

The New Orphic Review

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ISSN 1480-5243

The New Orphic Review, a journal devoted to publishing fiction, poetry, reviews and essays, is published two times per year by New Orphic Publishers. The review accepts no financial assistance from government sources, but will accept advertising.

EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICE:

The New Orphic Review, 706 Mill Street, Nelson, British Columbia, Canada, V1L 4S5. Tel: (250) 354-0494. Please make sure all inquires and manuscripts are accompanied by an SASE and that the return postage is Canadian. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for one month and then discarded.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS PER YEAR (2 ISSUES)

Individuals Canada	\$30 (CAD)	Institutions Canada	\$35 (CAD)
USA	\$30 (USD)	USA	\$35 (USD)

Individual issues \$17.50 CAD or USD as applicable.

ADVERTISEMENTS (BLACK & WHITE CAMERA-READY ONLY):

Full pages:	Half pages:
\$150 CAD, \$150 USD	\$75 CAD, \$75 USD

Subscriptions and advertisements should be sent to the above address. Make cheques payable to *The New Orphic Review*.

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Cover art: *The Repose of the Refrigerator Man: a Study in Entropy*. Digital photograph by Margrith Schraner, © 2013, one in a series documenting the life/afterlife of a sculpture by Ernest Hekkanen.

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 45 books. The most recent are *Heretic Hill*, *Flesh and Spirit: The Rasputin Meditations*, *All Night Gas Bar* and *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow*. His novel, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, was a finalist for the George Ryga Award for Social Awareness. Hekkanen is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*.

Entropy

Ernest Hekkanen

I HAVE NOW REACHED the age where I measure how much energy I'm willing to expend on a task—rather than rushing into it, headstrong. For instance, it was necessary for me to replace the back door to our house and to lay a new kitchen floor. I didn't really want to attend to these matters. I'd been putting them off for years. Three days before turning sixty-six, I decided to take up jogging. If by the end of six weeks I hadn't managed to induce a heart attack and die (and I was half hoping I would!), I reasoned I'd live long enough to get my money's worth out of the repairs. I did the repairs, but it resulted in a lot of lower-back pain. There's nothing quite like pain to temper one's enthusiasm, to remind us that we are in the grip of entropy!

Last fall, in order to mentally prepare myself for the repairs I had to undertake, I dragged my life-size sculpture of the Refrigerator Man (depicted on the cover) out to the backyard and lay him on the lawn to let the elements have their way with him, reasoning that the elements would hasten his decomposition. One day, when I ran into our next-door neighbors in the supermarket, they asked me about the "corpse" they could see from their kitchen window. I quickly fabricated the explanation that the Refrigerator Man had become a study in entropy.

"A study in entropy?" they inquired.

"Yes, you see, I created the Refrigerator Man back when I was going through a manic phase, and felt I could do anything I set my mind to. He's been standing in the corner of our kitchen for nearly five years. I realize now I'll never finish him, so I'm letting the elements do what they will with his carcass. Margrith has decided to photograph his gradual demise."

I could see that my next-door neighbors weren't convinced. They are Catholics and that puts them firmly on the side of life after death—not

entropy, and the gradual decline of every system!

“Not to worry,” I followed up. “When the Refrigerator Man has been reduced to nothing but shreds of cloth and twisted wire mesh, I’ll haul his remains down to the transfer station. The disposal workers have promised to give him a decent burial. For an extra five dollars, they’ll even say a few prayers.”

According to my *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, entropy is “a thermodynamic quantity representing the unavailability of a system’s thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work, often interpreted as the degree of disorder or randomness in the system.” As I now like to joke to friends and acquaintances, and to almost anybody else who’ll listen to my blather, “From now on I’m going to devote myself to entropy. By the end of my life I’m pretty certain I will have mastered it.”

I enjoy the disconcerted smiles such comments bring to people’s faces.

There’s a little ditty I insist on teaching recent converts to entropy, and it goes like this:

I’m a do-nothink-izer
I do nothing for the Kaiser
I do lots of nothing every day.

It has become my theme song, I guess you could say. At the most inappropriate moments, my tongue will give voice to it—independent of my mind, it would seem.

Please don’t think of me as a gloomy fellow, because I’m not. However, my naturally cheerful disposition—perhaps I should say my *élan vital*—was tempered at an early age, when I witnessed my first hen being killed on my parents’ chicken farm. I became acutely aware that my life could be snuffed out at any moment, with the descent of an axe blade. Later, at the age of seven, after having my consciousness wrested from me by gas prior to a tonsillectomy, I became an ‘existentialist’—long before I knew there was a word that described my condition. I found it difficult to get any traction in life, knowing my every effort would end in death. Most of us are born with the desire to survive; that desire surpasses our ability to reason with it or to fully fathom it, really. That is due to the fact that each of us is a system designed to pass on genetic information, and that is the overriding imperative of life, apparently. Human beings live at the behest of their genes or, to use a bold analogy, we are the martini mixers in which the genetic ingredients get shaken up.

Some purpose, that!

I have a confession to make. I am only able to forget about the senselessness of life when I am engaged in creating a piece of art or working on a narrative of some kind. For me, creativity has become an act of defiance in the face of entropy, which we become more thoroughly in the grip of as we get older, due to the fact that the dissipative structures designed to dissipate randomness in the human system no longer work as

effectively or efficiently.

Given the predicament we are faced with—an existence that is fleeting and has no real meaning—I am led to think that we should place a great deal more emphasis on the study of entropy. It is sown into every system, be it as large as the universe or as small as a cell. Indeed, it is my view that we are unable to create anything without also sowing entropy into it. It's a given. Everything runs down, everything perishes. So why do anything? Why fight so fiercely to stay alive?

I'm not trying to depress you, dear readers of the *NOR*. Far from it! However, I have come to think that every field of endeavor should be studied with entropy in mind, even the field of literature. Why do we find it necessary to give order to experience, when we know, in the end, that entropy will triumph? Why build empires that will only crumble? Why copulate the next generation into existence, when it will simply add to the evergrowing number of deaths—on the road to nowhere? Also, let us not forget that systems which dissipate randomness are given to acts of randomness that further entropy, especially when those systems reach a certain complexity, if not sophistication. For instance, human beings enjoy engaging in wars, consuming fuel as fast as they possibly can and writing books that require vast amounts of wood pulp, all of which further randomness. Entropy is sown into each and every system, and our conduct is often determined by our subliminal awareness of this fact, be it on or off the page.

Excuse me. I think I've been sitting for much too long. I just experienced a twinge of pain in my lower back. Let's move on to the fiction and poetry in this issue of *The New Orphic Review*, and banish these thoughts of entropy—at least for a few hours.

TYLER KEEVIL was born in Edmonton and grew up in Vancouver, Canada. His short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Brace* (Comma Press), *Brittle Star*, *Front & Centre*, and *New Welsh Review*. His first novel, *Fireball*, was longlisted for Wales Book of the Year, shortlisted for the Guardian Not the Booker prize, and received the Media Wales People's Prize, 2011. This August, Myria Editons published his second novel, *The Drive*, and in the spring Pathian Books will be releasing his story collection, *Burrard Inlet*, from which "Sealskin" is taken. He lives in Mid Wales with his wife and son.

