

Fifteen

by Mark Schlotterbeck

“How’s the gyro?” I mumbled as I attempted to chew and swallow the first bite of my hot dog. C.E. was struggling with his own food that he had bought at a window restaurant.

“Pretty good,” he replied, “but a little messy.” A piece of his gyro dropped to the curb where we sat. The sun was moderately warm once it managed to peek through the overcast sky, and the smell of roasting chestnuts caught the October breeze and was wafted under our noses. We sat along Ninth Avenue chewing like horses and observing the various people walking by; New York City has a million of the most unusual people in the world. The streets, neither crowded nor desolate, allowed us to do as we pleased without much distraction.

The year was 1994 and C.E. and I were eighteen and highly experimental. We had taken the train into the city for some harmless shopping and to eventually end up at the “Fifteen” show, a punk rock band, among others that C.E. had gotten me into. C.E., an abbreviation for Carl-Erik, had been my best friend since childhood. We had been through thick and thin together and had experienced everything, from tossing stones into a nearby secluded lake to participating in a foreign exchange program to Germany. So, anytime one of us was introduced to something new, we would share it with the other. At that time, it was punk rock. His two sisters had been involved in the scene for years and C.E. slowly gained interest. Then, when he played me Green Day’s first album, I gained interest, too. It was different, and we liked being different; and throughout time, the image came with the music.

We walked the city streets in hopes of a new experience, which New York was always been able to provide for us in the past. C.E. was sporting his cropped bleached hair, a heavily pinned blue jacket and dickies. And I too was fashioning a unique look - blue-black hair, a “Descendants” T-shirt and black Chuck Taylors.

We wandered on the cracked sidewalks of Greenwich Village reciting familiar lyrics and sharing obscure thoughts. Every so often, we’d check out a particular store in hopes of purchasing something new. We bought some records on Bleeker Street and visited some zine shops on Houston Street and then continued south. From noon until dusk we walked the breezy streets and avenues and eventually found ourselves at St. Mark’s Place, the place we believed to be our home.

C.E. and I walked the curb, avoiding puddles from last night’s rainfall, heading toward the show on Livingstone Avenue. St. Mark’s Place was full of life, as it was every time we visited. Some people viewed it as a place to shop for eccentric products or visit outdoor cafés, but C.E. and I saw it as the center of the punk rock community. Then, as we walked up St. Mark’s Place, was the exact moment *it* happened- I felt accepted. I had been yearning for years for that moment to arrive. In the past, I had tried several new things, hoping to find and stick with something that I truly loved, but after a while I would lose interest. I had experienced everything from sports to Heavy Metal, but nothing clicked. But punk rock was special. Not only did I feel accepted, but I felt accepted in a thriving community in the greatest city in the world. At any other location, we would have stood out, without a doubt, but at St. Mark’s we blended like camouflage, and it made me feel good, with cold shivers running up and down my spine and tingling sensations lingering in my head. At that exact moment, I had experienced something that I had heard people talking about for years: “finding yourself.” I was only eighteen, but honestly felt as if I was an established person, I had found myself. From that point on, every mohawk or pierced body part I saw brought an even wider smile to my face and a gleam to my eyes. Yet, although we had always complained about the clique-riddled society in the past, in actuality, we had let ourselves become a part of it. But I tried to make excuses. I figured that although punk rockers are considered a form of clique, they stand for something positive, unlike many of the other groups. For example, gangsta rappers. I never understood them because they promote violence

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FIFTEEN CONT.

and I had a great time at the "Fifteen" show at "ABC No Rio," a punk rock landmark, before heading home to Jersey.

But back at home, things were different, and along with the music and image came the attitude. I guess I wanted to prove that I was somehow superior than the rest, with the exception of my close friends, because while everyone else was spending their weekends at home, I was wandering around New York City, seeing my favorite bands and meeting interesting people. The music gave me so much energy that at times I became a troublemaker.

I can still remember the times C.E. and I would cruise around town in my Volkswagen Jetta, its back window decorated with punk rock stickers and "Screeching Weasel" in my tape deck. We would turn my stereo up real loud and bounce to the vigorous beats and electric guitar riffs. A lot of the time, we would talk about people that we either disliked or just didn't understand. When we spoke of such things, we were usually quite unkind.

"Look at this guy...personality plus," I said sarcastically to C.E. while in the Jetta. A large rugged-looking kid sporting a football jersey and a shaved head was walking along the street.

"Yeah, I'm sure his father's real proud," said C.E.. We laughed. Usually when we saw someone like this, C.E. and I would verbally rip them apart, and this guy was no exception. We didn't think too highly of jocks.

"Good game last week, ya big goon," I yelled from the car window as we sped by. This was relatively harmless behavior, but at the same time, uncalled for.

It's safe to say that my personality was in a state of flux, and I wish I could say it was for the better. My carefree ways also began to affect my life at home and the fact that my father disapproved of my image made matters worse. My father would say that I looked like a homeless kid, mostly because of the patches I wore on my clothing. I always told him that I didn't care what I looked like, it was my personality that mattered. He didn't necessarily disagree with that concept, but still suggested that I lose the look. My parents were also extremely strict when it came to education and curfews. They wanted to see me doing my homework and coming home at a decent hour so that I had plenty of rest for the following school day. But I wanted to be out on the town having fun, just like the other kids my age. Whenever my parents restricted me from this sort of activity, I began to rebel with disregard to any consequences.

I soon learned a new way to express my rage and rebellion—through music, which led me to start, with two other friends, a punk rock band called Pipsqueak. We were young, full of energy and quite good. I was the lead vocalist and guitarist and wrote much of the music we performed, and within the lyrics I discussed several personal issues and was able to get a lot off of my chest.

Pipsqueak was doing well for a while. We played a few gigs at a nearby club and were repeatedly asked to come back and play again. We had a blast whenever we were on stage so we continued to perform there. We also had some less formal gigs, like school activities and local parties. But we never expected that the party at the Clubhouse would be our last gig.

The Clubhouse was in the center of a condominium complex called Spring Ridge. It was a large building with several small rooms and one large room, designed for meetings and performances. It was fairly modern-looking with its white plastic siding and large windows. Directly in front of the main entrance was a parking lot and out back was a large pool for community recreation. The area was fairly quiet, made up of mostly middle-class residents. Most of the surrounding homes looked alike and the families were typical of a suburban neighborhood; adults, children, pets and four-door sedans. Directly out front of the Clubhouse was a

section of woods that led to the main road.

A friend of mine worked a maintenance job at the Clubhouse and was able to pull a few strings in order for me to hold a party in the building. I was excited that I would be able to provide a night of celebration for my friends and at the same time, a gig for my band. The Clubhouse, as well as its neighborhood, wasn't a prototypical location for a Pipsqueak performance, but that didn't bother us.

It was a Friday night and quite a few people had shown up. The crowd consisted of about fifty guys and fifty girls, some underage and some of age. Either way, we were just a bunch of kids who wanted to have a good time, whether it was because of the music or the alcohol. The beginning of the party consisted mostly of beer-drinking games, like Asshole, Flip-Cup and Beer Pong. It also included dancing, mostly by girls, and a bunch of kids being loud, spilling beer and accidentally breaking things. But when Pipsqueak took the stage, all attention was focused on us. We sounded okay, but we had had better days. I was using a friend's guitar because

"The cops are out front," yelled a girl in the crowd. My mouth dropped. I felt a strong and electrifying sensation in my chest.

mine had decided to break down on me the day before. Plus, the acoustics of the Clubhouse muffled our sound and made it a bit too sloppy, as if we were performing in a tunnel. Finally, my vocals, coming through the sound system, lacked treble and added to the messy intonation. However, no one else seemed to notice as they expressed themselves through singing along and dancing. Our music was mostly fast-paced and heavy, which allowed the crowd to get crazy. It was a time for forgetting any negative thoughts and entering a state of oblivion.

The crowd response was the strongest as we jammed out a Pipsqueak favorite, "Mary's Pretty Popular." It was the kind of response that reminded me why I cherished making music so much. But suddenly, I noticed a quick change in people's expressions and postures as their faces went pale and they began to push and shove in separate directions with fear in their eyes. I could smell trouble. They were running from something, but I couldn't figure out exactly what it was. I looked at my bandmates, but they seemed as confused as I. Then I saw C.E. signaling me to stop the music and we did in an instant.

"The cops are out front," yelled a girl in the crowd. My mouth dropped. I felt a strong and electrifying sensation in my chest. It reminded me of an instantaneous electric shock, of the feeling I experienced a while back when I was fooling around with a bunch of electric cords connected to my TV and suddenly felt a shock wave travel throughout my body. It felt like pins and needles with an attitude that wasn't so much painful as frightening. My friend across the room told me that he felt the electric wave coming from the floor and vibrating in his toes.

Everyone began to scatter throughout the main room of the Clubhouse with frightened expressions. The crowd moved like a stampede of buffalo. I knew I had to get out of there because I couldn't afford to get busted for underage drinking. I could see my girlfriend, Beth, fighting her way through the frantic crowd, trying to push her way toward me. Once I noticed the painful look on her face, I got an upset feeling in my gut and my hands began to shake.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said with a jagged voice.

"Yeah," she nodded.

I placed my guitar on its stand and looked at Beth. I held my arm out and we clutched hands, hers sweaty and warm with a firm grasp, serving as a symbol of compassion. It comforted me. We slowly made our way out of the main room, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. My adrenaline reached

its pinnacle as we snuck through a back room of the building. My heart raced within my chest while we searched for the quickest route to safety. The rest of the crowd also continued to disperse and searched for an exit from the building.

Beth and I were able to get to the front door, exited, and headed directly for the car. The parking lot was well lit by the Clubhouse's spotlights and the police strobe lights. Two squad cars were diagonally parked, but no officers were around them. In the distance, I could see a few guys and girls scurrying into the woods before the Clubhouse. Without hesitation, Beth and I leaped nervously into my car. As we pulled out of the lot, I saw a crew of people exit the building. I could sense their panic, but strangely enough, I noticed a disguised excitement. "Where are we going?" asked Beth.

"I don't know." I hadn't even had a chance to consider a destination. I was simply driving as far away as possible. We fled into the darkness of suburbia—it would take me a long ten minutes to catch my breath. It took Beth twenty, but I kept assuring her that everything would be okay. But my mind was so flustered and my nerves so tense, I probably didn't come across as very assuring.

"How about the diner?" she asked. "We can wait there for everyone else."

"Okay," I agreed. After all, the diner was the area's hangout and on our

way back to town. I began thinking about the others and hoped they were able to escape trouble. Beth and I squeezed hands as we entered the parking lot. I pulled around back and turned off the car. As we sat in darkness, I could still sense Beth's shaking and fidgeting.

The parking lot was quite packed; typical of a Friday night. The Sterling Diner was the place to go when nothing particularly great was going on. It had the appearance of a classic 1950's diner, with soft colors and time-worn brick. Its condition was fair considering the enormous numbers of people who frequented it each day. It was a place to simply hang around with good friends, grab a bite to eat and converse. The parking lot would also be filled with kids leaning against their cars, smoking cigarettes or whatever. I usually didn't hang out there, mostly because the conversation would end up consisting of car talk, about which I wasn't very knowledgeable. However, when I did go, it was almost definite that I would run into an old face, but not tonight.

Where is everybody? I wondered. I kept my eyes peeled on the diner's entrance, but no one we knew entered.

"I wonder what's going on," I said to Beth, staring at my knees.

"I know, I feel bad that we left. I hope that Jessica's okay," she added. Jessica was a friend who had lied to her parents about going out that night. She was supposed to be at a movie with Beth, but instead she was drinking and, for all we knew, she could have gotten arrested.

"I'm sure she's okay," I said, trying to comfort Beth in a time of need. We sat behind the diner for fifteen minutes, although it seemed like thirty. For every minute we waited, the more and more we worried. Eventually, influenced by both guilt and curiosity, we began heading back. After all, our friends could have been in real trouble, and we had simply driven away.

Beth turned on the radio, but I turned it low. I needed to think. We didn't know if our friends were long gone or if they were hiding in the woods of the Clubhouse's perimeter. When we approached the building, I tried being as unobtrusive as possible, and noticed that most of the cars were gone. Apparently, almost everyone had fled the scene, which was quite relieving. However, there were still two police cars out front, and someone waving his arms. I couldn't quite make it out until I slowed down.

"It's your brother and his friends," exclaimed Beth. "What's he still doing here?"

"I don't know, but I think he wants us to come

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FLIPSIDE SIDE

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For all their help and support, the Flipside staff thanks: Claudia Bennett; Joy Helsel; Dave Ferris; Ron Forsythe; Jay R. Wheeler; our families; Gavin Bennett and his team of WWF action figures; Hope Creamer, the little humanoid who gave Tanny someone to look down at; the Evans family for their trips caving—thankfully we lost no one in the Laurel Caverns; Phillip Morris, Inc.; The Frito-Lay company; Pepsi; Mr. Coffee (and Maxwell House); Cartoon Network; and Winnie.

FLIPSIDE is published by the Professional Writing Program of the English Department, California University of Pennsylvania. Opinions expressed in this magazine are not necessarily those expressed by California University or its Council of Trustees. Production assistance generously provided by Student Publications, Student Association Inc., California University of Pennsylvania. FLIPSIDE is designed and laid out in the Student Publications office at California University. Any resemblance found in this publication to persons with access to a good lawyer is strictly coincidental.

A final note: With this issue, FLIPSIDE will cease publication. Because it was the brainchild of Alan Natali (to whom honor and glory not only for a brilliant concept but for many years of an excellent product), it seemed impertinent to continue the magazine following his decision to step down as its advisor. To paraphrase that mordant wit Saki, FLIPSIDE was a good magazine as college literary magazines go, and like a good magazine, it went.

The bright day is done, and we are for the dark

KITES WITH NO WIND

Kites with no wind,
Ribbons of circus riot,
or some wind,
twisting Chinatown-parade Dragon forms.
not full wind,
Ribbons like butterflies,
wind themselves in knots
Monarch migration in Easter-egg hues.
on their light ropes.
Tight skin painted in glorious pictures.
Sporadic impetus
Solid swatches of color:
runs me in circles and lines
red,
forming
blue,
hexagrams, pentagrams, trigrams
green, ocean, orchid, chrysanthemum, and geranium,
in I Ching mystery.
tangle in a myriad mobile of stained glass
Now UP! Up! Blue sky beaming in Caldecott Award hues,
paradise. Flying tigers chase Smurfs and daisies
lines running taunt, clean edges sharp against cloud fluff,
until the gust falters and one
then,
by one; in twos,
drooping,
threes, or tangles,
half-circles of moon against my daylight
triangles,
come gently in on puffs and gusts.
squares,
Spider-silk clings to kites
and strange spinning spheres fall
gently crushing damp green grasses
to gently rest immutably on earth.
with their splendored wings-
The only thing mutable is the wind.
grounded,
No wind.
with no wind.
For now

Derek Ross

The Smell of a School

by Daryl Evans

When I drive through a road construction project that involves poured concrete, I always roll the window down and put my nose in the air like a dog. The smell of linseed oil is what I seek. That odor brings forth the memories of La Grange Elementary School with its oiled wooden floors. In the oldest section of the building the hallways looked to me like wide bowling allies. They were made of narrow strips of wood, finished with linseed oil to a grayish brown. I spent the first four and a half years of my education there, until the school burned down one night in 1964. My cousin and I watched the fire from his bedroom window. The ashes smoldered for three weeks. Long before the smoke stopped rising from the scene of the fire, all of us students, teachers and administrators, moved to another school in downtown Belle Vernon. That building had floors covered with tile that did not carry the smell of history.

La Grange School served as an odd lesson in historical contrasts as well as an institution of learning. Constructed in two separate projects, each half reflected the architecture of the corresponding time period. The older portion seemed monstrously huge to any kindergarten student entering through the cavernous porticoes. The steep slate roofs ended in points that challenged the clouds and sat upon the square, red brick facets of the walls like great dunce caps creased at the corners or admiral's hats made of newspaper. The large bullet shaped windows looked dully out over the blacktop parking lot in front of the building and onto the dirt lane that traveled along the backside. That end of our school was erected around the turn of the century while the other half was built in the late forties. Still red brick, the newer portion sported a flat roof and smaller rectangular windows. I was glad that my kindergarten career began in the less imposing, modern section, although the newer side left a smaller impression upon me. Huge sycamore trees that dappled the sunlight delightfully on good weather days and seemed to invite and gather the wind and rain on gray, cloudy days created a semicircle around the fortress. On calm days they reminded me of enormous fence pickets and on windy days, dancing giants swinging their arms as they performed an endless ring-a-rosy.

The most vivid of my memories circle the personalities that populated the hallways and rooms of the first school I attended. George, the janitor, lived next door to the school. Always friendly, he carried a smile most days. There was a small semicircle of flesh missing from the top of his right ear. He told us that a raccoon had bitten him there. We believed George back then.

There were a series of teachers, some good and some bad, as always. Mrs. Shawley, my kindergarten teacher, let me sleep behind the piano almost every day. I had been diagnosed with Lupus Arithmatosis and slept a lot in those years. She understood. My mother understood, too. I remember the look on her face, years later, when she recalled an incident with a pharmacist. As she waited to have one of my prescriptions filled, the pharmacist asked how old her husband was. He had assumed it was for an older man. When my mother declared it was for her five-year-old, he sadly shook his head and walked away looking at his shoes. Doctors have since expressed disbelief in Dr. Applebaum's diagnosis because five-year-olds with Lupus in that time did not survive. The nightly treatments were miserable for all of us. The wet wash cloth, held against my cheeks and over my nose strangled me with the odor of the ointment. And the taste of that yellow pill (Triquin) gagged me every night. Whenever my mother thought of those years, her face would carry an odd mix of sorrow and triumph. However, with me napping on my rug behind the piano in Mrs. Shawley's room, kindergarten passed and I survived. I am convinced there is always hope and the odds can always be

beaten, no matter what the experts believe.

During first and second grade, I only thought I had died and gone to school in hell. I still do recall the names of the teachers, whether I want to or not. First grade moved me from the newer, less frightening side of the building to the mammoth older section. The first grade teacher had very little patience with little boys who slept and cried easily. Even now I can feel the panic that rose in me that day as she told us to pass our spelling tests forward. I had memorized the words in order and had written them on my paper ahead of her calling them out. The last two words were "in" and "out" and she reversed the order. With no eraser on the pencil, I couldn't fix the error and I knew what was coming! I can still feel her grip from another time when she took hold of my biceps and dragged me to one of the red chairs in the front of the room reserved for those weren't paying enough attention (I had fallen asleep once more). Again, I survived and learned that frightening circumstances and people can be endured, and they don't last forever, at least in this life. Nowadays, when those around me do not act or react according to my expectations or requirements, I do try to keep in mind that there may be other things going on in someone's life that I am not aware of.

Once, the second grade teacher ignored Kip's frantically waving hand until he wet his pants. She had decided that he had been to the restroom enough times that day. In the Christmas program that year, four of us were to read Bible verses. I memorized everyone's verses and so when I lost my place during one rehearsal, I could still say my part. Miss Bowers, the third grade teacher, noticed what I was doing and gave the first compliment I can remember ever receiving. The anger rises in me even now as I recall Merle bursting into our second grade classroom and announcing to my cousin and me that the Bibles we used in the program were to be burned. They were disposed of because of age and wear, and no one wanted them. Had the administration asked, I would have liked to keep that Bible. Over the years I have found asking all those involved in any given situation a good idea.

Up to that time, my cousin Wayne was probably my best friend until he moved to another part of the school district. After that, we drifted apart. He made new friends and I was left in a neighborhood that contained two girls about my age that attended Catholic school and one family whose youngest son tried to cut my sister's leg off with a broken coffee mug. Twenty-two stitches, three layers deep were required to close the wound. Needless to say, I was allowed to play with the Catholic girls. Everyone else in the neighborhood was older and my grandfather became my best friend. To this day, I prefer to make friends with women and people older than I.

That same year, second grade, the second major medical event of my life occurred. An infection unrelated to my previous illness, destroyed my left nipple. I still shudder when I revisit the time I peeled the first in a series of four scabs from my chest. Those scabs formed over a period of about eighteen months. I remember feeling as though I had a nickel taped to my chest under my shirt, as it caught and snagged on all my clothing. I showed one of my classmates as we stood on the blacktop playground and he ran. My ostracism became complete and I learned my lesson. Afterwards I didn't share my problems with anyone, not even my parents. It's not a big deal now. My wife and I laugh about me having only one good one left, and a doctor examining me for a mill job joked about the possibility of my girlfriend biting me.

Third grade was much better. Miss Bowers hugged me the same as everyone else on the last day of school, even though my white shirt was covered with mud from that morning's soccer game. The guys would let me play when they needed someone to fill in. That was the year President Kennedy was assassinated. The event didn't mean a whole lot to

me, but it really upset Miss Bowers and therefore upset me.

Fourth grade seems like just a blur. Mrs. Lattermer's classroom and a portrait of Daniel Boone reproduced in my history book are about all I remember besides the fire and consequent move to the next school. Her classroom sat at the bottom of six steps that led to the area reserved for the older fifth and sixth graders. That area also housed Mr. Samoda's office. He was the fifth and sixth grade math and science teacher and the principal of the school. During my years at La Grange, I didn't sit under Mr. Samoda's teaching, but he was one of the best teachers I've ever had, though a speech impediment made him very difficult to understand. His speech required him to process the information he taught slowly and methodically. However, methods that worked well with multiplication tables and science, didn't work well with students that didn't meet his behavioral expectations. As principal, he did interact with me on occasion.

If we misbehaved, we would be placed outside our classroom door and made to wait for Mr. Samoda to make his rounds. The fear and anxiety of the wait was always worse than whatever he decided your punishment should be. I remember hiding behind one of the double doors that divided the building sections hoping he wouldn't find me. One day in the restroom he found me using a "sit-down" toilet to urinate. He insisted I begin to use the urinals. Since then, I have refused to use a urinal unless I have no choice!

Outside Mrs. Lattermer's classroom, I first noticed the smell of the floors. After the school burned we heard horror stories about the fire starting in front of our particular classroom and how lucky we were that the fire had not started during school hours. "You would have never gotten out alive!" my mother exclaimed.

"Those old wooden floors soaked with linseed oil made the fire spread too fast!" We missed four days of school and we thought that was pretty cool. The following Monday, riding the bus, past the old school to the new one, I wiped the fog from the window and watched the raindrops fall as the smoke rose from the ashes. The fire destroyed the older half of the building. The newer portion sat empty for more than a decade until it was torn down.

