

The New Orphic Review

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Cover Art: *Brutalized Oranges, Guttled Trout*
by Ernest Hekkanen

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of over 40 books. The most recent are *Volume One* and *Volume Two* of *The Collected Short Stories of Ernest Hekkanen*, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, *Shadows on a Cave Wall*, *Kafka: The Master of Yesno* and *The Life of Bartholomew G.* Hekkanen is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* (Vol. 240) in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen* (2007).

Telling Ourselves Stories

Ernest Hekkanen

MY FATHER, Toivo Ernest Hekkanen, was too earnest to tell a good story. At my current age of sixty-three, I'm uncertain of how to account for his 'disposition'. Was it the effect of having the middle name of Ernest? Was it due to being a Finn, an ethnic group which places a great deal of value on honesty? Could it be attributed to the arid environment of Southwest Wyoming, where he grew to manhood? Or was it something implicit in his character?

In English, my father's first name, Toivo, means 'hope'. When I contemplate the trajectory of his life from birth to death, it must have been his 'hope' to get out of the lower working class typical of coal-mining towns, as well as the dusty environs of Southwest Wyoming. He was something of a mathematical savant, you see. His abilities in that field allowed him to get a university education and so move up the social ladder to a job in engineering. Gainful employment with the U.S. Corp of Army Engineers resulted in him moving to the Puget Sound area of the Pacific Northwest, a rainy environment much closer to that of Lohtaja on the upper Bothnia Coast of Finland, where the Hekkanen family began its odyssey.

My father had a huge vein of nostalgia running through his soul and every few years he would drive his wife and kids back to Southwest Wyoming, where we would visit the largely dismantled towns where he grew up: Glencoe, Cumberland #1 and #2 and, later on, Superior. He would try to interest us in his early life in those clapboard villages, but his monotonous retelling drained the vitality out of his narrative. However, from what I could glean, his upbringing was international, due to the fact that the coal-mining communities drew laborers from around the world, from countries like Greece, Serbia, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Norway and Sweden.

Only when my father rehashed his youth in the proximity of friends, in particular a man by the name of Angelo Ricardo, did I realize how colorful his early life had been. Angelo was a great storyteller. He brought the sagebrush-strewn plains of Wyoming vividly to life. Back in the early part of the 20th century, just about every boy ran a trapline. They caught coyotes, badgers, muskrats and cougars and sold the pelts to government agents—which, for a long time, made me suspect that dear old Dad had lived during the era of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. Trapline-raiding parties were often conducted by boys of different ethnic groups and that resulted in quite a few pitched battles. Also, there was no shortage of game to be shot with guns: antelope and deer, for instance. As boys, my father and his companions worked as moonshine runners for men who produced the stuff in abandoned, underground mines. They collected boxes of arrow- and tomahawk heads—which, at that time, could be snatched up off the floor of the plains. When fruit vendors drove through town in their ancient, rickety vehicles, Dad and his friends would hop up into the bed and pitch cantaloupes to kids running along behind. Angelo made my father's youth seem so colorful I began to wish I'd been born during the early part of the 20th century, rather than during the late 1940s, which soon became the boring, uneventful '50s.

On one of our many drives home from one of these storytelling reunions, I said: "Gee, Dad, you sure lived an exciting life, back then. Why haven't you told us about all those things you did as a kid?"

Dad glanced over his shoulder into the shadow-laden backseat of the old '50s Dodge. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about all that stuff Angelo said you and your friends did when you were my age. You sure had a lot of fun, back then."

"Oh, that," he said. "Don't believe anything Angelo has to tell you. It's all lies, nothing but lies."

Angelo's accounts of what they had done as children brought the era to life far more vividly than my father's dreary facts and figures. He employed language that was far more colorful, far more animated. I decided, right then and there, while sitting in the backseat of my father's '50s Dodge, that color, animation and adventure trumped any sort of 'factual' rendering by a country mile.

If you've been following my editorials in *The New Orphic Review*, you'll be familiar with my argument that we are enfolded by a social context consisting of stories, and that these stories end up holding a great deal of sway over our behavior. The less aware we are of this, the more likely we are to remain in the grip of stories bequeathed to us by our culture, stories that might be deleterious to our welfare, by the way.

Recently, in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, where I was a participant in the Finnish-North American Literature Association component of the Finn Grand Fest, I fell into conversation with a Finnish-American who made a

point of telling me that he didn't read fiction because, according to him, it amounted to little more than frivolous amusement. He preferred reading non-fiction because it dealt with real things. By the way, in demeanor and steadfastness, he reminded me a lot of my father, although he was approximately the same age as me. Also, while in his early twenties he had experienced the social upheaval of the Vietnam War era, but unlike yours truly, who had gone to Canada to avoid being drafted, he had fulfilled his obligations by going into the army.

It's funny how our past catches up to us.

I gave my adversary my usual reply. "If you ask me, any essay or article over 2,500 words is probably a piece of fiction and anything below that is pretty suspect. That's due to the way we select details, in addition to the hidden infrastructure inherent in our perceptions."

"You'd have to do a lot of explaining to convince me of that," he said.

"What if I were to tell you that the social context is made up of stories, and that if you're ignorant of these stories you can be driven to do the most honorable or reprehensible things?"

"I'd have to tell you that you were blowing a lot of smoke up your chimney; that's what I'd say."

"And I'd have to rejoin that you're the sort of person who prefers his life to be an unexamined story," I told him. "Because of that, you're prone to being the sort of individual who willingly believes the most nonsensical stories provided by the leaders of your country, whether they be stories having to do with the collapse of your economy, weapons of mass destruction purported to have existed in Iraq, or even the lie that your country is a democracy rather than a corporate feudal state. You see, what you don't understand is that your country has been styled after one that was first described in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Namely, it's a warrior culture. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* gave rise to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and they, in turn, became templates for the fictitious tales you find in the Bible. In *Gilgamesh*, there's a character named Enkidu who's the epitome of Carl Jung's 'shadow'. Also, in that epic you'll run into ideas that later gave rise to Adam Smith's theories about wealth and labor concentrating themselves in metropolitan areas and how this inevitably results in the destruction of nature. However, because you refuse to read fiction, you wouldn't know anything about what I've just told you. Read *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and you'll better understand why your country found it necessary to invade Iraq, because, for the States, it was a mandated piece of fiction, and nearly everyone in your country chose to subscribe to it. That, my friend, is why it's important to read fiction, because the contents of your mind, as well as your behavior, have been shaped by it for quite a few millennia."

In Western society, whether we choose to believe it or not, every story, no matter how dry, fanciful or seemingly factual, is an offspring of *The*

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Epic of Gilgamesh, which hails from the area just south of Babylon. Furthermore, I'll go so far as to say that every story in this issue of *The New Orphic Review* harkens back to it in some manner or other. However, I'll let you, the esteemed readers of the *NOR*, decide whether I'm blowing smoke up my chimney or whether I'm being totally earnest.

Remember, I'm a storyteller.

CARL F. THOMPSON JR. is a retired U.S. federal employee and a graduate of the University of North Carolina. He and his wife Patricia live in Annandale, VA. In addition to *The New Orphic Review*, his fiction has appeared in *Potomac Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *The William and Mary Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Phantasmagoria*, *Iconoclast*, *Thin Air*, *THEMA*, and *descant*. “Lake” forms the first chapter of a contemplated novel.

Lake

Carl F. Thompson Jr.

IT WAS A TUBEROUS plant. Green curling leaves above the waterline, cresting in a flower that bloomed everlastingly beautiful, bringing a strange, fearful pleasure to the eye. The blossoms were of many colors, an eye-riveting red, a beet-plum purple, a bright canary yellow. Not that there was a canary or a beet or even a tree of any kind to be seen, only gnat-like creatures that at times invaded and swarmed the plants—and us two women. Perhaps the gnat-creatures carried plant seeds that fell upon the waters ... or perhaps they migrated to an unseen land where they deposited them. An imagined land that was dry or merely damp, or spongy-wet, or mud-soupy and foot-sucking, imperious in its hold, something worse than the permanent wetlands here—where there were at least blossoms to trap the eye, if scentless and dead to the nose. Or, perhaps the plants bore an aroma beyond the human range, beyond the dog range, too (had we dogs); a scent meant only for other plants. Perhaps it was a scent that pleased them, that was supportive, as if the plants were comrades and the scent that we two women could not smell acted, plant-to-plant, the same as if they had hands and held each others’ hands, one-by-one-by-one, running without end across this sea—a community bound in a scent we could not detect. Wonderingly, I speculated. Likely there was no scent. Or perhaps there was such a chain, a cuddling of the species, one to another, but not accomplished by scent at all.

Grace Odom died eating a plant. It was two months since our pod had bumped and jittered and fragmented skimming the surface of this sea or lake and left us in that initial squall of confusion that spelled a crash landing, with the gnats our first company, a sort of living dust cloud that milled about our sweaty brows and irritated until with nightfall—or boredom—they moved on. The next morning and the mornings thereafter, we forged west—on mission, as best we recalled it—through endless

ankle-deep water, a hot sun-bright mirror-country of water and plants and nothing else, to arrive where Grace would die. Two long months in light, all-planet work suits but lugging full backpacks (while food lasted), Grace the sprinter, and I, the lady with stamina. Until in practical terms (down to a candy bar?) we'd exhausted all our food.

We both knew it was time to act, but Grace was always the aggressive one; not reckless but not a procrastinator, either. She knew that if we did not eat something we would die, die within weeks, letting our bodies diminish until we lay on our air mattresses and simply never moved again. At death we'd release our own personal scent, our reek, even our bodily contamination, perhaps to be absorbed by water; welcomed, ignored, or abhorred by the plants, could a plant be gifted with awareness at all.

Quicker (she, the sprinter) to test a plant, Grace was very careful, very patient, to note what she was eating. This one's yellow, she said, as she pulled it from the water. Her long blond shiny hair—so unlike my earth-shock of brown tangles—fell into her face as her darkly tanned hands reached into the water for the plant that would kill her. How her hair flared bright in the alien sun, so like the yellow blossom crowning the plant she had chosen. Her tall body, tall as mine, we two strong girls, she thirty, and I thirty-seven. Both tough, though I had demonstrated neither the spirit nor valor to try first. Seven years her senior, I should have been first.

We sat now on our inflated chairs as we'd sat when we first recovered from the landing. She said, or announced for the record—to that constant listener in our heads—I am first going to try the blossom; and she bit just part of a petal, 3 cm worth, nothing more. It doesn't taste, she remarked, chewing slowly. Her green eyes regarded the part she'd bitten from. For a tiny bite, it's yet as if I were eating a thickened, mushy sort of cotton candy—absent the stickiness, or the taste. I loved cotton candy when I was a kid, she remarked. Now when the sun lit her hair it reminded me precisely of a confection. I don't feel a thing, she said, not unpleasantly, not with worry, but with merely a patient curiosity. I don't think there's reason for concern. Grace closely studied the flower to see if the injury to it produced any change in its yellow blossom, a darkening, a fringe of despoliation, even a petal sloughing off near where she had eaten. Nothing wrong with the blossom, at least, she remarked. In all, we waited an hour after she bit and chewed just that half of a petal. How do you feel? I asked. She merely looked at me and bit into another portion of the blossom, waited a few minutes, and ate the rest except for a single petal that fell from between her teeth to the waters, floated, drifted carrying her scent and her saliva, before—with a corner of my eye I witnessed it—it sank without a ripple, presumably to disintegrate and dissolve in water, dead and forgotten.

Once she'd consumed the blossom, she waited yet another hour. I still

feel nothing, she announced. No satisfaction of taste or hunger, no pain, no hallucinations—it isn't hallucinogenic—and its bloom's not toxic. I'm going to try a leaf. The leaves were icy green and clustered at the base of what had been the blossom. If a leaf on a plant could be called treacherous in appearance, these spiky, long leaves did to me. Bitter, she said immediately, and spat it out. Worse than bitter. Again she waited. At one hour she remarked, I feel ... something, but I'm not sure ... what. It's ... indefinite. Why don't we hold off? I prompted. I can test the rest, I suggested, but why don't we wait for another hour or so? To see precisely what it is you feel; to see if it's anything at all, Grace. Sharon, the risk needs to stay with me, she replied firmly. No point doing both of us in. And she bit into the fat root—the tuber. Naturally, if any part of the plant were to be sanctified as a source of nutrition, our guess would have been the root. It has a taste, she noted at once. It's ... agreeable. I can't put my finger on it. It has ... The taste generates ... a memory, indistinct. I can't find the words, but, something ... creamy? It's mild, nothing overpowering, but ... comely. I could like this, she announced after more speculation. She took another bite, not waiting more than a minute or two. Yes, she said, yes. For a moment she looked out upon the unending lake. Suddenly, she raised her head and stood, as if an idea had occurred to her. Are these tended? Farmed? Then she blinked. Aztecs?—Quicksand? More plaintively: Navigator? She turned to me, a look of confusion. Three words so suddenly, quixotically uttered. She was looking out upon the irregular rows of plants, row after crooked row as far as the eye could see, horizon to horizon, endless. Then her knees gave and she fell forward, quite as if she'd been struck by a plank. Died standing, really; I'm sure she was dead before she hit the water, the remainder of the plant slipping from her hands.

So I was alone.

* * *

Aztecs? Aztecs and Mayans, I'm sure her parietal chip would say. Grace had a thing about Aztecs and Mayans, and Olmecs and Toltecs, and a lesser thing about the Incas, though I know she had visited Machu Picchu. She read pre-Columbian history, recent translations, anything to be had. She made winding trips through Mexico to Teotihuacán, Palenque, Uxmal, Coba as well as places—Tikal, for one—in Guatemala, or Belize, or Honduras. If a great general, some pale ghost visiting his poor brain, must cry, Strike the tent! as he dies, then exclaiming Aztecs! was due to a similar ghost in Grace. That which she would have wanted once again to explore. So perhaps she knew at that exact instant that it was over.

Quicksand was more problematical. Originally, quicksand was no interest of Grace's. It was, rather, an interest she picked up from me. My obsession. My earliest, deepest, childhood fear. The old staple of British mysteries set upon the moors. Who in America ever experienced

quicksand? No one I knew, except me, my father, and our dog Ursula. As an eleven-year-old child, on a trip to Florida, in an area of wetlands, we had lost Ursula, my perky mutt, to quicksand. Daddy warned, Don't go near her, Sharon, don't go near. And I'd had to watch Ursula yip and squirm and wriggle and sink until her eyes were gone and then, too, the tips of her ears. The locals readily believed us when we reported it. Their only disbelief was, Didn't you know? An old man with a haphazard crew-cut and a three-day beard, a man missing two lower front teeth, and whose breath stank, told me that if I ever fell into quicksand the thing to do was not to panic, but to calmly and slowly try to *swim* out of it. Lay flat and spread your body out. Often, you can even float in it. Those were the things to do if no one was there with a stick or a rope to pull you out. As for the prevalence of quicksand, in later years I learned that anyone might run into it. Just try beaches, sandy riverbanks, shorelines, marshes. Any place where sand and water mixed, such that sand no longer supported weight. That old man with missing teeth was the one I had to bless. His image of swimming out of quicksand cured me utterly from the fear of it. As a teenager and in college, I was a highly competitive swimmer. First or second nearly always. Swimming wore away any old, wayward thoughts about quicksand. Though I was immunized from my phobia, once my story reached Grace's ears, even in her mid-twenties, it stayed strong in her heart. She was infected by my earlier irrationality. I think she visualized Ursula going down, and that image took root. If she had an enduring fear, it was of quicksand. Did she believe, in her dying minute, she was being drowned by quicksand?

But what did "Navigator" mean? Vasco da Gama—was that the name from secondary school? "The Navigator." I didn't know if it was the right name or not, or whether Vasco da Gama, or anything to do with him, related to Grace's last words. Centuries past, did a NASA mission bear the name Navigator? There were so many ancient missions, I couldn't dismiss it. But I was aware of no recent mission named "Navigator." If Navigator had a personal meaning for Grace, it was wasted on me.

In fact, the whole thing was wasted—Aztecs, Quicksand, and Navigator. Grace's last words were an enigma.

* * *

Afterwards, I began to feel the Eye. Microscopic or enormous, the invisible, observing Eye. I couldn't help it. Who could? Alone like that, fear comes. Alone, I felt as though I were being watched.

* * *

I buried Grace's body in a glaze of mud. Would it have been sensible—abhorrent but sensible—to watch her body as it decomposed, to see if anything fed upon her? Eaters—insects, grubs, wildlife—that I might in turn hunt and eat? But most decay comes from within, from the body's own bacteria and enzymes. It was how the body ripened. The mission

profile said I should keep slogging west where for all I knew might lay a land of milk and honey. Staying, my very presence could scare off foragers. Not that I would feel guilty if scavengers came and I survived by eating them. For survivors, conscience adapts; guilt didn't apply.

In the end the crucial question was, could I eat the plant? Was some portion edible? Should the bitter leaves be discarded? Should the yellow-blossomed plants be avoided but not the red ones or the purple ones? I scrounged our two packs for food and found one-half of a nutrition bar and a one-serving disk of peanut butter. I liked peanut butter. I liked nutrition bars. Those few delicacies I would save for some select occasion. Our supplies of water had given out weeks ago and we had been drinking from the lake ever since, merely adding sanitation pills, bubble-bubble, and drinking without a care, as we could see no choice.

That night I slept hungry and dreamed of five days passing—the time it would take her body to ripen. In day one of the dream, I unburied her, wiping the mud from her body. By day four, I saw no change. But a morning later, gazing at her eyes, I felt compelled to roll a lid up. Her eyes had begun to liquefy. Grace's own organisms, absent the living body's defenses, had begun to take over. Her torso looked weird. I pressed a finger to her diaphragm. Her skin felt loose as though separating from her body. But on the body itself, I had seen nothing to trap and eat, or trap and farm. No bite or claw marks, no injuries from midnight graveyard poachers. I woke. Her arms were still closed over her mud-laden chest. The dream had done its job. I abandoned the idea of waiting and watching and prepared to march west with my backpack.

That morning I ate from a plant, from the tuberous part, and lived.

* * *

My days were an unending trudge westward, toward the day's-end falling of the sun. When we landed, neither of us, Grace nor I, knew what had happened that had caused us to land without our couriers. The couriers—our forearm chips, embedded in our skin and protected by soft, durable covers—retained all the mission information. But there were no chips. Myron, we speculated. In the orbital ship, our too-forgetful tech assistant responsible for mission prep, while he was suiting us up and we were too busy to monitor everything, goofed. Before each mission, Myron was to remove the chips from the last mission and replace them with the new ones. Our guess was that Myron had removed the chips, but simply forgot the little matter of replacement. Directions, coordinates, topography, geography, meteorology, star charts, logistics, all gone. (Much of this, admittedly, meant Navigation.) Relevant information about flora and fauna—whatever was known about the plants, if anything—that, too, was lost. But not, I think, information that would have prevented Grace's death. If someone had known the soil held flora toxic to humans, they'd have warned us verbally, and we'd have remembered.

Explore the lake and head west—surely the chip had had specific coordinates, specific routes—but all I knew was the command to head west. Eventually, to find land? Of course, there was Grace’s parietal chip, which maintained a constantly updating record of personal life experience (anything about Navigator?), including up-to-the-minute mission experience, but how (and what would she know about the mission that I didn’t?) was I to retrieve that chip—go back and dig it out of her skull? And without a chip reader, what did it gain me? It wouldn’t fit my forearm chip packet. The chip was annealed to the inner side of her parietal bone, the part of the skull covering the brain’s parietal lobe. It was available for any explorers who might follow, when her head was but a skull. Whoever came after us would know how to read it. As they would with me. In my head, some portion of that chip records these very thoughts, my thinking monolog if you like, for whoever comes after—unless I have lived to construct this story as I like.

Anyway: Push west through the heat of days; that was what I did.

* * *

I ate one plant, sometimes two, a day. They pulled easily from their muddy base although attached tendrils ran like neural dendrites through the muddy lake bottom—both into the mud and along the surface of the mud—horizontally, lost among other plants. It looked to me broadly like rice land, but I’ve never trekked rice paddies, and I couldn’t honestly judge. I once read that aspens and some mushrooms (like the plants?) grew as colonies, creating enormous footprints in the soil—some aspen colonies lasting tens of thousands of years—all part of one massive sequence with individual sprouts—trees, and table-topped fungi.

I happily considered that were the plants hallucinogenic, I would have appreciated them more. I wouldn’t mind getting stoned, once or twice, recreationally, as they say. I tore off the tops—leaf and blossoms—and ate the tubers only. I did not experiment with the rest. There was a mild, light taste, pleasing enough to keep eating, if you worked to imagine it to be some other food you liked. I tried to think carrots or sweet potatoes, but reality said couscous.

* * *

On a warm night, I dreamed of Nightface. I had no other name to give him. A man’s face. I felt an impression of height, strong hands, and a resilient mind. In time, he became increasingly familiar and regretfully unknown. He never spoke. But now he reached, and touched me in a dream.

* * *

If you’re reading this as an abstract from my parietal chip, that means I wasn’t found alive, and this certainly wasn’t my debriefing with coffee and donuts. Sharon Dellester, strong-willed and caring about friends, my friend Grace, certainly. And though there was six feet of me and six feet

of my friend Grace, don't call us Amazons, please. I've run through two husbands and hope, if rescued, to cohabit with a third. But tall and physically adroit, I'd always been. I could have climbed trees easily, were trees here to be climbed. I could run long distances and swim, but I admired—coveted, really, Grace's looks (her long blond hair, her peering green eyes) and skills (her bravery, her blinding burst of speed in a sprint, her fierce unyielding sense of competition). Put me in the starter blocks next to Grace, and I was far behind a second after the gun fired. But those events were gone.

I'd been marching westward for what, six days now, since Grace?

And all the while the Eye continued to spy upon me, bringing with it that clingy, shivery feeling. From behind, above, or across the long, unchanging horizon. Watching me as I stood or walked or even squatted, as I sometimes must.

Was there an Eye? Has there ever been an Eye, even on our old world rudely populated by billions, a world with a history? But here was a lake—a sea—of water, a mere 12 cm deep, covered in blossoms, plotted not really in rows—we only liked to think they were rows—but more rudely dressed than that: self-distributed, I think. I didn't think some hand reached down and pushed a seed, or a plant remnant, into the mud. I don't mean a Giant's hand by that, either; I didn't think there were any creatures here, farmers, if you like, anyone who—farmed. I didn't think these were “crops.” Or gifts to or from any extra-biological intelligence. No homage to an unseen Eye. All the same, I felt spooked—and that wasn't like me.

* * *

Seven days west. The long, slow race with each afternoon's hot sun. At mid-afternoon, something on the horizon attracted me. But sweat stung my eyes, blurring my vision.

Two shapes, indistinct, far off. *Men*. On the horizon. Or beyond? A mirage composed of two stone piles? Since when could stones walk?

Just as suddenly, the image evaporated. I did not change pace.

A half-hour passed as I kept on.

Once again, they appeared, as if they'd taken a dip into a minor valley and were now ascending, or had reached a plateau.

At great remove, the image still wavered like a mirage, two gradually becoming one. Someone tall—a man? Proudly staring. Or did he suddenly turn and look away? His head, next his torso, dissolved, and he was gone.

Heat sat upon the horizon. I waited for the atmosphere to settle. *Were* the tubers hallucinogenic? Or had I seen a man—the Navigator, leading me?—because over the horizon there was indeed a man? In water? On land?

* * *

Eight days west now. With my hand, I brushed hair from my face. How quickly my hair had grown long, not its normal duty cut. My lovely blond

hair. Blond and lovely as I'd always wanted, a fair, star-warm blond, teasing me, making me blush, it was so wonderful. A gift of an alien sun, absent trees and shade in a world of water, wading-pool deep? And my tan, my perfectly bronzed arms as they extended from my work suit. Surely my neck and face were also tan now. Desires turned into reality.

When did I begin—I have tried to reconstruct it—to hear the ruffle of a soft wind, a wind I'd not heard? Was it a change of weather? Or had I always heard a murmur, but nothing so distinct? Was my hearing infinitesimally stronger? Grace had such sharp ears. I wanted to sit off from a beach, listening to the dull pound of distant surf, testing what I heard. Maybe the changes were late-to-blossom gifts of bioengineering Administration hadn't told me about. Or why hadn't they simply selected someone else instead of me, someone more like Grace, someone with blond hair and dark skin and fantastic hearing to begin with, if that was what they wanted—they could have arranged it so easily. Was it because of my desire to go and the fact that nearly anything can be bioengineered if needed? They could select for duty, or they could bio-groom for duty. They could do either. ... But what was their *need* for blond hair? Other than my *wanting* what was Grace's?

Of late, my pace had altered, too. Now, in the mornings, I practically sprang to the march, as if at the firing of a sprint gun. Irregularly during the day I launched into sustained bursts of not double-time, but triple-time. My feet splashing. It felt good. All my adult life I'd been able to lope twenty miles at a marathon pace, but this—explosion of nervous energy—was alien to me. And freshening.

Now I could see them on the horizon, this time two humans—shimmering—advancing toward me. I fumbled hurriedly through my pack for my weapons. One, a plain wire-thin short sword, an analog of the common Roman short sword, but sharper and far lighter; the other, an electric-bolt gun, target-seeking and range-finding with a nearly unlimited charge. When I know absolutely nothing about an on-comer, in theory a possible enemy—unlikely as these looked human—I prefer—if danger is confirmed—to use high sub-lethal, followed by lethal if the first hasn't worked. If that didn't work, then it's ultra-lethal, which covers, it is hoped, any biological entity—or a deranged boulder, for that matter.

