search of the truth." Dr. Pestilence then leisurely crossed his legs and placed his two hands together like a tent. Leaning back in his chair he softly chuckled as he stared in my direction.

Such power he possessed. I knew, as everyone else knew, that his discovery enabled him to be immunized against the effects of all disease including the effects of aging. His strength grew to the limits of human potential. His intelligence magnified to almost god-like proportions. It is such a shame that he did not share this discovery with the world. When I look at the members of the Hall today in the courtroom, I can see their disdain for him. They too thought he wasted his discovery when he could have saved billions of people. Instead he chose to subjugate those billions with an eye on total world domination. It was only through the efforts of Molecularman that disaster was averted.

Dr. Pestilence's grin slowly retreated as his disturbing eyes narrowed. I instinctively shrank from his glare. In the back of the room I could just make out the form of Molecularman. His red and blue cape fluttered behind his large frame even though we were indoors. How is that possible? The prosecutor, a man in his late thirties, short and stocky, strolled to the stand in a self-confident manner. After some preliminary questioning, the prosecutor, a man who never introduced himself to me said "Mr. Rice what were you doing the night of June the twelfth?"

I breathed deeply a few times as I sorted out my thoughts. Thankfully the question was not something I needed to worry about so I said "I was working the night shift, driving my cab looking for a fare."

"And did you find a fare?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I answered.

The prosecutor frowned and said "what do you mean you didn't exactly find a fare? It was my understanding that you did."

"Well," I began, "my fare was a call from the station. Max said I should pick up this girl on the corner of Edison and Main."

"Who is Max?" he asked.

"Max is our dispatcher," I replied.

The prosecutor turned slowly towards the jury and asked "Did Max say anything unusual about this fare?"

I paused for a moment and replied "yes he did. He said that she sounded frightened and I should be very cautious when picking her up."

"And were you cautious, Mr. Rice?"

"Yes... I was. I parked my cab around the block so I could check the area out in case it was a setup." I tried not to look anywhere particular but I couldn't help notice that Molecularman was staring at me from the back of the room. His emblem, a large, white J on his chest overpowered my sight. Unlike most superheroes, Molecularman did not wear a symbol of his name. His symbol was for *justice*. It was one of the reasons why I had been so proud of his career. I came to believe in that principle because my hero had.

The prosecutor clasped his hands behind his back and paced before the jury. "What did you find in your scouting?" he continued.

I thought back to that horrible night. I clearly remember the stink of the garbage cans in the alley. Steam rose from a vent by the road. Even through the haze I could make out the forms of two men fighting. I leveled my eyes in a stare at nothingness. "I saw a tremendous fight," I said.

"Who did you see fighting, Mr. Rice?"

I looked at the defense table and then towards the back of the room. My hands began to shake again. With a cracked voice, I replied "Dr. Pestilence and Molecularman."

"Did either of them notice you?" he asked.

Time seemed to slow. I struggled with my tongue. Dr. Pestilence's grin seemed to widen as far as a Cheshire cat. In the back of the room I could clearly hear Molecularman's light cough. Finally, I softly said "No, they didn't."

The prosecutor slowly made his way towards the defense table. He turned his back to me and looked at Dr. Pestilence. "There was a girl there also, wasn't there Mr. Rice?"

I swallowed a gulp of air and closed my eyes. I could still see her underneath my eyelids, however. It was so incredibly vivid. I shifted a little in my chair, but it still felt hot. "Yes," I finally replied, "there was."

The prosecutor, after a lengthy pause, went on. "This girl, Cindy Davis was her name, was murdered that night. Did you happen to see the circumstances that led up to that terrible tragedy?"

"Yes I did," I replied.

"Could you please tell us what you overheard just before Cindy was brutally murdered?"

"I overheard Dr. Pestilence demand that she tell him what the secret identity of Molecularman was."

"And how did Miss Davis respond?" asked the prosecutor.

I had to hesitate. This is where it might really blow up in my face. I thought for the best way to answer the question, but all avenues were paths to lies. Perhaps against my better judgment I said "I never heard her speak. I only saw and heard Dr. Pestilence with his demands from her. I didn't see her until afterward." The look on Dr. Pestilence's face when I said that could only be described as awestruck, with his mouth opened in a silent "O."

Dr. Pestilence, sitting motionlessly, only grabbed my attention for a moment because the prosecutor turned abruptly around and raised a clenched fist. His face, contorted in an odd smile, struck me as more than a little frightening. The courtroom seems to be littered with frightening people today. No one, not even the kind looking bailiff, seemed to offer me a smile. It almost seems as if everyone is on the same team and I am just not willing to play. Very slowly the prosecutor paced until he stopped directly in front of me. He eyed me up and down while letting out a small "tsk..tsk." He breathed deeply and asked "Did you or did you not see the defendant murder Cindy Davis in the alleyway that night?"

I tried staring into nothingness again. But the apple was now intruding on my waking thoughts as well. Justice for all, no matter who they may be I thought. I started to reply and then choked on my own lie. I asked for a glass of water, which the bailiff gave me, as he laid his iron grip on my shoulder. I looked up into the eyes of a policeman. This was not the bailiff. This was the policeman of that dreadful night. He put his finger to his lips and motioned me to the side of the alley. He paused for a second and said "what you have seen and heard here cannot be retold. You must know that our city depends on it. If the truth should be known then we all that we have fought for will be lost. Do you understand?"

My heart beat rapidly and my legs were paralyzed. All I could do was nod my head. I will save my hero and Dr. Pestilence will be put away forever. The policeman leaned close to my face, so close that his foul onion breath made me recoil. His grimy complexion was silhouetted by an overhanging light. He whispered in a soft tone "now this is what you will say..."

I felt my arm shake and slowly I began to realize that I was back in the courtroom. Each trip back into the past brought me closer to that horror. What will make it go away? The prosecutor, red as a beet, was imploring the judge to force me to answer. I felt a calmness that I had never felt before. It was as if my inner soul suddenly became lighter. A light voice, coming from somewhere in my mind, comforted me. I raised my head and looked the prosecutor in the eye. I said "no, I didn't see Dr. Pestilence kill Cindy Davis."

The prosecutor's face froze for just a second, but he quickly recovered and said "did you or did you not, Mr. Rice give a deposition that the defendant did in fact murder Cindy Davis?"

"Yes I did."

"Then why," he began in an exasperated voice, "did you just say that you did not see him do it?" The prosecutor kept shaking his head no slightly in what appeared to be disbelief. Amazingly, in the back of the room, I could see Molecularman seated with his strong jaw resting on his fist. Even from that distance I could see that he was gnashing his teeth.

I could feel the tension in the air. Dr. Pestilence's grin actually seemed to widen in enjoyment at my predicament. If his grin got any wider it would be just a circle on his face. He does not even seem to care about his own situation. I can't help but wonder if he feels anything at all. Could that have been a byproduct of his discovery? I shuddered at the thought. I have come too far now to go back. The apple began to drip red as it faded from my mind. Slowly I said, in a voice that I knew must have sounded strained, "because... I was told to lie about what I saw and heard."