The first time these scenes came back to me was while building a small percussion cap lock pistol from a kit in the late 1970s. I asked a rifle builder what to use to finish the pistol grip. He suggested linseed oil and when I opened the can, I was standing on the stairway in front of Mrs. Lattermer's fourth grade schoolroom. The next time came at 3:30 AM on Route 119 in 1989. I was delivering mail between the Uniontown Post Office and the one in Greensburg. A construction company had just finished replacing a stretch of concrete highway, sealing it with linseed oil. For two weeks I opened both windows in the truck every night, no matter what the weather and relived some of those gone forever days.

Why would I want to remember these things? They are part of me. I can't deny them or pretend they didn't happen. I can, however, learn about myself and how I should treat other people from them. I need to try understand those around me and remember there may be things going on in their lives that I am not aware of.

Many people have great difficulty sharing their problems. Not everyone I meet is willing to do things exactly the way I expect them to be done and that is okay. There are those that I need to give any honest compliment I can. It may be one of the very few, if not the only compliment, they receive in their lives. And everyone needs some respect and hope. Since I discovered the memory jogging odor of linseed oil, I rarely fail to take every opportunity I'm given to inhale the past for a few moments.

Are you afraid of making your partner angry? Does your partner humiliate you? Does your partner threaten you? Are the bad times starting to out weigh the good? Do you feel you need to defend yourself against your partner's accusations? Does your partner call you names? Is your partner extremely jealous? Does your partner always have to be "right?" Does your partner criticize you? Does your partner try to control your time, your friends, your interests? Do you blame yourself when your partner hurts you? Are you afraid to argue with your partner? Are you losing friends to please your partner? Do you do things you don't want to just to please your partner? Are you afraid of making your partner angry? Are you scared to go home? Are you in a violent relationship? your partner threaten you? Are the bad times starting to out weigh the good? Do you feel you need to defend yourself against your partner's accusations? Does your partner call you names? Is your partner extremely jealous? Does your partner always have to be "right"? Does your partner criticize you? Does your partner try to control your time, your friends, your interests? Do you blame yourself when your partner hurts you? Are you afraid to argue with your partner? Does your partner physically restrain or hurt you? Are you losing friends to please your partner? Are you Afraid to end your relationship? Do you do things you don't want to just to please your partner? You don't deserve to be abused. There is help.



Washington Women's Shelter
223-9190 • 1-800-791-4000
Greene County Women's Center
852-2463

untitled

by i.a. bennett

PART THE FIRST

Right now I am lying face down on cool wet morning grass, watching blood pour from my face onto my hands. My mouth tastes like someone shoved a handful of pennies in it. I push myself up into a standing position, and an erumpent spray stains my white shirt bright red. When I cast my gaze upward I see wide-eyed looks of surprise on everyone's faces. I am playing in a championship softball game.

As part of the many perks of working at Kennywood (a local amusement park), softball is an easy way to let off the steam built up by working with the public. Eight hundred dollars are being awarded to the winner of the game. I can't believe this is actually happening. The game had only been going on for a few minutes before I ran head (or, as the case may be, face-) first into a fence while chasing a fly ball. I walk somnambulistically toward the infield and blood keeps squirting out of my cheek. I idly pick grass and dirt from the meaty hanging flaps of skin framing the long gash in my ragged cheek. A barb from the top of a chain-link fence has torn a jagged hole in the right side of my face, and I am bleeding profusely. My shoes and hands are wet and sticky, and I am beginning to worry that the cut might be significantly worse than I had originally anticipated. I haven't yet seen the extent of the fence's damage, but when I see the looks on people's faces I know it can't be good.

"How bad is it?"

"..."

"Really, how bad is it?"

"You're going to need stitches."

"You have to go to the emergency room...now."

I look out to where I hit the fence and see one of my friends jogging in to see my face. He peels off his outermost shirt and hands it to me.

"Here, press this against your face...you need to stop the bleeding."

I take the proffered shirt, and ignoring the dirt that is encrusted upon it, press it against my open wound. I make my way across the field and people try to console me. Their pseudo-optimistic commentary cannot hide the worry in their faces.

"I just hope it isn't going to permanently disfigure my appearance," I offer.

This comment gets a few laughs, but they sound forced and uncomfortable.

A Kennywood Kop (their K, not mine) is walking with me across the parking lot and into his car. Joe (the KK) has elected to take me to the hospital. He is noticeably shaken from what he has witnessed, and his remarks and conversatory dialogue are terse.

"Good God, shit, just keep that shirt against your face...and whatever you do, don't look at it."

I throw caution to the wind, and circle behind a parked Chevy Blazer. The sunlight is brightly reflecting off the back window, and I make use of the mirrored fenestration. Utter horror fills me as I stare at the blackened reddish hole in my cheek. It actually is significantly worse than I anticipated. My knees quaver as the initial revulsion returns. Two

dirty ragged flaps and a reddish pulsing interior stare back at me. My face is disfigured in a way that I honestly can't believe.

"Fuck, I said don't look at it, come on!"

I get into Joe's car and immediately flip down the visor in order to utilize the underside's mirror. "Why me?" keeps going over in my head as I fight back nausea. I'm not sick over the cut itself; at twenty-two years of age I have had more than my share of bloodied cuts. The thing that is making me sick is the fact that the cut is on my face; my cheek for that matter, and it's a horizontal cut, so it won't fade into my face's natural wrinkles.

Scene From Joe's Car

Joe: *Shit man, stop looking at it. Keep that shirt against it.*

Me: *Joe, you're a cop, can you be honest with me? I mean, how bad is it? Do you think it's going to scar really bad?*

Joe: *(showing discomfort and forced reassurance) uh...it shouldn't be too bad. I mean if you don't pick at it....*

He stops the car outside the park's first aid office for a sealed, sterilized gauze pad as a cleaner preventive to help facilitate clotting, and prevent further blood loss from my face. The office is neatly arranged in preparation for the day, but Joe can't seem to locate any gauze pads. His hands shake as he vigorously pulls open drawers in vain. He is having little luck and his frustration shows with the drawers' metal reverberations on the walls as they are slammed shut. He finally locates a thick bundled wad, and tears open the packaging.

"Press this against your face."

Back in the car...sad looking early sunlight through the windshield...a quick trip through morning traffic and in to the emergency room...the nurse greets me with what I'm sure is a finely honed professional stare.

"Hi, I'll need some of your insurance information, so if you could just fill out these forms we'll..."

I peel away the gauze pad, which is now sodden with blood and facial tissue. A few yellowed meat clumps are attached to the surface, and I can't help but think of a kitchen cutting board upon which poultry has been prepared.

"Oh...just give me your name and you can go ahead in back, hon. Third door on the right. A doctor will be with you in a few minutes."

With all the story's emphasis on my now firmly altered appearance I know it is hard to believe, but I felt rather stupid lying on an operating table with metal cleats on my feet.

A nurse enters the room.

"When was the last time you had a tetanus shot?"

"Can't really remember. Probably a few years ago."

"You'll have to take off your shirt...let's have a look at your face."

I strip off my shirt and lay back against the clean, cool cotton sheet that separates my skin from the actual surface of the mattress of the operating table. As I take off my shirt I wish for a moment that I had shaved my upper body that morning. Normally I am as smooth as a baby, and because of this I felt slightly self-conscious about being so uncharacteristically hirsute. A nurse standing above me and to the left notices that my nipples are pierced, and as I make eye contact with her, she chortles. I laugh too, and it helps break some of the morning's tension. She prepares a tetanus shot and plunges the syringe into my shoulder. Not even a drop of pain. I am too preoccupied with the remains of my right cheek to notice anything else. As she punctures my skin, a doctor enters the room.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Deluca."

"Ian."

A firm handshake and some customary Q&A.

"So what happened?"

I tell the story for the first time. As I'm talking I realize that this story will be retold so often that even if I want to forget running into the fence, the entire incident will be imprinted on my memory forever.

"Well, it doesn't look too bad. Why don't you just lay back and relax while I take a closer look. I'm going to have to shine a light directly on it, so you might want to close your eyes."

I should have. The light in my face was like staring into the sun. Dr. Deluca's hands were at my face, and there was a sound like the squishing of ground meat through one's fingers as he pried apart my laceration.

"Well, it appears that you actually have two cuts. One big one on your cheek and a smaller one by your temple."

I can see him preparing a large syringe via peripheral vision.

"Uh...I'm just assuming that's going into my cheek."

"Well, I need to numb it before I can stitch...with a cut like this, in this position, I could try to numb it through the undamaged tissue around it, but I'm afraid it just wouldn't be as effective."

A cool gauze pad with a large hole in the center is pressed against the right side of my face with surprising pressure.

"This will help isolate the area that needs to be stitched."

The needle closer...I take a deep breath.

"Are you ready? We can wait if you don't think you're up to this yet."

I begin rhythmic deep breathing, and with the slightest nod of my head the inoculation takes place. I'm reminded of a time when I was climbing a tree

as a youngster. In an effort to impress my dad I kept climbing higher and higher until I noticed an ambient humming. I looked at my right hand and noticed a beetle crawling around on it. Upon closer inspection I saw that it was a wasp, and that I had climbed right next to a large papery nest. On the operating table I feel them stinging me, but this time it feels as though the wasps have come back for my cheek. I count the number of flashes across my face as the needle hotly invades and retreats. Ten shots spreading calm through my facial tissues.

"Now I'll give it a few minutes, and we can start. I'll need to clean your face...I'm not sure how numb it is so this might feel a little strange at first."

The anesthetic acts quickly and my face's throbbing pain is finally dulcified. A large bottle of saline solution is held up in the light. The water's stream is hardly felt as it jets against my face, but as it runs down my neck and wets the sheet and my back it feels cold; invasive.

"Oops, sorry about getting you so wet. The gauze was supposed to stop that, but I guess it didn't work."

"Mmm...not a problem. I understand. The cold isn't too bothersome. Just stitch it tight, and don't make me look like Quasimodo."

He laughs and begins to give reassurance.

I try to talk as normally as possible, but it comes out slightly garbled; I don't really want to move my mouth when someone is sticking a needle and thread through my cheek.

"Well don't worry, this isn't going to look bad at all. I'll stitch it as tight as possible."

I tell him of another time when I was cut on the face. I was a junior in high school and caught an elbow in the eye at basketball practice. It sliced my eyelid and required eight stitches to close. My eyelid swelled shut, but the doctor did an excellent job. He stitched it so tight that when I finally got the sutures taken out the job required three people: one to hold the skin taut, one to lift the thread from my eyelid and one to do the actual cutting. To this day the scar remains invisible. This I gleaned from the fact that Dr. Deluca did not see it, even after I told him the story.

(I would include the majority of the conversation that I had with Dr. Deluca, because I think that he was very personable and funny, and the conversation itself didn't seem totally forced like most doctor/patient conversations are, but as I stated earlier, my lines came out mostly in mumbles, and I don't think I can accurately reproduce them on paper.)

"Yeah, the eyelid heals very well. I'm hoping this heals just as well. When it's faded you should only be able to see a tiny white line where the actual cut is. I mean, I can't make it invisible, but I'll make it as small as possible. Besides, scars add character, heh heh heh."

I semi-laugh. (I can't begin to tell you how many times I've heard that one.)

"Yeah, just look at Harrison Ford...I mean lots of women still find him attractive, and the scar on his chin is sort of his trademark...he's learned how to make it work for him."

"Well when I'm done it probably won't even be that noticeable."

What sweet music to my ears.

PART THE SECOND

Tiny audible squeaks doppler in the hall. I'm looking at the floor while I trace the tiles' borders with the cleat on my right toe. Some of the squeaks get louder. I see white tennis shoes come into the tile I'm tracing and I look up. A very attractive older woman has entered the room; a nurse coming to check on the aftermath of the fence. She is probably old enough to be my mother, but impure thoughts run through my head as her soft hands feel their way across my map. Her face is close to mine as she lightly touches and inspects the doctor's handiwork. She is chewing gum, a big plus in my book, and it cracks in cinnamon pops as she lightly feels at my cheeks.

"Oh, he did a really good job. Don't worry hon, I worked for a plastic surgeon for eighteen years and he did very well with this. You'll still be as handsome as ever."

"Umm...thanks."

Her eyes roam as I sit on display. Again I'm being prodded and looked at. "This must be what it's like to live in a zoo," I think. The nurse points me down the hall and tells me where I can find a mirror to look at my newly repaired visage.

"Go take a look at your cut while I get you some stuff to take care of it. I'll give you some gauze and tape, and show you how to put it on."

I walk down the hall, not without trepidation. I don't know if I want to see my face, not to mention the fact that metal cleats on highly waxed and polished tile could lead to a vaudevillian slip and fall. I enter a room that is under construction. A man is laying tile, and I'm not sure if I'm in the right place. He looks up as I click and clack my way over to him.

"Is there a mirror around here?"

"Yeah, right in that room. Let me get out of your way. You cut your face or something?"

"Yeah, on a fence"

Confusion on his face.

"Playing softball...in the outfield."

"Ohhhhh...someone hit it pretty far huh?"

"Yeah, something like that."

I look into the mirror, and a myriad of thoughts come. I'm simultaneously and paradoxically filled with relief and dread. It's not like I want a huge scar on my face, but it could be a lot worse. I back out of the room and make my return to the operating table. I sit, and the object of my desire returns.

"What do you think?"

"Oh, it looks good."

"Yeah, he did a good job. He's the best we have for that sort of thing. If I didn't think he could do the best, I'd've sent you to a plastic surgeon. I've done that before, you know."

"What?"

"Sent people to plastic surgeons if I didn't think the doctor could do an adequate job with the stitching. I'd hate to think about someone leaving the hospital after having some clumsy hack do a sub-par stitch job on a facial injury."

"Uhh...thanks."

She smiles.

"Sure, now let me show you how to take care of it."

The nurse squeezes a minute amount of triple antibiotic ointment onto a folded piece of gauze and gently presses it to my face.

"Make sure you keep it moist. The more you keep it moist, the less of a scar you'll have."

I cringe...I hate the word "moist."

"Now like I said, I used to work for a plastic surgeon, so I know all sorts of secrets; you know, tricks to help lessen the scarring."

I breathe a sigh of relief when she reassures me that my face will be somewhat normal with time.

"No sun for a year."

"A year!"

"Yes, the sun will darken the tissue and make the scar worse."

"I work in the sun. My job requires me to be in the sun for inordinate amounts of time."

"You'll have to do something about that. You'll keep it covered while the stitches are in, and after that you can wear sunscreen I guess...maybe you can wear a hat or something."

Oh right, a hat. Like what, a sombrero? That's the only hat I can picture being large enough to blot out sun from my face. A fucking year. How the hell am I supposed to do that?

I try hard to pay attention to what the nurse is saying, but I'm too preoccupied with lurid fantasy. Crude, sophomoric thoughts pass through my head as she talks. Something about showing her things she didn't learn in medical school. Her instructions weave themselves around my daydreaming and I catch the gist of what she's saying.

"...Keep it clean...dirt...germs...new bandage...hours...nothing stronger than peroxide...soap...harsh...stitches can't get wet anyway...work outside...heat...sweat...clean...change often..." Etc.

She finishes her bandaging and gives my face a final study.

"You can't go back to work today. Do you have a way home?"

"I don't know. The guy who brought me...I don't know if he's still here."

"Oh right, I mean, he's not here, but he said he'd be back. He went to get your stuff. Did you have much?"

"Just my bag and other shoes."

"Oh. I didn't know you still had your spikes on."

"..."

"Shouldn't you call your mom? Won't she be worried?"

"I don't know...she thinks I'm at work. I'm not

due home until after midnight."

"Call her anyway. You can't just surprise her when she gets home."

"I guess not...uh, how do you work the phone?"

"Just dial 9 and then the area code and number. I'll be near. Call me back in the room when you're done."

"Thanks."

A smile; white teeth.

"You're welcome."

Be still my beating heart.

INTERLUDE

I actually decided to go to work that day. I figured that a large bandage on my face would be a great conversation piece, and I was only supposed to work for seven hours. (For me a normal shift would be anywhere from ten to fourteen hours, so seven was almost minuscule.) I had some interesting conversations that day (mostly with young children and old people), and generally wasn't as miserable as I had anticipated, but pain won out and sent me home (to the relief of my supervisors and coworkers) much earlier than my intended departure time. I would love to write about them, but due to a lack of space I won't. I will, however, note that the first thing I did when I got home was watch *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. (I figured that it would be a relief to watch people in a much worse state than I

I'll also note that many people called to check on the nature of the injury. Much information was passed via the telephone, and I was given opportunity to greatly exaggerate the extent of my injury. The fact that I could joke about my face was the first indicator that dealing with it wasn't going to be as bad as I had thought. With this in mind I have decided to include a slight portion of a typical call wherein I utilized a bit of popular imagery to describe my face.

Sample Call
Caller: How's the face?
Me: Oh, not too bad. The doctor said it wouldn't be very noticeable in about a year.
Caller: So what's it look like?
Me: Ever see Kenneth Branagh's version of *Frankenstein*? A little worse.
Etc.

PART THE THIRD

Here is the hard part of the essay. Because it is personal, and because it is even being written, I feel as though I should be entertaining the notions of some lesson being learned after my run-in with the fence.

I think that it would be much easier to write this section if I had been a bad egg as a young man. I could write about how I had always made fun of people with disabilities or disfigurements when I was growing up, but I didn't. My parents raised me with more intelligence and sensitivity than what I have seen from most of my peers. Any time that a group of kids would get together to bait the bear with a verbal onslaught to imperfection I would walk away. To me it wasn't fun. Not that I'm trying to make myself out to be some sort of saint or anything, but I have never made fun of anyone for any reason, nor have I stared or gawked as one of nature's oddities crossed my path. I could never see the point at gaining entertainment at someone's expense, and if I had it would have resulted in profligate use of parental reprimand.

On the other hand, I could write that my eyes were opened to the insensitivity of others, or even the stupidity and rudeness of the general public, but after working for an amusement park for four years, I sort of developed a bit of contempt for most of society. I knew people in general were pretty stupid and insensitive (I think the two go hand in hand) so it's not like I learned anything about the world in which I lived. I knew that when I returned to work

full time that people would not hesitate to ask about my face, and did not find it the least bit surprising when total strangers would accost me while waiting in a ride's queue.

Scene from a Ride's Queue
Guest in Line: (with wrinkled face as if disgusted) Ewww! What'd you do to your face?
Me: Uhhh...cut it on a fence playing softball.
Guest: (with even more wrinkled face) That must SUCK to have a huge cut like that right on your face!
Me: Umm...yeah I guess it does.

Why exactly something as personal as a facial cut became an object of public scrutiny I'll never know. I Guess it's the same universal sort of mystique that compels people to objectify the afflicted. Watch the way everyone rushes to touch an expectant woman's rounded tummy, or floods the parents-to-be to get any idea of what I mean. It's almost as though expectant women exist simply as a non-abstract medium to educate people about pregnancy, and furthermore, by making the decision to have children, a married couple decides for forgo anything remotely sacred in regard to their personal and/or private lives. All conversational topics that are suppressed by societal norm are now exposed to public scrutiny and commentary. (Please note: I am not in any way trying to say that pregnant women are afflicted re: being with child, but I was looking for some sort of catch-all term to complete the analogy, and that's the one I chose.)

At the time of my accident I almost thought that it might be some sort of divine intervention to let me know I was being too shallow, but in retrospect, I have never really thought of myself as being superficial.

For months a wracked my brains with concrete as well as metaphysical question trying to understand why I happened to put a large gash in my face. What did it mean...what was it supposed to teach me? Etc. After a while my dad did the honors of putting it to rest.

Scene from My Family Dinner Table

Me: So what was it? I mean do you think I'm too judgmental or something?
Maybe I was touched by the hand of God...
My dad: Maybe it was just an accident. You must know the expression "accidents happen." Chalk it up to human error, and live with it.

And that was it. The whole thing just reduced to being an accident. It didn't mean anything, nor did it need to be a lifelong learning experience. I mean, just because my appearance was altered didn't mean my life's philosophies needed to change.

But in all seriousness I suppose I actually did learn some things.

The biggest was learning to accept accidents for what they are. There does not always have to be a bigger message at work. Sometimes things just happen.

This in turn helped me to learn the importance of letting bygones be bygones. No matter how much I want the scar on my face to go away, it won't. I can't change what happened so I'm learning to deal with it.

Patience, patience, patience. I wasn't patient in the least bit before I got cut, but I'm in the process of learning. Every day I looked in the mirror to see if my scar had faded, only to see that it hadn't. It took a long time to realize that healing is a slow process, and year without sun is a long time to wait.

(At the risk of sounding new agey I'll add that the underlying theme in this entire essay is to not lament, brood, steam, etc., but to realize and accept the past. It's over, so let it go. Spend time concentrating on the future. The tabula rasa of what is yet to come.)

I don't really want this to end on a serious note, because it's never the way I end the story when I'm telling it. People always want to know about the cosmic things that are at work with the whole incident, so in order to placate them I say that cutting my face taught me two very important things:

1. Every baseball/softball field should be equipped with a warning track. I always took warning tracks for granted, but now I can definitely see their significance.

2. Communication is very important in baseball. I always sort of thought about it being a nonverbal game, but in this instance I would have really liked for someone to tell me I was going to run into a fence.