We slogged toward each other through the lake, the two in garb I could not make out. I saw only that one was taller and looked to be wearing some form of regalia. Even he was short and slightly pot-bellied, though his brown chest looked thick and strong as the trunk of a tree. The one behind, the shorter one, brown as well, but not pot-bellied, was a boy. The elder (*Aztec!*) wore a headdress made of gloriously rich-colored feathers, while a necklace of jade ornaments decorated his chest. Within the headdress his hair circled in plaits around the crown of his head, then rose long as sheaves of wheat, the hair so heavy it fell and draped his

back. His ears bore enormous circular jade earrings, and his wrists and forearms flashed with bracelets of gold. His lips protruded broadly above a short whiskbroom goatee. His wrapped loincloth featured geometric markings and his legs were protected by shin guards. As we passed, his lips parted and teeth bared, he glared past me, straight ahead, unfazed. Some upper teeth were inlaid with small triangular studs of jade. He was a proud and surely fierce man, bearing his ceremonial war club. The boy, likely his son, also garbed in feathers and jade, bore a smaller club. But the Aztec lord, I shall call him, held a mysterious doubt, a discomfort: trancelike, his eyes traced the water. His sandals splashed and he walked bravely but awkwardly east, his eyes mystified by the lake. I had made no impression upon him; he was consumed—struck—by the lake. Maybe he was not bothered by a mere woman, someone his warriors could sweep up with little trouble. But I turned and stared. If he was an apparition in the way that my golden hair *must* be apparition, why *this* apparition? Aztecs were not my obsession. Aztecs were Grace's.

My feet maintained a steady pace. For days now I'd been eating these plants. Once again I asked myself, were they after all hallucinogenic—life-sustaining, but mind-bending? I would have to save samples once I reached the shore, as surely now I would, as it could not lie far ahead. You will not find Aztec lords trekking across what seemed from his expression a hitherto unknown lake for any great distance, I hazard. But how could he be surprised at a lake if he lived nearby? It was as if this great plumed serpent of a man-king had been suddenly removed to a new world. How Grace would have been amazed and pleased.

So I had to be heading to shore and pyramids. I could not believe I was in grave danger from warriors. If Grace dreamed of horrible marches up the steps of a pyramid to be laid atop an altar to have her heart cut out with an obsidian knife—that would not have been the Grace I knew, a person who would have bowed to no enemy, not even in her dreams. If I indeed were to find a peopled city, a mighty Tenochtitlán, I had my weaponry, which easily would have outdone Cortes and his army, the army (allied with smaller tribes seeking freedom from their Aztec overlords) that had beaten the Aztecs. The Aztecs were of no consequence to me.

At last, after trekking perhaps two more miles of lake, I saw a pyramid on the horizon. I grabbed my air seat from my bag and sat and ate the nutrition bar. Next, I looked for a good-sized tuber and spotted a maroon-tipped extravaganza. I decapitated its foul parts, and ate, contemplating. I wrested from my bag a collapsed pair of binoculars. I was looking for people, Aztec or Mayan. Both sacrificed their enemies on high altars, tore out the living hearts, skinned the corpses, and ate the remains. I was close, but the people remained invisible.

The tuber was big and I was satisfied by eating half. When finished, I

put everything but my binoculars back in my bag. It would take an hour to reach the city, at which point I would give up the bag and carry only my weapons.

Attaching the binoculars to my belt, I was suddenly but at last fully struck—stunned—by the darkness of my skin, the blaze of my hair which fell over my shoulder. I stared at myself in the water, but the lake was never still, and I had no undisturbed reflection to examine. Again I heard the low, weird wind that girded this world, that surrounded almost without notice—unless you had the hearing that belonged to Grace and which I now possessed.

I hoisted the bag with my weapons and equipment onto my back. At even a prudent pace, an hour to shore! My mind wandered as I took my first steps. I was still recalling the first half-petal of a plant which had dropped from Grace's mouth into the waters, descending among the plants. What happened to the refuse of what we—Grace and I (*and others?*)—had eaten? That bit of petal had met Grace's saliva. The saliva contained her DNA. Had that fragment, when it dissolved, somehow become food to be consumed by the vast network of tubers? Had something human passed to the plants been retransmitted—across a worldwide network of plants—to its next human eater? A network that passed the eater's fears, emotions, even aesthetic ideas—for some unknown, adaptive purpose—on to later eaters? It had passed to me Grace's fear of, or fascination with, the civilization of the ancient Aztecs. It had also passed to me Grace's fascination with navigation and her irrational fear of quicksand. It may have passed to me my belief that I shared her long, blond hair, or even her especially fine hearing. All being *illusions* ... hair, Aztecs even ... so there were no *real* enemies here, likely no *real* pyramids ... Only messages carried across an ocean of plants ... one vast cortical chain of living things entertained by the sagas of Grace's worst fears, supplied to anyone like me who took a bite of the apple. A diet infused by stories spun by Grace. My stories, too, I suppose, passed through these same tendrils, now. Thus my need for weapons seemed silly, for if all I saw was illusion, remnants of Grace's mind, my senses had been deceived by the refuse of what we have eaten, absorbed and given back by the network. Fears, emotions, and simple personal interests—all illusions?

Again I lifted my binoculars. Now I saw not only a pyramid but the shoreline itself! And on the land (through the binoculars) little ant-sized humans in colorful clothing—dark skin majesties.

How had I navigated to this place? How could it have been guaranteed that I would arrive at *this* location (I saw people more clearly now, even without binoculars) *other than* by the desire that Grace had possessed ... or the pleasure of her friendly Navigator, who or whatever that was. The Eye? The Eye, the Eye! Are you, my listener, the Eye? Is posterity the Eye? Those who would come after me ... having *dug from my skull* its

parietal chip ... was this (a hypothetical, future Eye) the reason for my obsession that I would not make it back?

Keep moving! ... Though all ahead was illusion, I had to make an end of it. Wasn't that the mission?

I struggled out of my overlong reverie and looked up. Suddenly startled to see how close I was to shore, without thinking I accelerated, my legs pumping. Never mind the water, I was suddenly crazy for reaching land—in a sprint, my knees lifting high out of water, my bag jostling ...
OOOOOOOOF!

What in hell—? Had I fallen off an invisible cliff? ... Good God—I was in *quicksand!* Sand—mixed with a flow of water—near a shoreline! Classic! Driving me to my knees, to my waist, I was stupidly sinking like a stone! I tried raising a mud-locked leg. It was as if someone were hanging onto me. I tried the other leg—and merely struggled. How deep was it? I tried to touch the bottom with my toe, but there was no bottom. Quicksand—the texts said—was seldom more than a few feet deep.

This was not my doing—it was Grace's. I'd left the fear of quicksand behind. *She* still carried—the damned *dendrites* carried it from her to a tuber I ate—what she learned from envisioning my poor dog Ursula go under. The horror, the sinking horror of quicksand, which dominated Grace's mind.

When the sandy muck reached my navel, I tossed my backpack as far toward shore as I could. But the very act of tossing it caused me to sink more. My hand knocked the binoculars from my belt but I paid them no mind as they sank while I paddled.

Swim slowly, I remembered. I still envisioned the old man with the missing teeth yelling at me to swim *slowly*.

Breaststroke would be best, wouldn't it? In which direction? Back to where I fell, naturally. I had no idea how far toward shore this foul patch went—or was it the area ahead where there were no plants, right up to where plants reappeared? It was too far. So, yes, go back to where I fell. But my bag! I'd hurled it with all my might and yet there it was ahead half afloat in this glop. If I escaped without my weapons, I'd be nothing against those Aztecs; they'd rip my skin off! So I reversed. This muck—it barely let me turn—I was *dog-paddling* to get that bag. The ooze was up to my breasts. If I wasn't careful I wouldn't be able to raise my arms to swim a single stroke. No—the bag was too far, impossibly too far, and I was sinking. I had to go back. When I got out, I'd go for the bag, if it were still there, or run like hell to the east—I'd run on water if need be, I swore I would—away from these ancients. Who didn't *really* exist, did they? Though seeing was so very believing ...

So I finally turned back. I had maybe fifteen feet to cross. Not much. But my arms were lead! It was so damn hard. That fifteen feet might as well have been a swimming pool's length ... How much time was left

before I went under? The stuff was up to my chin. I stroked. My shoulders ... my back ... if I were only twenty again! I hardly ever lost. But here I sank, thinking this crazy thought—who would find my brain chip were I lost *here*? I'd die in a bog. Who would hear my story?

Then I saw two Indians running, their feet splashing water. They were running fast, two swift warriors brandishing adze-edged clubs ... When the first one tumbled in—his mistake, overrunning—I climbed aboard, pulled myself onto his back—making him sink as I rose. Despite his panicky struggle to find firm footing, he gave me half the space I needed. I leaped from his back ... but my fingers grabbed ooze. The second Aztec stood over me with his club. When he swung, I ducked—this *was* my dream, wasn't it? I *would* make it out alive, right? I managed to grab his club, which he belligerently (and errantly) would not release, so that between his swing and my tug, he tumbled in and I had a second life raft to leap from ... this time stretching to where I drove my arms like anchors into muck trying to pull myself from this cesspool ... tugging, half crawling on my belly, reaching for my second life, just there ahead of me ... a single arm's length farther.

But then I saw two more warriors running, their feet splashing water. Tall men bearing—bolt guns! I heard commands being issued. To me. In *English*. *This way*, I heard. One, holding onto the first, gingerly descended into the bog. He stretched out his arm. I made the old college try, grasped fingers, and finally, we locked hands.

I looked back. The two Aztecs had submerged from sight.

I would not have to make my dash to the east after all.

* * *

It was a variegated land. There was a small beach, low vegetation and scrub hedging the sand, backed up by patches of brambles or thickets, and behind them a mist of vegetation. Paths wandered in and out. To the left, a low promontory gave a view over the approaches. Impossible to tell whether the whole thing was a small island, or something larger. A world? Without sign of native habitation. No pyramids, no Indians.

So I was done running. My final sprint from water to land was perhaps the last facet of Grace in me.

Someone later retrieved my weapons. The bag had floated to land. The bag, after all, hadn't been so foolish as to panic in this mess. But who needed weapons now?

Stephen and Nelson, as they introduced themselves, led me to their—our—camp. Both were about thirty, both redheads with bushy beards. They looked hearty and tall, making good rescuers, these two.

Well, this makes four of us now, Stephen replied when I asked as we trudged up from the beach.

I saw one of you on the horizon yesterday, I said. I thought it was a mirage ... or an effect of the plants.

Plants? Yours were plants? asked Stephen.

Of course, plants.

I saw them exchange glances.

Neural, replied Nelson. They have a definite neural system and it transfers neural constructs to whatever eats them. There's a DNA effect, too.

But no, we didn't see you yesterday, Stephen said.

Just now—did you see *them*? The Indians? The pyramids?

No, Stephen said. I saw you—trapped in quicksand. First quicksand we've seen, by the way.

Likely gone now, Nelson noted.

Gone indeed, I thought, agreeing.

* * *

Stephen and Nelson had been here three months. Administration had informed them of our crash, told them there were no survivors. There'd been no signals, as our mission chips had never been implanted. No, we don't eat plants, not tubers, anyway, Nelson said as we climbed the hill toward camp.

You don't eat the plants?

We eat nothing grown on this world. We've ample foodstuffs.

We had next to nothing, I responded. You've been here three months, and me, almost as long. You were fully supplied, and we weren't. Why weren't we even told you existed? It sounds to me like we're all part of the same mission.

My new friends exchanged looks. You've been a victim of the neural effects, Stephen replied. One way or another, we all have. If you want the expert on neural and likely DNA effects, that's the Navigator. He's been here longer. Arrived with the crew we relieved.

Your navigator?

He studies complex neural networks. Just like navigating the innards of multiple brains. He's just up the hill here in his bungalow. He'll want to meet you. But be careful when you talk about Grace. They ... knew each other. Stephen grimly smiled, his eyes disclosing his meaning. And I warn you, he's the most important among us. Nelson even calls him Prince Henry.

Prince Henry, the Navigator, I take it?

That's the fellow, said Nelson.

In a minute we stopped before a bubble hut, where Stephen ducked his head in.

Henry. There's someone here I want you to meet. Sharon Dellester. It seems there was an Alpha pod survivor after all.

A barrel-chested man hunched over tables filled with strange plants and things I could not make out. He turned his head, stood, and gaped as he saw me, a sudden shock of recognition breaking off any prepared

greeting.

My God, he said, stunned. My God. He shook my hand warmly. He was tall, as tall as the man in my dreams. Nightface. Sharon Dellester, is it? When they said Grace was gone I couldn't believe it ... and now I see she isn't. You really *are* Sharon Dellester ... you're not Grace pulling my tail?

I wasn't quite certain what to make of this man who read into me the reincarnation of his once beloved. I had room for anger—indeed for fury. Why hadn't he launched a search for us? Had he merely accepted the reports? What sort of man would that make him? Surely he didn't expect me to play footsy as his surrogate Grace. Though, God, his smile was so damned engulfing—like quicksand?

But soon my attention was drawn to the displays in his hut. One table held what appeared to be a (figuratively) frozen, immobile swarm of insects each bearing long antennae. Another had something resembling enormous (3 cm-long) amoeba, with apparent pseudopodia. At another table I saw fractal constructions, mountains, rivers, tributaries, made of what looked like sand. Some tables held plants, too, but not the same plants Grace and I had seen. Was I to presume these were examples of amoeba-to-amoeba communication via “feet”? “Ant”-to-“ant” speech by antennae? Sand particle-to-sand particle *talking*—by silicone or whatever?

Almost eagerly, he launched in: So, you say, you saw plants? Could you describe them?

I found the question misplaced.

Could I *describe* them? I've just got here, barely alive, I said.

Well, hardly need to press you right now, he corrected. Another time.

You're not telling me (I cautiously asked), the plants, my long sea-chains of plants, aren't real? You're not telling me *different* species of entities—even sand—can transmit information across this planet—form images in the human mind, transfer aspects of one person *into* another—and that the observer can never even know for sure *which* species is rendering the magic?

I'd no more expect you to believe that you didn't see chains of talking plants than I'd expect you to think I believe I'm not actually talking to my old friend Grace, just on the say-so of someone named Sharon Dellester. It's a hellhole to navigate out of, the treachery of this planet. Treat it too seriously, it's sheer mental cruelty.

They lost their courier chips, Nelson said.

So you couldn't locate us, I told him.

Here, he said, taking my arm. Is this what you mean? Quickly, he popped the cover off the forearm pocket for my courier chip.

The chip was there, intact, not missing at all.

I don't understand, I said. This means we did transmit our location. You could have rescued us.

Yes, your chip's in place. But you didn't perceive any mission instructions at all, did you? Your peripheral nervous system should have shuttled the chip's data straight to your central nervous system, but what mission knowledge did you actually have?

You're saying—

You can't trust a damn thing here, Sharon. None of us can. Not unless it comes from orbital communication. We at least *think* we're safe in that regard.

Wait! Grace didn't bite into a plant till we'd been here more than two months. Until that happened, our minds would've been unaffected.

He folded his arms, sighing. Was this his patience-and-sympathy look?

Tell me: nothing else disturbed you, might have caused confusion even earlier?

I played along and acted like I was trying to think. Suddenly, I said, Oh, damn!

I thought it out silently: Those silly swarms of gnats, so thick they infiltrated our nostrils and mouths and ears as soon as we'd crashed ...

Gnats? I said cautiously, embarrassed. I think I turned red.

Even microorganisms carried on the wind, he replied.

He did have a warm, ingratiating smile. It was something I needed right now. Even if it might not be quite trustworthy.

JANE BYERS is a poet living in Nelson, B.C.. She has previously been published in *Fireweed*, *Our Times*, *poetsagainstar.ca* and most recently in *Horsefly*.

Jane Byers / Four Poems

Populist

The crew chief used to slice the structural gloves ragged
to approximate the firemen's lacerated palms,
so their compo claims would be accepted.
And then there's the falling-asleep-
at-the-wheel-of-a-fire truck claims
due to second jobs as renovators and movie extras,
or just plain tired from fire hall banter and early morning
false alarms set off by cockroaches in housing projects,
or sprawling commutes or the tedium of nothing burning.
This is not the fraud you'd anticipated
when you promised an overhaul of the system.
You've decided to go after welfare mothers instead.

Planet def'n:

“A celestial body that is in orbit around the sun has sufficient mass for its self-gravity to overcome rigid body forces so it assumes hydro-static equilibrium and finally has cleared the neighborhood around its orbit.”

134340 Religion

*“Come wander with me, she said,
Into regions yet untrod;
And read what is still unread
In the manuscripts of God.” - Longfellow*

I

In 1930 the ninth planet was found named Pluto...the Roman God of the underground... after a deity of creation, as all trans-Neptunian objects must be. Now, 76 years later, it is relegated to dwarf status prefixed with a number as minor celestial bodies are and renamed 134340-Pluto.

Pluto has been turfed out of the solar system for bad housekeeping.
The distant, rural hermit,
in the dark banished for a yard full of space junk;
celestial jalopies ambling around in orbit.

II

Science has dwarfed religion,
it can't clear its neighborhood
of inconvenient, persistent truths: evolution,
that the earth is 14 billion years old.
The Pope has pardoned Galileo after 400 years.
Once banished for discovering that the sun,
not the earth, is the immovable centre
of the universe, contrary to holy scriptures.

Each advance about the origins of the earth,
the universe and humankind,
the nature of matter, space and time
has been answered by science
and followed by a religious retreat.

III

Science is the sun.
Science-our almighty One,
we fall at your proven, empirical feet
Offering answers while the robed men
Provide a rickety pedestal of faith and
sand to bury one's head in.

Ever-questioning science offers only change and
hypotheses.

Shaken by Pluto's downgraded status,
Some hold fast to the scientific "truth" we learned in school;
there were nine planets then,
they resist the evolution of knowledge
and turn instead to sand.

IV

The stars, named or not,
Burn a hole in the atmosphere's ceiling
Of this same vast sky that was gazed upon in 1930.
When people's faith was atrophied or strengthened
by the Great Depression
when faith was backed up by re-armament, just in case.

I look through the alpine night and
restore my belief in the universe,
the milky way and the ground under my feet
are my constancy.
I, for the first time, have compassion for a holy man's fear
Invite him up to my observatory
to gaze at the celestial bodies on a dark night,
to look at the galaxies that his gods did not create.

Women At Forty

(for Donald Justice)

Women at forty
have learned to open loudly
the doors to shut rooms.
Having resolved the question of children
either way,
they are renewed,
having learned to sail after being refused
entry to the ship's engine room.
Something fills them, sails billowing,
a long beam reach.

What remains is the tender way their mothers ushered them
through growth. The umbilical cord severed twice
before the bond is built by choice,
the power of that gentle, sustaining embrace.

Now, when a forty year old enters a room,
her sheets snap firm.
Harvesting the wind,
no filth of diesel,
no need.
Her house. Her door.

Inaugural Flight

By invitation of the pretty British Airways stewardess,
I walked the aisle west to the complicated cockpit.
What held my attention was not the instruments or their operators
but the sky beyond the windshield,
more blue than I could fathom
and a horizon larger than the pea green boat or
the owl and the pussycat ever sailed towards.
It was just me and the vastness.
I knew my life was somewhere out there
Beyond the infinite horizon and not in
the slim seats my parents occupied, anticipating a meal.
Nor in the joy stick or flicked switch of the pilot.
Beyond even my new country, Ca-na-da.
Even its land mass could not contain my gaze,
not unlike my newborn eyes scanning the blue ceiling
through the incubator for six days.
Lonely, no,
not lonely, profoundly alone,
always the deepest times in my life alone.

DANIEL DRAPIEWSKI lives in San Francisco. He is working on a series of stories that chronicle a man's life. Four of them have been published in literary journals.

OOPS

Daniel Drapiewski

DAVID DIDN'T LIKE it on the boat. The winter stalked him there. It slipped fingers of fog under the bridge in late afternoon. By sunset it had a stranglehold on Alcatraz. The horns moaned a protest, but all was lost on the Bay. It drew the last of color from the hills beyond Berkeley and launched an attack on the marina. It groped the breakwater and found its seams.

He knew the fog well. First it smothered the bigger boats that lay on end-ties. The ketch on C Dock faded away. Then that racing sloop with the snazzy paint job. The motor-sailor with the satellite dish on its stern. Every evening, as he sucked the life out of his last cigarette, he watched the assault on his little boat. By the time he dropped the dead butt into a beer can, the invader was at the companionway, rattling the boards of the hatch cover.

From the dark of his cabin he listened as the fog transformed itself into the droplets of water that snaked their way through the rigging. The plips that he heard were the wet that slithered down halyards, dropping off the line inches above the cabin top. The plops were the globs of water too anxious to make a quiet descent. They leapt from the upper shrouds onto the deck. Throughout the night it was this relentless rhythm that accompanied his sleeplessness. Plip. Plip. Plop.

Each night at about midnight there was a thud on his sleeping bag. And another one. And another. It was at first just a cold spot on his hip and he could turn over so that the wet was a puddle around which he curled. For an hour or two he was close to sleep. But after the stench and dampness had drowned him in a soup of rain, he would resignedly unzip the bag, prop his stiff neck on an arm, and peer thoughtlessly through the portlight as the first light of day found the masthead.

A change in the weather riff had come in early May. It was shortly

after he'd returned from Seattle. It had been a bad drive home. He looked forward to time alone in his dank cabin and mildewed sleeping bag. After a few nights of the usual, he heard a counter-beat to the infernal plip, plip, plopp—a sliver-thin cheep dancing through the heavy air.

He had known of the nest. The white-haired couple with the yawl tied up at the "B" dock had shown it to him. No surprise that they'd noticed the bird under his bowsprit—matching canvas hats, shirts and shorts, they looked like birders. After some head-bobbing, the old man had introduced himself as Eddie, a very loose translation of a Germanic name that he knew an American could never get his tongue around. He had a broad face that twitched with every word of his uncomfortable English. He said they were headed up the coast. He asked about sailing to British Columbia. He pronounced Vancouver as if it were two words, like Van Gogh.

David told them he'd just driven back from Washington and had stayed in some of the port towns along the way. He said he wouldn't venture north this time of year. The seas were steep and it would be a relentless beat at close-haul. He himself was heading downwind. Since childhood he'd wanted to sail to the Marquesas.

The wife frowned at David's weather weary boat. When she spoke, it was without looking up from her huge, black camera and without any reserve about her English. She said they'd navigated the North Sea in gales. She snapped the heels of her boots together as if to say any further exchange would be unproductive. Eddie got a faraway look in his eyes as if he were listening to music.

His wife didn't seem to hear the concert. "I take picture now, yes?" She touched her camera sanctimoniously the way a nun does her crucifix.

Eddie and David watched as she leaned into the tangle of line at the bow of the boat. She struggled to keep herself on the dock and the camera out of the water. In the process, her clothes came undone at the middle. David caught himself reading the label on her underwear.

Eddie's hairy finger guided David's eyes into the dark shadows below the bagged headsail. "Pigeon!" he proclaimed.

"This is not pigeon," the Dutch lady scolded without taking her eye out of the viewfinder. She snapped shot after shot. "This is bird you hear in morning time. Pigeon does not sing. Is different species." She spit out the word "species" as if it were gristle. "This bird is rare." She rolled her r's as if they were the edible flesh from the same hunk of meat. "I take with flash just to make sure, yes?"

The pop of light from her camera re-awoke David's hangover. He stumbled, catching his heel on the dock. It rolled under him. Eddie teetered too. The two men looked at each other and laughed uncomfortably.

The wife turned the camera over in her hands and studied the images she'd captured. "I put on internet, yes?" Then came a comment issued

more coldly than an order, warning David that the cyberspace community would be watching over this nest. “This boat does not move, yes? Soon come offspring, yes.”

The old lady turned away so that all David saw of her head was a mole at the neck. Eddie put an arm over her shoulder and he eased her into a slow walk, waving goodbye for both of them.

David retreated to his cabin without even a glance at the nest the foreigners had found so intriguing. As he tightened down the portlight through which he had first spotted the uninvited guests, he muttered to himself, “Broom Hilda didn’t have to twist up like a Bavarian pretzel.” A half hour later, he was lifting beer cans, trying to find an empty he could use as a toilet. “This boat hasn’t left the slip in five years. The pigeon or whatever has nothing to worry about.”

[Note to Toni – When I write “pigeon or whatever” I don’t mean we should leave it that way. We should find out what kind of bird it is. I’d do the research myself but after today I won’t have internet access. The dimwit that works in the marina office says that the harbormaster doesn’t want me behind the counter. The truth is that she doesn’t want me there. She thinks I’m hitting on her. She’s Scott’s age. In other words, I’m old enough to be her father. Which reminds me, I got your book recommendation. I’m not sure a how-to book will help. Scott turned eighteen this month. He had a birthday while I was up there. (I wasn’t invited to the party.) I’m not really involved in the situation. Anne’s dealing with that. I know you’re my sister, and I know you’re trying to help. But you’re also my editor, and at the moment what I really need is your input on the story. Everything from here down is new.]