Sealskin

Tyler Keevil

AT THE FOOT of Gore Avenue, Alex pulled up in the parking lot that overlooked the Western Fishing Company Plant. He turned off his car but did not get out and instead sat listening to the engine, which tinked intermittently like slow-cracking glass. The plant was a barn-like structure, at least a hundred yards long, with a peaked, shingled roof and red siding; it sat on a concrete wharf jutting out from shore. Above it a column of seagulls turned around and around in a sluggish tornado. They were attracted by the fetid reek of herring roe, which permeated the air all along the waterfront. It was a terrible smell and if there was such a thing as hell Alex thought it probably smelled a little like that. He waited and watched the clock on his dash: it was quarter to seven and their shift didn't start until seven. The other guys would already be inside having coffee, but Alex had stopped partaking in that ritual.

As he sat there a black Ford truck wheeled into the lot. It was Bill, their boss. He parked a few spots over and climbed out, dressed in the blue, one-piece coveralls that all the union guys wore. Some of them came and left like that and skipped the change room, as if they lived in their coveralls even when not at work. Bill noticed Alex and waved at him and asked if he was coming in for coffee.

"Nah. I'm good."

"You avoiding Rick?"

Alex shrugged. He still had both hands on the steering wheel, as if ready to drive away.

"Don't pay any attention to that asshole."

"I'll be there in a bit."

"Suit yourself."

Bill locked his truck and headed off towards the plant.

Alex waited until six fifty-five before he got out and from the backseat

took his own coveralls and work boots, which he carried with him across the lot. That morning the tide was low and around the perimeter of the harbour you could see the high water mark: the rocks above it were bleached sun-white, the ones below were slick with seaweed. At this end of the plant was the shipwrights' warehouse and gear locker, which could be seen through a garage door. Next to it was a regular doorway that led to the lunchroom and office. Alex could hear the others in there and avoided them by going through the warehouse to get to the change room. All the lockers had names and union numbers on them except one, which was his. He kicked off his shoes and took off his clothes and stuffed these articles into the locker.

He'd left his coveralls sprawled on the floor like a deflated person. He had an old set that Bill had dug out of the gear locker for him; they were thin and threadbare and dull grey instead of blue, and that colour difference served to set Alex apart from the union guys. Alex picked them up and stepped into the legs one foot at a time and slipped into the sleeves one arm at a time before zipping the front up from his crotch to his chin. Doing this always made him think of those sea creatures that could change from people to seals and back again; each morning he put on this grey skin and became somebody else, somebody owned, and after work he peeled it off and became himself again, or at least somebody closer to himself. Next he tied up his boots, which he'd found in the dumpster behind the plant and which were a size too big for him. After that he checked his watch, waited another minute or so, and went to face the men in the lunchroom.

He had timed it right and the guys were all standing around the table, having just finished their morning coffees. Aside from Bill there were five others: Diego, Steve, Jimmy, Elmore, and Rick. Rick was big and pushing fifty, with a shaved head and saggy skin and the hefty, muscular build of an old bull walrus. As soon as he saw Alex he started in on him, calling him a scab and a lazy Newfie in a way that sounded like a joke but wasn't and they all knew it.

"Must be nice not punching the union clock," Rick said. He was gnawing on a chunk of chew, his mouth full of black juices. "Being able to wander in whenever you please."

"It's seven by my watch," Alex said.

"Seven, my ass. What happened? Your mom forget to wake you?"

The only one who laughed was Elmore; he always laughed at Rick's jokes.

"Nah," Alex said. "But your mom did. I stayed over at her place last night."

That got a laugh and Rick spat into his empty coffee cup, using it as a spittoon.

"You lippy little shit."

Bill chuckled. “Admit it, Rick. He got you good.”

“Like hell he got me. He couldn’t get his own cock out to piss.”

There was some more snickering and Bill waited for it to settle down before handing out the worksheets for the day. The other guys accepted the sheets without looking at them and shuffled out, stretching and yawning. They all knew what jobs they were doing but Alex didn’t. Bill used him as a utility man and his duties changed from day to day. He was given his sheet last. Bill passed it over with a small smile of apology and when Alex saw the task at the top of his list he knew why: it said he would be working on the Western Kraken today.

“Rick needs some help,” Bill explained.

“Doing what?”

“His precious decking.”

Rick had stayed behind the others; when Alex looked at him, the seam of his mouth split open—the lips peeling back to reveal teeth stained brown like rotten kernels of corn.

“Hear that, scab?” he said. “You’re fucking mine today.”

They walked down the wharf together, with Rick a few steps ahead and Alex trudging behind like the prisoner of a one-man chain gang. The walkway was as wide as a road and ran the full length of the wharf, with a long drop to the water on the left, and the packing plant and cannery on the right. When they passed the open doors of the processing area Alex glanced inside at the rows of workers; they all wore lab coats and rubber gloves and face masks, and they were already at work sorting the slabs of yellow roe that looked like elongated banana slugs, rushing past on the conveyor belts. Even outside the stench was sweet and fetid, nearly overwhelming. Most of the workers were Asian immigrants: Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.

“Know why them chinks wear those masks?” Rick asked.

“So they don’t have to smell the roe.”

“No—so they don’t have to smell each other.”

From the wharf they descended a gangplank that led to the docks and marina where the fishing boats were moored. Beneath the gangplank, near the crane, was the spot that his seal usually appeared. Alex checked but couldn’t see it in the water at the base of the wharf.

Rick caught him looking and asked, “You still feeding that fucking thing?”

“No.”

“Better not be.”

Near the northwest corner of the marina they came to the Kraken, a seventy-five foot seiner. Like all the vessels in the Westco fleet the hull was painted black and the bridge was painted red and white. It was Rick’s boat. He wasn’t the skipper, but when the Kraken was in dock he worked

on it, and when it went out during the salmon and herring seasons he was its engineer. Rick hopped onto a bollard, using it as a step-ladder as he hauled himself over the gunwale, and after him Alex did the same. Rick waited for him amidships; he had his can of chewing tobacco resting open in his palm.

“Finally finished the forward deck,” he said.

Alex came to stand beside him, being careful not to step on the deck, and studied it in the way Rick wanted him to: with appreciation. About half the planks had been replaced and the new ones looked odd and incongruous set next to the older wood that was more worn. The seams between the planking had been caulked and paid with tar.

“Took me damn near a month to get it done.”

Alex nodded. “Looks good.”

“Course it looks good.”

He pinched a fingerful of chew; the clump of tobacco looked like a large hairy spider, which he stuffed in his mouth and chewed on hungrily, an errant strand dangling from his lips like one of the spider’s leg. Rick nodded towards the bow, where he had piled all the excess scrap from his repair job: torn-up planking and rusty nails and carriage bolts and sawdust and woodchips and dried bits of tar that resembled deer turds.