The stars flashed so rapidly that it became hard to see in front of me. The murmuring and hushed whispers continued for several minutes as the judge tried to restore order. In the confusion I lost track of where everyone was located. I grew fearful of the unknown. At the same time, however, a premonition of the known filled me with dread. Somehow, I know what the consequences will be. But I must stay true to the principle. It is, after all, the principle itself and not the man behind it that must be saved. Otherwise, what is the point in fighting for it?

The prosecutor began to pace so rapidly that the judge ordered him to sit still. At that precise moment Dr. Pestilence started to laugh and he continued to laugh so hard and so long that the judge finally ordered

him to be gagged. Finally, the prosecutor approached me and asked "who told you to lie about the case? Was it me? Anybody in the D.A.'s office? Who?"

"No one connected to the case. It was a police officer who I haven't seen again. He told me to lie at the murder scene."

"Why," he continued "did he want you to lie?"

This was the moment of truth. I knew that the world as I knew it would change forever. My life had been pretty decent to this point. No troubles, I paid my bills. I also had seen, in action, the superhero Molecularman. He was the only man capable of defeating Dr. Pestilence. His power to change his molecular structure made him invulnerable to the bacterial devices created by Dr. Pestilence. Their battle in the alleyway was furious and awesome to behold. They both possessed such extraordinary strength that it was amazing anyone could survive the terrific blows they each delivered to one another.

I will never forget the sight of Molecularman flinging Dr. Pestilence over fifty feet in the air to crash against a solid brick wall that crumbled from the impact. Nor will I ever forget how he stopped Dr. Pestilence's death darts by forming his body into a gaseous cloud. My skin prickled when I saw that happen. It prickles now because I know what he is capable of. Molecularman was a superhero and he was my boyhood idol. It was so heartbreaking to see that he was a false idol.

I scanned the courtroom, but could no longer find any trace of Molecularman. For some reason, that made my skin crawl. Somehow...I would rather *know* where he is. I answered the prosecutor in a hoarse whisper with "he wanted me to protect Molecularman."

"What does Molecularman, a superhero I might add, need in the way of protection from you?"

"Well, the truth of the matter is it was...Molecularman who murdered Cindy Davis and not Dr. Pestilence."

Several loud "No's" rang out in unison from all corners of the courtroom. The furor would not abate and finally the judge ordered that the courtroom to be cleared of spectators. When order was restored it was discovered that not only was Molecularman gone, but the whole Hall as well. Not a trace of a single superhero remained in the building.

The prosecutor, when questioning resumed, charged at me with an unrestrained fury. "You do realize what you have done," he shouted. "You have impugned the reputation of this city's greatest citizen. What would make you think that we could actually believe Molecularman murdered Cindy Davis? That man has saved our fair city again and again from the machinations of super villains such as Dr. Pestilence. What, pray tell, would be his motive?"



"Untitled," Elizabeth Bedell, Black Paper

I knew I was lost. They would never believe my story and I would 'disappear' somehow. But at least I was honest to poor Cindy Davis. I could at least be true to her. Justice may not come in the form of punishment, but at least she will have the justice of truth. "Mr. Prosecutor," I sternly said, "on the night of June the twelfth Molecularman murdered Cindy Davis because she knew his secret identity. I don't know how she knew, but she knew. Dr. Pestilence found out somehow and was prepared to get it out of her in some way or other. What I saw, though, was not a murder by Dr. Pestilence. Instead, I saw Molecularman thrust his arm, in the shape of a metal tube, backwards against the wall. I did not see what he had hit at first, but I heard the slight gasp of a female voice. I saw a little later that it was Cindy."

The prosecutor wringed his hands and then ran them through his hair. "It could have been an accident, couldn't it have?" he implored.

I slowly shook my head. "No," I said. "I clearly heard him tell Dr. Pestilence that he would be blamed for this crime and then he laughed. He laughed at how he had committed the murder and Dr. Pestilence would have to pay for it. He also said that she deserved it for trying to leak his identity."

The prosecutor and defense attorney, who strangely never said a word during all of this, accompanied the judge in her chambers to talk for several minutes. When they finally returned the judge looked at me and said "you are dismissed Mr. Rice."

I looked from the prosecutor back to the judge. I felt vulnerable. I said "your honor, may I have some protection? I fear for my safety. Molecularman may come after me."

The judge looked at me with solemn eyes and shook her head. "The entire Hall has left," she said. "Besides...I doubt any of them would offer to protect you...and none of us can do anything against a superhero. I'm afraid you are on your own Mr. Rice." She pointed to the doors and had the bailiff escort me out. As I left the courtroom I caught the smirk of Dr. Pestilence who was being led back to his cell. How will they hold him without a superhero? I knew the answer, of course. They can't. The city needs superheroes.

The lobby was full of people who stared with disgustful faces. I put on my coat and hat and lowered the brow as far as possible. I tried to leave the building as quickly as possible. Once outside I headed for home. The park is about halfway between the courthouse and my apartment and that thought led me towards its inviting garden. I leisurely walked down a commonly treaded path. The gravel kicked up from my heels with an accompanying crunch sound. A little on the way I spied an old bench that seemed to beckon for attention. I stopped and sat on this bench. It was cold, with the black paint flecking off it but somehow it gave me warmth.

The sun was setting in the west, its light slowly extinguishing. The blood red eye had given way to a soft purple one which seemed to smile as it fell on the horizon. I watched the last rays slip in the distance. My head grew light and my heart, in a silent salute, tugged. Looking down at my breast I saw the familiar apple of that fateful night. The birds seemed to be silent at the moment, perhaps as a tribute to the dying day. The warmth of the sun receded as I felt the onset of cold. I could not focus my eyes but it seemed I saw Cindy Davis waving to me in the distance. She pointed at the apple on my chest. I stared at it for a moment as it ripened to fruition. It was going to be a very large apple.

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Art



"Untitled," Photograph, Luciana Carniero

Tangled Up in the Blues

by Karen White

She was not late for work. She was adamant about that one fact up until the end. She woke up regularly, showered frugally, and then prepared for her day, as usual. She got into her car, drove to work at the prescribed speed limit of 55, got out of the car, walked to the door of the store, reached for her keys . . .

Her keys to the store were at home. She could see them, hanging mockingly on the peg beside the door, teasing her with their location that was diametrically opposed to her hands at that moment. Because she organized her day so stringently, she had fifteen minutes. She decided to try the bypass to get home and back again.

On the way home, she cursed herself. She hadn't indulged in any alteration to her morning ritual. She had not opted for a morning quickie—those days were gone, since he'd left. She hadn't spent the previous night drinking; she went to bed at an appropriate hour, not too early to be considered depressing, but not so late as to be insomnia. She woke up with no ill feelings or rush, so there was no logical reason for her forgetfulness.