The night of the first chirping was shortly after the foreigners had set sail for “Van Couver”. David had been suffering through another wet, sleepless night when he heard that discordant note in the usual chorus of plip, plip, plop. By daybreak there were more chirps than plips or plops. When he staggered onto the deck, he was cursing the cacophony at the bow of his boat and intending to silence it. He furiously uncoiled the hose from around the dock box and thrust its nozzle at the little bird half-hidden below the bowsprit.

She wasn’t the plain dust ball of gray tones he’d expected. She was a subtle palette of earthy colors that in places were a smooth blending and in places precise patterns. She had a delicate bill and elegantly long neck. Her robust little wings were an iridescent olive green. The longer flight feathers were hues of brown in gradations that transitioned along the shaft, then quite abruptly turned a pure white, and, just as abruptly, the deepest black.

She sat as still as porcelain. If she breathed, David couldn’t see signs of energy within her. If there was life under or around her, it was silent. All the easier, he thought. He aimed his weapon at her feathered center.

“This is a boat – not a maternity ward.” He squeezed the trigger.

[I'm in no mood to write. The real reason for sending a new draft is so you know I can get my e-mail again. I found this café on the other side of the tracks (literally). It's behind the shopping center. Anyway, the waitress is a kindred spirit (she too is going through a divorce) and a kind soul (she lets me use their internet connection).]

When David stormed into the marina office, Teresa sat at her desk, munching on trail mix, fingering her nose jewelry. She didn't notice his arrival until he slammed his fist into the countertop between them. Her hands dropped to her computer's keypad as her eyes tried to understand the sudden commotion.

“Who turned off my water?” he boomed.

At first she didn't recognize the bellowing, bedraggled man confronting her. She knew David as the quiet, friendly renter in Slip 23-C who'd brought her a cupcake on Valentine's Day.

“Mr. Truchek!” Teresa tried to settle her trembling fingers on the keys. When she was finally able to make a few squiggles with the mouse on its pad, she stared too intently at the rows of names and numbers in front of her. “You are . . . Let's see here . . . There are six months in rears,” she offered feebly.

“The term is ‘in arrears’! I'm not here to talk about rears or arrearages. I'm trying to wash my fucking boat, young lady.” David refused to use Teresa's name, the name he'd had inscribed in the icing of the Valentine's Day cupcake. “Adler will get his fucking money. In the meantime, turn on my fucking water.”

“You don't have to curse, Mr. Truchek.” She grinned sheepishly in an effort to rekindle their friendship. “You know, he can lean on you!”

“Lean on' me? He may need support, but I think he'd rather lean on you, sweetheart.” David's barb was at the expense of both the harbormaster (who was a Desert Storm vet and amputee) and the befuddled office girl (whose handicap was her clumsy vocabulary). When she failed to appreciate his double-barreled humor, he gritted his teeth and again thumped his fist loudly on the counter. “It's a lien, you whore! He has a fucking lien!”

She rolled back in her chair. Her lip quivered. She drooled. Her words gurgled in her mouth. “He can have you towed, you know. He can even sell your boat!”

As if he found her fear empowering, David squared his shoulders and thrust out his chin. “I've told you again and again, Adler will get his money. And you can also tell Mr. Adler, I'll be out of his hair in a few days. I'm setting sail as soon as the weather clears.”

“On your boat?” She held her hand to her throat in the way of a victim. “You can't do that, Mr. Truchek! What about the nest! What about the little ones!”

“Little ones?” Beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks and forehead. His nostrils flared. “There are no babies. And I intend to deal with the situation before that changes.”

“The Dutch lady said there would be little ones by now. She said we won’t get to see them. They don’t let people near their babies.” Her eyes panned the room as if looking for an escape route. “They push guard duty.”

“Pull guard duty. You ‘pull’ guard duty.” Again David pounded the counter.

And again Teresa rolled in her chair, this time striking the file cabinet behind her. From the cover of the copy machine she muttered, “They never leave the babies alone, not for a moment. They’re perfect parents.”

“They?” Dave shrieked. By the time he slammed the office door behind him he was mumbling to himself. “There’s only one bird. She won’t be there for long!”

[The office girl survived my little tantrum. The upshot is that she and the harbormaster are stuffing my post office box with all kinds of cease and desist crap which is a waste of their time because I don’t read any of it and I’ve given them notice. I’m leaving. By the way, Anne is telling people that Scott “dropped out” of school. Those two are delusional.]

Over the next week, David ventured off of the boat only at night and only for beer and cigarettes. He was certain that his next public appearance would be his last. He thought about casting off, maybe under cover of darkness. But he didn’t. He was sober enough to remind himself of the sludge in his fuel tank and the rot in his sails. He spent days at the portlight, watching the comings and goings of the bird at his bow. While he couldn’t see the nest from his station, he could see the bird’s flight path, both landing and taking off. If she was there to protect her young ones (or, as he thought more likely, to incubate her eggs), she was not good at her duties. She left her post frequently, staying away for as long as an hour. He concluded that Teresa’s report of “perfect parenting” was highly exaggerated. There was nothing special about the bird. On the other hand, he lost interest in blasting her out of her nest. Maybe the marina management wouldn’t bother him for as long as he didn’t bother their beloved bird.

It was the puzzle of his guest’s extended absences that drew him out of the cabin one morning. The dense winter fog had made that ever so slight transformation into the thinner stuff of spring. There was the whisper of it at the mast. He watched it dissipate as the first rays of sunlight strafed the starboard gunwale. He ventured onto the foredeck, timing his inspection tour with the bird’s departure, hoping that he might catch a peek at the unguarded nest. But when he arrived at the bowsprit, there the bird sat, still and flapless in a way that made him doubt that he’d seen her leave.

That day he'd repeated the exercise a dozen times, trying over and over again to catch the bird off-guard. He waited at the portlight until she'd flown away. Then he darted aft through the cabin, up the companionway, and forward across the deck. Each time he raced faster and each time he arrived at the nest to find that she sat at her outpost serenely, ever more puzzled by the odd behavior of her host.

That night, as he lay in his sleeping bag exhausted by the day's extraordinary exertions, his thoughts were of a voyage. The little bird was his companion. She rode resolutely on the bow like the talisman figurehead of a clipper ship. She seemed unperturbed by the building seas. She kept her post even as the waves crashed over her. She was there when they made landfall and they lay at anchor in a becalmed harbor. He slipped into sleep to the rumble of her chirping overhead.

[Toni, I got the book and the check from Dad's probate. Many thanks. Anne and I probably should have bought a parenting guide years ago. Apparently Scott's in LA, working at a salad bar. I guess that's a good thing. While I'm in no position to say (I haven't spoken to him since Seattle), he's probably not ready to go back to school. Things continue to improve since my Chernobyl moment in the marina office. The money means I can pay the slip fees here, buy gas, get my prescriptions filled, etc. I owe Jennifer too. She's been running a tab for me at the café.]

It was June (just before Father's Day). A few days of summer sun had completely driven the fog from the bay. The wet on which David had blamed his unrest was mostly gone. Each night the ever-louder nursery noises at the bow soothed him into sleep. The warmer, drier weather had brought with it a reason to get up early. On that particular morning Dave took his usual place at his portlight perch enthusiastically. He thought about going to his coffee shop and thought about taking a walk in the evening. It's a good day that starts with thoughts about a walk at sunset.

He waited on the bird at his bow. She did not make her usual flights in and out of her nest. He crawled into the v-berth, opened the forward hatch there, and put his head deep into the locker. He was sure things had sounded quite busy above only a half hour earlier, sure that it had gotten so loud that the commotion had awakened him.

The cabin was already stinking hot. He opened all of the ports and hatches. He turned on the radio to hear the president asking for more money for war and promising tax breaks in the same sentence. On the classical station, there were only ads for walking shoes and mattresses. None of it disturbed him. He relaxed into a meal of cold tortillas and peanut butter, listening unconcernedly to the bilge pump working too hard.

It was during this breakfast that it occurred to David that he'd never seen the bird carrying even a morsel into the nest. How had she fed these babies whose existence he no longer denied, whose nighttime chirping

had become a regular, welcomed ruckus? Maybe she didn't know what she was doing. Maybe she'd lost it, freaked out in a way that left her paralyzed with no idea what motherly thing to do. Maybe she was a bundle of good intentions and bad instincts, that the reason for this morning's abrupt silence was that her brood had finally succumbed to weeks of malnutrition. Maybe she'd smothered her little ones with her love.

He raced to the foredeck. Mona, as he had come to call her, was where she always was, where she should be. He hadn't before seen as much of the nest, only the entryway of her home, a cave really where the foredeck met the sampson post, covered by the overhang of bowsprit and sailbag. No wonder he hadn't much idea of her home life.

"Is this what you call a bed, Mona? Pathetic! Aren't you supposed to weave these bits together? You don't just shove them into a corner and call it housekeeping."

His eyes were finally adjusting to the light in this cavern. It was more than a pathetic nest. It was a dirty one. There were droppings everywhere. Shit covering the twigs and leaves. Shit covering each blade of grass. Shit that had glued these bits to the teak of the boat.

"You haven't cleaned in here for months."

He looked deep into the bird's eyes. He'd thought them only dark and plain. These weren't the tiny black beads that he'd first noticed. They were deep pools with no bottom and with a very fine line of bare skin along the shoreline. Surrounding these was a complicated fusing of vibrant greens and blue down. Above and behind this rainbow border, there was a pattern of little feathers that formed a black crescent moon.

"I'm going into town. You need anything?"

He was closer to Mona than he'd ever been. For the first time he saw brown spots on her neck and chest. She looked more like a fawn than a bird, more vulnerable than stoic. He thought about the deer he and his son had seen on Angel Island. She fluttered a nervous wing again, and he backed off. Still it wouldn't hurt for him to leave a bit on the gunwale. He held it out so there was no mistaking his intent. She shifted on the bed. She was all puffed up, no longer the sleek or smooth feathered bird of the nest —no more brown spots, black tipped wings.

He put a second bit of tortilla so near her that she fluttered violently, as if she had to escape but couldn't because of the big black shadow at her front door. Before he could step back, she started to flop around in there. It was a frenetic flapping of wings that landed her loudly on the dock like mud thrown at a wall. She used her wings like crutches to get herself across the boards and away from him. Then she was airborne. He lost sight of her over the stand of pines beyond the marina, a dot of gray that was quickly erased by distance.

When Teresa arrived for work, David was pacing in front of the marina office door.

“You’re not supposed to be here.” The mail in her hand tumbled to the sidewalk.

“I’m not here to make trouble, Teresa. I need your help. She’s gone. I scared the bird away. The nest is empty.”

He explained everything as he picked up her letters. How he’d never seen the little ones, but he’d heard them. Even that morning he’d heard them. He told her that the nest seemed less crowded today, that the bird was sitting farther back than before. He told her that the bird’s name was Mona.

“Mona! That’s a nice name. I thought you’d forgotten mine.” Teresa unlocked the door. She put the mail on her desk and picked up the binoculars from the windowsill. She scanned the marina first with a naked eye and then through the binoculars. “The Dutch lady said the parents stick around for a while just to make sure the kids get the hang of flying. Then they go, too. Places to go, people to be.” She smiled at him the way she used to when they’d shared opinions about rock and roll and pizza toppings, when he was working, when the slip fees were on time, when he took his pills regularly.

“Who’s ‘they’? The mom and dad?”

The phone on her desk rang. She answered it. She talked to someone about the vending machine. Some people weren’t getting their change; for other people it paid off like a slot machine.

“The Dutch lady told me there is a husband and wife. They marry, well, they stay together for life,” she said.

“Teresa, the bird I’m talking about lives alone. She’s probably divorced. Maybe they couldn’t make a go of it as a couple. Maybe she’s having psychiatric problems. I don’t think she even fed the kids. For all I know she never had kids.”

“Oh, they had their babies for sure. The eggs hatch in two weeks. After that the father sits with the babies half the time. She sits with them the rest of the time. One of them is always on the nest; one of them is always out getting food. If nobody is there today, they blew the coop.”

Dave drove into town to do some shopping and to visit with his waitress friend. For the first time she took off her apron and sat down with him. Later, back at the marina parking lot, he could see a half-submerged lump of wet gray, adrift at the shoreline. It bobbed a bit with the wind and current, but otherwise was lifeless. He dropped his bag of groceries and clamored down the rocks. It was hard work, made harder by clothes that weren’t up to mountaineering and an anxiety that made him hurry. He slipped over rotting seaweed. He fell into stinking crevices. He twisted an ankle, tore his pant leg, and scraped a shin. But he made it down to the water’s edge. He got to the victim.

It was a rag. He took a seat to have a laugh at himself and to catch his breath. If Mona had looked helpless on her rubble nest, how must he

have looked on those slimy rocks, shoulders slumped, chest collapsed, half dead of exhaustion.

He could see his groceries by the gate. The bag had exploded on the blacktop like a water balloon. He tried to remember why he'd bought a half-gallon of milk when he had no refrigeration on board and each day it was getting hotter and hotter. He thought about the walk he was going to take. For the first time in a long time, he thought seriously about sailing, about cruising. He'd need a new mainsail. The radio would need repair.

On the lawn to the side of the marina office Larry Adler, the harbormaster, was taking tentative steps on his artificial leg. Usually he used crutches, but not today. Today he threw a frisbee in the general direction of Teresa. She was enthusiastic but as clumsy as he. When she collected the frisbee she should have caught, she returned it so poorly that it was easier for her to chase after the frisbee than to wait on him to hobble to it. He rarely missed anything half close to him, but when he did, he had a hard time reaching down to the ground to pick it up. He executed an awkward twist that got him balanced over his real leg, his artificial one, and the arm with which he intended to grab it. David looked for signs of frustration in him, or her. But there were none. And even though they were downwind a hundred yards from him, he heard their laughs: the harbormaster's thundered like a foghorn; hers was light like an hour bell.

Out in the channel a double-ender heads to the open waters of the bay. David sees it make the dogleg at the first set of day markers and watches its bow bob as it takes the waves of open water. It steadies itself, finds a rhythm, and glides toward the second set of markers.

David looks for his boat in that noontime panorama. With his eyes he walks the dock. It's hard to distinguish one vessel from the other. They all look the same. Still, he knows his boat well. It's the one with a dinghy hanging from davits. It's what makes his boat his, the reason he'd wanted it over all others in those years when sailing meant so much to him.

He can't find the dinghy. He counts the boats because he knows his slip number and knows his boat is the twenty-third from the shoreline. And counts again, but cannot find his dinghy. He counts a third time. This time he tries to notice the boats on both sides of the slip he thinks is his. He makes out his portside neighbor's barbecue hung on the stern pulpit and his starboard neighbor's gooseneck tiller. These he finds and there is nothing in between them.

He gets to his feet to look for the boat he'd been watching leave the marina. When he stands on the highest rock and looks toward the breakwater, he finds it. It is close to the horizon now. Too far to know if it is a double-ender. Or to know if it is a cutter as is his boat. But not so far that he cannot see the dinghy slung across its stern. There's only one like it in the marina. Only one boat with an abandoned nest under its

bowsprit.

[My friend at the café (well, she's more than a friend now) found out that, with this species of bird, the male and female are almost identical. Teresa was right. I was probably looking at the dad half of the time, the mother half the time. There was always one parent in the nest. The babies were behind him/her the whole time. I didn't see the parents bringing food because they regurgitate "crop milk" into their babies' mouths. Jen's mother calls the bird a morning (as in the beginning of a new day) dove or it may be a mourning (as in the end of everything) dove. She's not sure which. She also thinks that the word "oops" should expand or contract depending on the situation, i.e., the harder you fall the more o's you use. So when you lose your wife, your kid and your boat, you deserve at least three o's. Ooops.]

PAUL J. HEALY'S poems have appeared in previous issues of *The New Orphic Review*, *JAMA (The Journal of the American Medical Association)*, *The Neovictorian/Cochlea*, *Horsefly* and *Bellowing Ark*. He lives in Maine.

Paul J. Healy / Five Poems

Lost Steps

And soup kitchens,
and the frayed soiled clothes they wore,
odors of pea-soup and steam tables,
spilling the odoriferous claustrophobia
one bum at a time into the chill air of the streets,
blue and green Christmas lights draped in strings
on old porch fronts with plastic Santa faces
lit-up dim from forty watt bulbs within, and
silhouettes and branching shades cast upon
a concrete wall he came back to many times,
sable umbra seeming to colonize the windy air
so ethereal and lonely in that city and the way
like yarrow stalks tossed to prognosticate a fate,
he sensed a very portal of eternity
in that dirty, shadow-haunted place,
suspended so utterly at the mercy of what
moments later was like the nagging sense
of a lost memory, that *mysteria deluxe*,
the true name of God on the tip of the tongue,
a mother-in-law's phone number
you just can't quite remember.

The Keeper

At six years old
a terrarium is a special thing
with frisky green lizards called anoles
whose leathery skin turns brown when it gets too warm
- or is it maybe the other way around,
its hue altering when its complexion is cold?
You'll have to ask their keeper it would seem
red hair, big ears, limbs like sticks,
who unfortunately at this hour is asleep
though his frogs are not
nor his hermit crabs
creeping slowly through the wood chips
nor the crickets served for dinner
the ones not yet eaten
chirping away this winter night
as if summer never ended in a child's life.

Overripe Oranges

Does the heart grow faint?

Must you be reminded to face around,
eyes to the night?

The world is not a place of our own making.

The one who has always felt like an uninvited guest,
discovers what he takes to be an invitation.

If you've lost your teeth but still
burn for the lushness of women,

best bow low and don the orange robe of the *sangha*
or go sally forth south to Florida for the winter.

Fragrant Sands

And the dry paths that lead to the sea,
and the dust kicked up by hard boots,
moving carelessly down cactus
trails through tough country,
through clustering brown cliffs,
picking cautiously among
broken rocks, casually
kicking and sliding
through the scree,
and the sun tilting westward,
scorching the hills.

Gag

There was a fish store in the old neighborhood,
Which sold hand-cut French fries,
Boiled in steaming oil right before your eyes.
From potatoes you could actually see.
The nuns forbade us to go anywhere near that place,
So hot and crisp and salty and drenched in grease!
There must have been some hidden sin,
In those brown little paper bags packed to the oily brim.
But there were lots of things good Catholics couldn't do.
On Jamaica Avenue under the tracks they called 'the el',
Ruby's Funhouse was of course off limits.
Not entirely a respectable business,
Where without any detectable regret,
Reigned the great purveyors of the most American of shit,
Sneezing powder and colored vomit in plastic shapes,
Whoopy cushions for juveniles gone astray,
Gory rubber masks,
And innocuous looking cans that held trick snakes,
Which unsuspecting gumshoes inadvertently unscrew,
And like a poem that blows up in your face,
The uncoiling spring almost takes off your head!

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On the Beach

Giovanni Pucci

HE KNEW HE was going to die. The hours he had spent in his room before leaving had told him as much. He had sat on his narrow cot, smoking cigarettes and blowing the smoke out his window into the tiny cement passage that passed for a courtyard in the hostel. He had felt joy. He had felt strength and a little sadness. But he felt, above all, profoundly rooted in himself. He finally knew, from head to toe, who he was. And he was unafraid to see it. He was unafraid. That was the word. He was fearless. Bring on the world. Bring on the end of my world. It is not an ending at all. My life has been a passage in which I have learned a great many things. I have loved many people and they have loved me. There have been no accidents. He didn't believe in accidents. Everything that had happened to him, to others, was brought about by necessity. And now it was time to go. This too was a necessity. It would teach him many things. His death would propel him even further on a journey that never ended. Everything in his life had been leading up to this moment.

Now, as he faced the young Spanish man on the beach, many things came back to him and made sense. Some were merely fragments of images. His dog's ears when they bent back. His mother pulling him out of a scalding bathtub. The black hair on his father's forearms. The time he ate too many pears and was sick. The time his friend ran away from him and left him alone on a downtown street. But there were also things rising up in him that spoke directly to the young man in front of him now. The East Indian teenager with the American parents on the subway. They had stared at one another for several minutes. He noticed that the teenager had begun this challenge full of confidence, with a glimmer in his eye. But he had felt so much love for the teen—along with the ferocity—that the boy lost his bearings first, and was the first to look away.

He had remembered at the time understanding that he had been that

teenager himself on many, many occasions. He had stared into the eyes of older men and lost his composure first. He had lowered his gaze and felt shame. He had felt vanquished, unable to turn back to the eyes of the man who had seen his fear. He had never understood until that moment in the subway what these older men had had that he didn't. What had given them the bearing to continue to explore the depths of another man without fear. As he had watched the teen squirm in his seat and do everything to avoid looking back in his direction, he had understood that that which he possessed now—and hadn't before—was love. It occurred to him then that men were each other's silent teachers. That there was an unspoken pact between them to challenge one another with the conscious or unconscious motive to shape. He had taught that boy a lesson that day underground. A lesson that he had learned himself from others. Now it was up to that boy to go out into the light and question what it was that he lacked. It is easy to smile sardonically with the intention of making others feel insecure. How does one challenge and embrace at the same time?

He knew that the young Spanish man was going to shoot him. It was only now a question of when. The young man was a little drunk and very, very angry. He was a boy, really, with his shirt off and his spiked blond hair. He noticed that the boy had a strong body, naturally muscular. The gun in his hand, though, didn't fit him. It betrayed his youth and his fear. It was a powerful instrument, capable of doling out devastating sentences, and it was perched in the hands of an entity that understood much less about itself. The boy held onto the gun for definition. He had little sense of who he was and so he asked the object, with his firm grip, to lend him its strength. Physically, the boy held the gun well, without shaking, without apparent hesitation. He could have been Dirty Harry in some movie, with his dark sneer. And it occurred to him that the boy was indeed acting. That this moment was not something the boy could truly understand. It was a show—like the smile of the Indian boy on the train, only the consequences of the lesson this time would be more profound.

He knew that he was teaching the Spanish boy to love. Yes, as strange as it might sound to anyone listening to his thoughts, this is what he needed to do. Everything is necessity. His only obligation was to stay strong. To not be afraid. To keep his eyes squarely on the boy and accept the challenge, and accept it with love. This was where his life had led him and this was its meaning. He remembered once, some ten years ago, a similar situation had occurred on a beach in Italy. He had gone out dancing with a group of girls to a nightclub on the water. They had been dancing in a circle on a crowded floor outside, overlooking the ocean. A group of five or six skinheads decided to slam dance right next to them and one of them came crashing through the circle, knocking over two of the girls. He had been the only man in his little group and immediately had felt the responsibility to stand up to the lack of consideration and

defend the girls' honor. "Hey," he had said, "watch it."

This was all the provocation the young men needed. All six huddled in very close around him, with the one who had crashed into the circle, inches from his face. "You have something to say to me?" the closest one said in Italian, smiling and shifting his weight excitedly from one foot to the other. At this point, surrounded by all these men, he had had a decision to make. Yes, he was outnumbered. Yes, the prospect of confronting six men was a frightening one. But they had been rude and inconsiderate and he felt that he should say so. But what if he said so? Would they hurt him? Would they push him to the ground and kick him until he stopped moving? He was very scared. "No," he finally said, "I have nothing to say to you. Let's just keep dancing." The girls he had come to the club with had been saying "stop it", and "come on" throughout the confrontation, which had only lasted fifteen to twenty seconds. But it had devastated him. The skinheads laughed and moved back to their area of the floor. The girls closed in around him and re-formed the circle, commenting on how stupid the men had been. He shook his head in agreement and smiled, as if it had meant nothing to him.

The rest of the night, the rest of the week on the beach and for months after, he was haunted by the fact that he had been too afraid to stand up to those men. He understood the difficulty of the situation he had been in, but that didn't help. He had given up his dignity. "Do you have something to say to me?" Yes, you were rude. Watch what you're doing, and don't hurt my friends. Why didn't he say it and just accept the consequences? Your dignity at all costs. Why had he been so afraid? Would another man have responded with more courage? He had felt so ashamed. He now understood, as he looked back on that incident that, once again, it had been necessary. He had had no choice but to respond that way. He had learned something from those boys, about himself, about what he feared, and about what he lacked. He was grateful to them and he smiled, putting one hand to his heart, and tapping his chest two times.

The young Spanish man fired. He saw smoke and heard the sound of the gun, but he didn't know what happened. And then he did. He was on the ground. Everything stopped and formed a clear crystal above his forehead and he saw his life and many other lives pass through it in all different colors. He was a plant, he was the soil beneath it and the sky above it. He was the rain that tore down onto the ocean waves in a dark storm. He was the lonely whale hundreds of feet below, moving calmly through the water. He saw his dreams when he was a boy. He saw those men that had visited him every night. They were dressed in the same white robes and they carried the same spears whose blades still burned with fire. They were running to him again. Too late to kill him now. Perhaps they were coming to carry him home. It didn't matter. It was the same thing and he understood this so clearly and loved them.

One of the men knelt down beside him as he lay in a vast desert. It was the young Spanish man with his blond spiked hair. He lifted his spear above his head with both hands. You cannot kill me, he thought. You can end my life but I will not die and you, of all people, will feel this stronger than anyone else. He saw the sky. But it wasn't the sky from his life. It was an endless light and he moved towards it. He heard one scream. It was the scream of someone back in the world, back on the beach. Someone he loved. He thought with wonder at why she was so sad.