“First job is to get all that off of here. Then we’re gonna sand down this decking and varnish it.”

“I’ll go get my tug.”

“It ain’t your tug.”

“I’ll go get the tug, then.”

“Be quick about it.”

The tug was not a real tug but a ten-foot aluminium skiff with a deep hull and powerful engine and fenders made from old tires lining the gunwales. It was tied up in the same place that the seal usually appeared: near the gangplank that led from the wharf to the docks. The docks rose and fell with the tide; since it was low tide, the wharf stood twenty feet overhead on wooden pilings, many of them leaning at angles, all of them pockmarked with barnacles and draped in seaweed. In the shadows of the wharf the tug sat nestled like a sleeping duck.

Two tie-lines held the tug in place, and Alex undid these before hopping aboard. The tug had a small wheelhouse with room for only the wheel and the dashboard and the driver. When he turned the key in the ignition and pressed the starter button the engine fired up with a low, hoarse rumble, coughing several times in the process; the tug began to shake and diesel smoke belched out of the exhaust pipe above the wheelhouse. Alex let the engine idle for a minute before easing forward the lever that controlled the throttle. To steer he stood behind the large wheel and held it with both hands, feeling through them the rumble of the motor.

The marina was separated from Burrard Inlet by a jumble of rock and

concrete that acted as a breakwater, and it was between the breakwater and docks that Alex piloted the tug towards the Kraken. The larger boat was moored with its bow towards shore and starboard side facing the water. Alex could see Rick standing on deck, waiting for him, and he made his approach carefully; he dropped the throttle into reverse, countering his momentum, and turned hard to port so that the tug drifted in at an angle. As the two vessels came together he stepped out of the wheelhouse to brace against the Kraken's hull with his palms, softening the impact to a kiss. Rick didn't offer to take his tie-lines so Alex went to the bow to gather the first one himself, draping it over his shoulder like a lasso and climbing aboard the Kraken.

Before he was able to tie off, a series of waves entered the marina from the inlet and rolled beneath the docks, and because the tug was still loose it pivoted to port and ground its prow into the side of the Kraken. Alex yanked on the rope and held it taut, trying to steady the tug as it bucked up and down like a startled horse on the swells.

"Jesus Christ!" Rick shouted. "Watch what the fuck you're doing!"

"It was an accident."

"You scraped the shit out of my hull."

The waves had settled. Alex tied the rope off as fast as he could, looping it in quick figure eights around the nearest cleat and then finishing with a half-hitch.

"It was those waves," he said. "You could have helped me tie her up."

"I could help you wipe your ass, too. But I figured even a Newfie scab like you would be capable of doing something that fucking simple."

Alex leapt down onto the tug, picked up the aft tie-line, and threw it on deck. Then he climbed back up and tied it off, too. Rick was leaning over the side with both hands on the gunwale, peering down to inspect the damage; there was a clear scrape in the paint of the hull where the orange primer now showed through.

"You better touch that up."

"You want me to do that now?"

"Don't be an ass. Get rid of that goddamn scrap first."

Rick continued to swear and curse about the damage as Alex pulled on his work gloves. Trudging to the bow, he seized one of the splintered planks with both hands and carried it to starboard. On the forward deck of his tug was a steel container they used as a garbage skip, and into it he tossed the plank before heading back for another. He had to step around Rick who was kneeling on the deck, using a rag dipped in turpentine to wipe away excess tar, which in places had bled from the seams into the edges of the planks. For a time they worked like this with neither of them talking to the other and the only sound that of waves slapping against the metal hull of the tug and the wooden hull of the seiner.

Then, without preamble, Rick began talking about the Kraken. He

said it was a hundred years old and had been used to carry supplies across the Atlantic in the Allied convoys during the Second World War. He also said that it had survived three attacks by the Krauts when a lot of other boats didn't. Alex continued working and only half-listened and every so often made an affirmative or noncommittal sound in the back of his throat.

"What do you think of that?" Rick asked.

"That's really something."

"Damn straight it's something."

Alex hefted another piece of plank, this one riddled with nails, and lifted it carefully over Rick, telling him to watch his back, and Rick told him to watch his own. As Alex stepped up to starboard, he saw in the water a bulbous head that shone wetly and had the same blue-grey sheen as the waves, as if part of the sea had simply taken shape. It was his seal and she was looking at him curiously. Alex set down the plank and made a shooing motion with his hands, and when that didn't work he picked up a crooked nail and tossed it in the water—not directly at the seal but near enough to startle her. The nail made a plopping sound and the animal dropped beneath the surface, leaving concentric ripples radiating in its absence.

Alex looked back at Rick; he hadn't noticed anything and was still rambling on about the boat. He was saying that the company didn't build wooden boats anymore because they were too cheap, but everybody knew wooden boats were better quality and lasted longer and handled more easily in the water. Rick sat back on his knees and waved his rag at the boat moored opposite, which was a modern packer with an aluminium hull, bridge, and cabin.

"Think that no-account tin can is gonna be around in a hundred years?"

"No," Alex said.

"Fucking rights it won't."

After that Rick stopped telling him about the boat and they worked in silence again. Alex cleared the remaining pieces of planking, some of which had to be sawed in half or quartered to fit in the skip; then he gathered up the smaller chunks of wood and metal in a bucket, which he lowered down to the deck of the tug; lastly he got out a broom and swept the slivers and splinters and woodchips and sawdust into piles, and with a dustpan shovelled these piles into black garbage bags. When he said he was finished Rick stood up to check over the work and muttered about Alex's uselessness without being able to find any faults.

"Get rid of that shit and come right back."

"Bill might have some other jobs for me."

"I said you come right back—and I better not catch you feeding no fucking seal."

Alex undid his tie-lines and tossed them onto the tug and then jumped down after them, his work boots ringing off the metal deck. The engine

was warm now and in starting up did not cough or choke like it had earlier that morning but rumbled smoothly to a full-throated roar. Alex put the throttle in reverse and spun the wheel as he glided away, turning the tug one hundred and eighty degrees before heading back towards the plant.

Halfway there the seal appeared again. She surfaced off to starboard and kept pace, floating alongside him and following him all the way to the wharf. She hovered about ten feet away as he docked and tied up and turned off the engine. He looked around to make sure he was alone, and then leaned over the side of the tug and spoke softly to the seal, as you might to a dog. He chastised her for turning up when Rick was around. He asked if she was hungry again, and also if she was lonely, and if that was why she acted so friendly towards him. The seal gave no indication that it understood any of these questions, but simply stared at him. There were no whites to her eyes, or irises or pupils—just twin orbs that were the colour of water in a well and almost as fathomless.

“I’ll be right back, girl,” Alex said. “Just sit tight for a sec.”