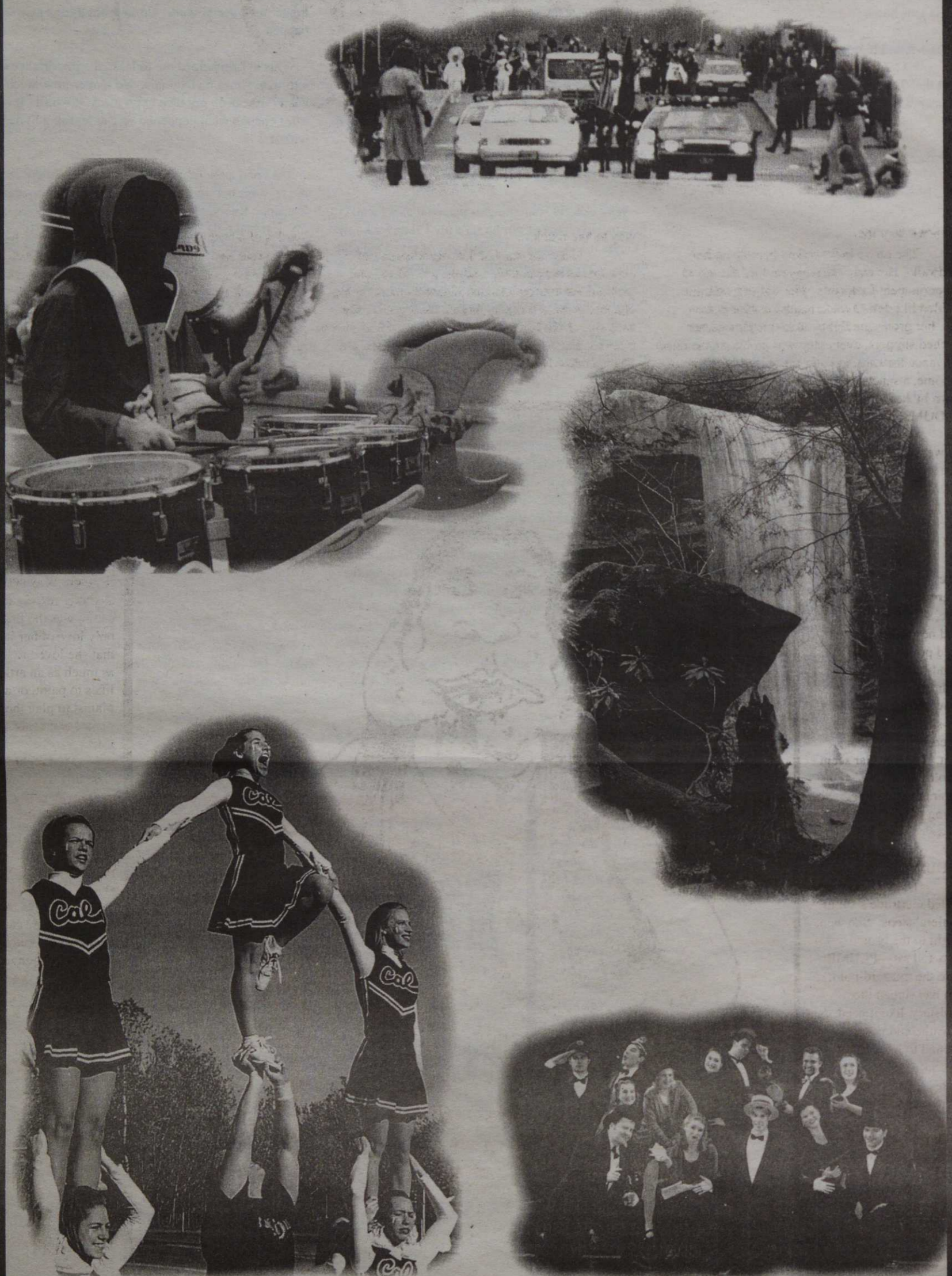
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MATT STU

BY IVETTE GARCIA

BOOM. BOOM.

The obese lady walked heavily on her boardwalk. Her massive steps molded the wood with permanent footprints. Her bulging cellulite trembled like Jell-O underneath her blue cotton dress, her grotesque flabby skin overflowed her stretched slippers, every step was an inhumane effort to advance forward, to enter the sacred kingdom of her home, a sanctuary only known by her lonely self.

BOOM. BOOM.

Her neighbor's kids were giggling behind a tree trying not to be rude. The fat silhouette gave the rugrats a dirty look and stepped on.

BOOM. BOOM.

Gertrude inserted the key in her doorknob and entered her dark mini house, furnished by a brand new TV, her most prized possession, a second-hand, putrid couch, a gas stove, a yellow refrigerator, and a king-size, worn bed soaked in the woman's sweat. The familiar scent of moldy leftovers, perspiration, and the purging odor of menstruation welcomed Gertrude home.

THUD. THUD.

The thick carpet muffled Gertrude's sumo wrestlers' steps. She went straight to the brown couch and sat—PLUMP—where the mustard-colored foam had ripped the upholstery, like it needed to breathe and now regretted to have left the safe confinement of the couch's interior. Gertrude reached for the phone with one hand while the other grabbed the remote control to watch the stream of soap operas in channel 18. She dialed the only number she knew by heart: Pizza Hut. She ordered two meatlovers pizza with extra cheese, garlic bread, and two two-liters of Coke.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

"I'm coming," Gertrude yelled in her sultry voice, the only attribute for this endomorph, a voice that could sing *The Phantom of the Opera* in one breath. God made up for her exaggerated figure in her melodious voice. She could at least make a decent living off her sexy voice. She opened the door so that only half her mammoth body was visible, the exact space she needed to juggle the pizzas inside. She handed the delivery boy a check for fifty dollars singing: "Keep the change." Great, thought the pizza boy, \$1.49. He mumbled his thanks with a crinkled nose for the ailing smell could reach him and ran towards his car to escape the foul stench.

SLAM.

Gertrude hummed Barry's *Mandy* all the

way to her couch.

Gertrude stacked her pizza boxes and breadsticks between her and the TV. Then, she grabbed the breadsticks and placed them at the top. She had to have foreplay before the orgasm. She took one of the bottles of pop and poured half of it in a sticky, plastic 24-ounce cup she kept by the TV. Then worked her way to her goods.

color of a beet, she curled her sausages into a fist and screamed back at the happy kids: "I am tired of you two, when your mom comes home today I'll tell her how much you disrespect me and my privacy!"

"And I'll tell her how much you disrespect your fat body!" Screamed Matt, the oldest.

"HA HA! Yeah you're fat, fat, fat. FATSO!" Cat called the youngest.

BANG!

Gertrude punched the wall. Angry tears streamed down her face. How many more years? She had been a blob all her life. Her whole family was big. Her schoolmates used to call them the Hormels. They called Gertrude Porky Hormel. Why couldn't anybody respect that eating was the first and only love of her life, that she loved to binge as much as an artist likes to paint, or a pianist to play the piano, or a sailor to sail!

That night Gertrude went to bed early. She didn't watch *Murder She Wrote* or the *Golden Girls*. She went to a dreamless, snoring sleep.

BOOM. BOOM.

Gertrude came home from a busy day at work. The phone didn't stop ringing, and Phaedra's (Gertrude's character) fans were requesting her phone whoring services. She had to talk to an old guy who wanted to fuck her while she was 'in heat,' and a teenager who wanted to bite her nipples until they bled. *Too much blood for a day*, she thought.

BOOM. BOOM.

Gertrude looked around for the two little jerks. She could not see their tanned, malnourished, little

frames. *Maybe they were threatened yesterday, when she said she would talk to their mom*, Gertrude thought with satisfaction. Those bastards made her nervous, roaming like dying rodents around her wild backyard.

Gertrude tried to put the key through the doorknob while searching the street for a sight of the two brats.

CLING. CLANG.

Her keys fell to the floor. She looked five feet and then inches down to her keys. She looked at the floor, at her keys, and around. Finally, she bowed her upper body without flexing her straining knees, and reached, reached for the keys. And very slowly, like a driving senile, she opened the door.

CONTINUED



by Derek c.f. Pegritz

MUNCH. MUNCH.

She ate all her food except for one slice. Her intercourse lasted forty-eight minutes.

BUUUURRRRP!

(Stifled giggles)

Gertrude look around after her ferocious

yelp.

"Who is there?"

"Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha," was the only answer Gertrude received.

She opened her window and found Matt and Stu peeping through the bent blind that covered the broken window. The two children ran away giggling and chanting their insulting rhymes.

Gertrude was furious. Her face was the

GERTRUDE CONT.

home she gasped and her keys fell to the floor again.

Her house had been vandalized. Gertrude's oversized underwear was laying around her carpet and furniture. Her plus-sized, purple panties were covering the 27-inch TV. A picture of a cow and a pig fornicating was drawn on her wall.

She closed her eyes and opened them again with the sheer conviction that it was all a nightmare.

But it wasn't. She went into her bathroom. A fresh smell of warm shit almost made Gertrude puke the sausage sandwiches she had gulped down at work. There were feces and urine samples decorating her black bathroom.

She walked in tears to her bedroom to throw herself on her messy bed. Before she threw her 308 pounds into the miserable mattress, she was distracted momentarily by the jumping pizza box on top of her bed. Startled, she reached the box and opened it. Then threw it to the floor in dismay.

She expected to find a mouse or a rat at the worst. She was not prepared to see her vibrating, cordless vibrator jiggling inside the grease-soaked pizza box.

It had to be them, Gertrude thought. The two bastards. Who else could have done such a childish, heartless prank? But she had to be sure. She would make sure it was them. And then, she would make them pay.

Next afternoon, she walded indifferently to the two scoundrels hiding behind the pear tree by her house. Matt, annoyed by her indifference whispered loudly to his little brother: "I bet'cha sge ysed tge greast vibrator last night." They roamed away giggling.

Gertrude woke up the next morning feeling freshness she had never felt before. She even showered before going to work. She made up her mind. She knew exactly what she wanted to do.

She went to work today with a smile. She thought that she might even enjoy talking with perverted old men and puberty-stricken teens on the phone. Hey, she might even get aroused. The thought accelerated her heartbeat. She has never

been with anybody. Of course she had touched herself a couple of times, she embarrassingly admitted to herself, but she had never... Well, done the 'real' thing.

BOOM. boom.

Even her last step seemed lighter.

All day she fantasized about her plan. Her daydreams made her day fly by. She could almost taste it.

When she came that day from work she ignored the two urchins sitting behind the pear tree, challenging her with their smirks. She even ignored their new little song: "Here she comes, the big fat blob, wobbling to her door, boom, boom, boom. Watch out! The whale's about to burst!"

The next morning Gertrude didn't go to work. She parked her car at the next county's mall and took the bus back to Sunny, her town. She had to take the long way home from the bus stop to make sure no one in the neighborhood saw her. It was a sacrifice that would pay off, she assured herself every heavy step.

She came inside her home, wiped her sweaty forehead and waited silently on a chair she placed beside the door. She wasn't sure her plan would work, but it was worth a try. Still, she felt sure that she would have the last laugh. She could almost taste it. Gertrude knew a little about the little criminals. She knew that thugs always returned to the crime scene and secondly, that her indifference should've provoked the bastards to play a trick on her again.

She sat and waited. Did not moved, ate or drank. She sat and waited. Anticipating with a watery mouth.

Finally, about 3:00 o'clock, she felt a couple of light steps on her back porch. She felt and could almost imagine with eagerness a sweet little hand fiddling with the recently repaired window. She heard whispering and another set of feather steps moving to the front door. She could hear and feel their minute shoes caressing her beaten boardwalk. Matt fiddled with the doorknob and told Stu: "Hey, hurry up. It's open." They opened the door and

stepped inside the adipose' shrine. CLICK.

She locked the door.

That night Gertrude sat in front of the TV with a nerve-soothing meat stew to watch *Murder She Wrote*. She was interrupted by two sharp knocks on the door.

"Who is it?" Asked the endomorph.

"It's Irene, the neighbor."

"I'm coming," Gertrude wobbled to the door with her stew in her left hand. With her free hand she opened the door.

Irene stood outside smoking a menthol cigarette.

"Have you seen my kids?" Irene asked abruptly.

"Who, the redhead and the blond kid who are always running around and yelling?"

"Yes, the same devils. Have you seen them?"

"No. Are they missing?" Gertrude asked innocently.

Irene was getting impatient and rolled her eyes. She was already late to her night job.

"Yes. If you see them please tell them that mom left for work and that she'll see them tomorrow. Tell them I bought them cookies and milk for dinner. It's in the fridge. I gotta go," Irene said adjusting a wrinkle off her leopard skin-tight mini skirt and then inhaled the delicious scent. "Mmmm! It smells good in here, what did you cook?"

"Stew."

Irene nodded approvingly, nodded, and walked away. Gertrude followed the sickly slim body walking away and deliberately, with contempt, closed the door. *She probably did that woman a favor.*

Gertrude enjoyed a home cooked meal for the first time in years.

She served herself another bowl,

And another...

And another.

The next day she drove to Pizza Hut

-Flipside

K.P.'s Laugh

by Harry R. Townsend

Her dark perfectly straight brown hair bounced healthfully as she flung off her winter coat. It landed haphazardly on an empty chair. Frank could see she

was young, maybe very young. He began to rapidly awaken over his morning coffee. Usually a much slower process, but she was new. Fresh from the icy cold February air, her vitality awoke him. She scanned the cafeteria, found the coffee machine and made a beeline. Her movements were catlike, athletic, with an easy looseness of muscle and sinew. Her energetic presence glorified the gloom of Monday morning. Frank wanted her.

Of course Frank wanted every new woman he encountered, but this was a more acute desire.

After she settled and was sipping, he was able to make eye contact across the fifteen or so feet separating them. There were about twenty other employees preparing themselves for another week, but Frank had become oblivious to them once her green eyes sparkled into his view. The smile that accompanied the eyes was open, genuine. Before Frank could get himself together enough to go her table, Paul Marone, V.P. of sales appeared. He sat with her. They chatted. Then the two left together. "Probably Marone's secretary," Frank mused. He knew the VP's previous secretary was leaving to raise her children.

"Well," his thoughts continued, "This one is much nicer stuff." Young and tender. Perfect for a lecherous twenty-nine year old prowler. She would be his newest project. Maybe more.

Frank saw her the next two mornings at coffee. He got a nice firm "hello" on the second day. He also managed to see her through the open door to Marone's outer office a couple of times during the days that followed. For his efforts he garnered a wave and a big smile. She knew he was interested. He assembled information picked up around the building. She was indeed quite young. Nineteen. Just out of business school. Her name was Karen.

On Thursday morning she was alone over her coffee. As Frank finished his cup, he passed close by her. "Welcome to the hardware business," he said, hesitating at her side. She laughed. A bold loud laugh. It reverberated through his soul. He almost sat down. At the last instant he thought better of it, gathered himself and fled. On the way out and up to his junior executive cubicle, the laugh-rang in his ears. The entire day he was affected. His concentration shot to hell. He had to hear it again.

The following morning Karen arrived at the cafeteria for her usual. She spied Frank who had eagerly been following her arrival while completely ignoring his coffee companion, Willie. The two men were both buyers for the large wholesale hardware chain. They worked side by side. Frank bought sporting goods and toys. Willie bought fasteners, nails, and other similar small hardware. Willie was astounded when the striking young woman strode right up to their table saying, "May I?" While

indicating the vacant chair next to Frank.

Frank stood up. He smiled. She smiled. His buddy, Willie, followed the smiles visually, understanding instantly. "Please do," Frank finally sputtered. Karen removed her coat, revealing a full figure to go along with her rather tall frame. Her face a bit red from the outside winter weather. Both men had simultaneous thoughts. Hunger. Willie's thoughts moved from desire to jealousy in an instant, realizing she had come to sit and talk to Frank. He was a good friend, Willie was, and made a quick exit, saying, "Nice to meet you, excuse me while I start work," and he departed. The couple ignored the exit.

"My name is Frank," he held out his hand. She grasped it firmly.

"Mine is Karen, but everyone calls me K.P." "The K is for Karen, and the P for?" Frank

dull," she added mischievously.

"Yeah, I believe you hit that two-penny nail dead center. He's not known for his rapier wit."

"I'd better keep my big mouth shut, I'm intuition caused him to look back at the three story office building. The building was brick and glass. The company officers occupied the third floor and had huge windows spanning their respective offices and overlooking the parking lot. The corner office was Paul Marone's. The late winter's weak sunlight was fading fast. Frank could see across the lot that K.P. was at Marone's will-lit window. She waved. He returned the gesture. Then she held up one finger signaling him to wait a moment. Frank leaned back on his Chevy. Staring and wondering, he dropped his briefcase. His breath was a frosty fog. What was she up to? The young woman was out of view only momentarily. Then he saw her back, her long neck.

The lovely hair usually down her back had been pinned up. Frank stood transfixed. She was naked to the waist. She began to turn gracefully and reached up and freeing her hair at the instant her breasts came into his view. The released tresses partly covered her full charms. Because the distance was great, the details of her body were unclear. The effect, however, was provocative, deeply sensual. Frank soaked in the scene.

Without hurry, the young woman waved good-bye and glided from sight. Then the office light blinked out. For one long moment Frank continued to stare at the now black window. He was no longer cold, but her absent image was frozen forever in his mind.

The drive home was a blur. He started the Chevy and somehow negotiated the route to his apartment, but his mind was full of her. As soon as he was in his door, he tried

to call back to the office, but Carol had gone home. The switchboard was closed down for the weekend. He went next to the phone book. There were only two Pervaskis in the book. Neither was Karen or K. While eating leftover spaghetti, Frank had a thought. Perhaps she lived with her folks. After all, she was just nineteen and this was her first full-time job. Maybe one of the listing for Pervaski was her parents'. He would try. Gulping his dinner, he popped open a cold Coors and settled by the phone.

At 6:50 Frank lost his patience. He dialed the first number of the two in the phone book. She answered. He knew it was her.

"Hello."

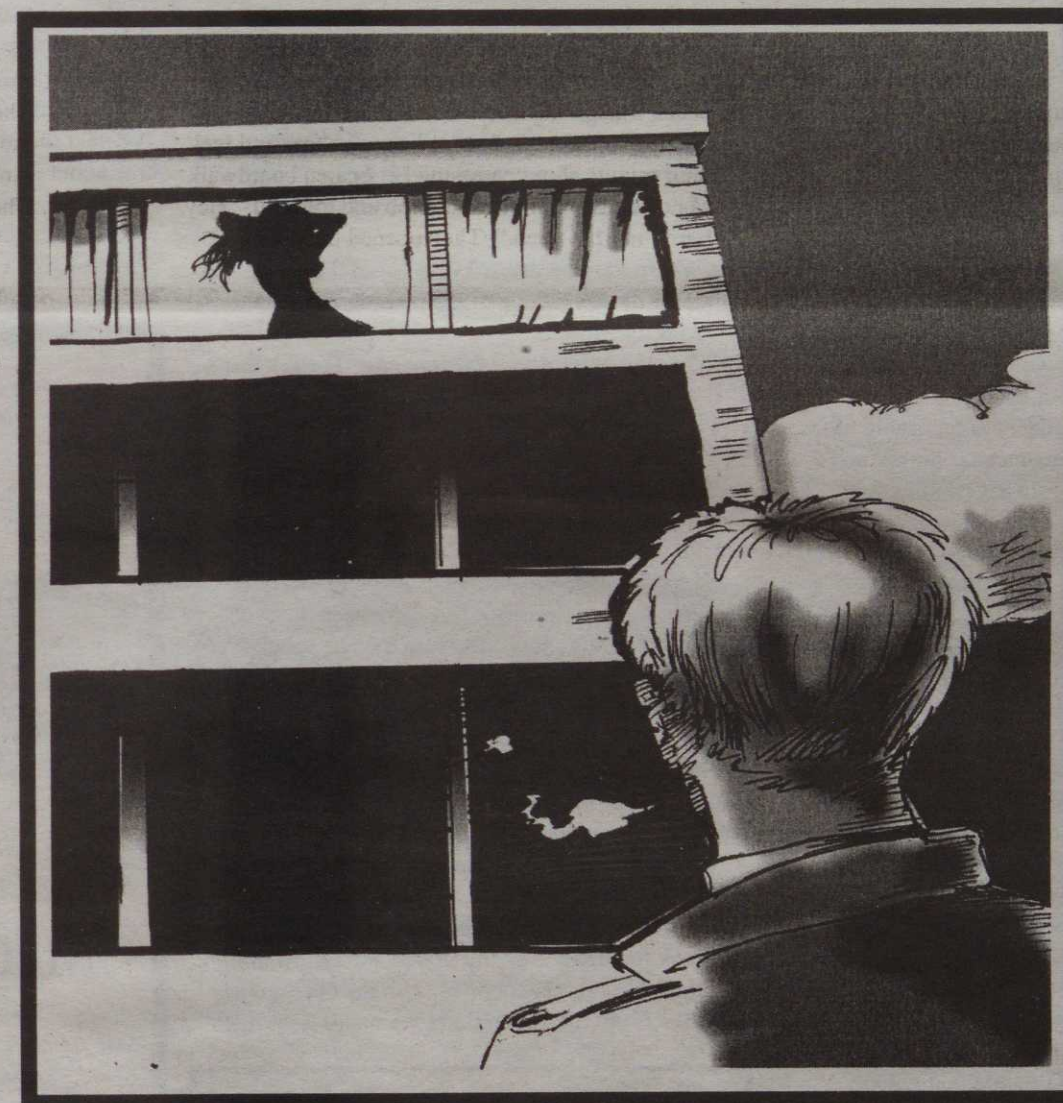
"K.P.? Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me."

"This is Frank."

"Ha, ha, heh-heh-heh, I thought you might try to call me."

The laugh, there it was again singing in his



asked. "Pervaski...Karen Pervaski..KP" "Polish heritage?"

"Polish and Ukrainian, no jokes please," she added.

"OK, I promise." He raised three fingers on his right hand as if a boy scout swearing an oath.

They sat quietly. Comfortable in each other's company without effort. Perhaps. Perhaps he was not awake enough, or witty enough early in this morning, for he could think of nothing to say that might induce her to laughter. He wanted to hear her laugh again.

"How is the new job going?" was all he could manage.

"OK, I guess. It's my first, so I don't have much to compare to."

"You're working for a decent guy K.P., Paul' been here forever."

"Mr. Marone seems fine... Maybe a little



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K.P.'S LAUGH CONT.

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"Hello."
"K.P.? Is that you?"
"Yes, it's me."
"This is Frank."
"Ha, ha, heh-heh-heh, I thought you might try to call me."

The laugh, there it was again singing in his ear. There was a pause while she quieted slowly. A moment of silence. Not awkward, just still. Frank was smiling broadly as he began again. "Can we get together? I know it's short notice here on a Friday, but if you're free?" He let it hang in the air.

"OK, Frank, how about I come to your place? I doubt you want to go through the ordeal of parent meeting. Right?"

"That's great, are you sure? I'll be more than happy to pick you up and go out somewhere nice."
"We can go out some other time. I'll come over so we can just talk and get acquainted."

"Anytime K.P., come ahead."
After he gave directions, Frank hit the showers, scrubbing himself spotless.

He dug out his only pair of decent jeans. Levi's. Then searched for a shirt that looked good. He checked around his apartment, straightening here and there. The apartment wasn't clean, but it wasn't a disaster. It'd have to do he decided.

He put candles in the holders in the living room and bedroom. He got out his incense burner and a few sticks. He lit one, got himself another cold Coors, put John Coltrane on the stereo and tried to relax. K.P.'s blurred glass nude image floated erotically round and round in his mind.

She knocked. Entered. Smiled. Laughed, then all was well. They were again instantly at peace together. No expected nervousness. No usual awkwardness. The two sat across from each other in the living room. For more than an hour, the conversation never lagged.

He learned about her. She listened and learned equally. Musically, Coltrane was replaced by Miles Davis, then Billie Holiday. They sipped Coors. Outside snow began to coat the grass and roadways. Throwing on their coats, the two went out onto Frank's front porch to watch the flakes float across the light of the corner street lamps. The wind bit them this way then that. Standing loose, Frank slid his arm around K.P.'s waist and fitted her to his. Both had the thought. The thought that they fit together nicely. It didn't need to be said.

Back inside warm, cozy, they sat together now. Snuggling. After a time Frank excused himself and slipped into his bedroom. He dug into his antique treasure box. Returning to the living room, he found K.P. sitting cross legged on the floor going through his albums. She picked a well-worn Nat King Cole album. "I'm surprised you didn't go for rock & roll stuff," Frank said.