* * *

"What are you smiling at?" he heard the young Spanish man say. He didn't know where he was. Rather, he knew exactly where he was and he couldn't believe it was on the beach. Where had he gone? This too was clear. He had died, as he knew he would that night. And the gun was still pointed at him and the boy was still angry. A crowd of terrified people still hung on to the periphery of a slowly widening circle. People were too scared to run, he thought. That wasn't it. They were too engaged in the conflict. His life and his death had become their own. They had witnessed both his passage into another world and his return, and now they had too much invested in the journey. Where would he go next? Where would he take them?

He turned his head ever so slightly in the direction of his friend. He had never seen her eyes so wide. In truth, he hadn't seen much of her eyes at all. They barely knew one another. And yet, there she was on the beach with him, watching him move between worlds. This was no accident either, for there are no accidents, he said to himself. Her hands were placed over her mouth, several inches from her face, ready to catch the scream he had already heard. And yet she wouldn't scream this time. It was gone. A sound that had already made its way through the deserts and over the mountains. A sound of grief that had accompanied his joy. The sound, he thought, that had made his joy possible. It was traveling this very moment. It had joined the numberless wails of the world and, together with them, would forever carve out the caverns of eternal sadness, from which all tears come and into which all joy must eventually go.

He turned slightly further in her direction and nodded. She froze at this. He could see her body take a sharp breath and hold onto it. Her pupils seemed to dilate even further as she searched for some meaning in his eyes. He saw the thousands of things she was communicating to him, all at once. What are you doing. Run. What should I do. Don't look at me. Where did you go. Help me. I don't want to die. I don't want you to die. I don't want to watch you die. He shook his head ever so slightly and smiled, as if to say, don't be scared for me. She lowered her hands slightly in response to this, and tilted her head. It was over. She knew it and he knew it, and the crowd seemed to release a communal breath and lower their chests back into their bodies.

“*Hijo de puta.*” He turned back to the young man whose face was beet red. The veins were lifting out of his neck as if they were going to explode. Clearly, he thought, the young man sensed the change as well. He felt that his moment was over. No one believed that he would use the weapon now. He had already used it and they were back in the same place. He saw the young man’s confusion. He could tell that the young man was beginning to doubt himself. To doubt his ability to do anything. He could sense the young man thinking, what have I done. What have I ever done. He smiled once again at the young man who responded by kicking his bare foot into the sand and raising the gun straight up into the air. He remained frozen this way with his hand on the trigger for more than a minute. Finally, the young man gritted his teeth and yelled. The sound was wordless and muffled. It signaled the end of the confrontation. It was the only release the young man could manage. “*Hijo de puta,*” he finally repeated, pointing the gun back at him, “why are you smiling?”

He took a long time before responding. He thought it was an important question and deserved a serious answer. The crowd around them no longer looked frightened. Rather, he noticed, they seemed to be following the exchange as if it were going to lead to some important conclusion. It had become a conversation. The two of them were working out an age-old question and the people around them, he thought, were waiting for the results. He looked at his friend. She wasn’t there. Something was wrong. He couldn’t find her. He felt slightly sick for the first time all night. In the bottom of his stomach a wave of nausea was gaining momentum. From the first cigarette he had smoked in his room hours and hours ago, he had known he was going to die and he hadn’t been scared. Now his lower back was covered in sweat. He will not fire the gun, he thought. He has already fired it. He looked at the young man who seemed to have grown in size since the last time they had locked eyes. He was enormous. His voice was deep and wide and made a sound like the rushing of a river. “You’re going to tell me why you’re smiling.”

The young man extended the arm which held the weapon and slowly lowered his head until his left eye was lined up with the gun’s trajectory. This was it, he thought to himself. I have a choice. I can raise my arms and beg him not to shoot me. Or I can tell him why I’m smiling. Was he smiling anymore? He doubted it. He was too scared to tell. His body was no longer keeping him informed of its activities. It had abandoned him. Or he had abandoned it. He couldn’t think. Don’t let it be this way, he told himself. Don’t let it end in fear. In terrible, terrible fear. Is there a light at the end of this, he asked. Who was he asking? He didn’t know. The young Spanish man seemed so far away. What a pity, he thought. What a terrible pity that I am going into darkness like this. Tell him, he thought. Tell him why you’re smiling. There is light. There is hope. There is always hope. He didn’t know what he believed anymore, but he forced

himself to open his mouth. He knew it didn't matter because he no longer knew what he was going to say. And he wasn't smiling. But he opened his mouth anyway.

Perhaps it was open for a long time. Perhaps his lips had barely parted. But before he spoke a word or uttered a sound, the gun fired. In his chest he felt a searing pain. He was on the beach. He was near the water, but he was burning. He noticed the sand in his hair as a torture. He wanted to be taken in the water. Take me in the water. He grabbed for his chest and felt a hole in it. The warm sticky water coming out of his chest. Take me in the water. He tried to cry but he was struggling too hard to live, to breathe. He tried to piss his pants. The pressure was too much. The pain of not breathing. Where is the breath? He grabbed for it and twisted in the sand. He felt his shoulders dig little divots in the tiny dunes. His elbows jutted out into the air. Air was all around him but he couldn't breathe it. He was dying. Why did he have to die like this? Where were his hands? He wanted to feel his hands one last time. He wanted to touch his own hands. He wanted to put them in the water. He was touching them. Putting them in the water.

He felt his fingers on his fingers. He felt his palm touching his other palm. Everything was burning. Take my hands. Someone take my hands. Someone had taken his hands. His friend. She was touching him. Her eyes were larger than ever, blacker than eight-balls and wider. She grabbed him and threw him in the water. He couldn't breathe. Water was filling his eyes. Warm hot water. He tried to breathe through his eyes. She pulled him out of the ocean. She was gone. It was them. It was the men in the white robes. They were dancing. They were moving through the water, a spear in his chest. His chest was on fire. He was carried. His wet hair against the wet white fabric, stuck to the men's arms. It was heavy. He was heavy. He was burning and wet. They carried him. They lifted him up into the rain. It rained on the ocean. He was crying. They held him and then threw him back down onto the whale beneath the water.

* * *

"I am smiling," he said to the young Spanish man, "because I am not afraid of you." He spoke slowly and kindly, maintaining eye contact and nodding almost imperceptibly. The words were coming out of him now on their own. They felt distant, as if there were a voice inside him doing its own speaking. He knew he was standing back on the beach. But why? What had happened? He saw himself reach his left hand up to his chest to feel for a wound, but he knew that he wasn't actually doing it. Or was he? He wanted to look down at his hands to check if they were moving. He wanted to find them. He looked down to find his hands. But he knew that he wasn't actually doing it. He knew his hands were resting at his sides. How did he know this? He couldn't say. He had died tonight and would maybe die again. Maybe he was dead now. Maybe this was death. But he

knew that it wasn't. He knew he was alive. And he knew that he would stand and face the boy for as long as he must. He looked down at his hands.

They were resting by his sides. He knew this without looking at them. "I am smiling," he said again, "because I am not afraid." This time he spoke louder. He said the words forcefully, though the smile remained. This was a challenge. He needed to move things now. He lowered his chin slightly as the sentence came out of his mouth. He did not intend to insult the Spanish boy. But he had to be strong. He was older and wiser. It was his duty to lead them both into darkness. Because the boy wouldn't know how to get there. The boy would run and stumble in the other direction once the gun went off. The boy would hide from what he had done, and he couldn't allow this. He couldn't allow it for himself. He felt starved for air. He needed to breathe but he couldn't. He wanted to turn to look for his friend. But she was there with her hands over her mouth, as she always had been. He knew this.

The Spanish boy stood opposite him. For a moment the boy didn't seem to know what to do in response to the challenge. How could someone facing a gun not be afraid? Even with an instrument of destruction in his hand, the boy could not destroy anything. He knew that this was the boy's worst fear: that he was insignificant. He felt his own chest tighten. He must move on this now. He must take them both further into the fear. He felt the impulse like vomit breaking up through his throat and out of his mouth. He screamed. A sound that he had never heard before. Wild, wild thunder and rage, crackling gravel. And it traveled out from the back of his head into the sky. It filled up the night. He and the boy, and all those in the circle around them, listened to the echoing. They stood together on the shaking sand. How long did it last? He realized that what he was screaming was "No." He was still screaming it. His mouth was open. Then it closed and the sound stopped. No. "*No tengo miedo de ti,*" he said in a loud, low whisper. He was still smiling.

The boy looked stunned. He took a step back and then steadied himself. He could see the boy searching for a response. The boy shook his head slightly, as if shaking off a punch. He then squinted his eyes and lifted his sagging arm back upright, pointing the gun with renewed determination. It was shaking in the boy's hand. "You're not afraid?" the boy asked.

"No," he said quietly.

"You're not afraid of this?" The gun went off. He heard a chorus of screams from the people in the circle. His friend's voice rose above the rest and pierced his eardrums. A long, high wail that grew and grew. It was impossible that anyone could scream so loud. His eyes closed. His hands impulsively moved up to cover his eyes. They muffled the sound of his friend's voice. It grew distant. He was floating beneath it like a whale beneath the ocean. A long, powerful beast gliding calmly through

the deep water. It was over.

He knew it and his friend knew it. He turned to look for her and she was there. Her hands were slightly further from her mouth, but still perched near her face. He breathed for what felt like the first time in hours, and she breathed with him. It was over. He could see her shoulders slowly fall down from her neck. The crowd seemed to sense it was over as well. They no longer hovered around him and the boy in a tense mass. They seemed simply to be observing an exchange between two people, interested in how it might turn out. He thought he even noticed one or two smiling faces as he briefly scanned the crowd. He heard laughter. The laughter grew until he could no longer stand it. His hands fell down from his ears and he opened his eyes. He couldn't breathe. He looked for his friend. She wasn't there. He searched the crowd. Something was wrong. These weren't the faces he knew. He hadn't seen any of them before. This surprised him. The laughter came back even stronger.

He turned to face the boy. The boy was laughing.

"That didn't scare you?" the boy said in Spanish.

"No," he said quietly.

"No?" the boy asked, waving the gun. He was enjoying himself now. "I could kill you," the boy said, becoming serious.

"Then why don't you?" he said, taking a step forward.

"I could have," the boy answered.

"But you didn't," he said, taking another step. The crowd was still. He heard some yell, "*policia*," but nothing happened. "You didn't kill me."

"Back up," the boy said.

"You missed," he said.

"I'll shoot again," the boy said.

"Then do it." He was going to die now.

He looked the boy in the eye. He was not afraid. He didn't want to die. But if it had to happen this way then he would accept it. He wanted to live. He wanted to look at his friend one last time. But he knew she was standing there with her hands over her mouth. He was ready to run. Not away from death. But along a river. Past rocks and trees. He was ready to run long distances. "I'm ready," he said to the boy, taking another step.

"Back up," the boy said.

"If you're going to kill me, why does it matter where I'm standing?" He felt very calm. He had been waiting for this moment.

"What?"

"I said," he continued, taking another step, "if you're going to kill me, why do you care where I'm standing?"

The boy frowned and shook his head. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Why does it matter what I'm talking about?" he asked, taking another

step. "If you're going to kill me, kill me."

The boy didn't seem to understand. "*Que?*"

"Why are you asking me all these questions? Kill me."

"Back the fuck up," the boy said.

"No," he said. He wasn't afraid. He was standing a few feet from the boy now. He could see the freckles on the end of the boy's nose. His legs had started churning. He was almost running now. Past rocks and past a river. He saw a dark blue sky the color of the ocean before a storm. The boy put the barrel of the gun against his head.

"I said back up."

"No," he said. He moved closer so that his nose was inches away from the boy's. The boy's eyes were green. With reddish-brown flecks that moved out from the pupil. The gun pressed harder against his head. He could feel the boy's wrist and fingers tighten. He had done everything. He wasn't afraid and he wanted the boy to remember it. "Remember this," he said calmly. "*Recuerdate de eso.*"

The boy hesitated. And then swallowed. The boy seemed unable to keep his eyes still and a frown was growing across his forehead.

"Don't stop now," he said to the boy. And he meant it. He wanted to run. He wanted to chase the river.

"Don't think. Do it," he said, putting his hand on the boy's hand and pressing the gun harder into the side of his head. The boy pulled his hand back and stepped away. "*Tu eres loco,*" the boy said, staring at him in amazement. "*Tu eres loco,*" he repeated, shaking his head. The boy looked around at the crowd of people. "*Es loco,*" he said to them, under his breath. The boy looked back to him for a moment and seemed to be asking him a question. Then the boy turned and ran out through the crowd, cradling the gun to his belly.

It was over. He was alive. He wasn't sure that he wanted to be. He wanted to run. He felt his legs churning beneath him. He saw the river and heard it rumble. A deep dark sound. He was running beside it. He looked down to see if his legs were moving but he knew that he wasn't actually looking down. He felt his knees hit the sand. His legs ached. He saw the men in the white robes. They were ahead of him now. They were running. He reached out a hand. They were running far ahead and they wouldn't stop. He tried to call to them but his stomach and his chest wouldn't support the sound. It died in his throat. He reached up to his chest to feel the wound. But he knew that it was no longer there. He wanted to hit the water. He wanted to close his eyes and drown in the water. Take me to the water. Take me deep into the water. He closed his eyes. It was raining on the ocean. He was exhausted. It was raining on the beach. The men were running. He couldn't see them any more. Only a tiny cloud of dust on the horizon. They were gone.

His friend was beside him. She held his arm. Her eyes were huge.

“Water,” he said. She called out for water. “No,” he said, “water.” He pointed to the ocean. “You want to go into the water?” He nodded. A man knelt down and offered him a bottle of water. He pushed it away. He struggled to his feet. There were people he didn’t know holding him up. He moved towards the water. They tried to move him away from the water towards the benches. He dragged them towards the water. “He wants to go to the water,” his friend said. “He needs to sit down,” somebody said. “Water,” he said. “*Venes aqui*,” somebody said, pulling him towards the benches. “No,” he said. He tried to scream but the sound wouldn’t come. “You need to sit,” somebody said. He dragged them towards the water. “He needs to sit down.” “He wants to go into the water,” his friend said. She pulled him away. “Let them go,” somebody said. “All right, let them go.”

His friend was walking him to the water. His legs were shaking. “We’re almost there,” she said. He fell. She picked him up. “Come on,” she said. He could hear the water. He could smell it. He wanted to close his eyes and lie deep below the surface on the sand. Still. Like the whale. Like the long, wide whale that hardly had to move. Like the whale that waited just above the sand before it swept up through the water. It was raining. He was wet. His clothes were heavy. His hair was in his eyes. He began to cry. “It’s okay,” his friend said, “you’re almost in the water.” He felt it on his toes and then on his feet. The water was cold. He wanted to take his sandals off. But he couldn’t say it. He fell into the water. His knees hit the sand and sunk in. “Wait,” his friend said. She caught his shoulders. “Do you...are you going to go all the way in?” He nodded. “Okay,” his friend said. “What should I do?”

“Hold me...”

“What?”

He cleared his throat. “Hold me in the water,” he managed. He fell. His face hit the water and he was under. There was nothing but the silence and it would last forever. His friend’s hand was on his chest. She was holding him in the water. He waited. His eyes were closed. He was hardly moving. The tiny waves came and went above him. He was enormous. A giant beneath the waves. The rain hit the surface and stopped. He opened his eyes and looked at the sand. He saw that he was moving ever so slightly. Back and forth to the rhythm of the ocean. He didn’t need to breathe. He was calm. He looked in front of him, into the deep. Everything stopped. Was he dead? He knew that he wasn’t. He needed to breathe. Somewhere inside his belly he felt the call for a breath. He waited. He felt the pressure build up in him. The ache spread into his chest. Into his arms and legs. He opened his eyes wide. He rocked his head up and down. He felt his friend trying to pull him out of the water. He grabbed her legs and held himself down. He could hear her calling his name. The ache to breathe was shaking him now. He was twisting and turning

underneath the water. He wanted to breathe.

He swept up through the water and out. He took the air into his chest. His chest rocked up and down. His friend was still saying his name. He sucked the air down and it forced its way back out. Over and over until he calmed. His friend was holding him by the shoulders. He wanted to stand. He got to his feet. He took his friend by the hand. They fell into the water. "Come on," he said. He helped her up. "Come on." He took her to the shore. He wanted to live. He took her hand in both of his hands. Her eyes were wide. He wanted to walk with her all night. He wanted to walk with her along the beach. She pulled her hand away. He smiled. She asked him why he was smiling. He didn't know. He didn't know anything. But he wanted to live. He took her hand again. Softly this time. They were facing each other on the beach. He brought her hand up to his chest and rested it there. He closed his eyes. She tried to pull her hand back but he held onto it. "Please," he said softly. "Please let me hold your hand."

"Why?" she asked. He thought for a moment.

"Because I need to," he said.

"Okay," she said. He held her hand. She had watched him die. She had brought him to the ocean. She had held him in the water. He hardly knew her. And yet she was there with him on the beach. This was no accident. There were no such things as accidents. He could feel the blood moving through her hand. He brought her hand to his ear. The gentle back and forth of her pulse made its way into his fingers. It wasn't gentle. It was fierce. He squeezed her palm to his cheek. He felt the relentless drive of her heart. Pushing her forward, towards him. Pushing them always closer together. Everything had been driving them towards this moment. Her face was red. His eyes were wet. He was going to live now. They stood together on the beach. The tiny waves kept inching forward along the sand to where the two of them stood. They stood there together unable to move. They would walk along the beach that night. He already knew this. But not until they were ready.

ERNEST HEKKANEN'S most recent publications appear in *Finnish-North American Literature in English: A Concise Anthology* (Edwin Mellen Press), *The Antigonish Review* and *The Nashwaak Review*.

Brutalized Oranges, Guttred Trout

Ernest Hekkanen

No, I won't modify the image.
Think of it in terms of a painting
executed by Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin.
Obviously someone is recently back from market
with three oranges and a trout;
or maybe the trout rose to bait
offered by a nameless fisherman. Who knows?
That doesn't matter; no, what matters is this:
the impact of the sledge and the spray of pulp;
also, the sticky suggestion of hand on handle,
held much too close to the four-pound head.
The picture must have been taken
moments after brutalizing the oranges,
and now we are forced to contemplate
whether the gutted trout will be next.

Yes, that's it; think of it as a still life
arranged to perfection by Sanchez Cotan,
or maybe a Dutch master living near a tulip farm,
on a day made bleak by scudding, low clouds,
the fields far too soggy to venture outside
with canvas, paints, easel and jug of wine.
In my photo, the concrete was noticeably dry,
when the sledge descended the requisite
three times, although, in fact, it was seven.

The difference between my work and the old masters
is the fact that the viewer must speculate
about the artist-slash-photographer's motives.
Why the sledge? What was he trying to portray?

SUSAN L. FERRARO'S fiction has been published in *The New Orphic Review* and *Dalhousie Review*, her non-fiction articles and essays in *The New York Times*, *The Times Magazine* and the *NY Daily News*, where she covered health. She lives in Copperopolis, California, an old mining town not far from where Mark Twain wrote "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County".

Love Triangle

Susan L. Ferraro

MIRACLES HAPPEN, Mom says. I mean, she says, look at me. Here I am, thirty-nine years old, two misses before you, four after, I'd given up hope of ever giving you a little brother or sister, and I'm expecting again. *Enceinte*, as the French say. Five months along, and Dr. McMahon thinks this one's going to keep. I mean, look at me.

So I do, and when I look, really look, I see she's fat, big as all outdoors as my grandma says, but she could also be pregnant, in fact she is pregnant, and I think, Great, just what I need.

I'm going into seventh grade in two months, Middle School. Which is like Middle Earth, another realm. And I'm the littlest in my class because I'm small to start with and, also, I'm a year younger—I'm going to be eleven in August—because I skipped fifth grade, for which everybody in sixth, which was last year, hated my guts. I'm flat as a pancake or, as grandma says, acting all friendly but inside she's really mean and rotten, You have the cutest little ironing board figure. All the other girls are getting breasts, which they call boobs, but I don't like that word because it also means boob, like stupid, and who wants to be stupid?

I pick up my swim bag, stuff my orange towel in it.

I have to get to the pool, I say.

What? Mom says. She looks at me with that stupid wondering face she gets right before she says she just can't believe what the world is coming to. What? she says again, like I didn't hear her the first time. Aren't you, and she's always repeating herself, Aren't you going to say something? Ask me how I feel? Ask to feel my stomach? Aren't you happy?

I put the swim bag down. I am not a brat, despite what she sometimes says. I am not unkind, something she also says, though usually about my father. I think about what her spiritual advisor, Miss Rebecca, always

says, which is Put yourself in the other person's shoes. So. And so okay, she's got a lot to deal with too. I mean, she's forty-one years old, even if she says thirty-nine, which I know because there's a date in ink on the side of her newborn baby picture in the box of family photos in the attic. This is July, 1988, so she'll be even older, forty-two, when the baby comes out. She'll be sixty when it goes to college, she'll have white hair or be dying it some horrible color, orange maybe like grandma, and be really ancient.

I think about college a lot. I have six years to go, not seven, which if you ask me is the only thing good about skipping a grade. I can hardly wait.

The thought of the baby coming is awful, almost makes me sick. I know it happens, there are pictures in Family Health, but how can you get big enough down there for a head? Ughhhhhh. And she's still looking at me, saying What? What? in her pathetic voice, in her Be nice or you'll be sorry for three days voice.

I'm sorry, I say, and I tell her that it's just that they're doing a backstroke clinic at the pool, which is a lie, and I know it's wrong to lie, but it just pops out and I'm stuck with it. So I say, It's just that I'm very focused on swimming and, I mean, I'm so surprised, and so, like, wow. I mean, how are you? Five months? What's it feel like?

She pours me an iced tea and I sit down, all attentive.

Would you like to touch my stomach? she says. Someday you'll have a baby inside you, and you can see what it feels like.

Sure, I say, thinking *As if*, which is something my friend Jenn says a lot. I get up and go over and touch her belly. It feels fat.

He's not moving now, she says. I asked the doctor not to tell me, but he did a sonogram and I think it's a boy because he jumps around all night. That's why I've been so tired. I think maybe he's going to be a musician, a great musician. Maybe a pianist.

Oh, I say.

She sighs, burps a little burp. Do you, she says, but her voice trails off and she looks around the room before coming back to me.

Do you want to ask me anything?

No, I say, which is not true because suddenly the true ick of what this means, that my parents have sex, that they do it, makes me want to scream How could you? But I don't.

Well, time waits for no man or little swimmer, she says. Then she giggles, like at a private joke. You go on now. I just thought it was time you knew.

Okay, I say. Behind me I hear her take in a big breath, like she's waiting for something. I'm not sure what, but I turn back.

Great news, Mom, I say. Way to go.

Thanks, honey.

She smiles but she's not really listening.

I grab my bike and pedal as fast as I can to the pool. It's at the Upper School, six blocks away, where I learned to swim when I was seven. Everybody goes there summers in the afternoon, because you can swim for fifty cents or a dollar if you're a whole family. I'm later than usual, but No biggie, as my friend Jenn would say. I don't think Mom would like it if she knew that I hang out with Jenn so much and her friends. By which I mean, boys.

I spot Jenn through the chain-link fence. She's sitting on her towel over where we sit, in a little square patch next to the bleachers. She has long black hair and she's wearing her blue and pink polka-dot two-piece. She's got her legs pulled up in front of her, knees together, tilting to one side. Mike's there, beside her, and Jason. Scottie must be in the pool—there's another towel beside them. I jam my bike in the bike rack, grab my stuff, and run to the gate. The ticket seller sits in a fold-out chair under a big umbrella. Her name is Hannah but everyone calls her Babe. She's sixteen and goes to the Upper School and is friends some of the time with Jenn. She has blonde hair, like mine, only it's long and really thick. I give her two quarters, show my cap—you have to have a cap if you're a girl—and get my hand stamped so they'll let me back in if I have to go to the gym to use the bathroom.

You want a suit? Babe asks. She has to ask, it's part of her job.

No thanks, I say, because I always wear my own, which has a ruffled front and a jacket Mom makes me wear, but you can rent tanks that the high schoolers use for swimming in P.E.—which Jenn says is like recess only a class called Physical Education, and you get a letter grade.

Babe nods and I go through the gate.

The pool is huge, with ten lanes and two diving boards, one low and one way up high where the boys jump from. There's a lane, on the side, roped off for grown-ups who do laps, pretty boring but they don't seem to mind—Mrs. Knudsen, who taught third grade, comes almost every day, and some days there are lots of them, maybe five at a time, going up down, up down. The shallow end is roped off too, sideways except for the lap lane, and that's for the little kids and anybody, I guess, who can't swim, but mostly it's little kids. The mothers who come with them spread their towels on the cement down at that end, so they can talk and watch at the same time, and sometimes they get in themselves, not to swim but to cool off. That leaves the big in-between for the rest of us, kids who can swim.

I walk fast over to Jenn—no running allowed—and spread my towel next to hers, on the other side from Mike. He's Jenn's boyfriend, or she wants him to be and he didn't seem to mind when she started putting her towel by his this summer. He always comes with his friends, Jason and Scottie. They're fifteen and going to the Upper School in September with

Jenn except for Scottie, who got real sick one year and missed so much school he had to do the grade over, so he has another year of Middle School, but Mike says they started together so they'll hang together. Mike's kind of a leader, which is one reason Jenn likes him, although she also says he's hot because he's tall and has great hair.