As she coursed through her self-defeating cycle, she missed the exit for her part of town. She noticed almost immediately, but just that second too late to do anything about it. She hurriedly tried to adopt her contingency plan for such situations: take the next exit and turn around. She did take the next exit, but she did not turn around. As soon as she reached the end of the ramp, the world went blue.

The blue was not dark; she determined that she was not blind. No, the blue was bright, yet washed out. The road before her glowed with the pale, almost white blue. The trees were lined in a slightly darker version, but the core of the trees, the trunks and branches, were whitish blue. The street signs were illegible from the coloration, so she could not quite get her bearings.

She refused to panic; panic is the killer of souls and all things good, or at least her so her mother had mentioned everyday of her life. She'd organized her life in such a way that panic was never an option. However, her heart raced and her breathing picked up and her eyelids fluttered and the blue just stayed.

Not once did it occur to her that stopping the car was an option because stopping was never an option for this one. Her plan was to simply take the next exit and turn around. So far, the plan went awry because she had not turned around, so she immediately turned around, in the middle of the road, regardless of traffic. Thankfully, the road was deserted. Not so thankfully, the road had disappeared altogether.

No problem, she thought, of course, I can handle this; I can form a plan at the drop of a hat, this is my skill. She thought these things as the sky melded with the earth on the horizon, right before the horizon vanished. She thought these things as she heard the voices sing in her head that she deserved to wink out of natural existence; no one would really miss her if she went in one fell swoop. The voices were blue—washed out, faded jeans and too bright clear sky of the desert. They were pale mock-ups of the real thing; the voices of her mother's calm criticisms and her now gone husband's jubilant lies mixed with the rasp of her dying grandmother and gruff of her thoroughly anal boss. She then knew that the keys would never be found in this state of being; further, the house had gone—she just knew it, deeply and sincerely, she knew that her life as she once knew it was gone forever.

She kept driving, listening to the clamor in her head that drowned out all other sounds; the wind sheer against the car was absolutely no match for the phrase her mother's keening voice rammed into her consciousness: I'm . . . just . . . so . . . disappointed. Her husband rumbled a retort: I love you, I do, I need you, i do, I have to do this, you don't need me fucking up your life, I know just what you need. Grandmother's voice was all cobbler and maple syrup, with a hint of nicotine: Kiddo, just give it up, keep driving, keep driving, keep going, don't ever stop, if you stop you die, look at me, I stopped, I'm stopping, I will stop forever. Her boss stuck with the immediate situation at hand: What time is it? What do you mean you forgot the keys? What kind of assistant are you? What am I paying you for anyway?

Panic. The blue streak of panic consoled her, caressing her lungs as she gasped for breath, tracing over her stomach lining as the ulcer broke through, draping her eyes with the stark reality of the summer day. She'd forgotten her keys, but more importantly, she'd forgotten her lessons, her rules, herself. She smiled at the face in her deteriorating rear view mirror; the face that peered back, leering, was the face of Panic, her lover, her friend, her solace, her indulgence for the morning. She pulled over, still staring into Panic's blue eyes, cold and icy. She reveled in her fear; she ignored the polite police voice asking if she was okay. She just kept seeing the blue and loving the end of her existence.



"Untitled," Mia Montgomery, Prismacolor Pencils



"Untitled," Mia Montgomery, Charcoal

Fever

by Carmela Orsini

I'm under the protection of three comforters and my fleece pajamas, yet I still shiver. The air conditioner and fans are all turned off and it's the middle of July – in Georgia. Yes, I am sick.

I stare down the unlit hallway leading from my bedroom to the kitchen where medication awaits me in my small, early twenties apartment. By the sound of the clock hanging next to my fridge, the kitchen is approximately three inches from my ear, but my eyes deceive me. The kitchen must surely be at least half a mile from my warmer bed.

I have been fighting this battle in my head for quite some time. I must be able to work in the morning; you can't call in sick on your first day. So, should I take the fever medication in hopes that once my symptoms subside I will be able to find rest, or should I take the sleep medication hoping that a good night's rest will cure me? My aching limbs tell me that reaching the kitchen won't happen regardless my decision. The logical answer is to stay in bed where I at least have my three comforters, but come nine o'clock, I must leave the bed regardless of how I feel. So back to my dilemma: relief or sleep?

Still unsure of my answer, I decide to start my trudge to the kitchen. I peel off my covers like healthy layers of skin, unwillingly and painfully. The alarm clock glows at me. 1:26 am. I've been fighting sleep for only an hour. My journey is long, slow, and agonizing. Each step comes with a new ache and the constant shivering doesn't help the pains rushing down my spine.

I finally fumble for the lights. 1:22. Could it be that it's been an entire day since I left the comfort of my queen sized bed? Could it be that I'm stuck in some sort of space-time continuum where time runs backwards? Could it be that my clocks aren't synchronized? I shall ponder the thought no longer.

I am forced, however, to finally answer the question that has been haunting my sleepless slumber, but, alas, I cannot. A compromise then. Half a dose of each. Shouldn't kill me. Instead of taking the normal two pills of each, I shall take one pill of both. That ought to do something. The idea suddenly seems so obvious and genius to me, but it could just be the fever talking. Opening the pills is ridiculously harder than normal, but that's probably because my hands/fingers won't stop shivering/shaking from the cold. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge to swallow the pills with, but the smell of food makes me gag. I quickly resort to my time-tested, mother-not-approved remedy for vomiting – I eat a freshly picked booger. I never could figure that one out, but it works every time. Maybe the mouth is tricked. It was thinking the nasty stuff was going to come out, but it grows confused when the nasty comes in instead. I digress.

The trip back to my room seems to go much quicker with this newfound contemplation regarding boogers and vomit, but my symptoms and inability to sleep still remain. 1:29 am. Three minutes. Three stinking minutes to travel the twenty feet to my kitchen, take a couple of pills, and return back. Seems right.

Or perhaps the aliens are coming after all.

Buddha on the Hill

by Karen White

I woke up to the sound of metal clicking against the spokes of my wheelchair. The combination of the high-pitched keen-and-click with the vibration in the still air more than startled me; the grating noise amplified the mean hangover I had started the night before. I cracked an eyelid to see who'd broken into my room. All I could see was a sharp smile and a knitting needle.

"Well, Stanley. Wakey, wakey. Where's the money?"

I surveyed the situation. Standing beside my chair and holding the needle, I had Joey Jakes, money collector for our local gambling baron, Kevin the Mick. He carried the knitting needle because it wasn't considered a weapon. He had a huge Star of David around his neck and was wearing a yarmulke. The light creeping in from the blinds glinted off the silver, intensifying my headache.

"What money? I haven't bet in weeks."

"How do you like that. He hasn't placed a bet in weeks." Joey looked up as if expecting an answer. I glanced over at my dresser, trying to shade my eyes from the glare from around his neck. As I tracked my gaze over my collected shit, my eyes snagged on a red resin Buddha I'd won at a carnival. I loved that thing.

Joey looked back at me. "Seriously, Stanley, where's the money?"