He walked up the gangplank to the wharf. In the corner of the wharf, above where he moored the tug, was the hydraulic crane they used to load supplies onto the boats. At the base of the crane was its control box and he used this to manipulate the arm and the cable, which had a steel hook on the end, like a giant fishhook. He lowered the hook to within a foot of his tug, then trotted down there to attach the hook to the carry-ropes on either side of the garbage skip. The seal was still waiting patiently and he spoke assurances to her again before trotting back up and raising the crane until the cable tightened and the ropes went taut and the skip left the ground, swinging in the air with a pendulous motion. Beside the crane was a wheeled cart onto which he lowered the skip. He then detached the hook and left it hanging there as he pushed the cart towards the dumpster at the far end of the plant.

In passing the warehouse door he spotted Bill, who was taking inventory: studying the shelves lining the walls and jotting tallies down on a clipboard. Alex let his cart roll to a halt and went in. When Bill heard him coming he looked up, pen poised over his inventory sheet.

“Problem, Alex?”

“Just thought I’d check to see if you had any other jobs need doing.”

“You and Rick done already?”

“Not really.”

Alex didn’t explain but stood with his hands on his hips, hoping.

“Hmm.” Bill tucked the pen behind his ear and scratched his jaw. “Tell you what—Frank left some scrap on the Seattle. After lunch I’ll send you over there to clean it up, eh?”

“Sounds good.”

“Give you a break from Rick, at least.”

Alex was already walking off. He called back: "What I need is a clean break."

"You got to have thick skin around that guy."

"I know it."

Behind the gear locker and their lunch room were the garbage dumpsters. That was where Alex emptied the skip, tossing the larger pieces of wood in one at a time and dumping the smaller scraps out using the plastic bucket. When it was done he left the cart and skip there and carried the bucket with him as he walked back along the wharf.

En route he stopped at the processing area. The stench was getting worse in the midday heat, and now had a physical, oppressive presence that made Alex retch, but the workers seemed oblivious: they continued to sort the passing roe with precise, repetitive motions, as if performing some important ritual or rite. Just inside the entrance was a plastic tub filled with herring. After the roe was extricated, the gutted fish were sent to another part of the plant to be turned into feed and fertilizer, but the workers always kept a few here; on their breaks they liked to toss them to the seagulls and watch the ensuing fights and place bets on which bird would end up with the fish. He had never asked if it was okay for him to take a few fish, but they had never challenged him about it, either. He grabbed half a dozen herring, all sleek and shimmering and slippery, and dropped them in his bucket. When he walked out with his load several gulls descended on him, squawking and flapping, and he made fake kicking motions to keep them at bay as he carried the bucket away, back towards the crane and docks.

At the bottom of the gangplank the seal was still waiting for him; she knew what gift he was bringing her and she rolled over once, slow and lazy as a log, to show her pleasure.

"Over here, girl," he said. "I got you a feast, today."

He stepped between the tug and the pilings, into the shadows of the wharf, where he would be shielded from the rest of the marina. Crouching down, he reached into the bucket and scooped out one of the herring, which he tossed in the water. It landed with a slap and hung there suspended, trailing smoke-like streaks of blood across the surface. The seal moved in to take it, snapping it up and tilting her head back to let the herring slip down her gullet. She had teeth like a dog's and used her jaw the same way, but her snub nose and watery whiskers reminded him more of a cat. When she finished he tossed her the next fish, and the next. She was bold but not stupid and would only come within five or six feet, so he had to throw each one that far and then wait for her to finish it before giving her another.

"Good girl," Alex said. "Tasty, eh?"

Between portions she would weave back and forth in the water, and by studying the torpedo-shape of her body he developed an understanding

of the way she controlled it—using gentle movements of her fins, tilting and twisting them, elegant as the fan of a geisha. When she rotated, the water rolled off her skin; it had a rubbery texture that looked thick and tough and impervious, and he wished he could touch it just to see what it felt like. It was grey like the sea on a cloudy day and glistened in the same way, as the sea glistens.

As he tossed her the last fish he heard footsteps coming down the gangplank; he stood up abruptly, hurried to the tug, and hid the bucket behind the gunwale. Then he began to undo his tie lines, moving casually and with what he hoped looked like nonchalance. He did not check to see who it was right away but waited until the person reached the dock: then he saw that it was Elmore, lumbering along with his arms dangling at his sides like a Neanderthal. But he wasn't looking in Alex's direction and didn't seem to have noticed Alex or the seal. She was still floating in the sheltered waters beneath the wharf and after Elmore had passed out of sight Alex told her that he had to get back to work, now. She twisted and rolled as if she understood, and continued performing as he rinsed the blood from his gloves and fired up the tug and pushed off. Thinking she might follow him he watched the water in his wake as he chugged over to the Kraken, but she seemed to have figured it out and did not reappear.

Before he'd had the chance to tie up, Rick stuck his head over the gunwale and shouted down, "Thought I told you to come right back."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

He heaved himself aboard and brushed by Rick and began tying off.

"Where the fuck you been?"

"I stopped in to see Bill."

"If you been feeding that fucking seal..."

"I ain't been feeding it, all right?"

"Told you what I'd do if I caught you feeding that pest again."

"Yeah, yeah."

"I'll catch it and kill it, like we do when we're at sea. Skin the fucking thing." Rick chuckled, as if imagining it. "That's right. Skin it and make me a pair of sealskin boots."

Alex had finished with the tie lines. He tugged on his gloves one at a time, twisting his wrists back and forth and flexing his fingers to fit them into the fingers of the gloves.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to get to work instead of slacking off, scab."

"I'm not a scab, okay?"

"What are you, then?"

"Just a worker."

Rick bent to the toolbox he kept on deck, and began rooting through it. "If you work here and you're not union you're a scab."

"I tried to join the union and they wouldn't let me. I told you."

“They probably thought you were too dumb.”

“They said I’m only temporary so that’s why.”

“I don’t give a shit what they said.” Rick stood up. He had a sanding block in one hand and a sheaf of sandpaper in the other. He tossed these at Alex’s feet. “Now would you quit yapping about it and get to work? I want this deck sanded by lunch so I can oil it after.”

“Yes sir, captain.”

Alex sat cross-legged on deck and fiddled with the sanding block and thought of all the other things he could have said and wanted to say but hadn’t. He was sweating from heat and frustration and the sweat made his coveralls itch so he unzipped the top to his sternum, baring his chest. Taking a sheet of sandpaper he folded it in thirds and tore off a strip along the first fold and fitted the strip into the sanding block. Rick watched him do this and also watched him as he knelt and began to sand, using both hands to pull the block up and down the first plank along the wood grain. The paper made a whispering sound and gave off small puffs of sawdust. Soon his gloves and forearms were sprinkled with it, like yellow powder.

He could feel the sun on his back through the coveralls like the weight of a hot iron, and he could feel Rick’s eyes on him as he worked. Rick was drinking coffee and observing from beside the galley door, and as far as Alex could tell that was all he was doing. At one point he asked Rick if they could turn on the radio in the galley and Rick told him no because all they played these days was rap and nigger music and there was no point listening to that.

“It’s not all rap.”

“Don’t worry about the goddamn radio—worry about the goddamn decking. I want it smooth as a baby’s ass before I oil it up later.”