Jenn's real name is Jennica and she lives up the street from me. We met her family right after they moved in last year, when her little brother got lost on the way to kindergarten, which is only three blocks away but he's really little, and my dad found him hiding under our car. He wouldn't talk at first but finally said his name, Henry Willoughby Harrison, and he spelled it out real fast, like a talking chipmunk. Mom took him back to his house, and the next week the Harrisons came to dinner. Jenn's father wasn't there, because they're divorced, but her mother's name is Marian. She said Jenn, who was in Middle School and liked it fine, could tell me all about it. Jenn didn't roll her eyes but said Sure, so that's what we talk about, Middle School.

And boys. Jenn's interested in boys a lot, and I guess I am too, though not as much. She says I have a lot to learn. She says I'm like a little sister and I need guidance.

Mostly she tells not just where things are, like the lunchroom and the administration office, but what the big kids do, how there are dances in the gym and ten minutes is plenty of time to go to your locker, see your honey, which is your boyfriend, and get to your next class. If you start at eight thirty you have six classes, and if you start earlier, the way the kids who are really smart do, you have seven classes. Everyone has P.E., where you have to take a shower after class. The teacher checks to make sure you're really wet, so you can't fake it, which I wish I could, because I don't want everyone to see me naked.

The deck is really hot, so I double up my towel and sit with my knees pulled up. The boys and Jenn have big beach towels—Jenn's is pink, and the guys have ones with big wide stripes or sports designs like one Jason has, with hotrods on it, that says STP. The place where we sit is right next to the lap lane. Two adults are in the lane, swimming already, when Mrs. Knudsen comes over.

Hi kids, she says, and to me, Hi, Holly. I wave and say Hi back, because Mrs. Knudsen is really nice. She brought cookies that she made herself to class every Monday. Nobody likes Monday, she used to say, but everybody likes cookies. She's from Sweden, although she's been here for years, and the cookies were lacey and had powdered sugar. Mike and his two pals get up—they wear narrow little black suits, like girls' bikini bottoms only squarer and straighter around their privates and you can see these bobbing bumps underneath, right in the center, which is what Jenn calls their packages—and go over to the diving boards to do cannonballs.

The high board scares me but the boys never get tired of jumping.

They compete about who makes the tallest splash, and since they can't see their own splash, the other guys have to tell them. Scottie and Jason lie all the time. Mike lies too but then he says Just kidding, and That was pretty good, or That sucked, honestly.

Which, when Mike says it, is true. He's really nice, even to me sometimes. Once, when I was almost running because the deck was hot and I was barefoot, I crashed into him, and he picked me up and said, You okay? And he didn't laugh, even though Jenn did. So I kind of like him, although not really because I'm too young—for liking him, I mean, and stuff like that.

Standing by the edge of the pool, Mrs. Knudsen wraps her hair around her hand and tucks it in her cap. She wears it long—Mom calls it the Aging Hippie Look, and does the tsk tsk, but I think it's nice. Mrs. Knudsen taught cursive writing, and multiplication and division, and local history, and myths. She really liked King Arthur and the Round Table, and she took the whole class on a field trip to see a special showing of the Disney movie. She gave me extra vocabulary drills to get me to the next grade level in reading, which was really good because reading is what you can do alone.

Mrs. Knudsen gets into the pool slowly, the way grown-ups do. First she sits on the edge, one hand on the ladder. Then she puts her legs in. Finally she gives a little hop and slides in, arms over her head. She always gets a tank suit and this one's green, so old it sags in the back. She says the tank suits remind her of when she was young, in Sweden, and they used to go sit in the sauna they had at the school, and then they'd put on tanks and roll down the hill in the snow. It doesn't sound like fun to me, but she said it was. She swims every day, and she must use a lot of lotion because her skin is pale, almost blue white, no freckles.

When I'm with Jenn, I keep my mouth shut most of the time even though Mom says You have a motor mouth and an active imagination and that's a double helping of potential as in potential trouble. But with big kids what can I say? I'm ten years old. I don't even know what a lot of the boy girl words mean. So Jenn tells me, and it's like doing a vocab list, which I'm good at, although it can be confusing. Like if something is bad, it sucks, but if something bad happens to you, you have to suck it up and deal, and that's good.

Does my face look sun-kissed? Jenn says. I look over and nod.

Jenn's kissed boys. Kissing is making out, which is what my mother calls necking, which is sitting around someplace kissing. You can go out with boys one at a time or hang with them in boy girl groups. Even in a group you can get what Jenn calls up close and personal with your honey, if you have one. At the movies, say, when you're next to him in the dark.

The thing about kissing, Jenn says, really good kissing, is you have to be careful.

Careful? I say. Like how?

Like with what you wear and what you do when you're kissing, because boys get hot real easy, and nobody likes a tease.

Hot? Like really cool?

Hot like wanting to do things, she says, rolling her eyes. Like all the time.

Things?

Sex, silly. Don't you know anything?

About sex? I say. Of course I know about sex, and I roll my eyes back at her.

But then, because she's my friend and it's important to be truthful, I say Maybe I don't know as much as I should. I know about the sperm and the egg. And bosoms, because everybody's getting them and I've seen my Mom's, which are big like my grandma's, except I've only seen my grandma in her slip, but hers are legendary, and she always has to wear a pin in the front of her blouse to keep it closed.

Bosoms? Jenn says. Oh brother, she says. Oh boy, oh boy. She shakes her head. Look, if you don't want to sound like a doofus, call them tits or hooters or boobs.

According to Jenn, the places where guys go, where girls dance around holding onto poles and wearing thongs—and I've seen plenty of them in Victoria's Secret catalogs—are called titty bars. Even if the dancing girls don't wear bras, and Jenn says sometimes they don't, they have to wear a thong over their love triangle, which is what she calls the hair girls get between their legs. Lots of girls shave it because it's kind of wiry and bristly, which is why some people call it animal names that she won't tell me. She says calling it the love triangle is more romantic. You can get it shaved in patterns, and Jenn's thinking of doing that herself someday, because she read in a magazine where a pop star had it done to look like a strawberry, dyed red and everything.

Wow, I say, although what I really think is yuck.

Jenn says making out is fun, especially if the boy gives tongue, which is when he sticks his tongue in your mouth, and when I say Eeewww, that's disgusting, she says No, it isn't, you'll see. Making out is also hooking up, and that's also having sex sometimes, usually in fact if you're older, although she hasn't done it yet. Having sex is going all the way, or getting to fourth base, which is like baseball. First base is kissing, second is letting them touch your breasts, which is also called going up your shirt, third is the love triangle, and fourth is sliding home.

She giggles about the sliding home part, does the eye roll.

A girl who teases is terrible, Jenn says, because she gets a boy all hot, maybe even lets him get to third base, but then stops so he feels frustrated, which is a terrible way to feel. Chaperones are the snatch patrol, because snatch is a word for a girl's privates. What everybody wants is the Big O,

and that stands for orgasm, which is this really great feeling you get in your body when you go all the way. Except you're not supposed to, or only with your one true love. Jenn thinks Mike might be her one true love. She says he makes her horny.

Horny? I ask. What do horns have to do with it?

What am I going to do about you? Jenn says. She does a big sigh. Look, she says, when boys get really hot, their things, their penises, get hard. Like horns.

Like in an orchestra? A trumpet?

No, moron. Like animal horns. Guys are animals, total animals.

But Jenn, I say, animals have two horns unless it's a unicorn, which it can't be because there aren't any, and boys don't have two penises. And even if they did, how can girls get horny? They don't have any penises at all.

Don't be an idiot, Jenn says, but she's kind of laughing.

We sit for a while, not talking, which is okay because I like the sounds of the little kids shrieking and life guards blowing whistles and the big kapow splash the boys make when they go bang off the high dive and hit the water and it shoots up like a fountain. But then, out of the corner of my eye, I see Jenn making a bad face, shaking her head.

Gross, Jenn says. Disgusting.

What? I say, looking around.

Mrs. Knudsen, Jenn says.

Mrs. Knudsen? Squinting, I spot her down at the other end of the pool, making her turn.

That suit, Jenn says. Would you wear a used suit? It probably has cooties. And it's old, even older than her. You can see her tits, especially when it's wet. And she doesn't care. You'd think when you got that old you'd know better.

Okay, so sometimes Jenn isn't very nice. She has what my grandma—and she should know—calls a mean streak. I mean, Mrs. Knudsen is really nice. She talks in a kind of singsong way, but she speaks English really well, and she has good little sayings that can make you feel better. Once, when I stepped in dog doo on the way to school, and I thought I would die, she said, Holly, There are very few real emergencies in life, and she was right because we went to the girls' bathroom, and she cleaned it off, and no one knew. She quit teaching when she retired, but even though she's old, I think she's pretty in an older sort of way.

I like Mrs. Knudsen, I tell Jenn. We all do. Ask Mike.

She's an old bag, Jenn says. She has that phony accent. She's horrible.

No, she isn't, I say, and then slap my hand across my mouth. Jenn doesn't like disagreement.

What would you know, Jenn says. You're just a little kid.

The guys come back from cannonballing. Sometimes, when they're

there, we play What If, which is when you say, What if the sun died? Or what if the new English teacher got caught making out with the band master? Or what if you went color-blind—except that wasn't a good one because Mike asked, Can you go color-blind, if you weren't before? And nobody knew. But usually, when the boys are there, we don't talk much. Jenn sits and looks at Mike, and if the boys say things, she says That's funny, or You are so smart, or Don't be such a wiseass just kidding just kidding. Or we take a dip to cool off and then put on suntan oil, or Jenn stretches her legs like a gymnast or combs her hair. Mine is short. Mom says it's easier that way, especially in summer, and one day Jenn tried combing it different ways to see what she could do with it, but it was hopeless.

I guess Jenn's in the mood for something different because after she does a big stretch, she offers to put suntan oil on Mike's back, which is a first. He says Sure, and she's just getting into it, leaning over him, making little umph sounds with each big rub, and Jason says You sure do a good job with your hands, Jenn, when Mike grabs his goggles, jumps up running and dives straight into the pool, right over the grown-ups' lap lane. I look quick at the lifeguard, but he's blowing his whistle at some kids under the diving boards and doesn't see.

For a while we all sit, but it's really hot so I get up and take a dip. Then Jenn takes a dip. Finally Mike comes back, but Jenn must want to punish him for running off or something, because she turns her back on him and starts a What if game with me.

What if you had to say what the worst thing that could happen was?

Like forever? I say. Like getting murdered?

No, like here, at the pool. Like totally gross.

Having a big fart underwater, Jason says. So big it makes a big pop and stink right on top of you.

I look at Jenn, thinking she's going to tell him to shut up, he's disgusting, she wasn't talking to him anyway, but she doesn't. She turns toward him and smiles.

There's so much chlorine nobody would notice, she says.

Like puking, then, Jason says. In the water.

Maybe, Jenn says.

Across from us, Mrs. Knudsen comes up the ladder, done with her swim.

Oh, My, God, Jenn says, one word at a time, like she's breathless. Don't look. You can see her horrible old boobs.

But of course I look, we all look, and even in the loose tank suit, she doesn't look that bad. She's not fat like my Mom, who kind of bulges even when she's not pregnant. She's—I guess the word is pleasant. And tall. I hadn't realized how tall she was, although maybe it's just because we're on the ground looking up.

She takes her cap off and her hair falls around her shoulders in loops. She smiles at us, nods, shakes out the cap and looks down at her chest, at something on her suit. She pulls at it, scratches it with her fingernail. And the tank suit—we all see it, there's no way not to—just peels off. Splits right down the front and flips to one side and slaps all wet and raggy-looking against her arm.

And there she is. Naked. And right in front of us, ten feet away, is her love triangle. It's snow white. Like her hair.

She looks like that picture of Venus in my Mom's art book, rising out of the sea with the angels whistling at her, only she has white hair, not red. The sun is behind her head, blazing, and it's like Miss Rebecca says, when your time has come and light shoots out of your head and you go up to glory. For a second there I can't even hear the noise of the pool, can't even see anything except Mrs. Knudsen.

She looks down at herself. I think Oh no—maybe she'll fall dead in a faint. I know I would. But she doesn't even gasp. She just shakes her head, she laughs a little laugh, and then, just like Venus, she covers her breasts with one hand, although you can still see them, and her love triangle with the other.

Holy shit, Jason says, not nasty but sort of like he's going to glory too.

Mrs. Knudsen looks over her shoulder at the pool full of people, who I guess don't know what's happened because they can't see her front. Then she looks back at us.

Oh dear, she says.

And then Mike jumps up and grabs his big towel and steps quick toward her, holding it sideways, and he kneels down and lifts it up, in front of his eyes, so he can't see her body. Mrs. Knudsen takes the towel, wraps it around herself under her arms, and knots it over her chest.

Yes, Mike, always such a good boy, she says. I dub you Sir Michael the Civil. She smiles her big smile. Thank you, she says. I'll change and bring this right back.

She walks back to her stuff, picks it up—not hurried or anything, just casual like nothing happened—and goes out past Babe toward the gym. Mike stays kneeling, watching her, and then he gets up and comes back and sits on the end of Scottie's towel.

Jenn grabs her throat like she's going to be sick. Eeewww, she says. My god, my god, I think I'm going to hurl. Those *boobs*. Her white—my god. Grosseteria. Pukola.

Shut up, Jenn, Mike says.

Mike? she says. She does a little gasp sound.

Shut up, he says. Please.

Her mouth makes a little oh shape and then, out of the clear blue sky she's on her feet, she's saying Fuck you Mike Sanchez, Sir Leering Eyeballs with a Towel, Sir Michael Shithead.

Nice talk, Jennica, Scottie says. You eat with that mouth?

Fuck you too, asshole, Jenn says. She grabs her stuff.

Come on, Holly, she says. Let's go.

No, I say, though not very loud because let's face it, I'm a coward and I can't believe she said those words, but I say it, No, and then again, a little louder, No.

Fine, she says. Stay with the boys, see if I care. You look like a boy—that hair, those zit tits. She gives a little snort. God, what losers, she says. All of you, I don't know why I bothered. And off she stomps, though it has to hurt, because she didn't put her shoes on and it's concrete and it's hot.

I wait until she's gone and then get my things. I better go now, I say.

The guys don't look at me, but Mike nods.

I pedal home as fast as I can because it feels good to go fast and because, face it, there's no place else I can go, and I run in the house and out to the back porch where Mom is.

Mom, I say.

I want to tell her about Mrs. Knudsen, and Sir Michael, and how I don't like Jenn anymore. And maybe about how there wasn't really a backstroke clinic, how I just made that up and I'm sorry, and I won't do it again even if I still don't know anything. But I look at her, and there's so much in my head and right before my very eyes that I never, ever expected, and I'm so full of—there's a vocab word for it—so full of this *visionary* day that I see how focused she is on the inside, how she's maybe listening already to the great musician, my brother the piano player.

What? Mom says. What? What?

Nothing, I say.

And I hug her so she can't see my face because she might think I'm laughing, which I'm not. I hug her as hard as I dare.

JILL MANDRAKE lives in Vancouver. She is slowly piecing together her life in the form of mini-memoirs, as with the one below. She also has a musical band, Sister DJ's Radio Band, although its lineup is in constant flux. She also writes book reviews on her blog, which is under the auspices of the *Geist* website.

Why My Brother Played with Dolls One Day

Jill Mandrake

WHEN I WAS a preschooler, my family—especially my grandmother—had concerns about my not wanting to play with dolls.

One day my grandmother was in her chair, listening to the radio. I was sitting on the floor with a Tinkertoy Construction Set.

Granny said to my big brother Lorne, “Go over there and show her how to play with dolls.”

Lorne made a face. Then he looked like a lightbulb went on in his head. First he said, “Those are my Tinkertoys, so give them back.” Next he grabbed one of my dolls from the shelf behind the stairs. He chose a blonde one with red leotards. The box she came in said her name was Sister Belle.

“Maybe you’d like dolls better if you knew they could dance,” he suggested. He stood the doll up and moved her legs around in time to the song that was playing on the radio.

I remember the music better than I remember Sister Belle, passive and broken-spirited, dancing with the help of Lorne’s know-it-all fingers.

The tune on the radio was *Wonderland by Night*. I didn’t care for it: Too sad, too slow, and bad associations ever since.

BEN ADAMS divides his living between the Hawaiian island of Maui and the South Pacific islands of Samoa. A frequent volunteer for the Pacific Whale Foundation, he also enjoys marine photography and plays the violin. "Message from a Rose" is his first published story.

Message from a Rose

Ben Adams

THE FOLLOWING account I received from my aunt who lives near the edge of Indianapolis. Her name is Debbie; she has never married, and has heroically battled with Crohn's disease for longer than I have been living.

Some time ago she bought a nice house on the northern side of the city. She had long since kept an apartment, and then a duplex, before coming with her cats to their own address, where they added a sunroom and a wooden fence and a couple of years went by.

Now the last time Debbie was in the hospital some mysterious events began. She had taken some old family papers to sift through and pass the time when she happened upon a series of letters addressed from her great-grandfather, Chase Harding, to her grandfather, Robert. It was 1929, and Robert was staying on his uncle's ranch in New Mexico, as he did every summer since he was a boy.

His uncle was an engineer who years before had moved to the West in a final attempt at regaining his health. When it worked, he stayed on in New Mexico and transformed into a rancher. His daughter was like a sister to Robert who had no sisters or brothers of his own. There is a frail old picture of the two of them together, Robert with cowboy chaps and a ten-gallon hat, and from the look of contentment on his face I strongly suspect that his times on the ranch must have been some of the happiest of his life.

This year, however, he took ill on the train. And the letters Debbie found were largely for encouragement. This is how they begin:

Dear Son—

Was glad to get your letter today. Also sorry you're having so much trouble all in a heap— You won't have

any more likely. It's the change of climate, altitude, feed, water, and everything. I reckon the ranch is just very dreary in its drought condition. You'll adjust yourself pretty easily after all. If you'd really get sick, of course, Uncle Frank would start you home— But our breed don't quit, you know— I'm thinking the regular ranch hours, early sleep and early rising will do you a world of good. And getting away from drugstore drinks will get you in better health. All together it will only be a little while till you're headed for home. It's been a good while already. At least it seems that way here...

The letters continue with charming little bits on life at home, what certain acquaintances were up to, and scattered references to Uncle Frank and his livestock. As Debbie read them she was reminded of stories her granddad had told her about the ranch.

In his later years, he had never gotten back much to this place that had been so essential to his youth. And so the ranch became for him almost a sacred place, a place for memories and dreams; feelings he perhaps unwittingly kindled in Debbie at an early age by presenting her with a cherished old Indian bow he brought back with him.

For my aunt, to be so unexpectedly reminded of all these things was like good medicine. But the letters were more than reminders; they were something new, allowing personal glimpses of the lives of her grandfathers, and especially the great-grandfather she never knew. But above all, they contained a phrase which became quite important to Debbie and which drew her attention like a magnet: "Our breed don't quit."

The statement amused her at first because Chase Harding was a widely respected attorney who for a time served as president of the Indiana State Bar Association. Robert himself was a wizard for those complex laws that govern the business of large corporations. He had actually been to Harvard. To find these men, whom our family all held in the highest regard, using deliberately bad grammar tickled Debbie, and she was immediately charmed by it.

There was just something about the old-fashioned way men used to speak to their children with stubbornness and confidence to convey pride and honor and respect in their heritage. But when four little words managed all of that and still seemed to casually say, "Don't give up," it encouraged Debbie very deeply. That it came from her own grandfather made it all the more meaningful. And so this little motto became like a very deep well she returned to over and over to draw strength from. So that during the difficult days she lay in the hospital undergoing another treatment for a miserable disease, "Our breed don't quit" was just what she needed.

When Debbie came home from the hospital her first night back she dreamed she was on the ranch. She wasn't quite sure what she was doing there when idling up to her on a donkey came a person she recognized at last as Robert Harding, or Granddad.

"Hello, Debbie," said a voice she remembered so perfectly but hadn't heard in many years. Almost too elated to speak, she somehow expressed how wonderful it was to see him and asked how Mom was doing. "She's fine. She's out visiting right now. She'll be back later, though." Then in the most comforting, reassuring way that only a grandfather could manage he said, "We know what a hard time you're going through right now, Debbie. But I wanted to tell you that everything is going to be all right."

With this a complete conversation ensued, which my aunt remembers entirely. They spoke of her work, her house, loved ones they both knew, and when the conversation ended Robert said, "Come on, let me show you how to shoot rattlesnakes." And they went off together.

Much later, after the sun was setting and a very happy time of rambling about the ranch, Robert said at last, "It's time for me to go now. But before I do there are two things I want you to know." Debbie, saddened by his going, was all attention about what he might say. "First of all, the bow I gave you you've had mounted in every house you've ever lived in, but you've lived in this new house for two years now and you still haven't put it up. I want you to hang it up for me again." *He's right*, I immediately thought when I heard it. That bow had not only hung in every house and apartment she'd ever lived in, but always in the living room or the main room where it was sure to be noticed and couldn't be missed. It struck me as odd, certainly that she hadn't hung it up yet, but also that in all that time no one noticed its absence though we all knew instantly it was true.

"Also, there's something for you in the rose in the center of the bed." At these words she woke.

The clock on the dresser said two a.m. and she was alone in the house except for the cats. Her dream had been so blissful and vivid that she wished she could go back to sleep and back to the ranch. Knowing, however, that wouldn't happen, she went downstairs to the kitchen for a drink, where, resting on the countertop, lay her grandfather's Indian bow.

Of course, Debbie had been having strange dreams, probably induced by a new medication. In her sleep she undoubtedly had taken a walk, unpacked the bow, placed it on the counter, and returned to bed. She herself accepted this as the only sensible explanation. And yet, she couldn't get over how bizarre it was.

There's something for you in the rose in the center of the bed.

Debbie's bed is a family piece. It is a beautiful, walnut full-size bed after the fashion of Charles Eastlake. It passed in its time from Chase to Robert to my grandparents and at last to Debbie. In the center of this bed in the headboard is set a carved wooden rose about the size of a saucer. It

is securely attached to the headboard, but in such a way that it may be spun in its place. My mother and Debbie remember times when they were young lying on the bed and spinning the rose around and around.

There's something for you in the rose in the center of the bed.

Had it not just been for the strange occurrence with the bow, Debbie might have persuaded herself to put the dream out of mind altogether. But it had been too real. And now, because of the bow she had to know about the rose. Was something really in the rose? It hardly made sense, but she couldn't ignore it. And so at two o'clock in the morning alone in her own house there was no one to think she'd gone mad when she carefully pried the rose from the center of the bed.

In that telling moment the long-hidden reverse of the rose revealed itself to have always been secretly concave. In its hollow rested a small piece of aged paper neatly folded. And when Debbie unfolded this paper she found written upon it only this: "Our breed don't quit."

Though I trusted my aunt, I thought she was possibly mistaken. She had after all been through a lot lately. But when I saw for myself the message all suspicions were abandoned. The handwriting was decidedly not Debbie's, though it matched that of the letters exactly. Also, the paper was old and faded and not something Debbie would have done even in her sleep. I asked if anyone had ever hinted about the rose in any way that suggested a special knowledge, and later asked my mother to be sure. The answer from both was "no."

In the weeks and even years since it happened I have tried to understand how these things could be. I knew that Robert and Chase had been always close and that after the death of his wife Chase had taken infinite care in the rearing of his only son. So I pictured him, when Robert was young, scribbling a little note on a piece of paper. It was a small thing to do and almost a silly thing, but was done more as a romantic gesture and more out of sentiment than anything else. I see how he placed the little creed in his son's bed where it would always be near him, almost watching over him as he slept. And I doubt Robert ever knew it was there, though in the dream he is the one who told Debbie because he is the one she knew so well. And so the years went by as Robert grew up, and my grandmother, and Debbie, no one suspecting the secret in the rose, until someone needed it terribly, and finally, the secret bloomed.

If this is all just another coincidence, I still say it's truly remarkable. And whatever explanation others might choose, this story has become like a gift to me. Because I have also suffered for so many years from my own despicable illness. I feel like much of my life has been stolen. Some days I am well and manage admirably, though many I do not. Which is why on my very worst days it means more to me than I can possibly say simply to know that our breed don't quit.

ROSS KLATTE, born in Minneapolis and raised on a family farm in Minnesota, emigrated with his wife to Canada in 1971 and settled with her outside Nelson, B.C., where they still live. He is the author of *Leaving the Farm*, a memoir of his boyhood that began as the prize-winning essay in the CBC Literary Competition for 1990. Currently he is writing a novel about back-to-the-land hippies in British Columbia at the end of the Sixties. He has previously been published in *The New Orphic Review*.

First-Calf Heifer

Ross Klatte

CARL OPENED his eyes. It was late. It was too light outside his window.

He raised the window, put his head near the screen, and listened. Chilled October air sifted in, and he saw frost on the roof of the pump house. A flock of sparrows broke noisily out of a tree and went bounding away in the sky.

He strained to listen. When he was sure he couldn't hear the purr of the vacuum motor in the barn, he relaxed a little. He jumped out of bed and dressed in his cold room.

Downstairs, the kitchen clock said 6:30. His father would have called him at 6. Could it be he hadn't called him this morning? No. *I'm gonna get it*, Carl thought.

The barn was empty. The little piles of ground corn and oats were before each stanchion. His father himself must be getting the cows.

Damn it, Carl thought. He was going to get it.