"Some other night. It's not for tonight. Something mellow, beautiful, don't you think?" She answered.

"Yeah," he said as he put Nat on the turntable. He was beside her kneeling as she sat on the floor back to the wall. They looked; Frank down, K.P. up; into each other's eyes. Frank touched the left side of her face gently with his right hand. K.P. closed her eyes. He turned, slid down and sat beside her against the wall. Opening his left palm up he revealed a fat joint. "Do you?"

"Yes I do!" She replied
He lit another stick of incense and three candles, then doused the living room floor lamp. Firing up the grass, he said, "I doubt you'll need many hits. It's real good weed. I've been saving it."

lay beside him on her back, beer in both hands on her stomach. "We gotta talk, old guy," she said.
"Go ahead, speak liberated woman."

She laughed. Frank's goal was fast becoming inducing her to laugh. "Well like I told you, I read a lot, so I know some things. I know that what I did at the office window was provocative, but I am technically a virgin. Book learning and car groping aside, I had never. Good European Catholic upbringing, you know." Silence filled the room. They each sipped, watching the candlelight flicker magically on the ceiling.

"I read a lot myself. Including articles about what women need, want and like. I've been reading Playboy and Esquire cover to cover ever since I could steal my Dad's copies," Frank offered.

"So you think I'll be O.K. in your care, old guy?"

"I leave it up to you, K.P. We can be lovers. We can be friends. We can wait. I defer to your wishes, me lady."

K.P. put her beer on the bedside night stand. She rolled back to spoon Frank and curled beside him. She reached up to gain a kiss, then whispered in his ear. "I've been a virgin long enough. With you, I know I'll be all right."

A full hour later, standing together under the hot shower, engulfed in slippery steam, the lovers embraced.

"Old guy?"

"What?"

"I'm glad I waited for you to come along. Listen, I don't want to rush you, but how soon can we do that again?"

"In a little while...then tomorrow, the next day. The next month and next year. What the hell, K.P., how about forever!"

Her answer was that damn haunting heart-rendering laugh. He'd never be able to leave the sound of K.P.'s laugh.

-Flipside

Her answer was that damn haunting heart-rendering laugh. He'd never be able to leave the sound of K.P.'s laugh.

"Saving it for what?" She answered.

"For a beautiful woman and a perfect evening. Saving it for you."

K.P. drew deeply on the joint, holding the smoke long and deep in her body. She exhaled the acrid smoke. "Boy, you sure are full of bull! I'll admit it's nice bull, though."

Frank just smiled. Minutes later on a new lovely plane, they turned and kissed. The first. Gentle. Tender. Almost childlike. She leaned into his side. Content.

"Where did you get that idea about the office window? It was fabulous. Something I'll keep in my head forever."

"Out of a magazine," she replied. "I read a lot," K.P. added.

"It was extremely sensuous!"
"It was meant to be."

They kissed again. Again. Again. Each grew in intensity. In depth. Then K.P. broke away. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-nine," he replied.

"Whew, an older man. I've only been out with teenagers. This is nice. The music. The pace. It's quiet. Real Warm."

"Good; be comfortable," he answered.

Frank flipped over Nat King Cole. He eased out to his kitchen returning with two ice cold Coors. Standing over K.P. he said, "Follow me young lady. Bring the rest of the grass, please."

While doing exactly as he asked, K.P. chided, "Orders from headquarters, eh-h-h! Haven't you heard, women have been liberated?"

Frank ignored the gentle jibe as she followed him into the bedroom. He popped open the beer, giving her one. He lit the candles and lay on his bed. K.P.

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Connie & Gary Slampak

Kytzvinyne's 7th Symphony

by Micheal Cohen

Lyossa's most respected team of doctors informed Yuri Plumkin his death was not only imminent, but impressively immediate. After his appointment, Yuri walked to his favorite cafe in a state of shock, and only then—surrounded by the rhythm of clanging utensils and the casual chatter, a warm cup of tea in his palms—was he able to ponder the approaching deadline. Outside, a cold front bombarded the small town of Lyossa, Arlandia, and plows patrolled streets, pushing the fallen snow onto the sidewalks. A thin wall of packed snow leaned against the cafe's large picture windows. Yuri waited at a table for Satorious, his son, who played first viola in Arlandia's national orchestra and would be arriving from rehearsal in the city. Under normal circumstances, he would have discouraged the forty-eight year old Satorious from traveling in inclement weather—the snow and ice had undoubtedly made the roads treacherous.

In his job as an assembly line manager for Dreamline Shoes, Yuri had been reliable with deadlines, and, regarding mortality, he expected no less from himself. Tilting his head back to stare at the cafe's low oak ceiling, he rested his forearms on the table. Would death be the blank and empty nothingness he had experienced when a Rigner rod had snapped from the lacying machine and knocked him senseless? Or would there be an afterlife? Maybe even the heaven his own mother had once described as a coming together—a closing of life's circle.

Sipping the tea, he thought of Pitheria's face, ten years ago, in the hospital bed just before she had passed on: cheeks shriveled, lips bleached, translucent eyes shouting what her weakened mouth could not—the last in his wife's long history of tantrums. Yuri had cradled her hand in his own. A moment and all at once, her skin cooled and hardened as if she had fallen from her body.

"Whatever death is," Yuri mumbled, "I will know it soon enough." His throat tightened, and he coughed into the palm of his hand. The waiter appeared suddenly as though beckoned.

"Sir?" he said. "Is everything satisfactory?"
"I can't complain," Yuri said, staring at the waiter's smooth pink hands, the black apron stretched taut around his waist. "I've lived seventy-one years; that's all a man has a right to expect. Yes, I'd hoped for more, but it's not to be."

The waiter nodded politely.
Yuri waived the man away. A burning sensation seeped into his chest. Was it the disease? The doctors had assured him it was an exceedingly common affliction. A minute irregularity in one of his organs. A name he could not pronounce. So be it, he thought. It is right to die, it is the cycle of things.

Yet something persisted in frustrating him. The source of this agitation was not that life had been too brief, nor unfair, nor marked by substantial regret. It seemed, rather, that an expectation remained unfulfilled or a meaning unrealized, and now at its very end, his life felt incomplete—like a shoe wanting laces.

He shifted his bony backside over the depression in the wood seat. Drawing back the cuff of his sweater, he checked the time. Satorious was now over twenty minutes late. Another plow passed by, and the snow bank rose higher, its dark belly compressed against the window. Yuri raised the cup to his mouth, the aroma of hibiscus stirred a memory

of summer—a hillside overgrown with wildflower. His young self balanced upon a fence. Wisps of lilac and fuschia clouds unfurling at dusk.

The memory closed as the cafe's front door opened. With a rush of cold air and snowflakes, Satorious stepped into the cafe. He wore a heavy overcoat, a wool muffler, and black leather gloves. In his hand, held like a briefcase, was his viola case, the weight of which drew both his shoulders into a hunch.

Yuri slid his chair over the hardwood floor and stood to greet his son. Satorious, with his usual formality, stopped at a distance.

"Hello, Papa," he said. They shook hands firmly. Satorious then apologized for his tardiness. Rehearsal had gone late due to some difficulty with a new symphony.

Satorious tucked his gloves into the inner pocket of the overcoat. Then he folded the coat in half over his forearm and draped it on the back of his chair. After they ordered food from the waiter, Yuri asked after his daughter-in-law, Marianna.

"She has taken a vacation in Piova for a time," Satorious said.

Yuri's eyes narrowed. Vacation was a word people often substituted for separation. Satorious had always been reticent about his marriage—much as Turi was at his son's age. Closing his eyes, Yuri saw himself, years ago, sipping white wine from a champagne glass at his favorite restaurant. The day was his fifth wedding anniversary, and Pitheria, with an uncomfortable smile straining her lips, broke a week's silence: "We don't love each other," she said.

And today would be their final lunch together, Yuri thought. Their final conversation.

"Why must we pretend?" The sound of her voice made Yuri blush. She turned her head to the side, sucked air through her front teeth. He couldn't think of an answer, nor could he pull her into his arms, press her lips to his neck, rest his chin upon the crown of her head, and call truth a lie, though for a moment he wanted to. So he lowered his gaze to the swirling patterns carved into the ironwood dinner table.

Soon after, Pitheria's fits of temper commenced. Concerned about their effect on Satorious, Yuri devised a plan. He noticed that his son enjoyed listening to music on the old phonograph: so during Piteria's outbursts, whenever he could, Yuri played a record at full volume in order to muffle her yelling.

In Arlandia, divorce was considered improper, so even though Yuri and Pitheria were unhappy, they stayed together as an honorable mismatch. In fact, Yuri carried a distinct sense of pride in remaining resolute to his vows. At times, it had been difficult, especially after Tania Zelline began working in the factory. Amidst the smell of freshly molded rubber and pressed leather, they had shared the details of their melancholy marriages. But, even then, Yuri had explicitly stated his intentions of remaining loyal to Pitheria, and Tania eventually requested a transfer to the newly established slipper division. He often dreamed of making love to her in the bales of cotton cream.

By nudging the handle, Yuri rotated his tea cup until its glazed ceramic reflected the oil lamp above. "A vacation? Is this true Satorious?"
"Yes."

"Will she be back soon?"
"Yes, very soon, Papa. Very soon."

Yuri forced a smile onto his lips. Pain tightened the skin on his son's face, and Yuri recalled the time Pitheria had shouted at Satorious for practicing his viola too loudly; she had been trying to sleep. Afterwards, Yuri had carried his crying son downstairs and played Kytzvinyne's 7th Symphony on the old phonograph. With the volume set low, they sat together on the floor; Satorious in Yuri's lap, close to the speaker, straining to hear the notes, swaying with the tempo. The boy stopped crying and listened with eyes as wide as his ears, and Yuri later swore that it was in those precious moments that Satorious Plumkin, the musical virtuoso, had been born.

And today would be their final lunch together, Yuri thought. Their final conversation. With a napkin, he dabbed his face, but tears began to fall as steadily as the snow outside.

"What's wrong, Papa?" Satorious' gaze dropped to the table, his expression sullen. "Don't worry, she's coming back. I won't disgrace you."

It was then that Yuri told Satorious of his morning visit with the team of doctors and the results of their tests. His son's face turned gray and his eyes dark. "The doctors are wrong," he said. "They've simply made a mistake."

"No," Yuri said, glancing toward the window. "They are the top of their profession. There is no mistake."

"Surely you need a second opinion."
He shook his head and forced a smile. "My time is up, and if one thing has ever been true of Yuri Plumkin—" he paused, head lowered. Sighed. "He always meets his deadlines."

Father and son stared into the cup of tea on the table. A blue stripe was painted on the rim, and Yuri's eyes circled round and round until he felt light-headed. The food arrived, and they picked at it with forks, cut it with knives, but neither had much of an appetite.

Yuri wanted to tell his son about the sense of incompleteness he felt, but Satorious's lips were pinched together so tightly, his face closed off and distant, that Yuri knew it would be useless. Many times when his son had still been a boy, Yuri had seen the same expression. Once, on the day before his first music contest, Satorious had fallen while ice skating and broken several bones in his left hand. After having practiced his performance obsessively for weeks, he had been forced to remove himself from the competition. Yuri had struggled to speak with him, to comfort him. There will be others, he had said. The bone will heal stronger. You must be patient. Wait for next time.

"I don't want next time!" Satorious had said, then his face had closed up, just as it was now, like a mask, and he had barely spoken another word until the bones had healed.

After their plates were cleared, Yuri found silence increasingly awkward and constrained. His fingers folded together on his lap. A dull ache, caused by the snow, throbbed in his joints. At the next table, the waiter—back arched stiffly, legs rigid and straight—recited the specials in a crisp voice. Across the aisle, a young couple rose to leave. Yuri began to ramble on about whatever he could: the blizzard, the sheer number of plows, he even

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METALLIC RELATIONSHIPS

By: Andrea White

I thought of my daughter's origin; the cold metal prod inside of me. No men in my life. My own father had walked

"I'll see you in a few weeks, honey," he hugged me.

"Don't tell her unnecessary lies," my mother screamed.

The door slammed. I didn't see him again for fifteen years. I'd raise my child right, without unnecessary pain, as a way of healing myself.

My hospital room door was closed, and I read my name, "Janet Walker, Dr. Gonzaga" as I passed it. My pains were intense but they were four, five, six minutes apart. They needed to be within two minutes before I would be considered in labor.

"Do you want me to walk with you?" my grandmother asked. She had a Coke in her hand from the snack bar. Grandma was eighty-three. Slow-moving, big-eyed and thin, she looked like an aged insect.

"I'm O.K." Both Grandma and Mom had been supportive since I said, "What do you want me to do? Have an abortion? I'll be the first woman impregnated by artificial insemination to abort her child. *National Inquirer* will be all over us."

After that conversation, Mother stopped by with something she called a bassinet layout and a suggestion.

"What are you going to name this child?" When she was more upset than usual, she talked like she spat.

"Helen," I answered.

"What are you going to tell her about her father?" Mother would be an attractive sixty-year-old if she hadn't spent her life mad at my dad. Her anger had parched her cheeks and dug rivulets that drained at the sea of her mouth.

"Some kids have fathers and some don't." I shrugged.

"She doesn't."

"You do that. In kindergarten, she'll tell her classmates that she had a virgin birth."

"O.K. I'll think of something else." Since I didn't need men, my daughter wouldn't.

"She's going to feel like a weirdo," Mother pronounced.

"I'm skipping the betrayals, the divorce and getting the good stuff."

Mother turned away. She had tears in her eyes. "What did I do wrong?"

I wanted to say, you were a victim, but I hadn't given up trying to make her see the positive side of my daughter's birth. "If you could have had me, without Dad, wouldn't you be happier?"

The far-off look in her eyes told me she was thinking about sex. Was my Dad good in bed? I was glad that if I told my daughter the truth, she'd never have to squirm as she thought about some man's penis inside of me.

The next contraction came. I hugged my ample stomach and breathed deeply. The roller-coaster of pain had started; for an instant, I was exhilarated. But the ride continued. Why had I wanted a child? Pain was my only companion. My

stomach jerked. The car pulled up abruptly at the exit. I glanced at my watch. The contraction had only lasted thirty seconds, but even as I realized I was pain-free, my body tensed for the next ride.

I looked down at my jogging shoes. Size 10. Big like a man's. The man whose child I was caring had small feet. He wore loafers with pennies in them.

In my consultation I had asked, "Are you sure he's Jewish? My eighty-year-old grandmother will kill me if I give birth to a goy baby."

"Yes. And I might add, he has traditional Jewish features."

I already knew he was a fair-complected medical student Baylor Medical School of medium build with no known alcoholism in his family. I also knew that providing more information to someone like me would be a mistake. "Like a hooked nose?"

Marion Rosenblatt, artificial insemination consultant, nodded. She understood how important this was.

"How do you know?" I demanded.

"It says so here." Marion patted her papers.

"Does it say hooked nose or does it say traditional Jewish features?"

"No, it says curly brown hair, hooked nose, gray eyes." Marion read from a piece of paper.

I sighed with relief. There couldn't be more than twenty Jewish interns at Baylor.

"But his parents aren't from the Ukraine?"

My father had been from the Ukraine and if my baby's father came from there, that might be a bad omen.

"No," she shook her head.

"One last question. I realize I need to honor the donor's confidentiality. I'm very athletic. Is he

athletic?"

the woman read the form. A perplexed smile appeared on her face.

"I guess you could say so."

"What does that mean?"

"When I think of athletics, I think of the traditional sports."

"But he's accomplished at a sport?"

"Very." She shook her head vigorously.

"Thank you. I'm excited." I had completed my interview for a husband. This one would do.

"A good Jewish boy," she smiled encouragingly.

Her smile made me mad. I hated secrets. I became a political consultant, because I wanted to take the back off the clock of government and see how it worked.

"The trace of a contraction distracted me. This pain gathered strength inside me. I checked my watch. It had been four minutes since the last contraction. The name of the pain was Hurricane Amalia. I watched the spot on the radar map grow bigger and bigger until it filled my stomach and my head. I stopped walking. I was going to explode. The pressure increased. I gasped for breath. The pain made my metaphor game silly.

"God, how long will these contractions go on?"

The eye of the storm passed over me. I sighed with relief and thought about Helen's father. I knew who he was. It hadn't been hard. Baylor sold me the Med School yearbook over the phone. Photographs to dream on.

I got serious about discovering his identity after my home pregnancy test came in a positive. I called the school again and was passed around to several departments until I got the Dean in charge of Extracurricular Affairs. "My son wants to go to Baylor but I hear you require the interns to make sperm donations. I'm opposed to your practice. It's immoral."

"From time to time based on the needs of the sperm bank we do solicit donations. It's a voluntary program. Your son certainly wouldn't be forced."

"Are all your interns asked?"

"It depends on the needs of the sperm bank. This year we opened the program only to our second-year interns. I can assure you Baylor is fine..."

I hung up the phone. Sometimes I couldn't help wishing that Baylor made this harder. I raced to the Baylor Medical School Yearbook, my heart pounding. I flipped the pages to the correct section and skimmed the faces. There were seven male Jewish interns but only one with curly hair and a hooked nose. Doctor Sid Lasher. He was cute. I said his name many times that night. I liked the sound of it. Stranger things had happened. Maybe he and I and Helen could get to know each other.

On one of our early "dates," I waited until Dr. Sid Lasher walked out of the hospital one night and climbed into his Mazda. It pleased me that I wasn't old enough to be his mother. I was already in my third trimester but I found myself wanting to get to know him.

I knew an intern at Baylor Med School slightly. I cooked up a story about wanting to start a political action committee for interns and residents. She invited me to a med school party at her house.

CONTINUED ON PG 31

SYMPHONY CONT.

informed his son of the new Jumbo-Clip stitch shoes developed by his replacement at Dreamline.

"I wish I had an irregular for my collection," Yuri said, pinching his chin between his thumb and forefinger. His shoe collection had begun around the same time as Pitheria's tantrums. In the factory, one of his jobs had been to destroy irregular Dreamline shoes. One day, while emptying a canvas bag full of discarded products into the incinerator, a single pair of the new Vexlin model sport shoe had fallen to the floor. An obvious crack angled down the middle of the two rubber soles. The irregularity attracted Yuri, and he slipped it into his oversized workpants pocket. That year, by labeling the

irregular shoes he took home from the factor according to their year, and irregularity. Yuri began a meticulous collection in his closet.

"If you want Yuri said, "you can have the collection, or else you can give it away."

Satorious nodded without meeting his eyes.

"But then again, who would want a collection of irregular shoes?" Yuri said, smiling. And that's when he thought of Tania; he debated asking his son to locate her and present her with the collection. But considering the awkwardness of the demand, he decided against it. All the while, he watched Satorious's face for signs of opening, but remained locked tightly.

Leaning forward, his elbows on the table, Satorious opened his mouth as to speak, but no sound came out. Then he shifted his arm, knocking the mug of tea to the floor. The waiter swept up ceramic shards and puddled tea with a white towel. He returned a minute later with an identical mug in his hand.

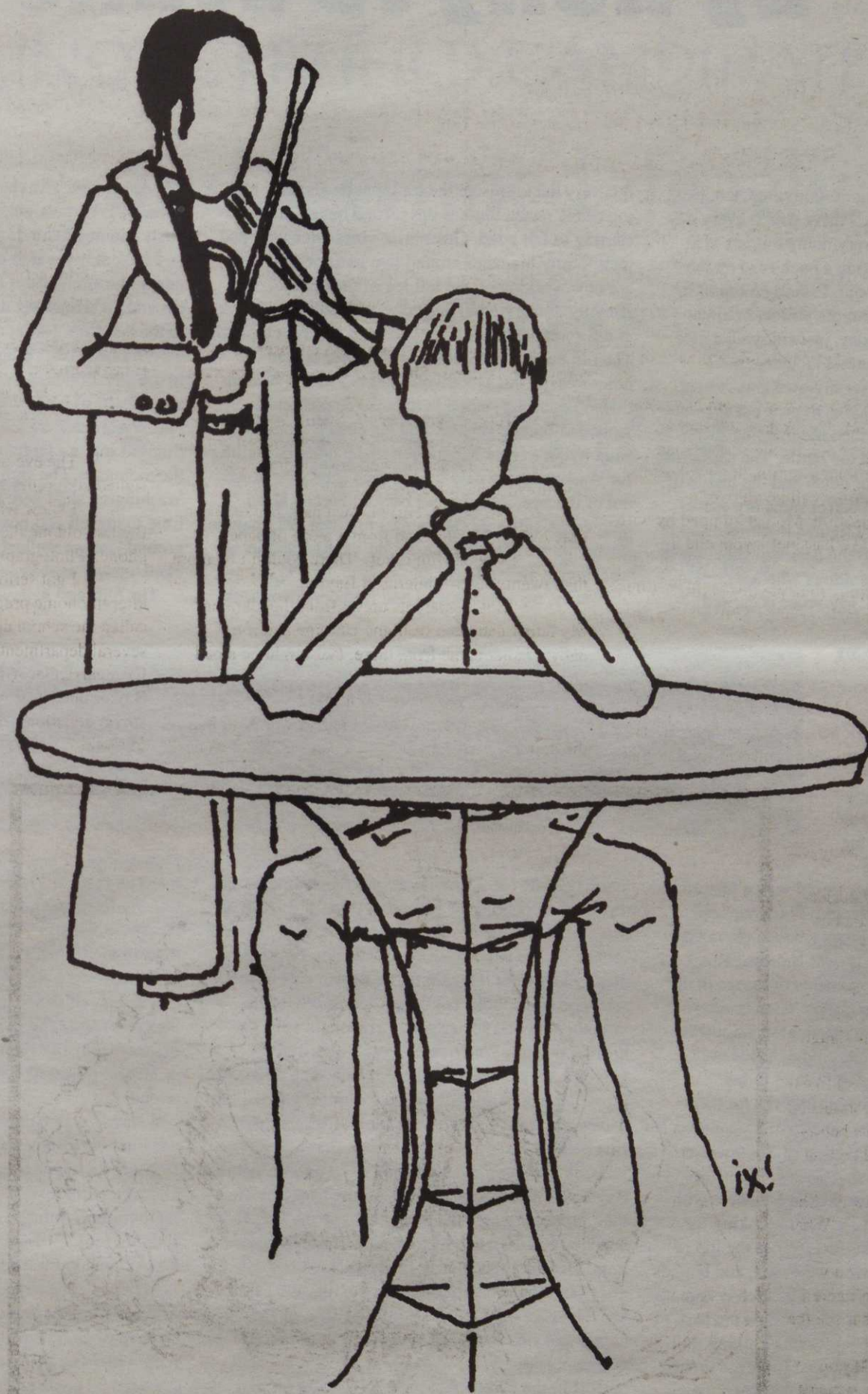
Satorious's chair scraped against the floor as it slid backwards. Yuri stared out the window. The snow spun in swirling spirals. Flakes settled onto the street in one sprawling, rippling white blanket, and the hazy orange light of a snowplow appeared in the distance. A couple walked by the window in thick fur coats, arms linked at the elbows, feet plodding and kicking through the snow.