I looked back at Joey. "What's the point, man? I don't owe, and even if I did, I don't have the money. Just go away." I yawned, feeling the pins and needles in my back from sleeping in the chair.

Joey chuckled. "Stanley, do you remember how you got your nickname?"

I rolled my eyes. "Of course I do, Joey."

Joey cut me off. "No, I love telling this one. One time, you owed Kevin some money, but wouldn't pay up. Apparently, you think that cripples get a discount." Joey laughed at his ever-present wit. "Anyway, I had to come see you, and you wouldn't pay. Just like now. I hit you so hard you went walleyed for days."

I looked back at Buddha. He smiled. "Great story, Joey. I still don't owe shit."

Joey ignored me. "What I never understood is why you're called the Butcher."

I kept my face still. "Cause it's my last name. Until you came into my life, sunshine, I used to be just Stanley Butcher."

Joey looked up again. "Aw. That's sweet. Didya hear that? He called me sunshine. We're like an old married couple." Joey laughed again, then looked at me. He scowled. "If you don't cough up, I'm gonna find the money somewhere."

I wised up. I knew I hadn't bet in weeks; nothing much had been going on. We didn't bet on sports or cards or anything like that. Instead, we bet on whether or not the cops would bust up the local crack house or if the whores would raise their prices to match the rise in gas prices. Stuff like that. But, the Mick took that shit seriously. He had weird odds, too. And I always lost. And he never gave a cripple discount. No, I realized that Joey was just trying to shake me down.

I stopped looking at Buddha and looked over at Joey, nonplussed. "Joey, I'm not givin' you crap. I ain't got any money. I ain't gonna let you hit me. Just let me sleep off the drunk, please, for God's sakes, I just want to sleep, maybe eat, just leave me alone." I heard the blubbering rise in my throat, the fake shame. He always fell for that.

"All right, man. I'm comin' back later. I gotta feelin' that Kevin's bookkeeping will show your error. I swear you bet on Jesus Freak last week."

I woke up quick, headache disappearing. "What happened to Jesus?"

Joey walked over to the unmade bed on the other side of my chair. I felt an amazing urge to trip him, but if I had, he would've found out I could walk. Buddha sat with his belly, governing over us all.

"Well, the Jesus Freak got caught, finally. He'd been pulling the legs off those fish things on the backs of the cars by the school. All those teachers got the fish with legs. Anyway, the cops got him." Joey paused for a brief moment of silence for a fallen hero. "They took him in around 10 last night. He was jitterin' and spewin' some crap about being a fisher of men or some such nonsense."

While Joey talked, I scratched the scruff on my face and thought about ol' Jesus. He was a squirrely guy. I figured he'd go down long before now. If he wasn't prying off those fish legs, he was taking a permanent marker to pagan bumper stickers or stealing the letters off church signs so they'd only say "Jesus hates cats" and nothing else. I liked Jesus, though. He was good for talk on the street, and he was the only one who knew my secret.

"Well. Sad for Jesus. Get out Joey." I wheeled back from the bed and hit the wall behind me, knocking a healthy amount of dust from the windowsill. I sneezed; Joey laughed.

"Bless you. All right, man. I'll go for now. But I'll be back later."

With that, he went back out of the door he'd pried open, leaving it open. I wheeled over to shut it, then stood up. Buddha stood smiling in the very center of the dresser. I noticed the stuff on my dresser was all arranged, and then I remembered the last time I saw Jesus. He'd come to visit and kept fiddling with the stuff on my dresser.

I swear; I could've taken a ruler to the spaces and they'd have all matched up. Around his feet were five coins, in a half-moon shape, all quarters. I felt rich. On top of his head, like a halo, was a plastic pull from a cigarette pack. Now that surprised me; I never picked up smoking, so he must have brought in the pull.

Running parallel to the happy guy he'd placed two matches, one with head down, the other with head up. Below the quarters he'd lined up a used sucker stick that had lint all over it.

I stared at the picture for a minute, trying to figure out the pattern and thinking of Jesus. I realized how bummed I really was that he'd been picked up. The last time I'd seen him, he was excited about something he'd read, something I'd inadvertently turned him on to. He was trying to see the connection between Jesus and Buddha, mostly because I'd given him the quick history of Buddhism one day while we were working college students for spare change.

"So it's all about suffering; is that all you see?"

When he had asked me that, I kind of jumped in my chair. "No, I guess the suffering means something, like it makes life whole or something. I don't really know, Jesus. All I know is that in this life we have to get it right, or else you repeat it. Or maybe that's reincarnation. I get confused." I scratched my face, thinking for a minute. "All religions are connected. The only differences seem to be after you die."

Jesus chuckled. That's when I noticed the new lines around his eyes and how bird-like his body was getting. I started to wonder if he was sick or something or maybe just getting old. We all get old quick on the hill, old and tired.

"Well, I don't know about getting it right, but I haven't done much in my life one way or another. I just try to spread the word, but I think I've forgotten what the word is."

It was after that day that I saw him on the street, almost jumping out of his skin with excitement. He was carrying a book, a big dusty looking thing he said he had gotten from the Mick. He didn't tell me what it was, just that reminded him of what the word was. Needless to say, I promptly forgot his vague excitement until Joey mentioned that the cops had picked him up. I decided that my goal for the day was to find out about Jesus to ask him about the message he'd left on my dresser.

I pulled out some sort of fresh clothes from the top drawer of my dresser. I hadn't changed in about a week, and my room didn't involve any sort of shower. The building I was in used to be some old hotel, but the city condemned it a long time ago. The guys who took it over fixed it up for low rent; they let me stay for free because they felt sorry for me, but not quite sorry enough to let me use the bathroom every so often. The wheelchair has its advantages sometimes, when I need somewhere to stay, but I hated the lie. Besides, if you gotta take a leak in an alley littered with the homeless, and you're in a wheelchair, you can't just stand up and piss. It's a bitch, but a guy's gotta do what he's gotta do, I guess.

I got dressed in the uniform for our side of town, jeans and a T-shirt with some beer logo on the front and a titsy girl on the back. I combed through my hair with my fingers. It felt like straw; I'd bleached it months before in an attempt to look a bit different if, say, Joey came asking after me. Sometimes the wheelchair has its disadvantages, too, because different hair doesn't erase it in people's minds.

I sat back in the chair and wheeled into the hall. People were walking back and forth, but nobody noticed me or said anything. This place always seems to have a thousand people all the time, moving like ants at a picnic. They never really slow down and just sit. They just scurry along, usually in a straight line, unless I'm in the hall, then they swerve just enough to go around.

At the end of the hall, I stopped to get on the old elevator. When I got on, I noticed that there was stuff in the corner. I hit L, let the elevator go about a floor, and then pushed the emergency stop. I got down on the floor to look at the little shrine in the corner. It was a smaller version of the Buddha in my room, sitting back on his haunches with a grin. On the floor around him was the same array as on my dresser, just slightly different stuff. Instead of quarters, there were pennies. Instead of matches, there were silver bobby pins.