In the milkhouse, next to the barn, he found the milking machines, the strainer, and the milk cans needed rinsing and setting up. He went to work at this, feeling better. He was rinsing the six 10-gallon cans with scalding water and disinfectant when he heard the familiar click of split hooves and blowing of nostrils in the barnyard. The cows were home.

He stepped into the barn and closed both halves of the Dutch door. Then he opened the door to the barnyard and the cows came pushing and heaving in, going hungrily to their own stanchions. Carl walked up and down the manger, closing the stanchions, waiting for his father to appear—waiting to receive his anger. The last cow entered the barn, followed by his father, who closed the door behind her. He looked sternly at Carl, then strode past him into the silo room, came out with a pail of extra feed for the best cows. Carl got the machines from the milkhouse. He scraped the floor clean where the cows had dirtied it.

“Well, for once you did somethin’ right, I must say,” his father began. “You did me a favor by laying in bed this morning.”

Carl didn’t say anything.

“Yup, it’s just a good goddamn thing it was me got the cows this morning and not you.”

His father was no taller than Carl now, but his bulk, his anger at Carl that often exploded into belittling verbal abuse, was still threatening. Carl wasn’t that afraid of his father anymore, but he knew better than to stand up to him; someday, maybe, but not yet.

“You know that heifer with the black over one eye?”

“She had her calf,” Carl said, knowing that was it.

“That’s right.” His father wiped his nose with the back of his hand. Carl noticed the hand was dirty, streaked a kind of rusty brown. “She was tryin’ to have it when I found her.”

“I thought she wasn’t due yet.”

“Yeah, well so did I. I shoulda known better. I shoulda kept her in the barn. You gotta watch these first-calf heifers. They get bred out in the pasture and then you gotta punch ’em and try to guess when they’re comin’ in. Yeah, it’s just a damn good thing it was *me* that found her,” his father said. “You wouldn’t a known what to do.”

“I would’ve known enough to get you,” Carl said.

“Yeah, well, what if I wasn’t around to get? You ever think of that?”

“I’ve thought about it,” said Carl.

“It was too big,” his father said. “I had ta pull for all I was worth to get it outa her. I think I hurt her a little.”

“The calf dead?”

“Yeah, *long* dead.”

“The heifer all right?”

“I donno. She might be ruined.”

His father turned away from Carl and hit the switch that started the vacuum motor. Then he picked up a milker. He drew the washrag out of the pail of warm, disinfected water and gently, soothingly washed the teats of the first cow in line. He pitched the rag back into the pail, splashing Carl with the water. Then his father swung the strap around the cow, slung the milker under her, and lifted each teat cup into place. Then he washed the next cow in line and grabbed the other milker.

“Look, tonight you go out there and find her,” he told Carl. “If she’s still down, get’er up. Bring her in, yuh understand? But take her easy, real easy. She’s had a tough time, that little heifer.”

“Where is she?”

“Over by the line fence, in the swamp pasture.” His father looked at Carl with his heavy face. “Goddamn it, you know how much a cow and calf are worth?”

“No.”

“You wouldn’t,” his father said. “Well, don’t just stand there with yur finger up yur ass. You goin’ to school?”

“Yuh.”

“Then *go*, goddammit,” his father told him.

* * *

His mother looked up when Carl opened the door to the kitchen. She was helping his baby brother, little Harold, button his jacket.

“Hurry up, you’ll miss your bus,” she said. Her patient, tired face looked up at him.

His kid brother, Billy, came clumping down the stairs, and then his younger sister, Janey, came regally down and sat at the kitchen table.

“Janey, hurry up and eat,” their mother said.

“I’m hurrying, Ma,” Janey said, but she took her time.

His mother would drive Janey and Carl’s brothers to the Catholic grade school in New Dresden. Carl, just fourteen, had started the public high school in Sioux Lake.

He just had time to wash, change out of his barn clothes, dip some toast in coffee, then run out to the head of their long driveway to catch the bus.

On the school bus he felt better. On the bus, and in school, he was away from the farm; away from the work. He was away from his father.

He had hated parochial school. His sister Janey was hating it now. But he liked the public high school. He was sort of coasting along this first year there on what he had learned from the nuns. He was unlearning some things too, such as not bothering to stand up when the teacher called you. Some of the girls had tittered when he first did that. Now he slouched in his seat and was a little bit of a smart alec. It was what he had learned from the other students. He liked high school too because of the girls. They were tougher, more exciting than the girls at sister school. And they dressed in exciting ways—in tight jeans, for instance, that hugged their cute little behinds. He was learning a lot about girls in the boys’ locker room, where he got into shorts and a jock-strap for gym class in the morning and into sweat clothes for wrestling practice in the afternoon. Like most farm boys, he was out for wrestling, and like all of them he had been surprised at his own strength when he went up against a town kid, some kid from one of the swell houses around the lake, whose father worked in a suit in the city and who would have been better at something like basketball, “pussy” ball, where you could be flashy and didn’t need any strength. Some of the farm boys went out for football, too, but Carl was too light for that. He was out for one of the lighter weights in wrestling.

There were girls from those swell houses around the lake whom Carl wanted to “breed.” That’s how farm boys put it. There was one girl he wanted to hump like a bull if he ever got the chance. He’d know what to do. He’d seen some pictures in a guy’s locker, one of which showed a

woman on her back with her legs spread and a man about to shove it to her. Another was a closeup, not of a woman exactly, but of what a woman had between her legs.

“Ever seen *that*, you farmers?” the guy said, looking directly at Carl, “except on a cow?”

* * *

Carl stepped off the bus that afternoon, weary from wrestling practice. His neck was stiff and his shoulders ached from a practice match he'd had with another farm kid. It was never an easy match with another farm kid. The kid had almost pinned him, but then Carl had won on points.

He walked down the long driveway to the house. In the late afternoon the sun was weak and far down in the sky, but there was light and quiet in the air. He felt the quiet, the pause, in the air. He felt apart, suspended, not in school or on the farm but in between somewhere, somewhere suspended, in a kind of pause. It was always pleasant in this quiet pause at the end of day.

In the house his mother and Janey were making supper. Billy and Harold were in the living room listening to the radio serials he wished he could still listen to. They had their little chores—picking the eggs, feeding the chickens—but it was Carl now who did a man's work for his father.

“Dad said you might have to start the milking,” his mother told him.

“Yeah, he out plowing?” Carl said. He began to fill up on cookies and milk.

“Yes, and he said he'll keep at it till after dark.”

“Okay.”

“You know about that heifer you're supposed to look for?”

“Oh, yeah, that's right,” Carl said, remembering.

“Better get going then.”

“I'm going, I'm going,” Carl told his mother.

He changed into his old jeans and work shoes. Then he went out to the porch, where his and his father's barn clothes were hung out to air, and got into his overalls. He buckled on his overshoes, then put on his hat and jacket.

“You going to eat before you start the milking?” his mother asked. She had opened the kitchen door.

“I better not,” Carl said. “He'll be mad if I haven't started.”

In the barn he laid out feed before the stanchions. The gutters needed shoveling out, but he would do that later. His first job was to get the cows.

He went out the barnyard door, closed it, and walked down the cowpath to the swamp pasture.

The sun was just setting. It was chilly already. Carl walked down into a layer of frigid air as he descended into the swamp. This time of year the swamp was mostly dry, with only pockets of wet in places. The tall slough

grass was getting brown and bent over from frost. There was frost nearly every night now. In spring the swamp formed a shallow lake, where migrating ducks landed, and in summer there were hidden pools under the clumps of willow, where ducks nested. It wasn't till fall that the swamp could be used as pasture.

Only last week it had been Indian Summer. There'd been days so warm, so lovely, so full of leaves in the air and leaves underfoot that Carl had wanted to stretch out in all that softness, the softness in the air and on the ground. But it was ended now. It was starting to turn cold and gray, the gray sky seeming to touch the ground. It was the gray season.

It was the season, and high school this year wasn't making any difference, when Carl felt most hopeless. He was filled with the deep hopelessness of life, of his life on the farm, the only life he had known and might ever know. He saw his life as it was—without change. The only change was in the seasons.

It was always better when it snowed finally and winter had come. Then the country was like a picture in black and white: the white fields and the stands of black, leafless trees. It was like a block print he'd seen once in a book.

* * *

He found the herd in the middle of the swamp, still grazing in the waist-high grass. The cold air was settling in the swamp and a faint mist was rising. There would be a hard frost tonight. In the morning the swamp would be white with frost, white as if with snow.

"Come boss, come baaass," Carl called.

The cows threw up their heads to look at him. A few started for home. The rest began to pull hastily at the long grass, their eyes rolling back to watch him. It was a little game they played. It was a kind of teasing.

"Go on, *go home*," Carl said. A cow would start away, then stop to pull furtively at the grass. "Hey! Go home!" Carl said, running at them.

At last he had them bunched up and moving. A few held back, but he drove them into an udder-swaying run and they joined the herd. With the herd in a line on the path to the barn, he gave a count: twenty-six, barring the youngstock. The first-calf heifer was missing.

He began to push through the grass toward the line fence, where his father had left her that morning. She was still there. Her calf, the calf his father had pulled out of her, lay stiff, its eyes glazed, beside her, and she herself was on her side, her legs stiffly out, her tongue out, her eyes rolling back into her head. She was having another calf.

He looked toward the herd, strung out and plodding toward the barnyard. It was dark enough now he could just see them. He listened, and heard the tractor. His father was still plowing, away off in the field on the other side of the woods that bordered the swamp. He would keep working, by the lights on the tractor, until he'd finished the field.

Why wasn't he here? It was like his father wasn't here on purpose, like he was teaching Carl a lesson.

He looked at the heifer—her eyes rolled back—and knew he would have to help her. He would have to try, anyhow.

The heifer's vagina was terribly dilated, split and bleeding. The placenta was like a bubble coming out of her, and she had stopped pushing. The bubble was stuck. Inside the bubble, through the membrane of the placenta, Carl could see the nose and front hooves of the calf. "Well, at least you're not back-asswards," he told it.

He poked his finger into the membrane. He broke through and the fluid came pouring out. He took grass and wiped the slime from the calf's nostrils, so it could breathe. Then he knew it was dead.

"All right," he told the heifer. "We still got to get it out."

He was shaking now, not only from the cold, as he took hold of the calf's legs, braced his own against the heifer's backside, and pulled. The heifer bellowed.

"I know, I know it hurts," he told her.

He pulled more grass and wiped the slime from the calf's legs. He took off his jacket and felt the cold and took hold of the calf's legs again. He pulled and pulled, wanting the heifer to push. The heifer let out another bellow, and Carl said, "I know it hurts, but you gotta push, girl. C'mon now. *Push.*"

He pulled. He pulled and pulled, and the calf gave just a little. He caught his breath, took another hold, and pulled, felt the heifer push, and they pulled and pushed together until Carl felt something give inside the calf and thought it was coming, then realized he'd only dislocated the shoulder. But it was dead anyway and so he pulled again and pulled, with the heifer not helping anymore, pulled until he thought his heart would burst. He had to stop.

"It's no use," he told himself. A wave of his old hopelessness washed over him. He wanted to cry.

He heard his father's tractor in the distance. "God damn you!" he called to him. "Why aren't you here?"

It was dark now. It was an eerie, whitish darkness, from the cold mist rising out of the swamp. He stood up to catch his breath. The air was so cold it hurt to take it in. He was sweating and cold at the same time. He looked across to the lighted house, like light far away in space. Below, where the barn was, it was dark. He wished he saw a light in the barn. That would mean his father was home finally and wondering where Carl was and why he hadn't started the milking.

He knew what he would have to do now. He'd seen his father do it, and had thought he could never do it himself.

He stripped to his undershirt and the air was like cold metal on his bare arms. He got down on his knees behind the heifer, pulled her tail

aside and forced his right hand and then the length of his arm up into her, into that poor, distended, ripped opening taut as stretched leather, until he broke through to the hot womb behind the calf. He was in up to his armpit. The heifer bellowed and kicked at Carl.

“Sooo, boss,” he told her soothingly. “I’m trying to help!”

She bucked and bellowed as he felt around inside her, felt the calf’s hind leg, the one bent and caught inside her. He worked at it, twisted and pushed, until it straightened suddenly, and just then the heifer jerked and emptied her bowels over Carl. He felt it hot and heavy on his shoulder and down his back.

He eased his arm out and stood up and shook himself. Most of the shit fell away. He pulled grass and wiped his arm and shoulder and what he could reach of his back. His undershirt was wet and cold against his skin. He took it off and used it to wipe the calf’s forelegs again. *It’s no use*, he thought, but he knelt again and grabbed the calf’s forelegs and pulled. He pulled and pulled, but it wouldn’t come. Then he sat down, not caring anymore, braced his feet against the heifer’s backside, pulled, and the calf came slithering out, slop, like an enormous discharge of waste. It was all waste.

He fell back on the grass. Presently he got up and went around to the heifer. He could just make out her head in the darkness. He felt for her eyes. They didn’t blink when he touched them.

“Aw,” Carl said to the darkness. He was so tired, he felt sick.

He lay on the grass, listening to himself breathing. The dark forms of the heifer and her calves were quiet. Then he saw a light and heard something coming toward him through the grass. “Carl?” his father called.

“Here!”

His father came up with a flashlight and stooped to examine the heifer. Then he went to the calf. Then he moved toward Carl. The light was blinding and his father was a dark shape behind it.

“She’s still warm,” he said.

“Yeah, she just died,” Carl said.

“Twins!” his father said. “Who woulda guessed it?”

“I should’ve gone and got you, Dad.”

“Naw, I don’t think that would’ve mattered. You weren’t late getting the cows, though, were you?”

Carl felt a rush of the old anger, the old helpless rage before his father’s questioning of his ability. There was nothing he could say.

“Anyway, it was my fault,” his father said. “I shoulda checked on her today. I mighta saved her.”

Carl began to feel in the grass for his shirt. He found it, it was wet and cold, but he put it on.

“Well, it’s been quite a day,” his father said now. “We lost a cow and two calves today.”

Carl felt the weight of that loss and wanted to feel it. He wanted to bear some of it for his father.

“Aw well. Live and learn,” his father said, which was something he often said.

They started across the swamp toward the farm buildings. There were lights in the barn now. His father must have turned them on and let the cows in the barn before he came looking for him.

He stopped.

“What’s wrong?” his father asked.

“My jacket. I left it back there.”

“Here, take the light,” said his father. But Carl was already running back through the high grass in the darkness. He stumbled over the bodies of the heifer and her calves. He felt around for his jacket, found it, and put it on. He bent and touched the heifer. She was cold already, damp with the dew that was turning to frost in the darkness.

Then he was running back to where his father stood waiting for him. Together they walked to the barn to start the evening chores.

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Radiant Slob

A Poet's Day-Planner

Steve Elder

THE LIFE OF A POET is not easy. Everyone thinks it's all figs and strippers, but the daily grind can be full of pratfalls. For the muse-ridden, the human world is one of cold, dry, anxiety-inducing things like banks, supermarkets and the prose of philosophers. And if that's not enough, according to Theory, readers, not poets, are the real poets in all this mess. Alas, a poet makes a clear and beautiful point, but hungry readers, distracted by what the diners at the next table have ordered, entirely miss it and, like fool-poets themselves, make up their own.

So, great Reader-Poet—antic and improvident, capricious and whatever—I have taken the liberty, like a secretary (Lat., *secretarius*, “Keeper of the Secrets”), of drawing up a daily schedule to help you negotiate your way around the slings and arrows of the languorous day. It's not an ideal day, just a day like any other, but be sure to adhere to the twenty-one point agenda. If daily goals are to be met, there's no time to waste.

1. Wake up before noon, if possible, remembering nothing. Notice that the toilet still leaks. The water keeps flowing right through. The thing broke itself, it should be able to repair itself. Does the word “disentropy” exist yet? That might be the problem.

2. Consider washing your sweatsuit. It's getting droopy. Recall that washing it is impossible ever since the bathtub drainplug up and vanished. Don't even think about using a public washer. You need a PhD to operate those things. They're worse than vending machines.

3. Stumble to nearest cafe not patronized by clubby poets of whatever ilk. They're always begging for something New. Don't they realize that the old Old is always the new New? Order coffee and day-old roll filled with chocolate.

4. Ask waitress to please leave the coffee pot with you. For next half-hour, work on a poem about one of the following: Birds, Flowers, Love,

Angels, Being, Language, God, Nothing, Death or Lunch. Actually, skip writing about Death. It's a bore. Let the geniuses who know so much about the subject tackle it. And be sure not to use words such as "dancing" inappropriately. For example, "Sunlight dancing through the leaves." Sunlight shines, it does not dance. Don't be a flake.

5. After half-an-hour, your work is complete. Don't force it. You are now free for the rest of the day. Hop and skip down the street, even if rain is dancing on the pavement.

6. Stop abruptly and look up in awe and bewilderment as you think of the near-infinite options granted by the stretch of free time before you: you can get a head start on the cocktail hour, lie down on a sunny bench, read magazines in a bookstore, sneak a couple of 40-ouncers into a matinee, buy a new sweatsuit, et cetera. And et cetera again! The list could go on forever—your own private abyss of free time—till it's all gone. Sometimes you wish you had a job, a definite place to go.

7. Don't have a panic attack—only kidding about a job. When a pang of hunger distracts you, realize your girlfriend the Illustrator lives nearby. Knock on her apartment door. Nothing. Try to open it. It's locked. She's a Graphic Artist, not a real Artist, thank goodness. She has a job somewhere. She has actual food in her fridge, not just condiments, which is what she's best for (love and sex being out-of-date, mere poetic notions). Grieve that she took back her spare key when you stumbled in at 3 a.m. with some new buddies and demanded that she sketch you as odalisques. No, skip that memory. Block it out. Realize that life is a one-way street and that the past is the wrong way.

8. Notice that she hasn't repaired the screen window you broke and promised to fix. Consider fixing it now. Nix the idea. Another failure in the Handyman Department might not be for the best at this delicate time in the relationship. Wonder briefly why it is that all women are always so angry, cranky and snappy. They always, always, always assume the worst about jovial fellows such as yourself. It's like they're insane.

9. Push in through unlocked window. Make a huge turkey sandwich with a ton of mayo and, of course, horseradish. In your experience, girlfriends can be counted on for horseradish. As you lustily chew, realize that your core fantasy is Warm, Moist Death, exuberantly executed. Be sure not to tell girlfriend. Little Miss Censorship would only be repulsed, and you'd end up clinging to cold, dry life, for sure.

10. Go to bathroom with newspaper. Don't forget to turn on fan. Wonder briefly if those little fans work at all, or if they're just another hoax perpetrated by the Warren Commission.

11. Read in newspaper that the bank where you think your Grant Money might be was robbed. Hope and pray they catch the robber before he blows your savings on rum-drinks and fake beards. Read article more carefully. Realize it was a cozy little branch bank that was robbed, not

the huge hushed icy marble screamingly intimidating edifice where your money's hiding. Let out a sigh and surreptitiously check contents of toilet bowl. *Great gods what did you eat last night? Goat-fur and wormwood? Flush that mess away!* Flush it again. Other than that, don't bother covering your tracks in the bathroom. Girlfriends always know you've been there. They have Magic Bathroom Powers.

12. Settle onto couch with popcorn and what's left of girlfriend's lite beer and watch *Lost in Translation* for what must be the fifteenth time. It's as soporific as a lullaby, and relaxes your agitated spirit. Note that the Japanese characters are either robots with something to hide or boring individualists. Consider briefly that you might be boring. If so, at least you aren't to yourself. Face it, you fascinate you. As you watch, enjoy the transcendent feeling—really *feel* it—elicited by drinking beer while watching tv. A sort of heavy levitation, mystical and underappreciated.

13. When you wake up, depart girlfriend's apartment with some four dollars of spare change found on dresser. Your temper rises as you realize the screen window will no longer fit in place in any passable way. The damn thing just falls off and clatters on the concrete. Why isn't anything easy?

14. In a maniacal frenzy, twist, snap and stomp on screen window. Then toss it in dumpster. A tinny reverb. That was easy. Rub hands together. You are a problem-solver.

15. On way to Bar Cafe for much needed refreshment, feel your Presence/Absence switch start to flicker. Sometimes you feel an absence of Spirit, and it gets so that a poet and the general dreariness are one thing, unseparated. But it's sunny now. The sky's a little too blue. Is there an unseen presence in the vicinity? An invisible influence that simultaneously uplifts and smothers? Realize like a bolt out of the sea-blue sky that the word "otter" rhymes with "water." How is it you hadn't noticed *that* before? Feel epigrammatic poem heavy on internal rhyming shape itself in your head. You're an otter, confident as water. This shouldn't require any exertion. You have otterness to spare. Get out notebook. You have no pen! Don't curse. Ask a fellow pedestrian if you can borrow his pen *just for one second you'll give it right back*. Watch as he sidles away. Watch pedestrians ahead suddenly decide to scurry across the street. Compose poem in the treasury of your mind sans lineation. Flatheads.

16. March into Bar Cafe and grab pen off of cash register. Write poem right there in everyone's way. Don't be distracted by the petty chatter around you. *Most mammals are nervous residents here / but not the otter. He glides through life on earth / with the confidence of water*. Bingo. Let yourself recite it aloud. Accept praise in your shy, magnanimous manner.

17. Walk in concentrated daze to usual table full of clubby poet wannabes. Now is the time to admire to yourself your new poem's sleekness and perfection. It's just like an otter. You love the simple rhythms

of the people, and you love the connoisseur's attention to detail (and they love you back!). Go ahead, light a cigarette. When the waitress tells you it's against the law to smoke on the premises, assure her that you are a Poet. You have a License to Smoke.

18. Let the heft of your presence bloom as you prepare to hold court at your table. Notice that the thinkaholic pretend-poet English prof millionaire is in attendance. Praise one of his ungainly lines constipated with meaning and in(at)tention. Then tell him you forgot your wallet. Watch as he blushes and generously waves his hand. You have elated him beyond a state of monetary bliss. Order an espresso, a martini, and a dozen raw oysters. It's that easy.

19. Don't wake up hungry tomorrow. Have them bring the frosty brew pints and the baby-back ribs. And the lobster risotto. And the champagne and caviar.... Roar like the lion you are and have them send in the hookah and the obligatory dancing girls....

20. Why stop? Why ever stop?! *Have them bring tambourines and castanets to the players of chess. Smear the bodies of the flutists with applications of war paint. Let the boys dance too. Everyone stomps! On toes. On knees. On toes. Your name is Laughter. You have billions of beautiful siblings. You will lead the toters of hecatombs to the bonfires. You will listen as the sizzle of the sap of the pine-boughs mingles with the fat of the lowing beasts. The God of the Night is alive and slaving again.*

21. Let sense of self blur and fade away as the moonlight waxes.



1. Wake up next morning before noon, if possible, remembering nothing.

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Bodhisattva

Hillel Wright

“HAVE ANOTHER DRINK, *Shacho!*”

Yes, Yamada Saburo was the *shacho*, the company president and, yes, he would have another drink. And why not? Business was good. His company, small but productive, made ships’ propellers and other shipbuilding necessities and had contracts with Mitsubishi, one of the world’s great conglomerates. Mitsubishi Shipbuilding here in Shimonoseki was booming. Japanese tankers and freighters roamed the world. Japanese fishing boats and research vessels worked tirelessly to satisfy the appetite of the world’s #1 consumer of fish.

Today Yamada-san and his employees were celebrating the delivery of twin propellers to Tokyo University’s research vessel “Hakuho Maru”. It had been a big job, demanding, stressful, especially creating the mechanism for the propellers to feather—to vary pitch—both in forward and reverse gears. But Yamada-san himself, who was a born mechanical engineer—at least that was what his workers said—supervised the final operations and trials.

Reiko-chan, the Mama-san of the *sunaku* bar near the waterfront where Yamada-san and his crew were regulars, enjoyed pouring the *shacho*’s drinks. He enjoyed drinking, especially when Reiko-chan poured, bending over his sake cup just enough to expose a glimpse of her ample cleavage, keeping her flirtatious curves in his direct line of sight while lighting his cigarette. And the more the *shacho* drank, the more his workers did too. It was, after all, not polite to lag behind the boss in his celebrations.

Of course flirtation was as far as things ever got between Reiko-chan and the *shacho*. After all, she had many other important customers to keep happy and satisfied, or to console and sympathize with when things were not so good. There were the skippers of the big off-shore trawlers and long-liners, the accountants and buyers from the fishing companies

whose chaotic offices loomed over the bustling loading docks of the harbor. There were the foremen and section chiefs from the Mitsubishi Shipyard—the executives had their own favorite *sunaku* in downtown Shimonoseki—and the managers, brokers and wholesalers from the cavernous Karuto fish market. Sometimes a Professor from the National Fisheries University would stop in after a training cruise on a research boat with a group of associates and graduate students.

Besides, Yamada-san had a wife of his own in a nice two-storey house with a garden full of fruiting and flowering trees, overlooked by a wide and south-facing balcony, almost in the countryside, on the outskirts of the city, where the rice paddies began. And Reiko-chan had her *koibito* and patron, the yakuza boss Miyamoto-san, who'd bought the bar for her and stopped in four or five times a month, unpredictably, but always late at night—or more accurately, early in the morning—just before the bar was getting ready to close.