Yuri was about to motion for the check when his son placed the viola case upon the table and opened its lid. Raising the instrument, Satorious tucked it under his chin, and began tuning it. Two notes, plucked simultaneously, fought in the air for harmony until his thumb and forefinger adjusted the tuning pegs, and the notes blended.

Faces appeared from surrounding tables, eyes directed at the viola. Yuri folded his hands over his lap; his cheeks prickled and flushed. The waiter approached rapidly. "Please put that away, Sir," he said. "I can't..." But Satorious had no ears for him.

Appearing satisfied that all four strings were tuned, he snatched the bow from the case, tested the hair's tension with his pinkie, and commenced to play.

People hushed those around them into silence, and the noise of seats sliding masked the first few notes. The waiter apparently had realized that his customers wanted to listen, and objected no more. The bow dragged across the viola's bridge, and the notes—broken at first, then joined—emanated from the scrolled sound holes. In the background, the crunch of a plow packing more snow against the window rumbled beneath the music, and Yuri leaned forward, elbows upon the table, head resting in his hands. His son's face remained clenched and expressionless, eyes dark and



distant, but his body rocked with the music, and the music resonated throughout the cafe, sonorous and beautiful.

Yuri closed his eyes, and the song gathered speed, notes piling upon each other rapidly. The sound of fingers lightly tapping the fingerboard and the bow's hair sliding over the strings mingled with the quivering rhythm of Satorious's breathing, and then, for Yuri, time cracked open—he was a young man again, running early in the morning, rain pounding black dots into his grey shirt. Catching a glimpse through transparent shades, he stopped and watched Pitheria braid her hair in front of a Byzantine mirror. Her pale, smooth fingers moved the strands of silky hair from hand to hand, over and

under each other, unifying them in a graceful, mesmerizing dance. Stumbling to the doorstep, day after day, all that summer, he saw her hair tightly braided or flowing loose into magical curls. He met her several times in the street, feigned surprise, mumbled nervously, then cried into his pillow at night because he ached for her.

"I like you too," she had said one day as they strolled up and down the street, summer nearly over. She leaned to him, her hair touching his cheek, filling his nostrils, and he pulled away afraid.

The music eased into the symphony's final movement. Yuri opened his eyes. He longed for her hair, that summer, the aching fear of falling in love. The viola shifted from melody to harmony, mixing the two in a tense dialogue.

Satorious's fingers pressed, then plucked, then bunched, then sprawled; the bow changed speed and angle and tempo. He was trying to play all the parts: the counter melody, the harmony—with one instrument. Years ago, the national orchestra, with Satorious playing second viola, had performed Kytzvinyne's 7th Symphony to a sold out theater in Lyossa. Yuri had sat hunched in the back of the dark auditorium—alone because Pitheria had refused to leave the house. The stage lights had glittered off the viola's varnished soundboard—the viola that he had bought for Satorious, telling him it was a graduation gift from Pitheria. Yuri had used the instrument to explain that even though she raged, Pitheria loved him. And now, it seemed to Yuri, Satorious was playing the instrument with all her passion and all her fury.

The walls of the Cafe seemed to fall away, and as Yuri stared across the table, he saw himself and Pitheria in the dueling notes, the dissonance between that summer and the rest of our lives. He saw Satorious as a husband struggling for honor, a man performing for

thousands, a young boy crying in his father's lap. Satorious switched to the final melody line. The viola pressed hard against his voice box. Yuri understood these notes were the words his son could not say, and that when they ceased, the munch would end. Satorious would return to the city, and Yuri to his bed. And when the circle finally closed, it would not be a circle anymore, it would be as abstract and elusive as the promised coming together, as impalpable and ephemeral as the notes which filled the cafe yet could not be seen, smelled, tasted, or held, and as futile and desperate as one violist attempting to play a symphony.



by Dave Porter

The History Lesson

by Holly Jo Evans

It's a lonely place, the Jumonville Glen, just south of Uniontown. I drive past it every day and notice that not very many tourists visit there. Deep in the forest, along a back road up the mountain, a small cliff juts out. I stand on top of it, and the breeze blows up from the hollow below, ruffling my hair. I'm out today, just enjoying a nice fall day off. I work in the tourist industry, and I decided to play one today for my own amusement. My adventurous eye first begins to pick out several climbing routes below, but then the imagination takes over. I can almost feel the battle. The sensation of being on the very brink of death and the image of staring down a cold musket barrel stuns my senses for just a moment. Shadowy figures in uniforms are at the base of the cliff. I feel the desire to shout out a warning to the unprepared soldiers who are cooking dinner and setting up camp. My voice is carried away on the wind, unheard. Another shout echoes from my left, and every ear in camp becomes alert. I see young men begin to reach for guns and horses.

Jumonville Glen was the scene of the first battle fought by George Washington. It's the place that he made a name for himself. Although the trend that I've noticed is that every time I visit a historical site somewhere I'm disappointed. Those age-old heroes just aren't what the history books claim they are. All across the mountains near National Road route 40, I can trace the movements of troops in the French and Indian War. Jumonville Glen is where it all started. A young George Washington ambushed the great French General Jumonville, killed every one of his men, then chased down and killed Jumonville. The British wanted this area for themselves, but the French were here first. Thus began a long and bloody war that left most of Southwestern Pa in the hands of the British.

I whistle for my dog. She goes everywhere with me. She's snuffing through the brush, looking for chipmunks. The black beast runs over to the top of the rocks, fearlessly looks down the cliff, and bounds to my side as I descend the steps. The glen is kept up by Fort Necessity National Battlefield. At the base of the rocks, the dog and I pick up a small hiking trail that winds around the area believed to be the French camp. There isn't any sign of the scuffle that took place here more than two hundred years ago, but I listen closely and can almost here the shouts and smell the musket fire. The tiny trail continues on through the woods and the realization strikes me that when George Washington walked here there wasn't a tree to be seen. The glen had actually been a farmer's field. I wonder if any of his cows got killed during the battle?

There are three benches in this park. The dog and I take full advantage of all of them. One is in the dry stream, hollow, amid rocks and fall leaves. I hunker down in the streambed and slowly turn over some of the stones there. They are smooth and round. There must have been water here at some point. Perhaps the French horses drank from a shallow pool along

this very bank. Beside the trail that heads back to the top of the rocks, there is the second bench. It's starting to fall apart. Greenbrier vines have wrapped their thorny branches around two trees nearby and are now working on the left leg of the bench. Directly down the hill is a huge, old, oak tree. I look at it for a moment and compare it to the trees around. The old thing is at least four times bigger than the other trees in this woodland. I think it could be one that Washington passed in his mad dash after the wounded French general. Maybe even a scout from Jumonville's force had hidden in the boughs, waiting for Washington to pass by and then scurrying down out of the tree, taking word back to French Headquarters. A smile spreads across my face as I imagine the notion that old George might've missed one. He was human after all.

Finally, we wrap around and find ourselves back

horse skeleton. The skeleton turned out to be from a horse of French origin. He leaves in a hurry, obviously running behind.

I look at my watch and suddenly realize just how late in the afternoon it is. The dog and I jump into the car and go screaming down the twisty mountain road to the last stop. I want to look at Fort Necessity before I head back home. Route 40 is quiet this late in the day. Lunch is over. The rush home hasn't started yet, so it's just me and my dog and the road that Washington traveled many times in his life. The Summit Inn is a large, white structure at the top of the mountain. The sign outside boasts: "George Washington slept here and so should you." I laugh a little to myself and ponder the fact that the actual ground George walked on is somewhere under the blacktop and asphalt of Route 40.

The hills and valleys around Fort Necessity are dotted with troops. In one corner, the French forces lay siege. They're winning. The British General Braddock is gravely ill. His men are running from the French armies; there were too

many of them at Ft. Duquesne. They stopped in a low, flat area and quickly erected a fort. Fort Necessity is a tiny structure. It has only enough room to keep the General, his doctors, and his officers out of harms way. I walk among these reenactment characters, all pictures of men who lived more than 200 years ago. The British soldiers are tired and demoralized. The French had been dogging them for miles and miles, like vultures, waiting for a wounded animal to die.

I stay to watch most of the battle. My dog, who is not fond of real musket fire, had to be left in the car. It dawns on me how different this battle is from the Glen. Here the British are not winning; they aren't really even fighting a war. These soldiers are simply fighting for their lives and the life of their General. The sympathy I felt for Jumonville and the French at the Glen is gone, erased by the brutal French offensive I see unfolding before me. The sun is just starting to go down when I notice a small band of men scurry out the back door of the fort. They are not seen by the French lookouts. Between two of the men, there is a stretcher. I know who is on it: General Braddock. His men are making a last ditch effort to save him. I know he won't make it; his grave is just over the hill on Route 40, but I cheer on the soldiers' attempt anyway. They are gone just moments before the French set out on a full-fledged attack on the fort. Men fall to musket fire, and many more die in hand to hand combat. This whole reenactment is way too real.

I head back to the car; unfortunately I already know how the story ends. The dog is glad to see me. All that gunfire most likely drove her nuts. I let her out on the leash for a minute to relieve herself, and then we get back in the car and leave. It's been a long day, and I have lots of history to ponder.

-Flipside

The sympathy I felt for Jumonville and the French at the Glen is gone, erased by the brutal French offensive I see unfolding before me.

at the parking lot. There is one more bench to be sat on. I sit and ponder the plaque in front of it. A large piece of sandstone has been propped up here. On it, a bronze square tells the story of Washington's first victory and what it meant to the British side of the war. The stone looks contrived. It was obviously brought here and set up with a crane: not very historical at all. We drive back out the winding gravel road that was once a farm path. The dog presses her nose against the rear window and happily waves a plume of a tail in farewell to Washington's first battlefield.

Back at the highway I decide to jet over to Laurel Caverns. There's a small knob on the backside of their property where historians believe the French watched British troop movements. The idea comes to mind that the French most likely avoided low places after Washington ambushed Jumonville. We park. We then hike behind the Laurel Caverns visitor center and slowly climb up the highest point on Chestnut Ridge.

It is immediately obvious why the French took up this position. I can see for miles. To my left is Masontown, with huge columns of steam rising from the edge of town. To my right are Uniontown and lower down Brownsville. The view is wide sweeping. I can see all the way to Pittsburgh; the PPG buildings rise up on the horizon. There are no plaques here; the French don't get recognition at very many American historical sites. The only information I can gather is from a Laurel Caverns tour guide that I meet in the parking lot. He's a college student trying to make his way home in time to go to class, and here I am, a stupid tourist taking up his time and making him late. He says that some French historians had come to Laurel almost 30 years ago and had unearthed ladders, barrels, and a

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JESUS CHRIST?!

Some Say
LORD and Savior
Some Say
Just a curse word
"Who do you say that he is?"
Matthew 16:13-16

JESUS CHRIST?!

WHAT IS HIS PURPOSE?

"For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved."
John 3:17

JESUS CHRIST?!

I don't need to condemn anyone!
"He who believeth not is condemned already!"
John 3:18
"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ"
Romans 8:1

JESUS CHRIST?!

He really loves sinners
(that's why He died for me AND you!)
He really hates sin
(because it destroys you!)
John 15:12-14

JESUS CHRIST?!

He loves everyone! (even you and me)
However, you must love Him back!
John 3:16: Titus 2:11

JESUS CHRIST?!

Are you tired of the weight
and turmoil of your life?
"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."
Matthew 11:28

JESUS CHRIST?!

Why would anyone resist a God that loves us enough to sacrifice His only Son for us?
Jesus is "the light of the world"
John 8:12
Light is come into the world and men loved darkness... because their deeds were evil."
John 3:19

JESUS CHRIST?!

Do you feel trapped? Hurt? Limited?
Jesus came to:
"preach the gospel to the poor...
heal the broken-hearted...
recovering the sight to the blind...
to set at liberty them that are bruised."
Luke 4:18

**DECISIONS YOU MUST MAKE
FOR YOURSELF!
IS THERE A GOD OR NOT?**

*IF THERE IS, IS THERE ONLY ONE?
IF THERE IS ONLY ONE, WHICH ONE?*

Hey, check it out!
Which of the sacred writings spoke of an earth in the shape of a ball hanging in space before Jesus was born?
Which of the sacred writings mentioned the center of the gravitational pull of our galaxy being centered in the Pleiades before Jesus Christ was born?
Which of the sacred writings deal with the faults of its heroes and with everyone who reads it honestly?
Which of the sacred writings have never been disproved by any archeological finding?

Which of the sacred writings speak honestly about human needs and a Supreme Being that has lovingly provided for those needs?
The answer to all these questions and more is the Bible that has been recognized by the entire community of Christian believers through the centuries.
Check it out!
The Bible is not a puzzlebox you can't understand without the "secret understanding" of some special group.
The Bible speaks to anyone who honestly tries to understand.

"FIFTEEN" CONT.

out front, and someone waving his arms. I couldn't quite make it out until I slowed down.
"It's your brother and his friends," exclaimed Beth. "What's he still doing here?"
"I don't know, but I think he wants us to come back," I said. At this point, I didn't know what I was doing anymore, I just wanted this to end; and going by my big brother's body gestures, it seemed as if everything might be okay. I put the car in neutral and coasted quietly toward him and his three friends. He too seemed a little shook up. I rolled down my window and slowly braked. He leaned into my window.
"Where the hell did you go?" he asked with a steamy attitude.
"What are you talking about?" I asked, wanting him to make sense of his last remark.
"Listen, Mark," he demanded. "You're not running from this one. They know your name." My heart began to race and I could literally feel my upper abdomen jumping out of my skin. Beth grabbed my arm and squeezed.
"What?" I asked in disbelief.
"They know your name and they've got the entire police department out looking for you," he explained. I panicked and immediately pressed the gas. I had to get the hell out of town.
"Mark, stop!" my brother yelled. I did.
"Mark, don't you understand? They have your name, you're not running from this one." My brother wasn't simply laying down the facts, he was pounding them into my brain, but I was being stubborn. Why? Why? I couldn't understand why they wanted me.
"Pull over, Mark. Make it easier on yourself," my brother demanded. He sounded like he always did in these sorts of situations, very authoritative. He was two years older than I, so I guess he had the right to be. At that point, my thoughts were uncontrollable. I figured that if I just got out of town, everything would be fine tomorrow. I continued with my stubbornness. I just didn't want to give up so easily.
"What are they going to do?" I asked in a whiny

tone.
"I don't know, but if you turn yourself in, you'll be much better off," he assured me. Oh my God, I thought. Oh my God. Meanwhile, my brother and his friends, standing behind him, stared at me with wide eyes and straight faces.
"Oh my God," I said aloud. Beth squeezed my hand tighter. She too stared with apologetic eyes.
"I think they're right," she said. I gave no response. I just continued to shake my head in disbelief. I began getting weaker and unable to fight their words. Oh my God, I kept thinking. After a moment of silence, their coolheaded reasoning began to slowly sink in. I pulled over.
As I made my way past the staring eyes and consoling words, I noticed a police officer in the distance and released Beth's sweaty hand. The closer I got to him, the more I started to sweat. I could feel my heart beating at the same rate as a rabbit's. When I got even closer, I tucked in my shirt in hopes of presenting a more appealing image to the officer; and although I became more frightened, I was beginning to think that I was making the right decision after all.
"Excuse me, sir," I said with a broken voice, staring at the ground, then to his eyes, and then back at the ground. He turned slowly, lacking enthusiasm.
"Yes?" he said deeply. "Can I help you?" I took a deep breath and spoke to him with shameful words.
"I'm Mark...the guy you're looking for." He smiled.
So there I was with glassy eyes, hands cuffed, my mind full of thoughts and on the way to jail. I was finished trying to apologize to the officer, trying to weasel my way out of trouble. In fact, I was sick and tired of making excuses for myself all of the time. As we cruised from the scene, handcuffs wedged between my back and the back seat, I gazed out the window, only to see darkness and some occasional headlights. I was afraid of several things: going to jail and breaking the news to my parents, as well as Beth's parents. But the one thing that scared me the most was the fact that I had allowed myself to reach this point. As I sat in the back seat of the police car with my chin to my chest, I thought hard and remembered exactly when it had all begun on that breezy autumn day. But I shouldn't think too hard because the situation at hand worried me far too much.
"What am I being charged with?" I asked the officer as I lifted my chin from my chest.
"Making alcohol available to minors," he said. His voice was deep and extremely authoritative. If I had a choice, I would have ceased the conversation, but his response left me confused. What was he talking about?
"But I'm a minor myself," I explained.
"Doesn't matter. You organized the party, so you made it available. It's as simple as that."
He was right. I had organized the party and that had something to do with my arrest, but it still didn't make perfect sense. I wanted to argue more, but I knew it wouldn't get me anywhere. After all, I was arrested. My wrists began to irritate from the steel cuffs and my arms ached from the awkward position I was in. I shuffled around the back seat, sliding across the blue vinyl, feeling for a comfortable position. The smell of mildew coming from the floor also provoked me and I asked the officer to crack a window, which he did. The view through the front windshield was obstructed by the chicken wire that separated us, so I continued to

gaze out of my window, and the more I contemplated the situation I was in, the more I held back the tears.
Alone in the holding cell, I sat on the floor and stared at the toilet bowl that sat in the center; if I had to urinate, the two officers who processed my paperwork could have watched.
"What if I have to go to the bathroom?" I asked.
One of the officers turned toward me and pointed at the infamous toilet. I looked at it, then back at the officer and nodded. I expected his response, but I wanted to ask, strictly out of scorn. The officers took a year, it seemed, to process all of the necessary paperwork and it didn't seem as if they were in any hurry to get it done. So, I sat in that holding cell for an hour and a half thinking, worrying, begging that somehow they would change their minds and set me free. However, it didn't happen. Once they had finished with the paperwork and searched my pockets, they set me free for the time being, with a court summons. My brother picked me up outside and brought me to Beth's friend's house, where Beth was waiting and where we would stay the night. Although I hated the feeling I had that night, I wanted the night to drag on, just so I didn't have to face my parents any time soon.

"Can you pass the potatoes please?" I asked in a tired tone. My mother passed them and continued to eat. The only sounds I heard were chewing and the silverware scraping the plates; their echo bounced around in my head.
I looked at my mother. It almost seemed as if she wanted to forgive me, just so family life would be easier. But when I looked at my father, he would glance back with a look as if he had lost all hope in me. I stared at my plate and continued to nibble at my food. From time to time, my mother and I would speak, but the conversation would be limited. My father still looked at me with sunken eyes, disbelieving the news I had broken to him only hours ago.
As I lay in bed that evening, I stared at the glowing stars on my ceiling. I thought about how the communication between my father and me had suffered. But more so I was shocked, because normally whenever I had gotten into trouble in the past, my father would scream until he practically lost his voice, but not this time. This time there was silence. I lay there trying to figure out if he was just sick and tired of yelling or if he had given up on me all together. That particular thought angered and saddened me, not because of the way he acted, but because I was making myself difficult to deal with. I contemplated his behavior and tried to make sense of the silence until it finally dawned on me. Instead of being forced by my father to resolve a problem, this time I would have to resolve it on my own.
The following morning I peeled the punk rock stickers from my car and the image from my body. But more importantly, I started to clean my mind and restrained myself from any spontaneous actions that might come back and punish me.
Slowly but surely, I was regaining what I had before the punk rock years, with a few additions. I came to realize that you don't just find yourself by trying new things, but also through the consequences of that particular engagement. It was then that I found myself again. I also gained an undying respect for my parents once I realized that their sternness was simply a way of saying that they cared. And most of all, I eventually regained respect for myself.
"Check out this girl, she's got some issues," I said jokingly, referring to a girl with pink hair. She entered Palmyra's café and passed the table where my friends and I were sitting. Paul, an old acquaintance from Junior High and James, a new friend from around town, have become positive influences in my life, and we hang out at this café on a regular basis. It's quiet and keeps us out of trouble.
"Yeah, Mark, but I think you're forgetting that you were a freak at one time, too," said Paul. "You had some issues of your own a few years ago," he added. We all laughed.
"Yeah, the fifteen years," I said. "Boy, am I glad I'm out of that stage." Although I sometimes disparage or laugh about that time, in no way do I regret it, because I *did* have fun, no one got hurt, and more so, it allowed me to see all of the things I see today. For some people, the whole punk rock scene may be their fortune, but I have learned that, frankly, it's not for me.

CONTINUED

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FOOD SPECIALS DAILY

The Reckoning

by Deborah L. Johnson

he drops fell two seconds apart. In the silent darkness, each hit the stainless steel sink like thunder in a cave. How long had she lain here, as weak and useless as a newborn? Several hours, at least. Time was slipping away as fast as the water running down her drain. She'd only left her bed to pee. She tried lifting her right arm. It budged—a little. The left didn't even twitch. A few minutes later, a thin streak of liquid trickled down her leg.

She could shout like a cattle caller but not one damn neighbor would hear. When the morning sun lit the coffee table's ceramic swan, she began to move. Her right arm stretched out an inch, then her body dragged behind. Reach and pull...reach and pull. After an eternity, the front door knob was above her. Breathing deeply, she raised her arm, fumbled with the lock, and fell back. It hurt. She waited a few minutes, then tried again. The bolt slid neatly back. Please God, give me strength. Her hand shook wildly, but it closed on the knob like a vise. She turned it, pushed, and stuck her head between the door and the wall to wedge the door open.

Sally lived right across the hall. She'd be up by now, for sure. Reach and pull...reach and pull...her cotton nightgown twisted around her waist, leaving her legs flailing in the air. Her face felt as stiff as a kid's Halloween mask. Finally, the brass kick plate on Sally's door was in front of her. Rose tapped as hard as she could, but she might as well as have been using a feather. Sally heard something though.

"Yes?" Sally peered through the keyhole. Rose could only gasp.

"Yes?" Sally asked again.

Rose choked a little louder. The door opened and Sally's green terry cloth slippers were under Rose's nose.

"Oh, my God. Rose, stay there. I'll call an ambulance. Don't move."

Rose couldn't have moved if someone had paid her a million dollars.

She lay there like a piece of meat, wondering if feces were running down her leg. She couldn't do anything, anyway.

Doors creaked as neighbors peered out, but no one came over. She'd be the talk of the day, that's for sure. Finally, Sally came back. "The paramedics will be here in five minutes. Should I go down and let them in?" she asked.

Rose tried to shake her head, but could only lift a finger.

"OK, I'll stay here, sweetheart," Sally said.