Alex finished one plank and crawled on his knees up to the next. As he scrubbed at it Rick came to stand beside him and scrutinize what he was doing; every so often Rick would criticize some aspect of his sanding, telling him to go faster or slower or to go back and redo a particular patch. Eventually Alex straightened and sat on his knees and looked up at him. Rick loomed blimp-like above him and his shape was just a shadow with the sun behind it.

“Don’t you have something to do?”

“Yeah—I got to make sure you don’t fuck up my decking.”

“I won’t fuck up your deck, all right? But I won’t get much done with you standing there looking at my ass.”

“I ain’t looking at your ass, you little queer.”

“Sure—I’m the queer.”

The shadow stood motionless for a few seconds. Then Alex felt something wet sprinkle in his hair and he smelled the bitterness of coffee beans.

“What the hell was that?”

“An accident—like you.”

Rick walked away snickering; Alex bent to the deck and sanded as if he were trying to erase something or scrub out a stain, and as he knelt and worked like that, lathered in his own sweat, he could see the long summer of slavery that stretched before him, and it seemed to be endless and indefinite and eternal, each day melting into the next and Rick the only constant.

At noon the union men gathered in the lunchroom next to the gear locker. They sat together around a rectangular table and undid the top halves of their coveralls, which they allowed to hang down from the backs of the chairs so that the sleeves just brushed the floor. To Alex it looked as if they had sloughed off part of the skin that they worked in, making them more human, but he knew this was deceptive since below the table they still wore their uniforms.

As the men ate their sandwiches and drank their coffee they talked about Elmore’s new Harley and the strip club up the street and the best way to repair a broken compressor on a fridge. Alex listened to all this and said nothing. Originally he had tried to take part in these conversations, but anything he said had left him open to some barb or rebuttal from Rick, and he’d learned instead to sit and eat and wait for lunch to end. He’d grown so accustomed to doing this and tuning out their talk that it startled him when he heard his name mentioned; he looked up, still chewing a mouthful of macaroni. Elmore was telling them all how he’d seen Alex feeding the seal.

Alex swallowed his food and said, “No, I weren’t.”

“What do you mean you weren’t?” Elmore said. “I saw you.”

Then he looked over at Rick, as if anticipating how he’d react.

“You little liar,” Rick said. “You little fucking liar.”

“It was only a couple of herring.”

“Those things are a goddamn pest. If you’d ever been on a real fishing boat you’d know that. Tear holes in nets and eat the catch. Just giant rats is all they are.” He sat back and crossed his arms and chuckled. “Looks like I’m gonna go a-seal-hunting this afternoon, boys. Catch me a seal and do it in like them Eskimos—bash in its little head.”

Alex put down his fork, then picked it up again. “Yeah, right,” he said.

“Don’t think I would?”

“You better not.”

“Or what?” Rick said. “What you gonna do, scab?”

There was a long silence and Alex didn’t answer and they stared at each other in silence. Then Bill burped, long and low, distracting them and making all the guys laugh.

“Take it easy, Rick,” Bill said.

“You on his side, boss?”

“I’m not on anybody’s side—I’m just saying take it easy.”

“I’ll take it easy when this scab starts doing his job, not feeding no fucking seal.”

“That reminds me,” Bill said, scratching his jaw, “there’s a bit of a mess on the Seattle, from Frank’s rebuild. It needs clearing and I figured Alex could tackle it this afternoon.”

“No problem,” Alex said.

“Like hell,” Rick said. “You’re oiling up my deck this afternoon.”

Bill shook his head. “Sorry, Rick—the Seattle’s skipper is coming down tomorrow to check her out, so I want her looking slick. You might have to finish the deck on your own.”

Rick looked from Bill to Alex as if he suspected the plot they’d concocted. Without saying anything, he stood up and went over to the sink and flicked his coffee into the basin. He rinsed the cup thoroughly and deliberately, using his fingers to wipe out the dregs, and placed it upside down on the counter next to the taps. The men all watched him do this. Then, still without saying anything, he went out, and Elmore went out after him.

Later Alex would remember all that, and the way it had happened.

To reach the Seattle Alex had to pilot his tug by the gap in the breakwater that gave access to Burrard Inlet, and through which the fishing boats passed during the herring and salmon seasons. Out there the water was choppy and surging with whitecaps; he could see sailboats skimming the surface and cargo freighters lying flat like toppled skyscrapers, and beyond them he could see the North Shore, where he lived, with its beaches and condos and wooded slopes, and its mountains that rose up in grey swells still topped by snow, like larger versions of the white-capped waves. The sense of space was vast and captivating and as always when heading that way he imagined momentarily turning the wheel, hand over hand, and steering out through the gap into the uncharted waters beyond, and as always he didn’t do this or even seriously consider it but instead stayed on course and continued towards his destination.

The Seattle was as old as the Kraken and just as imposing. Frank was the contractor who had been hired to rebuild the cabin, on behalf of the Native owners, after the end of last herring season back in March. Frank was younger than the union guys and had treated Alex differently from them. For long stretches, especially when Frank had been replacing the stokes in the hull, Alex had worked alongside him, but the job was done now and so was Frank.

In the galley Frank had left the old cupboards that he’d removed, as well as a series of rusty two-inch pipes that looked like they’d been part

of the boat's freshwater supply system. Sprinkled on the surrounding linoleum were wood chips, sawdust, and flakes of rust, and all that mess needed cleaning. With a crowbar Alex broke the cupboards into individual panels; beneath the fake oak laminate they were made of cheap plyboard that cracked easily. The counter was thicker and stronger and had to be cut down with a handsaw. He carried the pieces out one at a time, followed by the piping, and laid it all down on deck near the bow. Next he set to work on the debris, which he swept slowly into piles, then re-swept for no real reason except to waste time. With a dustpan he transferred the rust, wood, and sawdust into a black garbage bag that had turned hot and tacky in the heat. Then he walked around deck, carrying the bag and hoping he looked busy and trying to think of something else to do.

The new counters in the galley were still dusty so he wiped those down, smearing the dust into grey streaks and then wiping the surface a second time. He did the same to the table and when he finished he sat at it, twisting the damp cloth back and forth in his palms and feeling the easy, listing rhythm of the ship beneath him. He checked his watch and knew it was time to go but found it difficult to make himself move. As he sat there he glanced out the galley porthole; across the marina he noticed two blue-clad figures, tiny as toys, standing by his tug in the shadow of the wharf. It was the same spot that he usually fed the seal.

He went outside and clambered onto the starboard gunwale and perched there, bracing one hand against the cabin roof for balance. He shielded his eyes from the sun to peer at the two men and tried to make them out. It looked like Rick and Elmore. He couldn't tell what they were doing but they were hunched over something on the dock. He felt it then: a sense of anticipation and foreboding, a kind of sickness, blossoming in his stomach.

“Son of a bitch.”