* * *

The *shacho* knew he was too drunk to drive home. He was tempted—he liked doing things for himself—but lately the TV news had been full of tragic stories of drunken drivers causing horrific accidents. The blood and bent metal and bouquets of flowers at the accident sites stayed with the *shacho* long after the TV was turned off and often haunted his dreams.

Not only that, but the *shacho* was a Buddhist, at least as far as his practices of making a New Year *meguri*, a pilgrimage to the temples of the *shichifukujin*, the Seven Lucky Gods, the first week of every year, and of visiting the graves of his grandparents every summer at *O-Bon*, the Festival of the Dead, with flowers—red, white, purple and yellow chrysanthemums, which would stay fresh for many days—and their favorite food and drink—Ritz crackers from America for *obaasan*, Kubota sake from Niigata for his father's father, *ojiisan*. Most of all, as a Buddhist, the *shacho* believed he should never kill or even strike another human being in anger.

So Reiko-chan called a taxi, bundled the *shacho* in and stood at curbside waving until the cab rounded the first corner and disappeared into the darkness one hour before dawn. If Reiko-chan felt any real affection for the *shacho* she might have been a bit concerned—he seemed to be drinking more than ever these days, maybe because business continued to be good. But the more the *shacho*—and consequently his workers—drank, the better business was for Reiko-chan too.

And if we can believe reported speech, then we can confidently repeat the simple but powerful aphorism reported by the journalist-author Tom Wolfe as having been uttered by the novelist Ken Kesey during the latter's Merry Prankster days as a carefree, hallucinating hipster, engaged in creating a new model for youthful rebellion: “‘Nothing lasts’”.

* * *

Far out a sea, hundreds of miles from Shimonoseki port, in the Western Pacific, the ocean temperature slowly, steadily began to rise. Was the cause a cyclical, natural event or a man-made environmental anomaly—global warming? Scientists have still not given us a reliable answer. Researchers have, however, tracked the results. At the bottom of the food chain, simple life-forms—plankton, diatoms and copepods—began to die off in great numbers. Newly hatched larvae of small pelagic fishes like anchovies and sardines, which depended on these micro-organisms for food, likewise died, of starvation. Next, the larger predators, the marlins, the swordfish, and especially the tunas, found their food supply greatly diminished and those who did not starve on the way, crossed the ocean, to the east and south, where food could still be found.

At Shimonoseki, Choshi, Kushimoto and Oma-machi, at fishing ports all across Japan, landings began to drop. First the sardines, then the mackerel and saury, after that the tuna. Scientists at Tokyo University's Ocean Research Institute begged the government to act. Bureaucrats at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries reduced the Total Allowable Catch. Leaders of fishing co-operatives taught their members how to apply for unemployment payments. Drinkers at the waterfront *sunakus* ordered beer instead of sake or whiskey. Or they stopped coming into the bars entirely and bought cheap one-cup jars of sake from the vending machines and lit their own cigarettes with 100 yen disposable lighters.

Soon, business at the big shipyards went slack. Orders for new boats dried up. The work shifted from construction to repairs, and as time went by, fewer fishermen could afford the costly repair work done at the yards. Instead, they attempted to do repairs and maintenance on their own. Many could not afford to go fishing at all, tied their boats up at the quay and looked for part-time work which was all but impossible to find. And as orders for marine equipment dropped, after Mitsubishi cancelled his company's contracts, the *shacho* turned up at Reiko-chan's *sunaku* alone—he had laid off more than half his workers.

The *shacho*, however, did not stop coming to Reiko-chan's bar. In fact, he spent more and more time there, as there was little to do at his office or around the workshop. Going home was not an option. The *shacho's* wife had firmly established her own routine, now that their son was in university and their daughter recently married and expecting a child of her own. She had her flower-arranging class, her lunchtime gatherings with her closest friends, her shopping excursions to Fukuoka, sometimes even to Osaka or Tokyo. Her spending money didn't diminish—not yet—the *shacho* was too terrified of Seiko-san's temper to cut her off. Indeed, although he couldn't believe she was unaware of the growing financial crisis around them, he continued to act like "business as usual" during the few hours he spent each day at home—mostly just

beer, bath and bed—and continued to turn over to his wife the generous amount of money she'd been accustomed to receive.

So the *shacho* spent many hours sitting alone on a stool at Reiko-chan's, pursing his lips, telling himself—and sometimes Reiko-chan—that one day soon this “recession” would be over, business would bounce back, the fishermen would go out to sea again and the orders for his company's propellers would return.

* * *

Much as the *shacho* longed for the economy, and with it his business, to recover, in reality the financial crisis only widened and deepened. Every day, thousands of lost jobs added up to thousands less customers and the unemployment rate increased proportionately.

“Okubo-san, what are you doing?” the *shacho* exclaimed in surprise as he headed down the empty street running parallel to the waterfront docks, on his way to Reiko-chan's *sunaku* after a long, lonely day in his office. He had tried to keep himself busy by emptying all his file cabinets, removing any papers he deemed expendable, replacing the “important” documents and burning the rest in a heater made from a 55-gallon oil drum on the workshop floor which his workers used to gather around to keep warm during lunch hours or coffee breaks on winter mornings. Okubo was one of those workers...former workers.

“Building my room, *shacho*,” was Okubo's bitter reply as he unfolded a cardboard rectangle, obviously a packing box for some household appliance, and spread it out under the eaves of an abandoned machine shop. The *shacho* knew the shop. It belonged to his friend Shimoyanagisan. It was a metal-plating shop which specialized in chrome-plating metal fittings such as cleats, chocks and fairleads for sailing yachts. It was one of the first shops along this familiar waterfront road to go under.

“But Okubo-san...” the *shacho* began to say, but could not think how to continue, as Okubo rolled a greasy, oil-stained overcoat into a make-shift pillow and spread a faded army blanket over the cardboard mattress. Finally the *shacho* proposed buying Okubo a drink.

Okubo rose up from the floor of his “room” and stepped a couple of paces to within inches of the *shacho's* face. A sour, powerful stench assaulted the *shacho's* nostrils. “Do you think I'd bring Reiko-chan a gift of this perfume, *shacho*? That's my *sunaku* over there,” he said, pointing to a bank of brightly-lit vending machines glowing incongruously in the gloom of the darkening, deserted street. “Can you spare me a couple of hundred yen for a one-cup sake?”

* * *

As the months passed and the economy worsened, the *shacho* found it harder and harder to keep his wife Seiko-san in the dark as to the desperate reality of his company's situation. Finally, while continuing to keep Seiko-san living in her customary high-style, the *shacho* fell behind in the rent

for his workshop and office. The bank refused him a loan. So, heart in mouth, the *shacho* tried to explain to Seiko-san that he was out of business, that he'd given up his building, that they'd have to live off their dwindling savings as long as they could, that he'd have to go to the city office and stand in line in the faint hope of finding part-time work, that both of them would be spending more time together at home. "At least," he offered, not realizing how alien a concept he was trying to communicate to her, "we still have a home."

After weeks of fruitlessly lining up for jobs that didn't exist, the *shacho* gave up and stayed at home, drinking. Of course, although he could still bathe and wash his clothes at home, he could no longer afford to spend tens of thousands of yen at Reiko-chan's, having his sake poured and his cigarettes lit. At first he drank the contents, bottle by bottle, of his well-stocked bar. It was interesting at first, since there were many *omiyage* souvenir bottles of exotic liquors and liqueurs from Seiko-san's various travels—sugarcane *shochu* from Okinawa, mescal cactus liquor from Mexico, fragrant anise-flavored absinthe from France. But as the *shacho* sat smoking and drinking in his chair, Seiko-san seethed in anger and frustration. She punctuated the air around her with explosions of exasperated sighs.

Soon Seiko-san quit making his meals, disappearing at lunchtime. The *shacho* made cup noodles from the convenience store down the street. He was expected to wash his drinking glass, his chopsticks, his bowl, the pot he made soup mix in.

Seiko-san eventually began to realize that their financial condition—including her personal savings—was dire and not likely to improve in the foreseeable future. So instead of long, expensive lunches with her friends, she turned to long hours in front of the TV, watching wide shows and soap operas. The *shacho* retreated to his small workshop behind the house and tinkered, fixing broken clocks, toasters, cassette players and other appliances which he found on recycling days in the neighborhood junk piles. He didn't really mind the soap operas, but the level of tension ratcheted up uncomfortably when he and Seiko-san were in the same room together, and the wide shows, with their inane worship of talentless idols and breathless devotion to following the romantic frustrations of over-the-hill songstresses, made him very close to being physically ill. Worse yet were the ubiquitous cooking shows—especially now that his own meals were Spartan and unappetizing—with marginal celebrities from the worlds of sports or entertainment exuberantly gushing over fried chicken or curry rice with the never-varying cry of "*Oishii!!*" (Delicious!!) and the disgusting close-up of a balding, 50-something comedian masticating a mouthful of boiled pork and Chinese noodles.

One afternoon, when Seiko-san had gone shopping, the *shacho* was enjoying a rare moment of peace and relaxation in the living room reclining

chair, bought in better times, watching a sumo tournament on NHK-TV. The broadcast had begun at 4:00 PM with the bouts of the lower-ranked wrestlers—young hopefuls on the way up, or taped together veterans on the way down—broke for a short newscast and change of ringside judges at 5:00, and continued on with the better rank-and-filers and the elite upper division champions striving for tournament victory or at least the double-digit wins record for the 15 day *basho* which would insure their promotion and perhaps give them a special prize.

At 5:55 the final bout of the day was about to take place between the East *Yokuzuna*, the highest ranking Grand Champion, and the #1 West *Ozeki*, who had won the previous tourney and, like his opponent, was undefeated in this one. Two consecutive tournament *yusho* would result in his promotion to sumo's highest rank. The *shacho* settled back into the easy chair as the two *sumotori* faced each other down in the pre-bout series of warm-ups, posturing and staring-matches. Finally, the referee turned his ceremonial fan towards the crouching wrestlers to indicate that the fight was now ready to begin. The *shacho* took a long swig of beer from his bottle. The *gyoji* shouted his command and the *ozeki* and *yokozuna* sprang at each other, colliding in a bone-jarring *tachiai*. The Grand Champion managed a grip in the challenger's *mawashi* belt, but the *ozeki* shook it off with a powerful hip twist that threw the *yokozuna* dangerously off balance.

“*Oishii!!!*”

The *shacho* sat stunned. Seiko-san stood a few feet behind him with the remote in her hand. Her fingernails were newly polished and bejeweled.

“Look at this mess!” she shouted. “Couldn't you even wipe the table!?”

The *shacho* slowly, like a man in a trance, rose from his chair and approached the kitchen table. There was a faint ring of moisture where the cold beer bottle had rested after the *shacho* took it out of the fridge. His first impulse was to lash out, to slap the remote out of his wife's imperious yet ridiculously lacquered hand. And then to strike again, to slap her face, to color it with the blood-hot red of rage, rather than the pale pink of blush it now wore. But he did not strike. He forced his anger back down his throat, into his body where it vibrated wildly in the atria and ventricles of his injured and insulted heart.

The *shacho* was a Buddhist. He would not strike another human being in anger. Such was his firm belief. But the *shacho's* rage immediately turned to the instrument of his despair, the new, flat screen, high-definition TV. With robotic inexorability, Yamada-san crossed the living room to the television, grabbing it with one hand and yanking its cord out of the wall. With the other hand he slid open the glass door to the balcony and with the panache of a *yokozuna* executing a perfect *uatenage* over-arm

throw, dispatched the offending electronic malefactor to its death on the stone walkway bisecting the garden below.

* * *

On the *shinkansen* bullet train to Tokyo, ticket bought with the dregs of his bank account, the *shacho* overheard two half-drunken salarymen talking and laughing about the homeless. “So many live in Kawasaki”, one of them explained, “because they can get better prices for beer cans than in Tokyo.”

The *shacho* had planned to head for Ueno Park in Tokyo, to join the community of homeless people camping there and to learn the ropes of living rough, but this overheard snippet of news piqued his native curiosity and he decided to see for himself what this beer can business was all about.

Strung out along the riverbank the *shacho* observed a collection of *ao manshon*—“blue mansions”. These were the jury-rigged shacks built with varying degrees of skill and utility by the homeless, with blue plastic tarps the chief structural component. Here and there, some of the more enterprising had managed to scrounge up gray felt fabric and sheets of plywood and had built rather substantial dwellings with framed windows, clotheslines, gardens, storage sheds, and in one case, even a welcome mat. The *shacho* spent the remainder of the day walking along the riverside, collecting and organizing flotsam that could be used for building, and in the evening made the acquaintance of one Maeda-san, who was out-going, drinking one-cup sake and, most importantly, living in a well-constructed felt-covered shack.

Eventually, the *shacho* completed his shack, about the length of a football field upstream from Maeda-san. He intended to quit drinking and sooner or later re-enter society. He knew that friendship with another alcoholic was not something he could afford.

The *shacho* also learned how the denizens of his new community earned their living, such as it was. Early each morning, mounted on cheap one-speed *mama-chari* shopping bicycles, they would fan out and scour the neighborhood garbage dumping and recycling sites, picking out cans and collecting them in large burlap-like plastic sacks, which they would pile onto carrying racks above the bike’s rear fender—often extended to accommodate a bigger load—and secure them with black, heavy-duty bungee cords. Around Noon, they would begin returning to the riverside and after a lunch—most could make rice or instant ramen noodles—begin the arduous task of smashing cans in order to compress them and fit more into the sacks. At the end of the week they would strap the sacks filled with flattened cans to their bike racks, pedal to the scrap metal dealers and get the three or four thousand yen payment (\$30-\$40) which would have to last them the week.

Joining this humble workforce didn’t appeal to the *shacho*, but

something else did. All along the riverside, sometimes in the river itself, were discarded bicycles, motor scooters and cycles, fishing gear, and an astounding variety of household and office items which people had thrown here in order to avoid paying what the city and private recycling companies demanded to haul these things away. Together with the myriad floating objects of wood and plastic which washed up after periodic flooding or bi-monthly high tides, the *shacho* was presented with a veritable workshop in which he could earn a living and at the same time immerse himself in enough physical labor to distract him from his need for alcohol and make possible the agonizing ordeal of quitting drinking.

From sun-up to sun-down, day after day, the *shacho* walked the riverbank, collecting, sorting, recovering, spending hour upon hour in front of his shelter, cleaning, fixing and re-building the treasures he'd found along the river—clocks, cameras, radios, fishing reels, bicycles—and building something of real value to his homeless neighbors, something to turn them into customers: bicycle trailers and hand carts, for it was the rare homeless man who could skillfully build a balanced load of sacks of cans on his bike rack. The *shacho* observed many wobbling dangerously along the city streets, some falling over or spilling their loads. Many would pay him on his self-devised installment plan to obtain a trailer they could load and pull behind a bicycle, or a hand cart they could push or pull through the streets on foot. This, along with bike repairs, provided the *shacho* with a small but steady income.

His life fell into a humble but satisfying routine.

* * *

Nothing lasts. The global warming which raised the seawater temperature and killed the plankton, which fed the sardines, which fed the tuna was also responsible for the rising strength of typhoons and hurricanes across the globe. One summer, about five years after the *shacho* arrived at the Tama River, a giant typhoon struck the Kanto Plain. Many blue mansions simply blew away, driving the homeless under the bridges seeking shelter, but in the face of super strong winds and horizontal fusillades of rain, they found scant protection and an exodus across the highway and up to Shin Maruko Station began.

Those like the *shacho*, who lived in more substantial felt and plywood structures, huddled in their rooms, hoping to weather the storm. But while this tactic kept them temporarily dry, it denied them views of the rising river, and when the dam upriver at Minami Tama burst and the torrential flood surged southward toward the sea, many of these homeless were instantly overwhelmed.

The river now covered the baseball fields, the wildflower gardens, the tennis courts—the entire riverside submerged and the river continuing to swell. The *shacho* found himself being swept in the muddy brown surge toward the now hidden Chofu-seki dam. But there was a small

treed island between his shelter and the dam and the *shacho* managed to grab the undulating upper branches of a half-submerged willow and hand-over-hand himself to the trunk. There, with every ounce of strength in his body, he clung to life.

Hours passed. The river was a roiling conveyor of flotsam and debris. Whole trees, small boats, roofs of sheds and houses, dead livestock all rushed by the willow but the *shacho* saw nothing, all his energy concentrated on keeping his hold on the tree trunk. Then, little by little, the wind abated, the water level lowered, the speed of the rushing river decreased. Looking around him, the *shacho* could see other human forms clinging, like stylites in a desert of foam, to the trees on the invisible island. They were his neighbors, and more than that, his customers—Aoki-san, who was lame and probably thought he couldn't run fast enough to reach the high ground; Kobayashi-san, an old man who had managed to save his pet cat, a stray he'd adopted and seemed to love as a mother loves her child. The third survivor, furthest from the now visible upper portions of the dam, was Maeda-san—the drunkard. He had probably been drunk when the flood struck and dumb luck had pasted him to the thick branches in which he was entangled, but alive.

Suddenly, a strong gust hit the river, the trees shook violently and the *shacho* saw Aoki-san lose his grip and plunge into the rushing river. Instinctively, he dove in, swam mightily with the current and managed to get a hold on Aoki-san's bony wrist. With the super strength of adrenaline and desperation the *shacho* reached what remained of a shoreline and deposited the limp but living Aoki-san on the cement steps which led down to the baseball fields and the river from the embankment above the highway.

Exhausted from his efforts, the *shacho* began to stretch out on the highest step when he saw old Kobayashi-san frantically flaying the water around him trying to reach his pet cat. The gust had shaken them too from their precarious perch. Without stopping to think, the *shacho* dove into the flood and angled out ahead of the cat which immediately, upon bumping into the body of the *shacho*, buried its claws into his shoulder, where they stuck in the fabric of his shirt. With both his arms free, the *shacho* was able to corral Kobayashi-san before he hurtled past and with a supreme effort, trundled the old man and the cat to the embankment.

The *shacho's* heart pounded like a jackhammer. But before he could make a move he heard the ungodly screams of Maeda-san, the drunkard, piteously crying for help. The *shacho* had no time to think, no choice but to act. As soon as he reached Maeda-san, the drunkard threw both his arms around the *shacho's* neck. The *shacho* struggled briefly to break the hold, but his depleted strength was no match for the panicked power of the drowning man. Drawing as deep a breath as he was able, the *shacho* and his burden struggled shoreward.

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Scientists from the Earthquake Research Institute of Tokyo University explained that a small earthquake in the ocean near Hawaii triggered a small tsunami that hit the Pacific coast of Japan at the same time the Tama River was still raging seaward, while the floodtide—strengthened by the full moon—was coursing up the estuary from Tokyo Bay. This, they said, caused the anomalous rogue wave that crossed the highway and deposited the body of the homeless man Sasaki-san in the courtyard of the Buddhist temple just across the highway at the feet of the statue of Ebisu-kami, god of fishermen, farmers and business, one of the Seven Lucky Gods. But the homeless along the banks of the Tama River and the residents of the neighborhoods around Shin Maruko believed it was a miracle.

After the flood waters receded and traffic on the highway resumed, the city of Kawasaki donated tents to those homeless who wished to return to the riverside. Many of them did. They had nowhere else to go. A few weeks later, as life along the river slowly returned to normal and the bicycles could be seen returning to the riverside at the noon hour bearing bags of beer cans on their carrying racks, and the afternoons were once again punctuated by the sounds of scavengers—the can-smashing of the homeless, the cawing of the jungle crows—a movement began among the survivors of the flood to memorialize Sasaki-san, who had saved three people and a cat at the expense of his own life. A small delegation approached the manager of the Nippon Ham Fighters baseball team's training ground located just west of the Chofu-seki dam. Indeed, it was on the steps leading down to their baseball field that Sasaki-san delivered Maeda the drunkard before losing consciousness and becoming lost in the flood. Soon, the Nippon Ham Company commissioned a stone carver to create the memorial statue.

A few months later, the statue, sculpted of green marble, was erected with a modest ceremony at the Ebisu temple where the *shacho's* body had come to its final rest. The statue contained a small group of figures. In the center was Sasaki-san (people knew nothing more about him than his alias) portrayed as somewhat resembling a *jizo*, the popular bodhisattva of Japanese Buddhist mythology, with a shaved head and a benign and peaceful expression. To his left was a figure leaning on a cane, meant to represent Aoki-san, the cripple. To his right was a figure holding a *tokkuri*, the traditional sake flask, representing Maeda-san, the drunkard. And standing at the feet of Sasaki-kami was a bearded figure holding a cat, symbolic of the old man Kobayashi-san and his beloved pet.

There was also a small collection box by the statue and every day the priests would collect the coins, mostly *go-en*, or five-yen pieces, because *goen* also means “good luck” in Japanese. Offerings were also left, such as seasonal fruits of the region—apple-pears, persimmons, loquats and

Japanese plums—packages of instant ramen; jars of one-cup sake.

Everyday, it seemed, homeless people came to pray at the statue of Sasaki-kami, *Tamagawa-no-bosatsu*, the Bodhisattva of the Tama River. Some prayed for safety from future typhoons and floods. Some prayed for a job, so that they could leave their tents or blue mansions and return to society, with four strong walls and a roof over their heads. And some prayed only for another jar of one-cup sake, which would help them make it through another day.

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Tract

Louis E. Bourgeois

MARCEL HOON, dressed completely in black, stood on the empty tomb of H. Logenback and spoke slow and clear to the presumed mourners: you flat-nose sons-of-bitches, hear me, hear me. You must understand that H. Logenback was not a man of distinction but of distillation, his mind I mean. So, you look at me funny as if I don't understand my own message. But there my friends you are mistaken! This message is not for you tin-heads, you Malcodian haters, you sidewalk glancers, you Dada worshipers. What I said is not a reprieve, but an oblation, a sizable reduction of your airtight stigmata. Crush me if you can but you'll not crush the revelry here. What was that Mr. Slogan? You driscoordination distention? Come, come, good friend, where are your forced metal voices now? I've got it in my hands Mr. Blocker, don't you worry none sir, don't you worry Mr. Rennco, I've got your concept. Do you remember the size of his hound? I remember the size of that son-of-a-bitch well! There he is now chewing on your Remington? Winchester? Hey Zeller! You remember that day, that day in Cuba, Alabama, after the dog kennels arrived, that day when Joe shot all them ducks? You remember, I know you do, that day when Sally was slapping herself having listened to too much Lana Turner. You son-of-a-bitch get off my shoes. Now, there was that time we were harvesting wheat and this dead bastard here Logenback turned to me and said, "I decree ye as the Harvester of Cut Breaths." Yes he did ladies and gentlemen, he sure did. He got it from a book the darn fool. I told that son-of-a-bitch I was going to slash his goddamn throat if he didn't get his damn discoder right. Johnson was right out there on the fucking turnpike. I saw the son-of-a-bitch myself! No, they wanted to go crabbing the darn fools! On the 1088 they were trying to blast him but they couldn't get him. So they were going out there messing with the toggle switch when that boat blew up. Throw the cats back in the water;

throw all the cats back in the boat dear friend of the Epicurean family of solid members and of the hundred-dollar prize. Back in Swahili they were doing it, doing it before dawn round the campfire, for at least 10,000 words but they didn't get the Freudian slip thing right; that was before I fired him. With all the sucking and murder, what would you expect? I mean they were out there dying to get back, no control though, and then their last infraction, an experiment going, and so we tied the dog back on the leash and had our way with him, trying to get things tight I guess. What do I care? What with the strain of one voice, hell, I didn't create the End of History. They were trying to say it but they didn't know how. What? When? Don't go starting again. Do you know how goddamn long it has taken to get this right? Do you know how much pain I've had to go through to get this right? Bound forever by two means and two heartaches. The Creator wouldn't have it that way. What were you trying to think? Well, let me tell you, it was disembodiment, and the longer we waited the worse it got, and Johnson over there wasn't having any of it. All form and no content makes Johnson a bad boy. They got all the fishes out of the water but they were stone dead, ready for market, but the market was closed, so we took them to Nigger Joe, but Joe was having whisky problems, so we gave them to Carlyne, but Carlyne was having a bad case of the greenmind, so we left the fish on side the road in a bad way. So we got to the point where we couldn't persist anymore so we went to the Bayou Club in downtown Oxford, that town next to Batesville, or is it Seville? All those Yankee towns sound the same to me! What about you Fred? You still married to that detestable bitch you found on Magazine Street? The one with the good lips? I told you once bastard not to refrain. We didn't go burrowing, we stayed right here disconnecting. So what? The problem is that any sentence you put into existence could be your last, or worse yet, your future. But he has his eyes on the goddamn shutter again; I told him not to go doing that, doing that, to those tortoise shells. But he's got that goddamn Isidore Ducasse with him again, what do you expect? So she had to go weaving tapestries again, tapestries of dead brains. *Su Conto* wasn't that way, he was *tabiculum*, that is Latin for table or basket, you choose. No, not that again, I'll have to burn that tape. It's obvious that I'm trying to hide something, aren't you the scholar? You Friedman Holmes? You bad painter? I told you not to use oils shithead. Armadillos with all the good wigs and black migs, of the Dolorian. So, they got to where they couldn't do it any more; so we had to search them real good and hard on the backs of their heads. No, the ambulance was broken but they did import some good used morphine. It was tedious out there; we shouldn't have told all our secrets at once. It was black inside. They went and filled in all the cracks, silly bastards of Lords, with the biographers and wine, and I haven't had no alcohol in 10 years, long before the coma and the special training. I have what they've