A few seconds later, Rose sensed a tugging below her waist. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sally trying to pull down her nightgown. When it stayed beneath her fat hips, Sally took the crocheted Afghan off the couch and put it over Rose.

"That's better," Sally said.

Only once before had Rose been this scared.

When she was 10, she was swinging on a rope in the barn when it broke. She'd had a nasty fall and remembered thinking she was dead. She'd never old a soul.

Before long, heavy footsteps came running towards them. Then a young woman on her knees was murmuring soft, encouraging words. Rose looked at her dumbly. Two men lifted her onto a stretcher and slapped on an oxygen mask. The woman asked Sally about family members. Sally mentioned Rose's sister out East. Sally didn't know about Edward.

In the emergency room, they stuck needles in her

like she was a pin cushion. Then oblivion, as welcome as a thick quilt on a cold night, carried her away.

She woke up feeling dizzy and sick. Light poked through a Venetian blind over the window at the end of her bed. It could have been anywhere from two hours to two days later. Next to her, a machine breathed with a rhythmic sigh. A thin curtain, almost wispy enough to see through, delicately curved around the right edge of the bed. She couldn't see, but sensed a person on the other side. She lay quietly, waiting for whatever came next. It wasn't long before an African-American woman with a pleasant smile and a white coat entered.

"Hello, Rose. I'm your doctor. You gave us a good scare."

"Huh," Rose said. "Hello" was as elusive as a pea rolling off a fork.

"Now that you're awake, I'll send in some food and we'll run a few more tests." The doctor talked while she lifted Rose's arm and peered into her eyes. "We'll do our best to get you out of here as soon as we can. We're in touch with your sister. She'll probably call soon. Is there anyone else you'd like us to notify? Someone closer, perhaps?"

Sure, Rose thought. *Edward. The man I was married to for 45 years. The man I'm still married to.*

SHE LAY THERE LIKE A PIECE OF MEAT, WONDERING IF FECES WERE RUNNING DOWN HER LEG...

"No." It was the first word she'd managed to get out.

During the next few hours, she tried to think through her situation. But as soon as she had one thought, another would come flying at her. She felt like a drunk boxer fighting his way through a room full of swinging punching bags. She wanted to cry, but couldn't. When an aide came to get her ready that night, she struggled mightily to talk.

"I. I need...mouse," came out.

"What?" the aide asked.

"H- house."

"You can go home soon," the aide said, as she smoothed the sheets.

"No." Rose practically cried in frustration.

"That...that." She pointed at the wall.

"What? You want the TV on? What do you want?" The aide asked, looking at Rose's wildly jabbing finger. "That? You want a mirror? You want to see yourself?"

"Yes. M-i-r-r-o-r." Her mouth felt full of molasses.

Rose's hand shook so much that the aide took the mirror from her.

"There, honey, you look fine," she said in a motherly voice.

Rose didn't look fine. She looked like someone had pressed a giant paint brush hard down the left side of her face, making both her eye and mouth sag at least a half an inch. Her eyelid drooped and drool glistened on her mouth. She saw, but couldn't feel, a tear on her cheek.

Three weeks later, Rose returned to her apartment. Belinda, her new 24-hour aide, grunted as she lifted the wheelchair over a hump in the carpet. In the bathroom, a high, white, plastic toilet seat covered the old one, and new railings gleamed by both the toilet and tub.

Medicare is wonderful, Rose thought. She

glanced at the half-opened box she'd been cleaning out the day before her stroke. On top lay her and Edward's wedding picture. Maybe the stress of unpacking that damn box had triggered what happened. She'd only waited two years to open it. Chatting as merrily and constantly as a wind-up doll, Belinda fixed chicken and rice for dinner, while Rose thought how much she would have preferred pot roast and mashed potatoes. But the last thing she wanted was to hurt Belinda's feelings. While Belinda washed the dishes, Rose settled into the La-Z-Boy to watch *Jeopardy*.

She was nodding off when Belinda asked, "Who's this?" In her hands was the wedding picture.

"Nothing," Rose yawned.

"Is this you? It looks a little like you. Who's the man?"

"Tomorrow. Can you put me to bed now?"

That night, like most nights, Rose slept very little. Listening to the cars pass, she thought about all the hours she lay awake longing for a different life and a different husband.

It wasn't that Edward beat her, although he did smack her a few times. It was worse. He ignored her. For years, he'd walk in after work, not look at her and most often, not say anything. After putting down his lunch bucket, he'd ask, "Is dinner ready?" She'd start telling him about her day and he'd pass

her, oblivious, on his way to the refrigerator for a beer. She'd catch the waft of alcohol rising from his skin. Every year, the scent grew stronger and the silences between them longer. She couldn't count the number of times she'd curled up in the pantry, her chest pounding with sobs and her hand clamped over her mouth to keep them silent. For hours, her tears would flow as freely as spillover from a storm ditch

in an April rain. Edward never looked for her or asked what was wrong, and the next morning, she'd get up and fix his eggs over easy just the way he liked them.

Finally, alcohol had soaked away all Edward's senses and she'd had to put him in a nursing home. At first, she visited every day. Then every week. Finally, she stopped going at all. The last time she'd seen him had been two years ago. To her recollection, he didn't look at her the entire 15 minutes she was there. She left when they brought him his baby food for dinner.

The next morning before breakfast, Rose rolled her wheelchair over to the box. Although they'd been married 45 years, Edward had always insisted they respect each other's privacy. She'd never looked in any of the shoe boxes that filled his half of the closet or gone through his dresser drawers. She didn't think she'd find anything important anyway. A few weeks after putting him in the home, she packed away the dresser drawer papers and the shoe boxes without opening so much as an envelope.

Now, as she was lifting the work-boot box, she almost dropped it. Funny—all the other boxes had been fairly light. Nothing about it seemed unusual—a faint sprinkling of dust dimmed the top and one corner had a slight rip.

"Breakfast is ready," Belinda started rolling the wheelchair to the dining table.

Rose was cranky. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Not too busy for breakfast."

Rose ate her cereal, drained a glass of foul-smelling prune juice, and promptly forgot all about the box.

Several hours later, she noticed it again. "Take me over there," she told Belinda.

While Rose reached for the boot box, Belinda pulled up a chair and started looking through the

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letters and cards.

"My God." The lid fell to the floor.

"What? What is it?" Belinda asked.

Inside were piles of crisp, green \$100 bills neatly tied with rubber bands. Her hand trembling, Rose lifted out a stack and rifled it. Numbers flashed past like scenes on a black-and-white magic lantern.

"Jesus Christ," Rose murmured. "How long has this been there?"

She didn't notice the faded envelope with the brown edges addressed to "Rose Jurigan," but Belinda did. Overwhelmed, Rose asked Belinda to open and read it.

*Dear Rose,
If you're reading this now, I am probably dead. Death is something that I will in many ways welcome, as my life for years has been a living hell.*

It's not because of you. I know that you tried to be a good wife and you took good care of me. But my demons were much greater than you ever knew.

Forty years ago, I was on a hill in France with six other guys. We were fighting the Krauts. I never liked to fight and I had to do it way too often. I wasn't good at it, either. But that didn't matter most of the time. No one paid much attention to me. Anyway, on the particular day, Joe and Billy were in front. They asked me to cover for them. I said, "Sure," like I always did. But then things went bad. The bullets started coming in really heavy. I got scared. Rose, I was scared shitless. I don't remember everything, but another guy saw what was happening. He pulled me down next to him and started giving Joe and Billy the cover they needed. I think I was crying. Then the worst thing possible happened—the guy got hit. Right in the head. His brains spilled all over me. I got up to wipe them off and just then, Joe looked back. He thought I'd been the one giving them cover. Joe and Billy got medals for what they did that day. I got one, too, but I threw it away. I never told anyone what really happened.

Rose, you always said you never wanted to see a penny of the money I made gambling. You never did. It's all here. I'd like to try to find Joe and Billy and give the money to them, if they're still alive. If not, maybe their kids could use it. I remember that Joe's last name was Marshall and he was from Knoxville, Tennessee. Billy Hudson was from Crown Point, Indiana.

I'm sorry for the way everything turned out, Rose. I know that you expected more from me. All I can say is that I never meant it to be like this. Your husband, Edward Jurigan

Ever since the stroke, Rose had cried when she wanted to laugh and laughed when she wanted to cry. Now she laughed like a maniac. Belinda looked at her as if she were crazy. Inside, hurt, pain, anxiety, and coldness rolled all over her. A twinge of love did, too.

When the laughter stopped, both were silent. Belinda asked, "What are you going to do with the money?"

"Been in the box for years. Can't hurt to stay there a little longer."

When Belinda wasn't looking, Rose hid the box beneath the towels in her linen closet, and put the letter in her bathrobe pocket.

Several days later, Belinda left for a few hours of grocery shopping. Rose promised she'd stay in the wheelchair and watch TV. Belinda moved the phone so Rose could call 911 if anything happened.

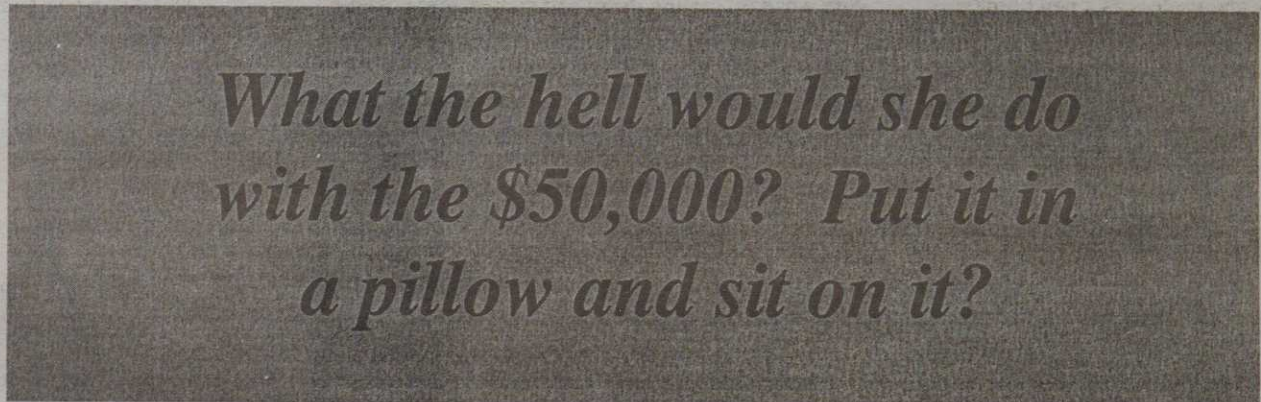
The door had barely shut when Rose picked up the phone. At first, the Knoxville operator had trouble understanding Rose. But Rose kept trying and eventually the operator figured out she was looking for families named "Marshall." She had a dozen listings, but not one with "Joseph." Rose asked for all the numbers and the operators said she could only give her three. Rose wanted to cry. The operator felt sorry for her and gave Rose all 12. It took Rose forever to write them down. Before hanging up, Rose thanked the operator for her

patience.

"Can't even write anymore," Rose muttered as she ripped off the page and stuck it in the side of her wheelchair. When she made the calls, what would she say?

"Hello, I'm Edward Jurigan's wife. As far as I'm concerned, Edward's as good as dead. But I found this old letter and he asked me to give you a lot of money. Could I please have your address?" It sounded stupid even to her. What about something like...

"Hello, I'm Edward Jurigan's wife. Remember that day in France when you thought Edward was covering for you? Well, he wasn't. He didn't do a damn thing for you. And I had to live with his guilt my whole life. Now it turns out he has a lot of money and he wants me to give it to you. Could I please have your address?"



That didn't sound right either. Did she really have to do this?

She never seriously considered not doing it. Obeying her husband was as natural as exchanging Christmas cards or returning invitations to dinner. Obey him she would, even if to anyone with an ounce of reason, Edward no longer existed.

As for working out what she would say, her mind simply couldn't handle such things anymore. She could only trust that the right words would come when she needed them.

She wheeled her way to the bathroom and opened the closet door. Inside the work-boot box, the bills were as fresh as ever.

Rose couldn't add up the money in her head, so she decided to count how many bills were in each stack. Ten. She counted again, just to make sure. Good. Now, how many stacks were there? She laid them out on the bathroom counter... 50 in all. God Almighty, Edward had kept \$50,000 in the damn boot box.

By the time the key turned in the lock, Rose was back in the living room. Now she'd hidden the box under the sink, just in case Belinda had already checked out the closet.

Nothing was missing, but you never knew. \$50,000 was a lot of money to someone making \$15,000 a year. It was a lot of money to Rose, too. She could kick herself for telling Edward she never wanted to see it. Why had he taken everything so literally?

The next week, Belinda went grocery shopping again.

Rose had to dial the first number three times before it went through.

"Hello?" Rose's voice sounded shaky. She cleared her throat. "I'm looking for a Joseph Marshall who served in France in World War II. Do you know him?"

At least half the houses had answering machines. Rose hated those machines; she didn't bother leaving any messages. Finally, at the last number, a man who sounded in his 40s said that his father's name was Joseph and he'd been in the war, but the son didn't know where. His father lived in a small town outside Knoxville. The son gave her the number.

"Hello?" The voice was almost as thin as hers. "Mr. Marshall? My name is Rose Jurigan; Edward Jurigan's wife. I think he fought with you in France. Do you remember him?"

"Eddie? Eddie from California? Of course I do. That man saved my life. How is he?"

Worry flooded his voice. "Is he all right? Haven't heard from him in years."

"He's fine. Just fine," Rose assured him.

"Good. Why are you calling then?"

"Well, Edward asked me to see how you were

doing. He's in the hospital now, just a small

problem."

"I see. How'd you get this number?"

"I talked to your son. He was very kind."

"Yes, he's a good boy. What did Eddie wind up doing?"

"He was a printer, Mr. Marshall."

"Bet he was the best damn printer in the county."

"Yes, he was. But, of course, we're retired now."

"Me, too."

Rose couldn't do it. She couldn't tear down Edward's image in this man's eyes, and if she didn't, he'd never understand why Edward wanted to give him the money.

"By the way, do you know whatever happened to Billy Hudson? Edward asked me to look him up, too."

"Billy? Sure do. He died not long after we came

back.

Car wreck.

Terrible tragedy.

Never married, no kids.

We were pretty close, you know."

"Yes.

Edward told

me."

Rose hadn't talked so much in a month.

"Good to speak to you, Mr. Marshall. I'll

tell Edward about our call. I know he'll be happy to

hear how well you're doing."

"Give him my best. Still think about him almost

every day. Good man, Eddie was."

Rose hung up, exhausted. So, Billy was dead—

Joseph though Edward was a hero—and she had

\$50,000 under her bathroom sink that she didn't

know what to do with.

That night Rose watched the green-yellow-red

rhythms from the corner spotlight play across her

Navajo white wall. The pattern beat its way into

her brain, slowing her thoughts and inching them

forward in drill-like formation.

Her memories of Edward were musty, as if

covered with cobwebs. But gradually she remem-

bered a look, a smile, the first time he held her

hand, their first Christmas together. She'd forgotten

how badly he'd carved the turkey. They'd laughed

about it then. Their last Christmas together, he'd

eaten takeout turkey, while she had stuffing made

from a box.

She sighed and tried to shift her weight. What

the hell would she do with the \$50,000? Put it in a

pillow and sit on it? She couldn't even take it to the

bank. Never mind the trouble getting there, there'd

be hell to pay over her government-subsidized

apartment. They'd take her money quicker than a

kid grabbing a candy bar.

What about just giving it to Belinda? It seemed

like she had a good heart, but Rose barely knew her.

Giving it to her friends didn't seem fair either—

after all, Edward had very specific ideas on how to

spend it. Her thoughts went round and round like

one of the carnival rides she use to throw up on.

She woke to the smell of fresh coffee and the

drizzle of frying eggs. Belinda cradled her like a

baby as she lifted her from the bed.

After putting her in the chair, the aide tucked a

faded red Afghan around Rose's increasingly flabby

legs. The warmth felt good.

At breakfast, Rose asked Belinda if they could

take a short drive the next day. Edward was in a

nursing home about 10 miles away, she explained

She wanted to see him.

The next morning, Belinda helped Rose put on a

pink silk dress with light blue flowers. It had been

one of Edward's favorites. For the first time in

months, she used eyeliner and lipstick. Her shoes

didn't fit because her ankles were swollen, so she

wore pink silk slippers. Edward wouldn't be able to

see her feet, anyway.

The cold air hit Rose like a whiff of menthol.

Across the cobalt sky galloped stringy white clouds

chased by dark gray cotton puffs. Sinking into her

CONT. ON PAGE 25



drawing by Derek c.f. Pegrutz

JUST WIND

A child walks barefooted
out from memory
into the blonde grass.
Morning sun
floating in a hammock of mist
teachers her
to let go of gravity.

Her body is desire
in the mouth of the wind.

Inside her parents' house
death arrives
with his tattered suitcase,
his hefty ledger,
scarwled with the world's history
of wars and plagues.

It's just wind,
calling the crickets home,
threading the trees with harps and
bells,
her mother assures,

while death sits by the window
wheezing his roll call, condemning
names
of ones the child loves,

so that she must plug her ears
and go where there is other music
and light
she can fit her grief into

even if no one is dying
just yet.

Dale M. Kushner



ON SUNDAY

There are holes in heaven
When you look through the trees
Especially at morning
When rain in swift descent
Veers from the sky,
When air is asleep
Except for birds
The murmured drenching of leaves
And the rumble
Of a distant train.
An articulate six o'clock
With no gold but gray
And the slow heave of foliage.

Why revere a cathedral
When trees in shadow
Spread wider and more varied
Than any church?
And who could not, without an alter
Worship the inscrutable silence of a
tree
Or the loneliness of early rain?

David Napolin

CONTINUED...

Buick's faded and cracked tan leather seat was like coming home. Fortunately, the wheelchair fit into the trunk.

Rose couldn't remember the directions to the nursing home. So they stopped at a 7-11 and Belinda called.

As Belinda wheeled her down the linoleum-lined hallway leading to Edward's room, a crisp antiseptic smell mingled with the slightly sweet odors of age and decay. The aide's usual stream of chatter had finally dried up.

Outside Edward's door, Belinda asked, "Do you want me to come in?" "Just take me to the bed," Rose said, "and make sure there's a walker nearby."

Edward's deep, dark eyes stared listlessly as Belinda pushed Rose to the bed. Rose guessed that little more than 90 pounds of flesh hung on his dry bones.

Only the strong jaw line, hammered out by huge hollows under the cheekbones, remained of the Edward she knew. She saw no flicker of recognition. Belinda closed the door when she left.

"Edward? It's me, Rose." Not a muscle moved. "I have to talk to you." Rose whispered. She could barely see his nostrils flutter.

"I had a stroke about a month ago. That's why I'm in this chair. I'm better, but I don't know how much longer I have. I was going through your boxes and I found the money. I did some of what you wanted in the note- Billy died a long time ago, but I found Joseph Marshall. He thinks you're a hero. I just couldn't tell him what really happened."

Edward's eyes fixed on her face and Rose started crying.

"Edward, why didn't you tell me? Why did you have to keep it a secret all those years? Now I'm in a real mess. I can't do a thing with that money. I'd lose my apartment and God knows what else..."

She cried a long time. "Things between us didn't work out like either of us wanted," she sobbed. "I'm sorry, too, Edward. I'm so, so sorry." Wet spots stained the front of her dress, but she didn't care. She pulled out a hanky

and separation. She straightened and caressed his cheek. Moisture gathered in the corner of his eye.

Words she hadn't spoken in years came as naturally as a flower unfolding in sunshine.

"I love you, Edward," she said. His face stayed rock hard.

She sat down heavily, the weight of age and sickness descending like a shroud. For almost an hour, she stayed there, watching his quick and shallow breathing, until Belinda tapped on the door and rolled her away.

That night, she took out the work-boot box and wrapped it in a cut-open paper bag. In the phone book, she found the address of the local Salvation Army headquarters.

During the war, Edward had greatly appreciated their care packages. She didn't have the zip code, but she was sure the package would arrive

*Words she hadn't spoken in years came as naturally as a flower unfolding in sunshine.
"I love you, Edward," she said.
His face stayed rock hard.*

and blew her nose. Edward blinked once or twice, but that was all.

With strength she never thought she'd have again, she heaved herself up into the walker and stepped towards the bed.

She felt dizzy and heavy, like her feet were stuck in quicksand. The second step was a little easier. Soon she was standing over the bed, looking down at the skeletal remains of the man she had lived with for more than half of her life. A deadness lay between them. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his clammy skin.

Long-ago memories rushed up, carrying her back through the years to when they really had been together. She sensed his skin heating and tingling beneath her lips. She felt younger, fuller, warmer. A glow washed over both of them, dissolving the hurt

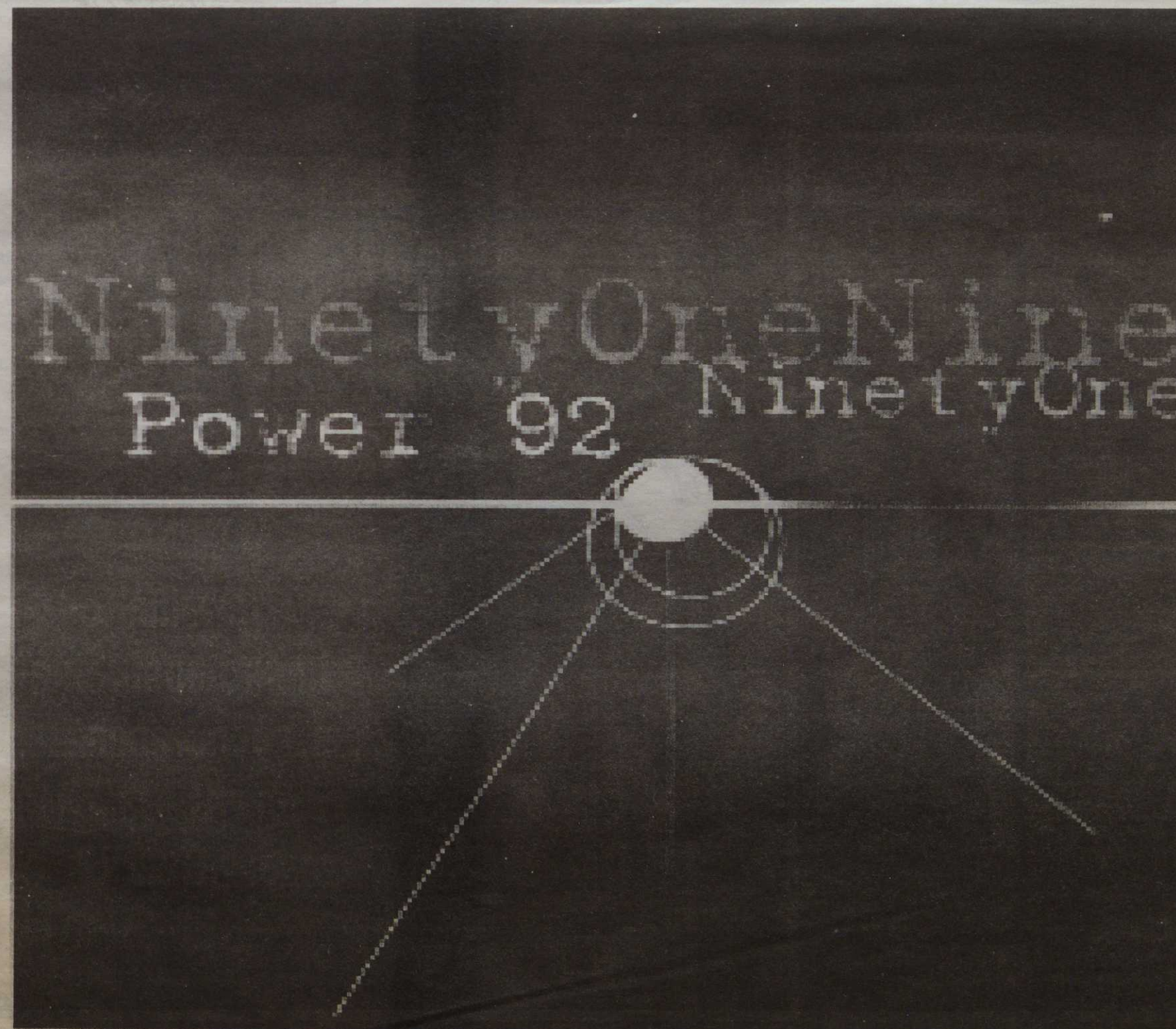
safely. Her not inside read:

*Dear Friend,
The gift is from Edward Jurigan, who fought in World War II. It is given in memory of his experiences overseas, which greatly affected the rest of his life. Do whatever good you can with this money and please pray for Edward and his family. Thank you.*

There was no signature and no return address. The next morning, Belinda drove her to the post office. The clerk slapped a bunch of stamps on the box and dumped it upside down into a basket.