From the gunwale he jumped down to the dock and landed hard, tumbling forward onto his hands and knees. Then he was scrambling upright, sprinting full-tilt through the marina; his boots pounded on the wooden docks, which swayed and rocked underfoot like the floor in a funhouse. At one of the gaps between sections of dock he tripped and stumbled and caught himself and kept running. As he drew near the gangplank he slowed down. The men were there, in the shadows of the wharf. It was Rick and Elmore like he'd thought and they were hoisting something off the dock, using a rope they'd looped over one of the crossbeams that supported the underside of the wharf. He could tell by the tubular shape that it was a seal, his seal, but at first he didn't know what they had done to her; she was no longer grey and speckled like the sea but bright crimson as if they'd dipped her in red paint and made a piñata out of her. Then he saw the blood drizzling from her tail, and he saw the bare muscles and tendons, and he saw the way she hung there all

skinless and garish and shining like some nightmarish vision of hell. He saw all that and the men saw him at the same time. Rick was squatting down and tying off the rope they'd used to string up the seal and Elmore was standing at his side. They turned to face Alex and for a brief moment seemed uncertain how to behave. Spread at their feet were the tools they'd used to catch and kill her: a bucket of herring, a fishing gaff, some netting, a claw hammer, a serrated six-inch knife. There was also something grey and reddish and rubbery that looked like a large jellyfish. Rick bent down to pick it up, clenching it in his fists and lifting it so it unfolded to reveal itself. It was the seal's skin. The side Rick displayed was red as a matador's cape, and like a matador Rick shook it to taunt him.

"I warned you, didn't I? I told you what I'd do."

Alex said nothing but only stood there. He had started to cry and when they saw that they made sad and sympathetic and mocking faces; they joked about killing his little pet and snickered at the jokes for each other's benefit. Standing there laughing, with their tools strewn about them and the skinned body hung behind them and their coveralls splattered in red, they looked less like men and more like demons or some malevolent imitation of men.

Alex made an outraged, animal sound that wasn't a word and wasn't a scream but something in-between, and then ran at Rick and grabbed him and started hitting him. They wrestled and clawed and punched at each other until Alex felt something connect with the side of his head and then he was on the dock. He pushed himself up and rushed at Rick again and got hit again and went down again, and this time he stayed down as they stood over him and kicked him a few times—quick and vicious toe-punts—in the ribs, the back, the kidneys.

He had closed his eyes and when the blows stopped he opened them and saw the two men standing over him. They told him that he was crazy and that he had brought this on himself and that he had got what he deserved. Then they were gone and he was alone on the dock staring up at a blue sky. The seagulls were circling up there; they'd already caught the scent of fresh blood and meat and flesh. A few swooped down and settled on the dock; they eyed Alex and eyed the hanging seal as if trying to decide which one was dead. When he moved they fluttered back out of reach and began to squawk indignantly as he rolled over and pushed up onto his hands and knees and eased himself to his feet. He felt as if he had been in a car accident: not quite sure how it had happened but knowing that it was bad and knowing also that it was partly his fault. He was still crying but not sobbing, just weeping steadily from the pain, the tears blending with the blood on his cheeks as if his eyes were bleeding.

He shuffled over to the rope that was lashed to a cleat on the dock. He untied the rope and held it, struggling with the weight of the seal, which was surprisingly heavy—probably a hundred pounds or more. He allowed

the rope to slither through his hands, the nylon threads scouring his palms, and in this way lowered the seal down to the dock. She landed wetly and heavily in the puddle of blood that had pooled beneath her, and as she did her body bent and slumped over to the side.

She looked as if she had been turned inside out and he didn't understand how her innards could hold together like that without spilling everywhere. She did not resemble his seal anymore, but he recognized her by the eyes: they were still dark and doe-like and gazed up from the depths of death as if she recognized him and understood the part he had played in her fate. There were cracks in her bare skull where they had hit her, and they'd used the end of the gaff as a makeshift meat hook, shoved up underneath her shoulder blades to hoist her. He gripped the hook and yanked it down and it came out with a soft sucking sound, like a spade shearing turf. Laying it aside he knelt with her and petted her muscled back, so tender and vulnerable without the tough hide, and spoke to her in the friendly tones he had used while feeding her. The seagulls created a circle around him like the attendants at a funeral, waiting for him to finish his mourning so they could enjoy the after-service feast.

To prevent that, he slid his hands beneath the seal and rolled her towards the edge of the dock and off into the sea. She landed with a splash and bobbed back up, before the head dipped under and dragged the rest of the body down, dropping as still and silent as a scuttled ship. As he stood the gulls cawed indignantly and hopped forward to inspect the place where the seal had lain. Others approached the skin Rick had left on the dock and began to peck at it. Alex swatted them away and picked up the skin, clutching it protectively. He stroked it. One side felt just like he expected it to feel: sleek and smooth as human skin, but thicker and stronger and more resilient. The other side, the inside, was tender and had a wet, gelatinous quality, softened by fat and blubber. He held it draped over one arm and carried it with him up the gangplank. He was limping badly; one of their kicks had given him a charley horse in his thigh and the muscle spasmed at each step.

Outside the processing area two workers stood with their face masks pulled down around their throats like the breathing sacs on frogs. The workers were smoking and they stopped smoking to watch Alex as he walked by carrying the sealskin. He knew he was bleeding because he could feel the warmth of the blood on his chin and taste it in his mouth, and because red drops splashed onto the concrete every few steps, but he didn't know how bad it was until he got to their warehouse and went into the washrooms and turned on the lights and looked in the mirror.

His lip was split wide and his nose was bleeding and swollen and probably broken; one of his molars felt loose and he could wriggle it like a kid about to lose one of his primary teeth. He draped the sealskin over the nearest sink and then ran the tap in the sink next to it and splashed

water on his face. The water was cold but each handful seemed to burn. As he washed the blood away more continued to drizzle from his nose. It hurt too much to pinch the bridge so from one of the stalls he tore off pieces of toilet paper, which he twisted into plugs that he stuffed up his nostrils to stem the flow of blood. He had just finished doing this when Bill appeared in the doorway. When he saw Alex, Bill stopped in mid-stride, and then came another few steps forwards. Alex didn't turn around but gazed at Bill in the mirror and waited for him to speak. Without quite meeting his eyes Bill told him that he had heard what they'd done and that it was a shitty thing and that he was sorry. He didn't say exactly what he'd heard, but the sealskin was right there in the sink and Bill glanced at it uneasily without commenting on it so it seemed as if he knew everything.

"They worked you over good, eh?"

Alex acknowledged that they had.

"I'll make sure they get written up for it. It's almost impossible to fire these union guys but they'll get a warning, at least." Bill scratched at his beard in that nervous way of his and twisted his left boot back and forth on the linoleum floor, making it squeak. The tap was still running and Alex stood over it with his hands braced on either side of the sink.

"Tell you what," Bill said. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off? Take a couple days off if you want. Don't come back until you're ready."

Alex said that he'd do that and thanked him and waited some more. Bill said he was sorry again and eventually, finally, he left. The twisted tissues that Alex had jammed in his nostrils had bled through. He plucked them out and discarded them and replaced them with fresh ones. Afterwards he looked at himself in the mirror for several minutes as he thought about what had happened and then thought about what had to happen now because of it.