been wanting for years but I ain't telling Southmoose, not this time around. Perhaps some other time when the moon is a little better and the tide's in sprinkling the shore with bits of glass and seaweed, in rushing jet streams. Yes they got the croakers; they were there; I saw them as well as you did. I told you to stop it with the ideas. Falling back on the thing? Me at once? And all today. Where's Will? You done gave up on Bill didn't you? I didn't. He's here in my back pocket; that's where I keep him, clean and crazy, where the goddamn transom broke before I could use it. Heart full of pain and dead animals. It wasn't very soothing the way he headed the Pass, kept the publishers off his back, off his wife too, away from the sewers, and back to the liberating forces of *Dichum-mic-kill* read everyday the last rites of the English Jew who found prayers to be useless and typifying lost words in dark puddles. It was what he couldn't Will that hurt him. I can do this with my eyes closed. Naw, I lie, I am right now, as you are a-piercing, doing this with closed eyes. When he got there, we were all told to get back and hold our tongues. I wasn't faking it like I am now. Precambrian dreams assuage me to the end my brothers, dear reader, sweet reader. Come close and I'll give you a jar of your own Palastone, no, not the immobile, those dumb asses who keep trying, dry words, who never tell a secret like you want them to. It's hard work but someone has got to do it, someone's got to tell, and absolutely not for their own goddamn good. Who do you think I am, Ibsen? Delacroix? Or that Irish tyrant by the name of Clay? I mean goddamn Mr. Sand I didn't get a Ph.D in English literature for nothing, didn't get it to amuse you soft flackers of ratdish hate and black skkêêpés. Of the swans, there are a lot that have died and will die on the river Styx. Well, when they did, I slapped them on their backs and writhed them a good time. That's the way I am. I'm very forgiving when they're kind, still can't spell though. I didn't go to a good school; they didn't try me too hard. That was smart of them. It's tiring on the fingers and eyes, not to mention the eyes, I mean, when they bleed or cry, or spear-out goo. Well, they had ten coullers, I said, but they couldn't blast it out of me. So I had to get it at the fork of the road while there was still time to get it at the fork of the road while there was still time to get my *Gamosepalous* together, before the reds got there to spoil all the fun and swing out my vodka that I had to pay a lot for because of the Adam curse of the old school. They had ten but only used three, the characters, but bless them, bless them, god bless them for all their mistakes of fatigable softness. Someone had to say it, why not me? When you get there, let me know and I'll be there to pay the rent and give them the food bill for my dogs and chinchillas and goldfish, Henry and Red, the two black ones. No, keep Marcel on the grave, ambiguous and weak these days, they got him over there walking the pipeline, they played a bad joke on him, and ditched the dogs on the way to the trial. We went there, but the coons were gone

and so we hunted possums for a while, and then the rabble came with all these spades and hoes. That was a time of pure release, pure relief system, back when a spade was a spade and I was an engineer, with thoughts and feelings, penmanship too, when I had my keys but no choice. So you got over there and they told you all that? No, not Prof. Carrithers, what would he have to lose on such a day as this, a lot, goddamnit, a lot! Not surprisingly, he's a little mute recluse from the old days, back before that hound in a tree story your dad told you about. But they got out of here and then left, and didn't leave a message for my dear old nonreferential dad. They tried to say something bright but it wasn't in them, the brightness faded out, and so they lost, I tried to help them, but stubbed my toe on the way, before I lost my grip and fell head first into the wall, lost my front teeth, cried a lot, and then it was down and out like it's supposed to be. I don't know, man, they had their kites. Why do you keep saying they? It was he, not they, who did it to me. He kept pushing his hair out of his eyes and it was quite annoying to see such a one as he do that for no reason at all, and then it was all about his asparagus, he could talk about asparagus for hours on end, saying nothing, but forgetting nothing, and one really did learn a lot about asparagus, and nothing else, and as my wife has informed me, he was eating the asparagus in the wrong direction. Go-Go comes forth and holds out his hands and begs me to undo him. But it is not in me to embrace, and Go-Go was a very long time ago, back before I could even talk good. Well, I showed Go-Go, I flushed him down the toilet. Well, and Go-Go showed me, he's been getting his revenge ever since. So, he got to pushing his hair out of his eyes a good while before we got down to good normal conversation, not the philosophical stuff, too intellectual for him, but we talked for hours about the Kashmir and Vermilion gods till sundown. There were spots on the wall so we talked about spots for a while, and then we talked about "Percy in Dust" and "In the Black Cradle," which are stories, stories I wrote just for you all. What about that Barn Owl that cooks for you all? Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all? You bastards? For you bastards everything is a joke, but I've got news, news that should be howled out in the desert, I'm not a Comanche or a Magi, sorry, I didn't mean to disappoint you, I just wish I liked you a little, to give a little respect, but you've forced me to this, you let me in. Well, Cora and I were getting by with it and we were driving up some mountains in Idaho and came to this store, and in front of this store was a sign that read: Come and Get Yerself a Drink. Well, you've got to keep going till you sweat your eyes, bone your face, and flatten the stomach. I mean, come on, it's the American way. Wouldn't want you to feel left out or anything on this cold night in Georgia. If you get to the top, let me know and I'll see what I can do. I'm full of all sorts of tricks to help you get through the night and so forth. Really, I'm not that bad once you get to know me, it's just that I

don't like to be hassled. I'm sorry, it's one of my hang-ups, call me old-fashioned, not a thing I can do about it. They taught me that in Catholic school, back in the day of expressions, ideas—C'mon Samos, let's get on with it. So you were sitting around being resuscitated? Being or predicting your fate? Shouldn't do that old man, shouldn't do it. Didn't they teach you anything at all, all those eighty years, all home on the range and such? So be it, there it is. Some flown thing on the edge of thought. Beckett was reverting back to something previous, right? Ten creations carry us through then they die and we die and the world is a better place for God to kill again and again for nothing and everybody is ashamed of him and for his creations, fluid to insanity, and the stage must be so clean, so clean, good god, never more! Never more! Stop yanging over semantics you black eye of a bitch of one and twenty. Teutonic and desultory, stop trying to piece me back together again. It won't work, I promise you, it won't work, it never has, it never will. Get turned on by the same old evil box, opening and reopening, looking or me, but you do badly, you will do badly here, I know you will, anyone would interest me more than you do. No Teutonic abhorrence, I'm all out, so what do you do? One, two, three and then presto? I swear you wouldn't like it here I just know you wouldn't want to go home and be like the stars and moon or whatever it is these people keep yapping about? So be it. What piece of flap has to be there? Well, Marcel Hoon, they got the arrogant rabbits out again, but it didn't help this time. It was too close to his brain, what do you think? Pure jazz man, pure jazz, and so what about it. Pure gut of evening and severed tongues. No nagging worms my friend no nagging worms, hell-bent on destruction. Mind is a complete blank, write on dust, write on water, no, write on white dust in red letters. A field marshall came up and slapped me in the face. I turned and broke that bitch's arm. Now, what's surprising, the slip-knot? The ambrosia? Signs from god? The clairvoyant? Surprising the elephant? The clairvoyant eye has failed to see Logenbach's entry, stage A and B, not Z. This is all a puzzle to get you through the day. The word becomes clear through the absence of thought. When we got back we were looking for a reflection, but Toga was not to be found in the Greek amphitheater. Like a line bent back on itself, we had to go forth into woods, into fields, in search of melons, and candleberry, and stethoscope, and above all syncopation, the R and W, to implant and distribute and desultorize, and imbulgations of Mohammed II, Zoroaster and Conrad, the existentialist, no, not Conrad, never Conrad, herein the disaster of the Profound God, and above all the lost coin that had his name, that fell off the camel's back and found later by the lion in the desert, a baby behind him holding a mirror, a very profound mirror, relating all and nothing, nothing to hold onto, and further, nothing to support, nothing to go by, nothing in the reflection of nothing, a solid thing, good for the heart and good for the soul, an alternative to

what....used for money, the coin, used for money by the innocent child who lived in the stone house way out in the desert of Zarbo, a confused child no less, a little slow, that is, stupid, like Roland Barthes, who couldn't come to conclusions, who had philosophical inquiries, a little stupid, a little demented, flash of green light, a little lost, a little stolen, no French and no Latin, an ignorant child, not very bright, like Roland Barthes. It was a bit like survival which in any case carries no rewards for the humble of the Malcodian forest. That was the thing you couldn't get blasted about after hearing their dark utterances, their yearnings, all the sad faces in a row, in a yearbook, all the sad faces of public and private education, no difference, or very little, very little difference in anything really, when you get right down to it, doesn't matter, nothing matters, nothing ever will matter, except this: all cops and shrinks and lawyers must die across this grand wide country of ours. To be free and so forth. It's all a big book, it doesn't matter where you begin or end or end and begin—it is the tension of writing itself which is at stake, nothing else, the blood tension, you can find the doctrine for yourself in Saint Genet by the terrible child. So, I said, it is the tension of writing itself that is at stake and the more superfluous power of knowing, of knowing there have been many many fools, far too many, so many in just this past year, not to mention the whole of the century that is now coming too a close on us, like a spiked net, imagine that. But so much for the perplexities of suspected icons of jabberwockys of yore. Come on now, don't be doubtful and then jealous, it will pass; it can do nothing else but pass, best thought first thought through the colors the blindness and the same tremendous song stuck in my head, my intelligence is out for lunch, but I'm trying I'm trying, no extra points for trying, don't revert, that's the sin here, at this burial, at this funeral, and don't forgive them anything they can use here, that's another sin, and the fire lives between whatever isn't much, isn't much to talk about or wonder about, not enough to remember or forget, I'm working on a novel here, remember, and that's not an easy task. But blast my Isidore you bastards of H. Logenback. I've been hating him for a long time and now it's good that he is dead, and better yet, no kin worth speaking of. Try to get them trilliums out of the way, don't bring a color code, or a meat code, or any code, I've got my head in the clouds ain't misbehaving. I don't have no quote for you. Like ten thousand explosions, like ten thousand people pushing their hair back before suppertime. Give me that absolute bell and that absolute white, I like it better there, better than this suspension of color don't need anything but comes out no trace of where I've been. More honest than you know who, maybe even better, but I fear worse and let me die better than him, Clay, I mean, let me die better than him, it's all I ask, and I keep trying to get this thing out, well, why not? You've got those splinters still in your forehead rabbi? Mr. Jenkins knows, he's always known. Why wouldn't he? That was a silly

affidavit you wrote up. And John Higgins died too, just last week, after the crab festival in Slidell. That day on his deathbed he winced and ‘bout lost his bearings, and didn’t care anymore, didn’t know how to care anymore, didn’t need anything anymore, didn’t need nothing but me and John Black. It was, or is, the chemical explosion of stars you say? What of the alienmatic? Did it do any good this time? It really doesn’t matter what goes on. Stop it with that referring and stop begging on issues that are completely irrelevant to your existence as a human being. It’s all enclosed in a big vault somewhere. Just to be behind the eyelids scares me into supplication enough for the both of us. There’s a long line to the cemetery, on that we can all agree. I’m just about finished. I wouldn’t lie to you, not in my nature as a petrified man. Carbuncular explosion again, try to get it right the second time around baby. That you tried is all that matters, here, here...so much here and so little do we owe to be here, without pulse, without word. Wrap ten strings around the world and say good-bye. I mean, they got all the goddamn skin, what you worried about it for? Just circling around in a large room, there’s nothing to it, get away from the two-dimensional cyclone if you can. It was all kinds of funnels and all kinds of tunnels, all kinds of neat tricks, but they couldn’t see past it, wouldn’t leave out one word, the evviiil bastards—eerie unto themselves—of the green glass I boast a literature. It was a flap of tin beating against a steel pole. I recorded the sound one day, out in Ebbing, Louisiana, when I was about ten or twelve, and so what about it? Demonetization is a real pity, somehow you’ve got to create your own ambition but it’s pretty hopeless, then, maybe not. But there’s not anything between the first and last thing that really matters. What matters is Sapo, and getting rid of Sapo, getting rid of Sapo’s not so easy, not so hard....

“Halloween Costume Night” comes from a collection of stories I wrote back in the middle 1970s and recently stumbled upon in an archival box. The stories were edited, but pretty much remain as originally written. I have included biographical sections detailing when they were written, and under what circumstances, and now that collection is entitled *All Night Gas Bar and Ten Story Autopsies*.

Halloween Costume Night

Ernest Hekkanen

IT WAS SURPRISING to me, but on Halloween night, at half past 11 o'clock, there were still lots of little goblins, fairies and pirates out roaming the neighbourhood. One evening I had arrived on the Eastside of town an hour before my shift was scheduled to start, just to check out what sort of urban setting the service station was plunked down in, and it was surprising to see so much squalor, so much ramshackle row housing, so many cheap tenements and collapsing older houses, especially down toward Powell Street and further east, where Powell Street turned into Wall Street, a neighbourhood that overlooked the railroad siding yard and the harbour where all sorts of big ships from all around the world unloaded merchandise at the docks or were pulled in for refitting at the Sterling Shipyard. Sterling, my ass, I thought to myself; this could be right out of *On the Waterfront*, the movie that starred Marlon Brando. It was bleak like that.

The Princeton Hotel and Lounge was located near the foot of Victoria Drive, where it met Powell Street, and suddenly it made sense to me why I so often saw fire trucks and other emergency response vehicles hurtling down the hill in that direction, with lights engaged and sirens yowling. It had been the sight of so many fire trucks heading down that way that'd made me want to investigate what was going on in that area of town. The steady stream of vehicles had resulted in my imagining that part of town burned to cinders, à la Hiroshima after the atomic bomb had been dropped. When I discovered that the Princeton Hotel was located down there, just off the railroad tracks, and that all sorts of seamen, Longshoremen and Teamsters were sitting at tables in the dimly lit interior, I realized it was probably drunken brawls and knife fights that resulted in so many emergency vehicles being dispatched down that way, night after night.

Given the nature of the community, I found it doubly difficult to believe

that so many pint-sized trick-or-treaters were out roaming the streets, usually in packs, but sometimes alone. The gas station didn't have any Halloween decorations in the windows, or anything like that, but that didn't stop the kids from coming into the office to ask for goodies. Nearly all of them had memorized the same ditty, "Trick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good to eat," and when I told them the gas station wasn't participating in Halloween, they'd follow up that ditty with remarks like, "Fuck you then, you stupid fucking prick," or another favorite: "Go fucking to hell on a fucking broomstick, you fucking asshole."

Nice kids, I thought to myself.

At around 1 o'clock that night, a pack of eight kids I took to be between eleven and thirteen years old came waltzing into the station, dressed up so they resembled little Zorros, pirates, zombies, Frankensteins and Robin Hoods. Actually, there was only one Robin Hood; he was a little taller than the other kids and obviously the ringleader of the gang. Robin Hood pulled a pistol out of the sash around his waist, pointed it at me and said, "Trick or treat, give me your money or drop dead at my feet."

I shook my head while feigning a smile meant to question the boy's intelligence. "You've got to be kidding, kid. This isn't any way to start out your life, you know."

"This ain't a fake pistol, you asshole. It's real and it's loaded."

"Yeah, it's loaded," another kid chimed in.

Judging from the gauge of the muzzle hole, it couldn't have been anything more than a BB gun, at best.

"Look, kid," I said, "I don't have any time for this sort of crap. Take off—before I call the cops on you."

At that point, Robin Hood fired the pistol. The first BB nicked my left ear, which really riled me up. I tore off around the counter with the intention of yanking the pistol out of his hand, with the result that he fired a second shot. The second BB hit the fold of skin right above my right eyelid, which resulted in me blindly groping for him. That's when the other pirates and zombies and Zorros piled on me and there was a real little scuffle all of a sudden. I had wrestled in high school down in the States and knew how to handle myself in a fight, but with eight of them punching, kicking and jumping on me, I was at a serious disadvantage. But then, all of a sudden, I heard a vehicle ding the bell that was tripped each time a narrow black hose was driven over and, just as quickly as the melee had begun, all the kids piled out the door of the gas station. I picked my wire-rimmed eyeglasses up off the concrete floor, noting as I did so that one of the lenses had been broken in the fight. I pulled back the door and yelled at the driver who had stopped at the far pumps that I had to call the cops; then I went directly to the black phone on the counter and started dialing. My right eye was smarting rather badly; in fact, it was tearing up so much I found it difficult to see the numbers on the

telephone, but finally I got hold of the police.

“The station at Semlin and Hastings?” the dispatcher asked me.

“Yeah, that one.”

“We’ll have someone there as soon as possible.”

“Thanks.”

In the meantime, I went out to serve the guy at the far pumps. He was driving a big Dodge pickup truck that had a double set of wheels that worked off the rear axle.

“Glad you dropped by when you did,” I told the driver, who had gotten out of the truck and come part-way to the office. “The leader of that little pack just shot me in the eye—with a BB gun.”

I took my hand away from my eye so he could see the spot. My eye was still smarting like crazy and now some swelling was starting to take place.

“I saw them jumping you, but I didn’t see them shoot you.”

“It was Robin Hood who shot me. He was the one with the BB gun.” I was a little jumpy from all the excitement. “Shot me in the left ear, too.”

“Looks like they also broke your glasses.”

“No kidding.”

The broken lens was the one directly in front of my smarting right eyeball and I realized, just then, that that was, in part, why I was finding it so difficult to see.

“Would you mind staying here for just a little while, until the cops arrive?” I asked him.

“If it isn’t too long, I can. I gotta head up to Squamish pretty soon.”

The cops arrived about five minutes later. I let the driver of the truck give his statement first, then it was my turn to blab my version of events. I’d been expecting to see the old cop with the ribbon-like scar cutting down into his upper lip, because he often dropped by to see how things were going for me, but that night I got a middle-aged guy with a long face and eyebrows that looked a little bit like those of Groucho Marx.

“So they jumped out,” he said.

“In the office. The ringleader shot a BB that hit me in the left ear,” I said, showing him my ear, which was still stinging. “I went around the counter to yank the pistol out of the kid’s hand and that’s when he shot me the second time—right here above my right eye,” which was still smarting, still watering. “That’s when they tackled me all at once. I would’ve probably ended up on the ground, if the guy in the truck hadn’t come along when he did.”

“Were they trying to rob you, do you think?”

“Exactly. The ringleader, who happened to be dressed up like Robin Hood, said: ‘Trick or treat, give me your money or drop dead at my feet.’ At first, I thought he was playing a practical joke.”

“God, the sort of kids you find around here,” the cop said in a

sympathetic tone. “They sure start them off early pulling this sort of crap.”

The cop had barely departed the station, when a black stretch limo traveling east pulled up at the near island of pumps. Everyone inside was dressed up for Halloween. They had really theatrical costumes, ones that looked as though they might have been designed for a stage production. The driver waved me off when I went outside to see if he wanted a fill-up. “One of them’s sick,” he shouted through the open window. “Wants to use the bathroom.”

“Just go right in. It’s unlocked.”

A fancy peacock-costumed woman stumbled out of the limo, with a Daracula-clad guy in tow. They got a few feet away from the limo when Lady Peacock threw up on the pavement. Daracula provided his right hand for support under her forehead, and she heaved again and again and again, until all she was throwing up was bile. Lady Peacock had obviously had a ripping good meal with lots of red wine, judging from the looks of what had splattered on the ground. By that time, some other costume-clad passengers had stumbled out of the limo. One was a guy dressed up as the Phantom of the Opera and the other one was decked out as the Hunchback of Notre-Dame. They came into the office and demanded change for the cigarette machine in the corner.

“We don’t ordinarily give out change for the cigarette machine,” I said, when the Phantom tried to give me a fifty dollar bill. I had seen him examining the bills in his billfold pocket and I knew he had pulled out the largest one.

“What do you mean, you don’t give out change?” he said in a theatrically trained voice.

“Maybe if you’ve got something smaller, like a ten perhaps, I could break it.”

“Do you know who I am, you little low-life scum? I’m _____,” and here, he provided me with his name.

“Sorry, but your name doesn’t ring a bell with me,” I said.

“I’m _____. I’m playing the lead male role in *The Marriage of Figaro*,” he said, and then he belted out the lyrics of some aria or other. I had to admit that he had a fine, well-trained voice. “Now will you change my fifty?”

“Make the bill one of those tens I spotted in your billfold and I’ll think about breaking it for you.”

“I don’t have a ten dollar bill, young man. I have nothing smaller than a fifty, and if you don’t break it for me, I’m going to break your bones by reporting you to your employer, and I mean it, too.”

At that point, the Hunchback of Notre-Dame dug into his front trouser pocket and managed to produce a ten dollar bill. I made change for the ten out of the till and then the Phantom of the Opera went through the rigmarole of trying to purchase cigarettes from the vending machine. He

put in the incorrect amount of coins and got really theatrically upset about that. He cursed the machine and even struck it with his fist—in a very theatrical manner. I could tell he was pretty drunk. At that point, the Hunchback of Notre-Dame asked to intervene, in this really fawning, obsequious voice. He hit the change return button of the vending machine and reinserted the coins, this time the appropriate amount, and then he bent to fish the package of du Mauriers out of the tray.

At the door to the office, the Phantom of the Opera spun very theatrically around on his heels and said, “I’ll have you know that I am buying these for the Sugar Plum Fairy, my good man, and furthermore, because you have treated me so abysmally—so beastly, I might add—I’m going to report you to your employer,” and then all the smartly clad characters piled back into the stretch limo and took off for parts east.

Later on, at 4:37 a.m., I decided it was time to start the usual clean-up. When I went into the men’s can to wash the place down with a hose, I noticed that the stall door was flung wide open and a guy was slumped down on the toilet in a red dress with all sorts of ruffles, a costume that could have been right out of the opera, *Carmen*. There was a syringe, a thick rubber band and a heroin rig lying on the concrete floor not far from the guy’s feet. When I thought back, I remembered a Carmen lookalike getting out of the limo and I wondered how his friends had managed to overlook him upon getting back into the limo and driving away—unless, of course, they had wanted to dump him in the first place.

I shook the guy by the shoulder, hoping to rouse him and get him out of there, but he was dead to the world. I leaned down in order to see if I could hear him breathing through his nostrils and determined that he was still alive. I went back to the office to phone for a V.F.D. emergency vehicle and five minutes later one came roaring down Victoria Drive with its lights flashing and siren wailing. I directed them to the guy in the men’s can and a little while after that the policeman with the long face and the eyebrows similar to Groucho Marx pulled diagonally into the station parking lot and, after that, an ambulance arrived, too.

I told the cop with the long face about the stretch limo and all of the theatrically clad people who had gotten out of it and even pointed to the puke on the pavement where Lady Peacock had deposited her dinner. “They were here at the station for a little over twenty minutes. Phantom of the Opera wanted to buy some cigarettes out of the vending machine for the Sugar Plum Fairy, but all he had was a fifty dollar bill. We had a little argument about that, but it was resolved when the Hunchback of Notre-Dame took a ten dollar bill out of his pocket—which I could make change for.”

“So, they just left their friend sitting there—on the toilet?” the cop said.

“Looks like that to me, alright.”

“Some friends,” he said.

“I’ll say.”

Around 6:15 a.m., a guy drove diagonally up to the Coca-Cola machine in a long, sleek Chrysler that screeched to a halt. The big front bumper had nearly crashed into the corner of the machine. I figured the guy was going to get a pop, but, no, he stormed directly into the office and slugged me in the face—right below the broken lens of my eyeglasses. There was no “Hi, how are you?” In fact, there was no introduction at all.

“That’s for giving my kid a rough time last night,” he said.

“I beg your pardon—what kid?”

“Robin Hood, goddammit. Robin Hood. He was dressed up like Robin Hood. He said you chased him halfway down the block, trying to rip his head off his shoulders and, let me tell you, no one, but no one, does that to my kid.”

“I think he must’ve given you a line of bullshit,” I said, taking off my eyeglasses. “See the swelling right here above my eye? He shot me with his BB pistol, after trying to hold me up for the cash in the till. Then he and his friends jumped me. They broke my glasses as you can see.”

I hauled myself up off the floor.

“If anything, you should be trying to instill some proper behavior in your son rather than going around hitting people.”

“He said you tried to clobber him and that’s why he shot you.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s a lot of bull, my friend. I was simply trying to do my job—nothing more than that.”

“That fucking, lousy kid,” he swore, now beginning to fume all over again. “Play me for a jerk, will he? Boy, is he ever gonna get it. I’m gonna beat him to a bloody, senseless pulp, goddammit.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Whadya mean?” he yelled. “You just finished telling me he tried to rob you, didn’t ya?”

“Yeah, I did. I think he must’ve gotten the idea from watching too much TV, or something like that.”

The guy—a surly, dark-haired fellow with rather thick lips—stuck out his hand. “Sorry about slugging you,” he said.

“I wish you would’ve explained yourself first—before doing it.”

He fluttered the hand that he was holding out to me, impatient for me to take it. Finally I took it.

“Sorry again,” he said.

“Not as sorry as me, I’m sure.”

Then the guy took off, heading east up Hastings Street. It seemed like everyone was heading in that direction the morning after Halloween, or maybe it just seemed that way to me.

I didn’t bother phoning the police to report the guy who had punched me in the chops, although I guess I should have—just in case he ended up

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killing his son. I didn't see any reports of any kids being killed by their fathers in the newspaper over the next several days, so I guess Robin Hood must have survived being beaten to a bloody pulp.

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