When Belinda pushed her back outside, a shaft of sunlight slid through a break in the clouds. Rose turned up her face to welcome it.

-Flipside



Mailman Jones

a paperboy story

by David Ferris

dedicated to all the mailmen who spent tortured hours after school, missing out on fun and/or waiting for the f***in' papers to get there. —dxl

We finished reading the paperboy story. The author had been a paperboy when he was a kid. One day, he was doing his route. A dog bit him. He thought he was going to die. But he didn't. He just went to the emergency room. The rabies shots hurt him so bad that he wished he had died. According to the story, that was the scariest thing that ever happened to him.

"What did everyone think about the story?" the teacher asked the class, looking to her left. The student to her left inadvertently matched her glance and passed it to his left, like a hot potato. It carried around the circle of desks, heads turning left, students glancing, waiting for someone else to answer. It would have been typical if nobody had answered, and the glance would have made its way around the room, all the way back to the teacher, who would have made efforts to extract critical commentary from us. But today wasn't a typical day. And Bolo Hawkins wasn't a typical Creative Writing student.

"Well, that was an okay story there," Bolo Hawkins said in a deep, gravelly voice. A truly noteworthy voice, he was the only thing that saved the class from drowning in the depths of inane commentary from youthful undergrads. Worldly and polite, he was always ready to steer the discussion of mundane, mediocre fiction into calm waters. As an insider, he'd stopped the class from lynching Nathan when they thought the African-American dialect in his story "Kickin' the Bobo's" was unrealistic. "Moms' is what some o' the young folk call they mommas," said Bolo.

Stinky, the scrawny kid with a layer of fuzz over his pitted skin, looked happy when he heard Mr. Hawkins' commentary on his story.

"But if you wan'ta hear a paper boy story," said Bolo Hawkins, "I'll tell you folks a paper boy story."

Tupac, Bolo Hawkins' protege, rose and dimmed the light. Bolo Hawkins reached into his mojo bag, removed two candles, and put them on either side of his desk. Tupac lit the candles as Bolo Hawkins rose and spread green dust around the circle of desks. Leslie, Crystal, and Ten Bears got up and closed the blinds. Suddenly sunk into darkness, Jill the Freak gasped, wrapped her arms around herself, and cringed in her chair. "Now Stinky over there told us his story about when he was the paper boy," said Bolo, moving around the circle, making eye contact with us one at a time. "That mean ol' junkyard dog almost took Stinky's arm clean off."

"It wasn't a junkyard d—" said Stinky, then Eddie

Van Halen, a thin kid with long black hair who looked like Eddie Van Halen circa 1984, hit him and said "Shh."

"So you know that Stinky was a tough ol' papaboy. But I'll tell you about the baddest paperboy there ever was. I'll tell you about Mailman Jones."

"Mailman Jones," echoed Tupac. As an apprentice, it was his job to facilitate and further dramatize the telling of the story.

"Mailman Jones was the king of the paperboys. Ol' Mailman had been takin' the Daily Post around town for fifteen years, since he was a little boy and his daddy passed away, taken away by the Night Doctors."

"Night Doctors," said Tupac.

"But that's another story for another day. When Mailman started, he was just a young boy, taking the papers to twelve other houses aroun' the block every day after school. Yessir, when all the other chillins was out playin' football, ol' Mailman would take those twelve Posts and take 'em around to Ol' Lady Braddock an' Ol' Lady Parker and to the Crenshaws and to the Wrights and to Ol' Man Fishburne and to Crazy Whoopie."

Jill the Freak laughed.

"And back then, that was before Mailman was even called 'Mailman.' Back then, he was just a little boy named Earvin Jones who took the paper around every day and every week for two years. And then, as they say, the times started changin'. The hood was gettin' rougher, and Mailman was gettin' bigger."

Jill the Freak laughed.

"When Jaybird Huxtable went away to the Gulf, his paper route was open. Mrs. Jones was needin' an operation on her 'pendix pretty bad, so Mailman took on ol' Jaybird's route. That there was 26 more papers for him to take every day."

"Twenty-six," said Tupac.

badlands. He wasn't just in the Heights anymore. Now every afternoon he was goin' down into the Pit, which was a scary darn place at times," Bolo Hawkins said, bugging out his big, white, round eyes. "The Pit was down by the swamp, where Missa Jones had disappeared while huntin' fo' a pawny-tail those three years back. Behind that stretch of those big ol' houses, they was things you didn't want to see. They was snakes," Bolo Hawkins wriggled his arms, "They was bats," he waved his hands, "They was hellhounds," he made a hellhound lunge forward, "and the women even said that sometimes when the moon was full those with the shinin' could see the ghost of the late great Robert Johnson."

Jill the Freak laughed and breathed heavy.

"Aaahhh-oohh-aahhaa," she said.

Bolo continued. "So mailman grew. Pretty soon most o' the boys he grew up with was busy doin' other things. They was workin' in the mill or stayin' home and watchin' the cartoons or bein' boys," he paused. "As boys will do. Soon the neighborhoods had new little kids runnin' around. These kids were watchin' Boyz N the Hood and Juice and lis'nen' to N-double-you-A and gettin' all sorts of crazy ideas in they head. Every day they'd see Earvin walkin' around the neighborhood in rain and snow and even sometimes in the dead of night, carryin' around that ol' paperboy bag like a mailpouch. And every day, it was the same ol' thing: They'd run around him and get in a circle. One boy'd say 'Hey mailman, you got some money for us?' And that's how Mailman got his name, from the little kids who confused him with the mailman."

"Mailman Jones," said Tupac.

Jill the Freak laughed.

"When ol' Joey Brown got guned down for takin' around drugs on his route, Mailman took it over and ran it clean. Now Mailman was goin' all over town, takin' a hundred papers through four o' the meanest neighborhoods they was in the Lou-easy-ann outback. Over the years, Mailman kept gettin' bigger and bigger like his route was gettin' bigger. He was like John Henry, takin' them papers around in all sorts of weather. Took a big man to carry that big white bag with a orange strap handle, full o' a hundred papers. Yes suh, takin' them papers was rough, and the working conditions wasn't the worst of it. One day, Ol' Man Jenkins' dog started t' foam in' at the mouth," said Bolo Hawkins, moving outside the circle and walking around us.

Jill the Freak laughed and breathed heavy. "Aaahhh-oohh-aahhaa," she said.

"Reddog was a mean ol' dog meaner than Cujo hisself. When that rabies virus got to his blood, the dog snapped his leash and took a big chunk out of Old Man Jenkins' neck. That was the end of Old Man Jenkins yellin' at the kids for climbin' his trees. That was the last anyone ever saw of Old Man Jenkins. The dog leaped over the fence."

Bolo Hawkins leaped over Ten Bears and landed on all fours, in the middle of the circle. We gasped. Jill the Freak shrieked. This guy was good.

Jill the Freak laughed. "Now Jaybird's old route brought Mailman—he was known as Earvin then— into some mean ol'

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"He jumped the fence and went lookin' for somethin' to eat. And you know the first thing he saw? It was Mailman Jones. That dog was on him before he knew it, chewin' on his arm like that junkyard dog was chewin' on ol' Stinky. But Mailman Jones didn't panic, no sir. Mailman kept his head calm, didn't start cryin' to his momma about how he was gonna die. He wrapped his paperbag around that dog's neck," said Bolo Hawkins, moving as Mailman Jones had on that late afternoon, "and gave the strap a squeeze, and squeezed and squeezed until that dog was belly up, lyin' on Washington Avenue. That day, Mailman Jones escaped with a mean scar, but he didn't wind up six foot under like Old Man Jenkins. Mailman Jones was one tough paperboy."

Jill the Freak laughed.

"An that's the least of the tough times that Mailman Jones faced as a paperboy. There was the time that the Blizzard of '92 put three feet o' snow all over town, and the time he had to deliver his papers in time to catch the four o'clock matinee of Deep Cover, and the time that Ol' Lady Simmons died owder' for three weeks o' papers."

Jill the Freak laughed.

"As the years went on, though, the ol' Post Press started breakin' down. When Mailman had started the route, the bundle of papers would get dropped off at his house around three o'clock, sometimes as early as two. They'd be there when he got home from school. But by the time Mailman was twenty-two, the papers would get there around four, five o'clock, sometimes as late as six. And when daylight savings time starts, it starts t' gettin' dark early. And you don't want ta be out in the Louisiana swamp in the dark. But one night, the press dropped a roller, and the papers didn't get dropped off on the Jones stoop until eight o'clock."

"This was years after the day ol' Reddog bit Mailman. Mailman was older, but so was the boys that used ta hassle him. They spent the days drivin' around, sittin on stoops, shootin' their guns, and drinkin' 40's. The day the papers got there late, the

boys was drinkin' hard. And by the time Mailman got down to the Watts district, they was itchin' for a fight. Barrelhead Washington, the leader of the Watts Crips, was in a fierce mood from losing the dozens and he was broke from losin' at the poker game that week. So when he saw Mailman comin' around the corner, he saw a way to get his rep back in front of his boys and get some money.

"Barrelhead walked up to Mailman and says 'Hey Mailman, gimmie some money.' Well, Mailman could smell the St. Ides on Barrelhead's breath, and he knew Barrelhead's tricks. So he took off runnin', runnin' down the tracks, past the old keypone factory, down to the swamp. Mailman cut in, duckin' under the trees, swimmin' through the water. And he heard Barrelhead and his gang runnin', runnin', representin' behind him, steppin' on the hidy-po's. That's when he heard a big ol' swishy noisy. The swishy noise was swishin' and swishin' and swishin', followin' both o' the parties through the swamp. Swish swish swish. Mailman was runnin' fast, but he was carryin' them heavy papers, and they was weighin' him down, down into the swamp. Barrelhead and his gang was gainin' and gainin' and gainin'. In the dark, Mailman took a wrong step and wound up in a big batch o' quick sand. Mailman was stuck. Barrelhead and his boys arrived in the clearing, and Barrelhead took out his granddaddy's straight razor.

"The razor flashed in the moonlight, and Mailman was sure he was a goner. That's when the swishin' noise came back, swishin' and swishin', except now it was sayin' 'Where's the Mailman? Where's the Mailman?' Barrelhead kept movin' forward, 'cuz he was gonna cut Mailman's throat, no matter what. But when he heard some screamin' screams and saw Mailman lookin' behind him, Barrelhead turned around and saw his gang, torn ta pieces, they arms and legs scattered all over, on the ground, up in the trees, in the bushes, all that red blood practically glowin' in the dark. And standin' there was a big ol' black shape.

"Where's the mailman?' the thing said. It grabbed Barrelhead and ripped his head clean off.

"There's the Mailman," it said. And the Mailman looked up at what he thought was gonna be the death of him, and he looked up, and guess what he saw?" Bolo Hawkins looked at Stimpy.

"The ghost of Robert Johnson?" asked Stimpy. "No," said Bolo Hawkins, and he looked at Jill the Freak.

"Was it a...spi-der?" she asked.

"No," said Bolo Hawkins, and he looked at Nathan.

"Old Mister Spadefoot?" asked Nathan. "No," said Bolo Hawkins and looked at the hippie girl whose hair wasn't the same color it had been at the end of last semester.

"The devil?" she said. Everyone was hunched forward, listening, our hearts beating fast.

"It was the Mailman's daddy, Missa Jones, with Barrelhead's barrel head in his hand."

The class gasped. Jill the Freak screamed. Then a hush spread across the room.

"And that's the story of how Mailman's daddy came back from the grave to make sure his boy did the papers," said Bolo Hawkins.

"That's the story of Mailman Jones," said Tupac, and he got up and turned on the lights.

Jill the Freak laughed. The class started closing their notebooks, then stuffed them in their bookbags. "OK," said the teacher. "That was very good, Bolo. That was a very nice story. I see that a lot of you are anxious to leave. Friday, we'll look at Lori's story, and we'll go over another story by Stink—I'm sorry, Larry."

The next semester, I saw Bolo Hawkins and Tupac in Subway. We ate lunch and talked about the Creative Writing class. Bolo got a C. He was a great story teller, but he wasn't much of a writer, and he wasn't good at meeting deadlines. The teacher just put a check mark on his end-of-the-semester critical paper, instead of grading it as she did with the rest of the class. And despite the fact that Tupac was coming into a marked proficiency with arcane arts and lore, he wasn't a very good copy editor.

-Flipside

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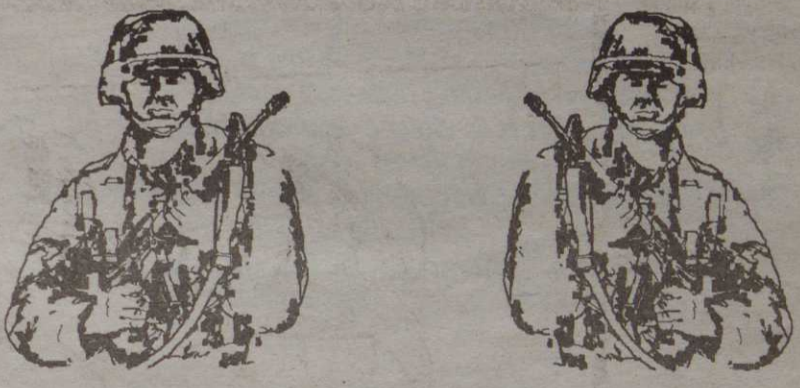
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Spanish Caballero

He comes to me at night, this soft spoken man, who whispers in my ear, and soothes my pain. His face is demure, his touch is sincere. He reassures me with the tone of his voice so clear.

Hold on tight! he says. Never let it me go! For soon I will be there, from his mouth the words flow. Should I believe or is this just a dream.

My soul aches for the man with my heart in his hands. We are destined to be together, we belong with each other. His touch, his desire, only strengthens my will.

He kisses my lips. His lips are on fire. which proves his honest desire. I rub his hair. I smell his skin. His face is a blur, but I can see it so real.

I feel his pain. I feel his struggle; he needs me to find him, my Spanish lover.

Help me to find you. Show me the way. Don't leave! Don't ever go away! Hold on tight. Never let me go. Soon we'll be together. Soon! I know.

I open my eyes. His face is gone. My tears start to flow, my heart aches once more.

Just to know he was there and will never let me go, sustains my fate, give strength to my soul.

Our destiny is not now, but our love will prevail.

I go through the day waiting only for the night, so my Spanish lover and I.... can once again...reunite

Jilian Holloway

DAYDREAMING A POEM

two fawns bolted from their beds of brown grass and asters got me thinking about where the doe was what instructions she'd given them how long they had seen me distracted by the poem I might write

horse swished his tail humped his back still I was thinking deer felt a surge beneath me was crow-hopped onto his neck one heel hooked on the saddle one hand twisted in mane the other gathering up rein just hanging in space saw the horsefly on his hindquarters felt the horse gather shit tried to pull myself back just gave up slipped to the ground

laughed at myself - asleep at the reins

Barbara Brooks



Salute to Colors

What a colorful generation! we have it all Radiant brown children sport flawless skin; as black children gleam of flesh of ebony. Cornucopia of Mother Earth; she salutes us all.

Jilian Holloway

Deny Delay

Through all the bittersweetness, I heard words such as never before. A longing that didn't exist. My eyes ache from reading. I can no longer delay my life. I can longer wait for you. My hands hurt from nervous twitching.

Tanya Kitelinger

FASHION STATEMENT

Her face, I wouldn't call it plain but another might. Angular, sharp featured. Nose too short Mouth too thin. Eyes, indeterminate, the color of flat beer.

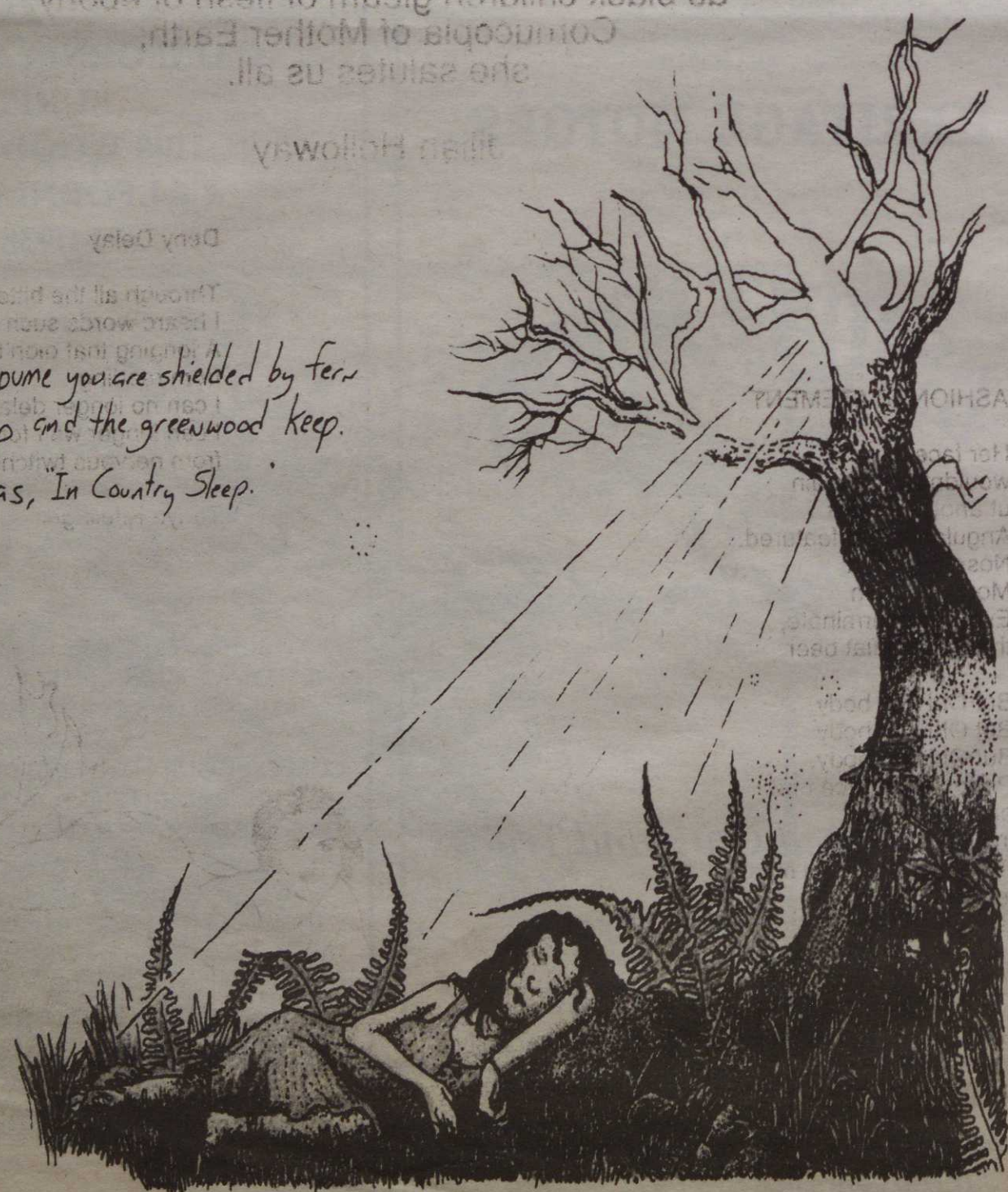
But Oh! Her body. But Oh! Her body. But Oh! Her body. Perfection, grace and beauty in every part. A visually stunning masterpiece female art

In a more reasonable society Fashion would show her body naked and dress her face.

Raymond Martell



From the broomed witch's spume you are shielded by ferns
And flower of country sleep and the greenwood keep.
- Dylan Thomas, In Country Sleep.



art by Derek c.f. Pegritz

METALIC CONT.

I pulled the rearview mirror toward me before getting out. That afternoon, I had treated myself to a cut and a style. Why was it that I had all the ingredients of a country-western singer—long brown hair, pouty mouth, big breasts—but the combination was disappointing? I raked a white head with my fingernail and felt a satisfying bit of skin catch and dislodge. I flicked it on the grass as I strolled to the front door.

No one answered the bell. Sid was at the bar. I hadn't expected his glasses.

"Hi. I'm Gwen Janet Walker." I smiled. "Are you a resident?"

"No." Sid started to turn away.

"I'm a political consultant, I work for a lot of candidates in town. Do you think that there'd be any interest at the med school in starting a political action group? You know, doctors traditionally aren't involved. The thought was that if we started them before they left med school..."

He looked at me like I was crazy. I edged closer to him to see his eyes. Behind the black frames, they were gray.

Right then the baby kicked and I wanted to ask him to put his hand on my stomach. He had the sweetest mouth. He took a swig of beer and stared at me curiously.

"By the way, is your family from the Ukraine?" I asked.