His trolley cart and garbage skip were still where he had left them that morning by the dumpsters. He folded and laid the sealskin inside the skip before returning to the gear locker warehouse. From the low shelves just inside the entrance he got down three cans of marine paint in the primary colours and three cans of lead-based primer. At the back of the warehouse was a toolshed they kept open for communal use, and in one of the drawers he found a rivet punch and a hammer and that was all he needed. He put the paint cans and tools in the skip and pushed the cart down the dock, moving as slowly and painfully as Sisyphus pushing his rock. The workers were no longer on their smoke break and nobody noticed him. The tide was higher now and the marina water getting choppiest as afternoon wore on. The gulls still circled ceaselessly, endlessly, indifferently.

As before he used the crane to manoeuvre the skip, this time angling it over the tug and lowering it directly onto the deck. He walked down the gangplank without hurrying and detached the skip from the crane.

Only once did he look at the place where the seal had been; its blood was already going dark and tacky in the sun, like treacle. He turned away and gazed across the marina. From the tug he could see the Western Kraken and he could also see Rick plodding back and forth on deck, mindless and purposeful as a golem. Alex watched him for a few minutes, and then hobbled over towards the boat, deliberately accentuating his limp. Rick saw him approaching and stopped what he was doing and came to stand at the stern, facing the dock. In one hand Rick had a paint brush and in the other he had a pot of deck oil.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Bill asked to see you.”

“You ratted on me, you little scab.”

“No. But he knows. I guess somebody saw. He called me in to explain my side of it and now he wants to hear your side.”

“I got shit to do,” Rick said, and spat a gob of black goo onto the dock at Alex’s feet.

“Whatever. I’m just telling you what Bill said.”

Alex turned and limped away, hoping he looked weak and defeated, and took shelter on his tug. In the wheelhouse he hunkered down to wait, feeling the burn in his back and side where he’d been beaten. From his position he was fairly well-hidden but he had a good view of the gangplank and wharf above. A few minutes later he heard the sound of boots on the dock, and then saw Rick lumbering up the gangplank. After Rick had passed, Alex counted to ten before he untied the tug, fired it up, and drove it directly to the north end of the marina. This time at the Kraken he docked with deliberate carelessness: grinding the prow right into the hull and scouring out a two-foot gouge. He lashed one tie line loosely to a cleat on deck and lifted the cans of paint and primer one at a time, placing them on the portside gunwale, before he climbed aboard with the hammer and rivet punch.

The forward deck gleamed in the sun with the fresh coat of oil Rick had given it. Now that the newer planks were stained they blended in better with the older ones, but the contrast was still evident and always would be. The pot of deck oil was sitting on the deck; Alex kicked it over casually and got down to work. He took the first can of paint—the red can—and rested it upside-down on the portside gunwale. Placing the rivet punch against the bottom, he brought the hammer down on the punch and drove it through the tin. As he worked the punch back and forth to free it, red paint started pumping out in arterial spurts. Picking the can up, he held it between his palms by the lid and base and shook it in front of him as he walked methodically around the deck. The red paint slopped and splattered across the newly-oiled planks, leaving coloured arcs like slashes of blood, as well as blotches of various sizes, from large spots down to tiny speckles. When the spurts of red dwindled to a trickle he let the can

drop and started on the next. This one was blue and the brightness of the hue created an unreal contrast against the red. The red alone had looked like a mistake; two colours made it more meaningful and more like art. He added the blue judiciously, using the entire deck as his canvas. The paint had a chemical smell that reminded him of the model paints he'd used as a child, only stronger. He breathed it in as he worked and the heady stench made him giddy and dizzy and high. Then the last of the blue sputtered out, so he punted the can towards the prow and reached for the can of yellow.

He thought the result was becoming more beautiful with each coat, and he grew so engrossed in his project that he paid no attention to who might have noticed, or whether Rick could be coming back, until he heard a shout from the direction of the wharf. He looked up and saw the big man rumbling down the gangplank, his whole body rolling with the motion like a bull on the rampage. Alex dropped the half-finished can of yellow and left it to spill across the deck. In quick succession he punched holes in the remaining three cans of primer, knocking one overboard in his hurry. He left one of the others dribbling over the gunwale and bulwark and hull, and the last he lobbed like a grenade into the galley, where it landed with a clunk and began emptying across the linoleum.

Rick's footsteps were pounding on the docks, closer now, and Alex moved to undo his tie line. As he did he glanced back and saw Rick's hands appear at the starboard gunwale, followed by his head, rising up like a baleful moon, his expression full of rage and hate and something worse, something murderous. Holding the rope in one hand Alex leapt down to the tug. Rick was screaming and rushing at him and Alex knew that he didn't have time to start the engine so instead he just shoved hard with his hands against the hull of the Kraken, pushing away from the larger vessel. As he did he felt something brush his head and looked up and saw Rick leaning out over the water, having lunged for him and missed.

"You son of a bitch," Rick was screaming, "you son of a bitch!"

His face had gone almost purple and he continued shouting and screaming at him, telling him he was going to kill him and calling him a faggot and a cocksucker and a Newfie scab bastard, but all these insults sounded meaningless and empty over the five feet of water between them. Alex stood and stared at him like you might stare at a cougar snarling within its cage at the zoo. Then Alex started to laugh. He laughed and continued to laugh as Rick shrieked and shook his fists and stomped up and down the deck, going rabid, working himself into a frenzy. Behind him, on the wharf, an audience had gathered. Rows of packing plant workers stood gazing down, in their white lab coats and face masks, observing the display like medical students who had come to witness some kind of strange human experiment.

Rick was still ranting when Alex fired up the tug, drowning the noise

out. He did not say anything and did not look back as he pushed the throttle forward and manoeuvred the tug around the northwest corner of the marina. He headed for the gap in the breakwater that he had always dreamed of passing through, and it felt like a dream as he did so for the first and last time. Burrard Inlet opened up before him and the vista of North Vancouver lay behind it. To the west he could see the upright supports of the Lions Gate Bridge, and between them the strands of the suspension cables were strung like thin tensile wires that glistened in the sun.

He cranked the throttle further, as far as it would go, and the tug lumbered forward, moving steadily and resolutely into the oncoming waves, which broke across its bow and crashed against its hull. He felt the concussions vibrating up through the deck, and each wave exploded in a shower of white spray, cool and light as snowflakes, that he felt flecking his face. In the distance were a few sailboats slicing through the water, as well as the slow, lumbering forms of trawlers and pleasure cruisers, but none of those vessels were near him. Four or five miles out, when he was midway between the North Shore in front of him and the shipyards behind, he cut the motor and let the tug drift, rocking like a cradle on the waves.

He went to stand on deck. It was mid-afternoon and the height of the day's heat, and in his coveralls he was broiling. He unzipped the front carefully, removing first one sleeve and then the other, having to peel the sweaty garment off like the skin he'd always imagined it to be. He lowered it down to his waist and pushed it further, to his knees, and then kicked off his boots so he could step out of it. From there it seemed only natural to peel off his tank top, too, and his boxers and socks, until he was naked beneath sun. Out there he could no longer smell the stench of rotten herring, only the richness of the sea air, which he inhaled in long and grateful lungfuls—as if he'd just emerged after holding his breath in a swamp.