"Untitled, American Legion Post 135, 2005," M. F. Greco, Photograph

The cigarette wrapper had become the pull from a paycheck. The sucker stick was an unused coffee stirrer.

I squatted down and picked it all up, wondering when Jesus could have done it and why no one had messed with it. When I got back in the chair, I stashed everything in the bag I have on the back. For some reason, leaving it there felt wrong.

I kicked the panel with the floor buttons, and the emergency stop button popped back out. I pushed L again and descended to the world.

I rolled out into the lobby and stopped to think. I decided to go to the Mick first, figuring he'd know about Jesus. The Mick holds court in a rundown house about six blocks from my building, up the hill that eventually goes back down toward the college. My building is downhill from his, so I geared up for the ascent to his house.

He'd been there forever. I'd hit the streets ten years before; he was more than comfortably situated by then. The cops never went near his house. I don't know if he paid them off or if they just didn't really care. The Mick was fairly harmless, he barely broke the law with the gambling; he didn't deal, and he didn't pimp. Furthermore, he doesn't condone people who do. He always said there were levels of sin.

When I got to the house, I stopped to pick up a rock. There was a short flight of stairs to the door and if someone was on the porch, they'd usually help me up. No one was out, so I chucked the rock at in the general direction of the doorbell, hoping not to break the little window beside the door. Luckily, with my perfect aim, I managed to hit the door, not the window.

The Mick opened the door a crack and looked out. All I could really see was a tuft of white hair and one wide-open, bloodshot eye. When he saw it was me, he came out onto the porch. He was wearing a white T-shirt, pristine, and black pinstriped pants. His stomach hung over his waistband like the sun, eclipsing his feet anytime he looked down.

"Stanley. How's business?" He leaned against the railing leading up the stairs.

"It's fine, Mick. I had an interesting visit this morning from Joey Jakes. Know anything about that?"

He crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows in innocence. "No, man. I haven't seen Joey since they got Jesus Freak last night. What did he want?"

Ahh, which to start with? I wanted to hear the news about Jesus, but didn't want to seem too desperate. Oh well, plow right in as my mother always said.

"What exactly happened to Jesus last night?"

The Mick chuckled. "Well, as usual, he was betrayed by the one closest to him. Well, not really closest. Joey called in a tip about vandalism, and then the cops came. Simple enough, but they found him beaten to a pulp." The Mick's smile drew down.

"So, you threw the odds then set him out for the wolves?" Admittedly, I was pissed. Bad enough Mick cheated, but I couldn't figure out why the Mick would have him beaten. He'd never done that sort of thing before.

"I don't like that one bit. I never meant for him to be hurt. He was a sacrifice of sorts, but he was supposed to go down quiet and smooth. He even knew what was coming. I told him last week to prepare him, and I gave him a book to pay him off. I didn't have him beaten, just arrested."

"What was the book?"

The Mick sat on the stoop. "Nothing important, just something I got at the college library book sale. Some book comparing Buddhism to Christianity, showing the history of both."

I sat back in my chair, realizing that I'd been leaning forward the whole time. My back muscles moaned, reminding me that I'd climbed the hill. The Mick refused to look at me while I stretched, pity dripping from his eyes.

"Well, is Jesus in jail or is he in the hospital or what?" I asked.

The Mick looked at me for a moment. "What business do you have with him, Stanley? He owe you money or something?"

"Nope, just curious. Joey visited me this morning and brought it up, so I came up to find out the whole story."

The Mick's eyes brightened up. "What did Joey want with you?"

I told him about Joey waking me up, shaking me down. He barely moved during the story, but his face was cloudy. "Well, I didn't send him. By my books, you paid up on the last deal and haven't been back in a while. I've missed your company, kiddo." He sat down on the first step. "I gotta talk to that Joey about freelancing. I've been hearing lots of things about bully tactics. His freelancing is messing with my business."

Admittedly, it was hard to take the Mick's business too seriously sometimes, at least until Jesus got hurt. I'd had respect for the man before he admitted to throwing his games; he was usually fair about money, and he never demanded more than his due. Sometimes he let me crash at his place when I was too tired to wheel back to the hovel in the sky. He was a generally good guy, so I could see how Joey's newfound sense of freedom was bothersome for him. He didn't want the good thing he had going to become a complication, and he certainly didn't want the cops to notice his trade. I guess the Mick was right; some sins are worse than others.

The Mick grinned, flashing some very tobacco stained teeth. "You know, Stanley, I've always liked you. I could use you in the business; the cops never notice cripples. Maybe I should kick Joey out, bring you in."

"No man, you know I can't do that. It's just the betting. I don't wanna get into anything involving money collection. Seems wrong." I regretted letting that slip.

"Ah, so the Butcher has a conscience. Interesting. All these years, I always figured you for another guy on the streets."

I laughed. "For the most part I am. I do want to talk to Joey though, ask him about Jesus. I wonder about that beating. Know where he is?"

"I don't know, kiddo. All I know is he is nowhere near the college. Stay away from there." He stood up to go back inside.

I smiled. "Thanks, Mick. Sorry about being mad, but I just want to talk to this girl."

"Right. Come back later; I got a fresh game to bet on. There's some weird stuff lately on the street, weird like Jesus Freak. Something about statues, I'm looking into it."

I'd been rolling backwards to get ready to take off, not really listening, until I heard statues. "What kind of statues?"

"I don't know yet, just people been finding some weird little statues. You seen any?"

I shook my head. Mick shrugged his shoulders, smiled, twiddled his index finger goodbye in my direction, and then went back inside to his bookkeeping and soaps.

I coasted down the hill toward the school, figuring the Mick was protecting his guy, or he had some other interest in Joey in light of Jesus. My arms still ached from the climb up the hill to the Mick's house, so I was kind of glad Joey was downhill from me. When I got to the campus, I decided to start with the gym locker room, mostly cause I could've used a shower. Another advantage of a wheelchair is that college students don't question your presence in their space.

After my shower, I tried to decide where on campus to start looking for Joey. I thought about the quad, and then I thought about Joey coasting for allies. If he was going to take on the Mick, he needed some help, and college kids were always easy to persuade. Jesus and I used to talk them into helping us all the time. We'd look for the ones who'd volunteer at the weekly Hari Krishna free food-a-thon. They always were willing to do anything to feel like they'd changed the world.

As I rolled to the quad, I thought about how Jesus found out my secret. He'd run into me outside of a diner close to the hovel. He talked me into going in with him, saying I looked like I could use some cheering up.

The tired waitress took us to a booth so I could sit at the edge, took our drink order, coffee for both, and left. I grabbed a menu, just to have something to look at other than his face. Jesus sometimes made me want to hide, like he could read all of the bad things going on in my head. He pulled a pack of crushed cigarettes out of the top pocket of his Goodwill special shirt, along with a box of kitchen matches. He tapped a cigarette out of the pack and lit it, exhaling heavily after the initial drag. I kept staring at the pictographic menu designed for the tired, drunk, or uneducated masses that frequent diners in the seedy part of college towns. I focused on the picture of a smiling pancake, the kids' sunny-side up special. I tried to mimic the bacon strips and pulled my lips up into a grin.