"No, we're Eastern European." He sauntered toward a lively group in front of the television. His khakis bagged like they didn't care who saw them.

Don't get arrogant around me, Buster, I muttered under my breath. I don't know what I had expected. Maybe I had gone a little soft over the father of my child. But he was just a typical male.

My friend walked up. "No interest in politics?" "This is a lost cause," I answered.

Before I left, I made one more attempt to talk to him. Someone asked me what I was doing there.

"He knows." I stood amidst a small circle of students and pointed at him.

"Hooker," Sid smirked at me.

"Yeah, and he's the father of my child," I shot back. The group laughed.

Mother stood at my hospital door now. She and Grandma must be taking turns. She walked next to me. Someone began kneading the dough of my stomach. Mother made cinnamon rolls from scratch. Her knuckles gathered the dough in a ball, then flattened it out into tendrils of pain. I looked over at her, barely able to breathe. Why was she doing this? I was angry. She looked sweetly at me.

"Mother, don't smile. I'm in pain. I don't want you here. Go back to the room."

Obediently, she turned around and left me. But her hands had gathered the dough into a ball again and smashed it into a plain, white flat roll of dough. I exhaled. The pain was gone again. I looked at my watch. It was 12:30 a.m. My eyelids felt like hot curtains; my feet, magnets to the floor. The night of May 17, 1985 was going to be a long one.

Helen was two years old when I realized that the concept of artificial insemination would drive her insane. In her I had cloned my curiosity. She opened and closed all the drawers in the house. I had to put plugs in the electrical outlets. She ate the dog's food. When people asked me how many children I had, I said, "Three," and meant it. One day I counted thirty questions that she asked between dinner and bed. I saw, in her exhilaration for life, the person I could have been if I hadn't been squashed.

One Saturday morning early, I dropped her off at Mom's house, drove to his apartment, turned off the car engine and waited.

I didn't know what he'd do on his day off. But I had called the nursing station. Dr. Lasher wasn't on duty or on call this Saturday. I hoped to catch him going out of his apartment with a tennis racket in hand. That was the one missing piece: I hadn't nailed down his sport yet. I noticed his Old Smoky barbecue pit with its lid off on the porch. At this point, I didn't care how many girls he entertained.

I pulled out the *Houston Press* to reread the article about my candidate for city council. He had been slated to win but he got caught taking a small bribe

from an undercover operator. The dumb bastard. We were in damage control. If his candidacy died on me, I'd be out of a job soon. Before I had Helen, I could handle poverty.

I saw a light go on in Sid's apartment. Early riser. I couldn't help but approve. He was the father of my child despite his complacency. I checked my watch. If Sid were really athletic, he wouldn't stay all day inside the house studying. He'd walk out in a few minutes with his tennis racket or his golf clubs.

Meanwhile, I'd call my dumb-ass boss. "Yeah."

"You're due at the Warwick Hotel in thirty minutes. Mexican Chamber of Commerce."

"Oh, God. No. Why?"

"Come on, John. You told me to book this."

"This is terrible. I feel terrible."

"Do you want to stay in this race or not?"

In the long silence that followed, I imagined him lying in his bed naked playing with himself. He sighed.

"It's in the Empire room. Keep your mouth shut. This constituency is sympathetic and don't blow it by denying things that later they'll prove in the paper."

"But I didn't take the money."

"Save your explanations for your lawyer. He's paid to believe you. I've got to go."

"You're not coming to the Warwick?"

"No, but I'll see you at lunch."

I stared at the car phone receiver. Unlike my client, its face looked like that of an intelligent being. Somehow I had to make sure this dork won his race.

Sid walked out the front door. I snapped several pictures of him through the glass. I was disappointed. He was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt but he had nothing in his hands. He walked to his garage and disappeared.

The green Mazda darted off with a surfboard strapped to the top.

I was completely sure now. Dr. Sid Lasher, anesthesiology resident at Baylor Medical School, was the man who fathered my child.



LOVE'S OLD SWEET SONG

I read once upon a time that dancing is a safe surrogate for sex: a young couple humps around the floor all evening to the seductive beat of the tango or maxixe, and by the time the band has called it quits for the night they're so bushed they don't have enough of the old get up and go to leap into the back seat of a roadster and make babies, not to mention that by now they're so beslicked by sweat that close contact has lost a lot of charm. Could be. I do know for sure that it certainly makes a nice substitute for spooning beneath the sheets when the Missus has gone all self-conscious about getting a little thick in the flitch and her swain finds it ever more difficult to get the bishop to stand to attention, if you take my meaning. Anyway, rather than start reading embarrassing books by ancient Hindu sex sages or toothy female doctors who say in public what most of us wouldn't whisper into a pillow, or stuffing ourselves with chemicals of the sort you used to have to buy in seedy places in Mexican border town, we've sublimated our urges in our own way: most evenings you'll find us cheek to cheek, enjoying a turn or two about the living room. We did run into sort of a crisis a while back, though. Over the years we'd built ourselves a fairly nice collection of records of our favorite dance bands, and then one day recently I went into the record store to buy a new needle and the pie-faced clerk looks at me as though I'd just asked for the elixir of eternal life and asks me, "Where you been, Pops? We don't have needles no more. No vinyl, either." By which I took him to mean records—a surmise verified by my looking around and seeing nothing but small boxes filled with small shining discs the size of saucers and priced as though what made them shiny was their being made of platinum. "Great heavens," I cried, "do you mean to say that if I want to listen to records I have to spend the equivalent of the Ecuadorian annual budget?" To which the pie-faced lad replied, "That's about the size of it, Pops, and by the way, they're not called records anymore, they're CD's." Well, if that wasn't the bullet that choked Billy Patterson. Right before my eyes I could see the romantic moments of my wife's and my twilight years vanishing where the woodbine twineth, their place taken by a succession of loveless nights in which we lay side by side in bed, hideously aware of each other's increasing physical podginess and reading simple-minded mystery novels until we drifted off at last into disgruntled sleep. But all's well that ends well: a few days ago a young friend of mine to whom I'd confided my consternation, informed me that there were places where one could purchase used copies of these so-called CD's (which are not, as you might think, certificates of deposit, but compact discs) at much less than their original cost. Time and space are dwindling to an end here, so let me tell you that in the space below you'll find the address of the store in which I replenished my music collection and at a reasonable price gave a new lightness to my feet and brought the light of romance back into my life.

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THIS LIFE

Thoughts escape to that part of the mind where they can be lost and forgotten

The nightmares you no longer remember hide there - brewing their hatred increasing their ability to truly frighten you
Childhood dreams wander amiably forgotten but not lost rather present and unachieved

Unwanted traits of the personality wait to be unleashed at the exact moment you wished for them not to

While your weakest moments follow suit anger unexpressed tears that never fell harsh words held arguements unspoken All that you didn't want to become

will become apparent and upon realizing this you will begin to hate yourself

for being so weak for letting your guard down long enough for people to see through your facades
Your own thoughts will make you cringe Your own deceit will make you shiver and all for what? all for nothing
Lonliness creeps up on you like a dark shadow and you are overcome by your mistakes you wake with a start wondering if it was just a dream

Even so, what will you do now?
Stephanie Simens

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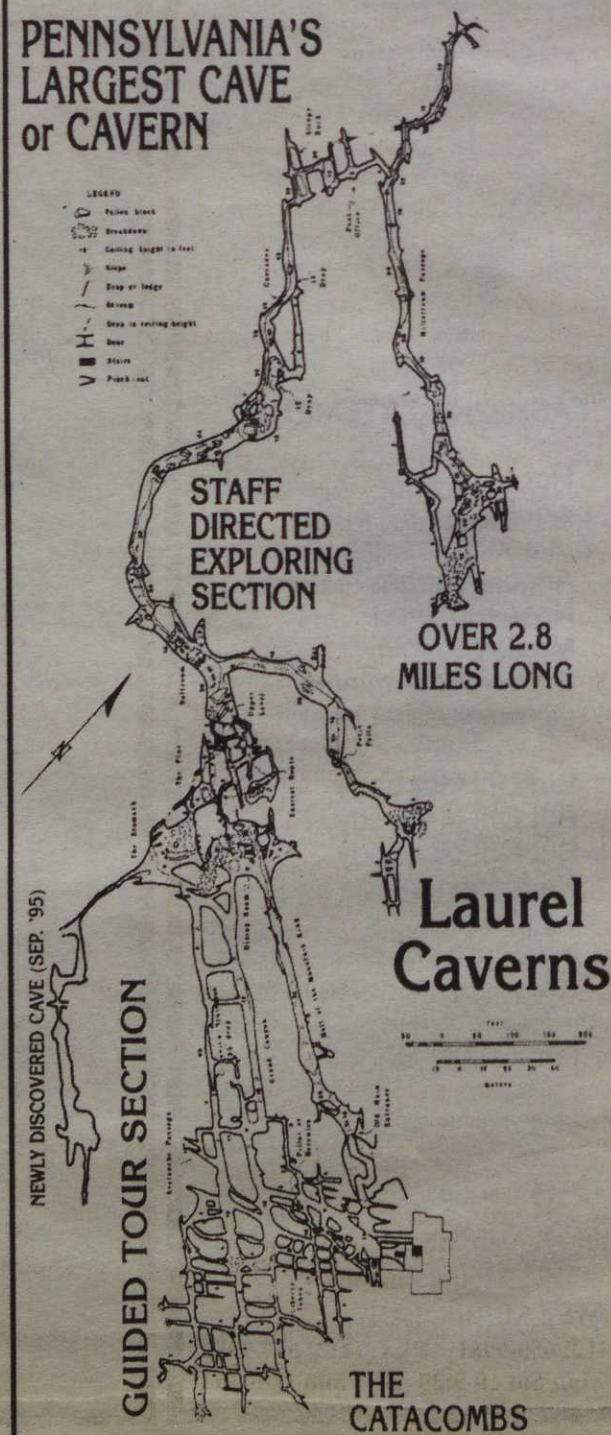
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Insomnia

I stop counting the stars
 at 3 o'clock A.M.
 The clock on the wall goes tick
 the house settles
 The clock on the wall goes tock
 the wind howls
 The clock on the wall goes tick
 a car drives by
 The clock on the wall goes tock
 the car wash beeps
 The clock on the wall goes tick
 who washes their car at this hour?
 The clock on the wall goes tock
 doors slam
 The clock on the wall goes tick
 feet stomp
 The clock on the wall goes tock
 the neighbors are home
 The clock on the wall goes tick
 loud as ever for two little girls
 The clock on the wall goes tock
 a truck drives by
 The clock on the wall goes tick
 the birds begin to sing?
 The clock on the wall goes tock
 the room begins to brighten
 The clock on the wall goes
 TICKTOCK TICKTOCK TICKTOCK
 I knock the clock from the wall
 The clock stops.

Stephanie Simens

Visage

Just before Robert Schumann
 threw himself into the Rhine,
 leaving his young wife Clara to a
 nervous Dusseldorf and countless
 unfinished
 piano sonatas, his Twelve Poems for
 baritone resonated sweetly. And his
 students wept themselves
 into history.

If you journey south, and take the
 river barge past Koblenz and the
 shameless Lorelei,
 you can sometimes see his face
 on the surface. It shimmers
 briefly where the water calms,
 just next to the black soul of insanity—
 dormant for the moment—seething
 in the passion of another betrayal.

Arthur McMaster



MAGNETISM

Magnetic
 unseen forces
 drew me towards
 the dark
 buffeted by tor
 rents of emotion
 of a faceless
 voiceless
 man
 Strong hands
 reached for me
 but I in my fear
 could not share his
 I left the door open
 but kept my distance.

Stephanie Simens

CHAOS

Laughter's death resulted
 in sinful, teary eyed testimonies of past convictions
 Soft escape to exiled asylum sanctuaries
 Heaven broke and fell loudly into the seas
 creating a surrealists horror in the sky
 The world sunk in on itself and physically disappeared.
 I tore through my unconscious with the vicious intent of
 taking it hostage
 Bringing it before the firing squad of doubt
 and laughing at its absurdities before killing it
 I live vicariously through your dreams
 Spending my (time?) scripting nightmares
 and playing the leading roles
 I hover above hell and take pictures
 selling them (for five bucks a pop) to the deranged angels with
 their broken wings
 I draw maps for the lost souls
 Always a crossroad
 beginning here - ending no where
 chaos and confusion swirls around
 me -> the epicenter of this tempestuous void.

Stephanie Simens

PERSPECTIVES

With most of my friends serious,
 And a few with rocks,
 I look at them
 And their mindless jocks!

It amazes me,
 That they lack serious plans,
 That they are content to be
 Under dominance of any 'ol man.

Another day has gone by.
 I look at the clock.
 Time has passed me so quickly.
 Chances diminish with each tick and
 each tock.

They look at me and wonder, I know,
 If all of my cute "friends" are just for
 show.
 Casual sex or a dildo or such,
 All of this time and freedom has got to
 be too much.

This primitive mind,
 must be lacking in me.
 Because sex will not do.
 There is so much more I need.

Romantic, no, and sweet, probably not,
 But I know what I want, and I expect
 a lot.

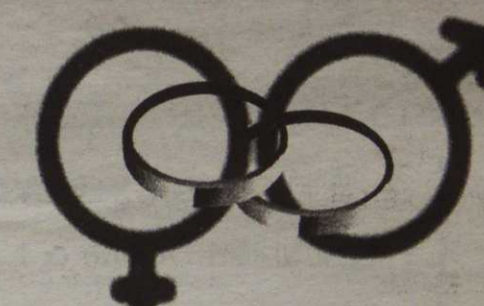
I'm young and ambitious, and I intend to
 succeed.
 So I pass the clock and hit snooze; I'll
 let true love find me.

Carly J. Fuller

UNITY

As the day begins
 I watch the sunrise
 on a world which is
 new.
 There are no mistakes
 made as of yet.
 We are all perfect
 Now
 It is a new day
 a new world
 a new time.
 To be individually
 happy
 and feel the earth pul-
 sate
 beneath our feet.
 Dance with the birds
 and understand
 that the new world is
 pure
 and we are pure.
 Together we act as
 one.

Tanya Kitelinger



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- assistant new editor(s)
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Students interested working in the **California Times** next semester should come to the Times office in the media suite of Natali Student Center, or call 938-4321 and ask for Dave Ferris or Joy Helsel.

My Dinner (Sort of) with John Gardner

by Bill Bennett

By the time his life and career ended suddenly in a motorcycle accident in 1982, John Gardner had established himself as perhaps the most popular and critically-esteemed American author since Ernest Hemingway. His output was prolific and various, ranging from the children's book *Dragon, Dragon to On Moral Fiction*, a volume of philosophical-literary observations that in many quarters was ranked with Aristotle's *Poetics*. His many fictions, among them *The Sunlight Dialogues*, *October Light*, *Nickel Mountain*, *The King's Indian* and *Grendel* (essentially the legend of Beowulf retold from the point of view of his loathsome foe) were enjoyed equally by the critics and reading public alike. At a time when academic literati were wibbering about the death of the novel and literary studies were beginning their long, fatal slide into the ideological bilge pumped out by witless and ignorant fanatics, Gardner strode on to the scene like Samson swinging the jawbone of an ass, proclaiming in a voice like thunder that fiction was alive and well after all (tricked out as they were with frontispieces and illustrations, his novels confidently proclaimed themselves as part of a vital storytelling tradition that extended back to Thackeray and Dickens) and that literature as literature was still a matter very much worth discussing, thank you.

I begin this story in such an expository manner because in the years since his death Gardner's star has dimmed almost to invisibility; most readers of serious fiction these days remember him more as the mentor of Raymond Carver than as an author. I'm not sure why, but I must confess that although I read most of his fiction, all that I remember clearly from the experience is being touched by Gardner's having written in *Nickel Mountain* a love story the ultimately successful hero of which was a gawky fat man, and finding royally entertaining a scene in *October Light* in which a testy gaffer, enraged past endurance by his sister's endless television-watching, blasts the set into oblivion with a shotgun. Much of the rest of his work, at least as I now recall it, is spoiled by a lit-major writing-workshop tone—the sort of stuff academics write for their colleagues' delectation, writing that comes into the world fully fledged as Literature, already trailing full-colored scholarly articles in its wake. Whatever the case may be, Gardner seems at this point to have joined Ford Madox Ford or James Branch Cabell in the ranks of writers famous long ago.

In any event, when my friend Bill French from the English department at West Virginia University invited me to meet and have dinner with John Gardner in the fall of 1979, the latter's was still a mighty name to conjure with, and I jumped at the opportunity, my eagerness tempered only by the nagging memory of a brouhaha that united Gardner's name with, of all places, California University.

A year or so before, Gardner had written *The Life and Times of Chaucer*, a book greeted, as usual, by critical rejoicing; Gardner, it was said in laudatory tones, was the perfect choice to write an account of the earthy Medieval genius who gave the world the *Canterbury Tales*. In the midst of these hosannas there arose a single dissenting voice: that of California University's Sumner Ferris, a medievalist of the first order and a man quick to bridle at academic cant, hypocrisy and dishonesty, who made the uncomfortable discovery that the author of *On Moral Fiction* had committed no less an intellectual crime than plagiarism, padding out his *Chaucer* with entire paragraphs (sans credit) of other men's work.

Irked by his discovery and filled with the scholar's zeal to set things right, Ferris committed his charges to print, and even though he temperately suggested that Gardner's sins stemmed more from careless enthusiasm than malice, set off a grand rowdydow that ended up reaching the general public via the distinctly non-ivory-tower *Newsweek*, wherein Gardner sniffily dismissed Ferris as a small-timer hoping to swell his size by riding on fame's coattails, and made inferences about his own genius reminiscent of Georg Frederic Handel's rejoinder—"I make much better use of it"—to the charges that he had looted wholesale music written by the hapless Johann Adolf Hasse.

Gardner sounded insouciant enough about the charge of possibly inadvertent plagiarism in the pages of a news magazine, but I had no idea how he really felt, and I felt a little nervous about our first encounter. Perhaps the whole business really rankled with him—sufficiently that he might see me as a surrogate Ferris and whup me upside the head the instant we were introduced, or haughtily announce to all and sundry that he couldn't spend another minute under the same roof with the pal of a slanderer and storm out of the Frenches' house in high dudgeon, putting somewhat of a damper on the evening and a strain on my friendship with Bill.

I needn't have worried. Although Gardner immediately brought up Ferris' name when he heard I was from California, he spoke rather light-heartedly about the whole affair (he was an altogether charming gentleman), rather as though the man who'd indirectly accused him of literary theft was a mere crank on the order of those crackpots who see the world's history as determined by sunspots, or labor a lifetime to demonstrate that Shakespeare's sonnets are enciphered with a secret code that proves they were the work of Francis Bacon. Learning too that I was advisor to the university newspaper, he favored me with an anecdote or two about the ham-handed attempts at student-newspaper censorship practiced by some bovine administrators at SUNY Binghamton, and observed with his novelist's keen awareness that I seemed to have a small snippet of border tape in my hair. And then he moved on. It was a fairly large gathering, and there were others to whom he had to be introduced. Little did I (or any of us, least of all the host) know that the better part of the evening was nearly behind us. Dinner would prove to be one of those horrific faragos that remain in one's memory as simultaneously farcical and ghastly.

Bill French is a gracious and diplomatic man, and had made up his guest list with considerable circumspection, including thereon the current specialist in contemporary American literature—not to have included a colleague whose subject embraced Gardner himself would have been an obvious slight—whom he did not know all that well. Before long, alas, he'd know him all too well.

I suspect that every university has among its faculty a man whose response to the general stereotype of academics as effete fellows—the pointy-headed intellectuals that Governor George Wallace of dreadful memory loved to drag into his populist demagoguery come immediately to mind—is to continue practicing in adulthood the oafish alcoholic follies of his undergraduate years and transform himself into a scholar-hoodlum, the Wild Colonial Boy, one of the Yobos of the Arsenal Gang. If his place of employment has a rugby team, he promptly joins it, delighted to spend his weekends in head-banging, muddied merriment with his fellow rough-

necks. Although presumably the beneficiary of many years of post-secondary education, he adopts the language and demeanor of hooligans who shed blood at soccer riots. Thus the Contemporary American Lit expert who arrived, already red-faced blotto, at the Gardner supper. With him was his wife, a faded and twitchy-looking Barbie in Her Later Days, for whom the adjective *long-suffering* seemed tailor-made. Even before we sat to eat, a bad moon was rising; his hostile and aggrieved voice rose above the polite murmuring of the gathered crowd like a strident trombone, the thrust of his bloviating being the penetrating scholarly insight that anyfuckingbody who didn't think John Fucking Gardner was the best fucking writer in America was a fucking asshole. By the time we were at table, his dazzlement in the presence of the Great Man had whipped him into a frenzy, and any and all attempts at civilized conversation were promptly stamped into the carpet:

"I was reading the other day—"
"Shut the fuck up! We're talking about fucking John Gardner here!"

And so on. The dining litany about anyfuckingbody, etc., continued through the meal, which I suspect was lying heavy by now on many a stomach. Surely I wasn't the only one filled with a vague dread that at any moment the Boyo would begin to amplify his argument by starting a food fight or supplanting his neighbor's teeth or bloodying his nose. Throughout this unseemly show Gardner remained as impassive as a stone Buddha. Was he so vain that he was happy to take adulation in any form he could get it? Was he observing the spectacle and synthesizing its details into something he could use in a story? Was he simply dumbstruck by the antics of his noisy fan? Who can say? Equally impassive (I told you he was a gracious man) was Bill French, even though the event he had so carefully planned was being turned into a scene more appropriate to the seedy environs of some hole-in-the-wall dive in Bumtown, and his guests were being systematically denied any opportunity to converse with the guest of honor.

In one of Edward Gorey's macabre illustrated tales a caption reads, "The guests departed in confusion and misgiving," and thus did the Gardner reception end. The author remained a polite interval after dinner (during which time he graciously autographed three novels my wife had brought along), and then he was gone. The Arsenal Rowdy, now somewhat subdued (perhaps Barbie herself had taken him aside and said for the thousandth time in her uneasy marriage, "You're making a spectacle of yourself"), departed shortly thereafter, as eventually did the rest of us.

A few weeks later, Bill, Frank Scafella (another of my WVU friends) and I were talking about *On Moral Fiction*, when Bill began to mull over the possibility of inviting Gardner for a return visit to the university. He didn't say so, but it seemed to me as though he was toying with the idea of replaying the first visit in such a way that it would work out right this time.

That visit never materialized. All too soon Gardner was dead before his time. On the other hand, to close this piece on a Nabokovian note, I imagine that the Wild Colonial Boy is still alive and well, yelling into every ear within hearing range that David Foster Wallace is the best fucking writer in America, and anyfuckingbody too dumb to see that is just....

"What a long strange trip it's been..." - Grateful Dead

Flipside

Fall 1999



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