I looked over at him, trying to see if my attempt at a pleasant facial expression was working. He was looking at me, as if reading my mind.

"Stanley," he started, hesitantly, "I know all about you."

My smile faded. "What do you mean?"

Jesus sighed, sadness expelling from his lungs with the smoke. "Stanley, I know your secret. What I don't know is why."

The waitress returned with our coffees and a handful of creamers. She asked if we were ready to order, her nose wrinkled as if she could smell our lack of mommy and daddy's money. Jesus told her to give us some time. I took a sip of the hot coffee, trying to clear my head, trying to clear the dullness from the shock.

"Ok. So what's my big secret?"

Jesus smiled placidly. "Well, I know you can walk."

I nodded at him to go on, while I sipped some more of the coffee.

"I figured it out when you wore those wool socks I gave you for Christmas."

"How?"

Jesus smiled brightly. Apparently she had paid attention to the sunny-side up special. "You would complain about your feet itching."

"How did he know about me?"

I laughed at that. I had been covering my tracks so well, but I trusted Jesus. I got comfortable around him, at least enough to admit to potential athlete's foot. "Well, good for you, your brain cells fire more often than I gave you credit for, after all."

Jesus scowled. "I don't think it's funny. Why do you keep yourself in that chair?"

I sat looking out the dingy window, trying to understand why I was staring out the dingy window instead of coming clean. Jesus lit another cigarette, and the waitress returned for our orders. I dimly heard Jesus tell the waitress that we'd only be having coffee.

We sat in silence. I thought about Jesus and my Buddha. I swallowed down the fear and the dregs of my now cold coffee. Our waitress really sucked.

"I got the wheelchair from my mother's garage before I left home. It was my grandmother's, but she'd died."

Jesus tugged his earlobe. "Why'd you take it?" He sipped her coffee. "Was it to make sure you'd make money panhandling?"

I looked over at him. "No. I took it because I had to see what it was like, stuck in a chair."

I felt my heart racing and my face growing red. Jesus raised his eyebrows, silently asking me what my problem was. My problem was big. There was no reason for me to tell Jesus any of this. I tried to decide whether or not I should just move on. There was no reason for me to be sitting there. All of a sudden, I felt

an urge to stand up and run out of the restaurant.

This time, Jesus really did read my mind. "Stanley, don't be scared. I'll keep your secret. I'm mostly just curious."

That seemed to work; my life story tumbled out of my mouth. I told him how I'd put my sister in a wheelchair when she was ten and I was sixteen. I stuck around for a couple of years after that. Mom had her put in a home, and I visited her everyday. No one blamed me. It was an accident.

We had been playing in the woods; I was teaching her how to camp before she went on her summer trip with the Girl Scouts. She really wanted to get her badges that summer; it was all she talked about. We were crossing a stream, well, more like a small river. She slipped. I ran to get help, and once we got her out of the water, and the ambulance got there, she'd woken up, but she couldn't move her legs. The doctors told us that she wouldn't be able to walk and something about hitting her back just right on the rocks. No one blamed me.

I left because I couldn't face her anymore. She could move her arms a little, but her legs were shriveled little branches, limp and useless. I wanted to trade with her. I wanted to punish myself since no one else would.

After I told Jesus the story, he sat quietly, sipping his coffee the waitress finally refilled. Finally, he spoke. "No one blames you." With that, Jesus stood, pulled me from the table, left a five for the crappy waitress, then pushed me out, past the empty booths, past the empty hostess station, out to the empty street.

After that, Jesus never mentioned it again. We stuck to amateur religious debates and discussion of the weather. He was good on his word; he never told anyone the secret. I owed him.

When I got to the quad, I decided to sit in the sun and keep an eye out for Joey. It seemed strangely deserted, then I realized that it was Sunday. Kids were all asleep in their dorms.

I hadn't seen my sister in ten years. I didn't know whether or not she was still alive. I started sweating, realizing that she might have really lost it when I left. I wouldn't blame her, really; I never said goodbye, just stole our dead grandmother's wheelchair from the garage and wheeled out of her life. I abandoned her, and I abandoned my mother.

I thought about Buddha. He always smiled, even though he preached suffering as a natural way of life. He danced his way into sainthood, waving his hat at his followers. At least, that's what the little statues tell me. All I could figure was the Buddha means calm, but not stagnant boredom.

After a while, I heard someone walk up behind me, the grass crunching underfoot. I smelled desperation and old sweat. Joey. I slowly turned the chair around in the manicured grass to face him. We locked glares. He flashed his shark teeth. I kept stoney faced. Any minute, I thought, we'll draw and shoot. I started wondering if it was high noon on the quad.

Finally, Joey broke the silence. "Hi, Stanley."

I nodded.

"What're you doing here?" he growled.

"I want to know what happened to Jesus."

"What do you care?"

I rolled over his foot, then tried not to laugh when he cursed. "I care because he'd my friend. He's not some playing piece in one of your games with the Mick."

Joey grimaced, still rubbing his toes. He looked like a pissed off stork. "What game you mean, my walleyed, crippled friend."

Ignoring the insults, I went on. "Why did you beat him up?"

Joey pulled up his yarmulke to scratch his bald spot. "You ever read about Job?"

I nodded.

"Well, I wanted to see if he'd help me out against the Mick. We need a change of scenery on the hill. Well, Jesus refused. I mean, the Mick threw his bet, threw him out to the pigs. I just wanted to help him out."

"So, putting him in the hospital helped him how?"

Joey's eyes darted around. "He said no. He said he didn't owe any allegiance to anyone. He kept babbling about some Zen shit, something about life unfolding and being neutral."

Jesus had taken up Buddhism with a vengeance. I felt a prickle at the corner of my left eye, a tear for getting Jesus into that mess to begin with. I should never have told him why I kept that Buddha, that reminder of suffering.

Joey stared at me, starting to smile. He'd finally stopped pouting over his foot. "Speaking of which, you wanna go into business. I could use someone to roll with, someone who knows how to bring people to their knees."

I rolled over his other foot, bringing him to his knees. "You mean like this, Joey. No. Like Jesus, I don't owe anyone anything. Besides, I think I need to get off the streets for a while."

I rolled backwards away from Joey, keeping my eyes on him. He stayed put, rubbing his foot, face red. I kept moving backwards, then turned around and rolled back downhill to the Mick's.

When I got there, the Mick was on the front stoop, playing golf solitaire. He looked down at me, me to start talking.

"Here's Jesus, Mick?"

The Mick sighed. "He's at the university hospital. That's the only place that would take him in with no insurance."

"What exactly what happened, don't you?"

Joey taking Jesus's eyes tired and drooping. "I know how it looks, Stanley. I just couldn't have Jesus taking in customers. He's out of the business now, though. Jesus didn't deserve that on

account of Joey's ego."

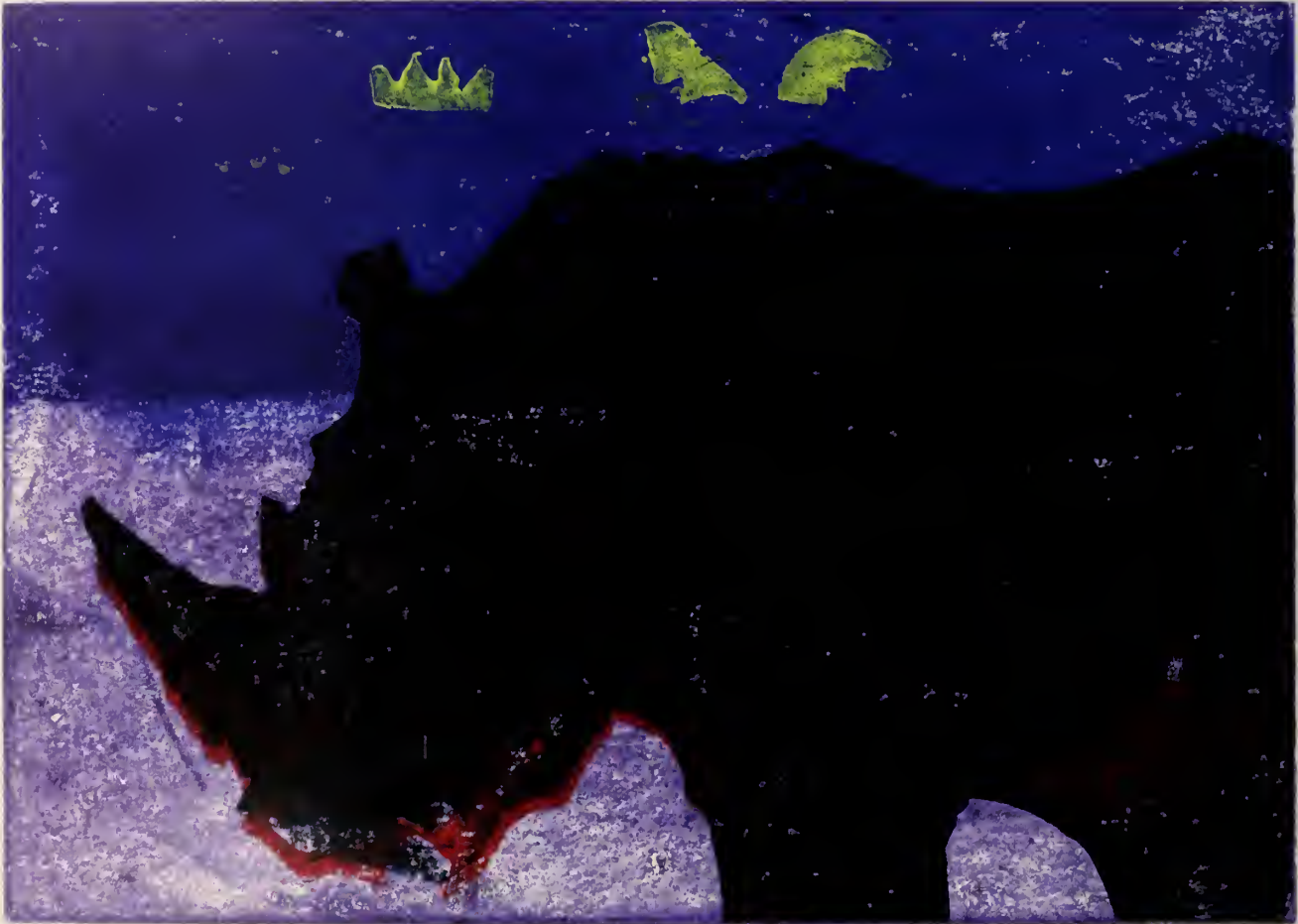
I sat there for a while, watching the Mick finish his game. He cheated four times, making sure he'd win. I wasn't terribly surprised.

"Stanley, none of this really matters in the long run. I know this. You and Jesus have the right idea. Just keep out of it. I'll settle Joey."

I nodded and stood up. The Mick dropped his flip deck on the porch as I walked up the three stairs. He stood up, and I put my hand out for him to shake. He took it. I turned around and left him standing on the porch.

I walked up the hill. The sun framed the hospital, giving the building a silver lining. I walked in and asked for Jesus Freak's room number. The nurse told me. I never would have thought that was his real name.

When I walked into the room, Jesus winked at me. He patted the space left on his hospital bed. We talked about suffering. We talked about Joey and the Mick and their little games. We talked about the weather. Finally, we talked about my sister. I left Jesus there, satisfied that he'd be fine without me. I walked out of the hospital and back down the hill to my new life.



"Rhinocerangel," Dean Miller, Ink on Fine Paper



"Untitled," Elizabeth Bedell, Mixed Media



"Untitled," Digital Photograph, Luciana Caniero

The Shotgun Blast Toe-Tap

by John Stockel

dance with me as i play the shotgun blast
toe-tap your way to heaven
smoky winding jazz bar blues guitarist sets the tempo
for the dance
the strung out white faces eyes closed
snapping fingers in time with the drip drip drip drip
of the saline waterfall runoff cover-up
as she dances around the room and expects everything of no one
but perfection in the sensual swaying of her hips and the flow of her step
this night is her perfect performance
silent standing ovation as she takes one last bow

History of the Motion Picture

by Rob Adair

1400 watts of light broke through the darkness
What was once... A still-life portrait of a fading dream
Scratched out words in a notebook with broken seams
A cover with smeared black ink
The perfect story

Memories long forgotten and buried
Decaying on love's battlefield
After a long fought war
The dust settled and the firelight ceased
Too many lost lives
It ends with a treaty

"You're right, maybe we aren't meant for each other"

You said I don't understand
"This pain can only be carried by me
It's not your fault but just let me be!"
I surrender and remain wounded
Yet refuse care, my wounds only worsen
Now that you are not there

The dream has now vanished
For it was only a dream
A portrait remains stagnant
Staged in a picturesque fantasy
The smiles a façade
The joy a masquerade
Anything to hide the truth of our ways

{Enter stage left}
A rate of 48 frames a second
A spectrum of black and grays
This is my *Casablanca*, my *Charade*
Talk of conquest over coffee
Stupid jokes and political conspiracy theories
Between the awkward silence
It's you and me on the silver screen
Waltzing through our thoughts and dreams

The perfect story could not be written
It can only be lived
Forget the orchestra and the on cue tears
Bring forth the cheap dinners
The long drives to nowhere
How it ends is yet to be seen
But I thank God
That even if it was just for a moment
You've cleansed me of the fears I once carried



"Scattered Fiction," Mia Montgomery, Silver Gelatin Print

Love Knows No Time

Travis J. Wallace

My girlfriend told me she LOVE me
we've been together five months and she already LOVE me
I's only five if I stretch it a little,
but since the first time I saw her pretty face there was LOVE in the middle
so that leaves her and I and the end
so we had a ménage à and from the trois relations began
at first she didn't wanna let me in
but if LOVE knocks once I's not leavin' like Jehovah's witness
at least let me appeal to emotion's senses
wrap you in LOVE like a Hershey's kisses
take the wrapper off cause I's so delicious
and now I feel like she could be my Mrs., and I could be her Mr. Buddy LOVE
so Ms. Purdy give your man a hug, or better yet tell Rudy that my name ain't BUD
but my last name Jones and my first is LOVE
so if your last name Jones then I LOVE to hug LOVE to kiss in time reminisce
of how this rose bud blossomed and lead to bliss, SWEET SADIE,
reminiscent of a lady, Holiday....Billie singin' songs that sway me
Ol' school R&B songs of LOVE makin'
Ordinary People livin' LOVE amazing,
Amazing LOVE livin' in Hearts places
In LOVE and out I feel like I trade places
In LOVE I stay with BEAUTY amazing
In LOVE I stay with a mind thas adjacent
In verse I write my passion to MY LADY.

Merry-Go-Round of a Memory

by Mia Montgomery

I cut the moon in half
And stole the stars
I placed them all on sticks
And went around the merry-go-round

Did you forget that time
Time of childhood games
Whistles, plastic cars, and it's all the same
Let's do it again

I cut the moon in half
And stole the stars
I placed them all on sticks
And went around the merry-go-round
All to see if you would remember again
But you didn't make a sound

Watching the broken moon fade away
Sparked an old memory of . . .

Never growing up
Staying in my field of ladybugs and hugs
Rolling around on the lawn
Staying up till dawn

Come back to the dream
Of bursting lights of fireflies,
The moon, and the stars
Let them collide into our
Everyday morning glory of sunshine
Let's make them blissfully ours again

Woman

by Autumn Flynn

Feet in the stirrups, at the wall I squint,
Where a dancer's poise appears effortless.
Degas' dame leaps, not a step does she miss,
As I (and this belly fat with life) lament.
It was a cruel trick to hang such a print
In an obstetrician's office like this
Next to posters of ovarian cysts
And women with cups over toilets bent.
"This is woman," whispered she to me.
What did she know with her quaint pointed toe,
Rosettes and tulle skirt floating about her?
"Under my satin slippers lie gnarled feet
From hours of practice and bone-breaking woe.
Discomfort is woman." That, I concur.



"Untitled," Digital Photograph, Luciana Caniero

Truth

by Erin Christian

As each blade of grass and the petal of every flower is cleansed after the kiss of morning dew, thus am I renewed after I close my eyes and my soul meets yours.

I melt under your smiling gaze as softly as ice sickles thaw when winter is in its death throes; my walls trickle down into meaningless puddles leaving me
vulnerable
bare
warm
eager
open

To hold your hand in mine is to take hold of all the world and all its splendor, it is to know what it is to truly be alive
and feel the vibrant electricity of life coursing through my veins.

To dance with you is to dance among the stars and know no bounds of earthly time or reason, but to surrender
with wild abandon
to the eternal music of the universe and lose myself in its pounding rhythm.

To know you is to know no fear, but to feel worries and doubts weakly submit themselves to be consumed by the flames of lust for adventure.

To hear you sing
with the joy in your heart
resounding with such a force, as if all the earth were rejoicing with you,
brings crystal tears of passion streaming down my cheeks.

To say we have seen three years pass since we first spoke
is to say we've but lived in the blink of an eye compared to all of the changing seasons that lay before us
let me change and grow with you.

Your love
your friendship
your soul is so bright
strong
and full of promise
that I yearn to bask in its light forever.

Sunset

by John Stockel

every day i
search for the one
girl who i can give my life to
and every night i find her
right where i left her
in my dreams

and when i wake
up in the morning
i understand why the sun
can only take sitting still for so long
before heading back to sleep
to make way for the moon

but i still
dont understand
how you can kiss me
and strip me of my clothes
soaking wet from discovering angels
in the freshly fallen snow of your front yard
only to kiss me goodbye nine short hours later
as i board a 747 back to the Georgia Sun
and you somehow forget all about me
in the midst of a time difference
that keeps me up one extra
hour past happiness
to pretend i can
sit and watch
the sunset
fade with
you



"Untitled," Crystal Poole Dummitt, Silver Gelatin Print

Adventure

by Erin Christian

I opened my bloodshot eyes and beheld a new world

I saw a rose colored dawn break over a never before seen horizon and after seemingly endless sleepless torment, I felt the unfamiliar stirring of joy within my breast.

I had endured hours of rocking and shaking, listening to those around me snore in their peaceful repose, doubting and fretting, crying and regretting, all to find hope in clouds bathed in ethereal golden light.

Emerging from an everlasting night of darkness and despair, I absorbed the promise of the dawn in my soul and allowed adventure to seduce my heart again.

I was in a silver capsule, hurtling across tracks and through tunnels toward a destination the farthest from home I'd ever been, a destination I never dreamed I'd reach.

Heroes

by Joe O'Connor

It was in times past that heroes would carry swords. They would hold their shields high to protect their brothers in line. When the time came to push the enemy back together, these men would march, confident that their brothers would protect them. Men would fall to protect their brothers in arms.

In those days, men were to come back carrying their shields high or being carried on them. It was better that a man died than for him to have thrown his shield away, for in throwing away his shield, he threw away his brother's life. Men who died to protect their brothers were revered; those who froze in panic were unmentionable.

Men in the days of yore knew war. They could smell it on the wind, that grand fire which men crave. They could hear it in the bellowing of their kinsmen. They would see the foe and know him. Men on both sides were just that: men. After the battles they would go home to bask in the love of their families. They would cherish their wives and play with their children and they would not take these happy times for granted. These memories would be their lifeblood on the plains of war. They would fight in hopes they would return for more happy times but with the foreknowledge that fate might have other plans.

It was all in the hands of their brothers on those battlefields long ago. Today is no different.

Don't Give Me

by Amanda Mathis

I must be strong,
(I don't want the flag.)
I must pretend,
(Please don't give me the flag.)
It can't be.
(Don't play the horn - that sad, sad song.)
My ears cannot stand it;
My heart hates it.
I love you - I don't want it past tense.
I need you - Why can't you stay?
This was always a possibility,
but why now, but why ever?
(Don't give me the flag.)
The regulation folding,
The stern, but sympathetic soldiers before me—
My heart is never to be the same now that
I have the flag.

Creating a New Dream

by Mia Montgomery

I wanted to take you in
And be lost in you
You gave me a reason
To lose count of the stars
And each dream I had wished upon them
I don't want the empty spaces in my life
To win
Open up all my doors
Clean out the webs and traps
Open up a new beginning for me
You will have to run to the middle
While I walk
'Cause right now I'm walking with a limp
I'm trying to keep my heart steady
As I get ready
To meet you in the middle
When we meet
I'll make a new wish upon a star
And create a new dream



"Untitled," M. F. Greco, Photograph