The sealskin was still lying on deck. He picked it up and held it out at arm's length, studying it. It was a complete hide. They had slit the seal's belly and opened her up to her throat, leaving the back intact. The scalp, too, was intact, with its empty eye sockets and flaps to the left and right that would have been part of the jaw. He turned the skin around and draped it across his shoulders, cupping the scalp over his head and letting the tail hang down his back. It reached to just below his knees. He let go and found he could wear the hide like that without having to hold it in place. On his back it felt tough and comforting, a kind of armour, and he imagined himself as an Inuit or bushman, inhabiting the hide of his animal totem. Dressed like that, he went to perch at the prow, with one leg on deck and the other propped on the gunwale, supporting his elbow, in the pose of a thinker. He studied the downtown shoreline and could just make

out the shipyards he'd left behind. There was no sign of any boat coming from there and he guessed that meant they'd decided not to follow him but instead would wait for him to come back.

"I'm not going back," he said.

He did not know who he was talking to but it felt good to say the words aloud. After he did, as if in answer, he heard an odd, deep sound like a dog barking. He looked around. At first he saw nothing and thought he had imagined it. Then, off to the starboard side, he spotted a small, bulbous head. It made that unmistakable dog-like sound again, and he made the same sound back at it, or his best imitation of it. At that the seal fell silent. It seemed to be regarding him with scepticism, as if it sensed he was an impostor but wasn't quite sure.

Then the moment passed; the seal lost interest in him and dipped beneath the waves and didn't resurface. Alex got back behind the wheel and fired up the engine. Instead of turning around and heading for the shipyards, he kept going towards the North Shore, his home, wearing nothing except his sealskin cape, feeling aloof and alone and untouchable.

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Entropy

Sean Arthur Joyce

*"I'm learning to embrace entropy. By the time I die
I'll have perfected it."*

—Ernest Hekkanen

Old injuries live in my body
like fussy children or old,
disgruntled lovers
whose complaints etch themselves
into tissue and cartilage.

The ankle I sprained
in high school when I hit
that last wrenching step,
the shock an uneasy sleeper
that wakes at the slightest sound.

The aching shoulder
whose periodic slashes of pain
force me to pay attention
to a joint I happily ignored—
a Zen master with his bamboo rod.

The split ridges of fingernails—
early rumblings of rockfall
from glacial peaks groaning
in forty-degree heat
and moving closer every minute.

MARGRITH SCHRANER grew up in Switzerland and came to Canada in 1969. She is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. “Dream Dig” was published in the *Journey Prize Anthology* in 2001. Her book, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen* was released in 2006. Her story, “Changing Trains,” appeared in the Spring 2012 issue of the *NOR*.

Pieces of Time

Margrith Schraner

SHE IS OLDER now. There is no one to stop her from attending to the finer details of her existence. Her rhythms must be off, her husband remarks with a smirk: Why else would she be tackling her spring cleaning in the middle of winter and risk her life to carry out bag after bag of stuff through all the hard-packed snow that makes walking difficult?

It should be obvious to anyone who has been watching that she intends to clear the clutter in her life. Deep down, she trusts that it is a natural process. Each day, she seems to receive the necessary energy to keep going, on to the next thing, and the one after that. Until the job is finished, she decides. Until it comes to a natural end.

“Look at this,” she says and blows the dust off the cassette tapes, stacked layer by layer in an open shoe box in her closet. “I certainly don’t need Santana, the Gipsy Kings, or the Dire Straits, anymore; I got rid of my old cassette player years ago. And what about the four bicycle helmets that are hanging on hooks from the low beam in the basement, at the bottom of the stairs? You hit your head each time you go by to retrieve our camping gear. Not very *feng shui*, if you ask me.” She looks at him, vexed. “When’s the last time either of us has ridden a bike?”

Her right eyelid has started to do its twitching again. “Day or night, at the oddest of moments,” she complains, “for more than a week, already.” He listens. There may be a reason for this, he offers, something to do with all the close-up work she’s been doing, all the cleaning and clearing and consulting of the *bagua* map and looking too closely into the sixteen corners of her existence. She might want to consider drinking less coffee, too. But she won’t listen to him.

* * *

She has decided that today will be the day: She will finally divest herself of the gold crown that has been rattling around in that little box in the top

drawer of her desk for what must be more than a decade now. She thinks back to the root canal after it had become infected, the molar a mere stump beneath that shell of gold. Both had to be removed in the end. The price of gold has recently gone up; everyone knows that it is at an all-time high. She will pay Max the Jeweler a spontaneous visit, ask his opinion. His shop is in the Medical Building, up that long, dark staircase, turn left at the end of the hall. Luckily, his door is wide open. He beams at her from his revolving chair, a benevolent god in a lead apron. A silver-plated gravy boat sits on a side table near his elbow, next to a small heap of discarded silver necklaces and bracelets. He takes the crown from her gently, lays it down on his workbench, applies some drops from a bottle to the metal and waits a while. "Fourteen karats." He seems pleased. "Your dentist was an honest man." He weighs the small piece on a tiny scale and scribbles some calculations in a receipt book. She leaves with a check written out in her name.

* * *

The cleaning and clearing has been proceeding in an orderly manner. She has finished dropping off the last bags of discarded belongings at the Women's Centre, the Consignment Boutique and the Sally Ann. But she feels utterly stumped when it comes to deciding what she ought to do with the small vintage gold watch, a replica of an antique pocket watch with the unlikely name *Hoover* written on its filigreed silver dial, below the number twelve in the circle of Roman numerals. The watch no longer seems to work. It hasn't been working for a long time; longer, in fact, than she cares to remember.

* * *

She was seated at the table across from him at Captain Cook's Restaurant on Broadway and stared at the floor behind him, the swift movement of legs and feet and shoes belonging to the waitresses in uniform blurring her vision. She felt curiously empty. He had promised her a steak dinner if she would go through with it, and she had agreed to it, had obeyed him like a school girl. She fingered the antique-looking pocket watch on the golden chain-link necklace that hung from her neck. The time had stopped; she must have forgotten to wind it that day. She glanced at the restaurant clock on the adobe wall above the imitation fireplace. It was still too early for dinner. She ordered the clam chowder. It was he who ordered the steak. He would have liked some lobster tails to go with it, but alas, they had run out of lobster the night before.

* * *

She rummages in the *Leckerli* cookie tin that has served as her jewelry box for years and searches in vain for the long chain-link necklace from which the small pocket watch used to hang. What she manages to locate is the small watch—there, at the bottom of the box, wadded delicately in a sheet of silk paper. She marvels at the intricate design of miniature

leaves and roses delicately entwined on the back of the gold case. But the filigree seems tarnished, the gold worn down in places. It looks sooty. Smudged and lustreless. She tries to wind it, holds it up to her ear and listens. Its movement has been stilled by time. She has forgotten what his voice sounded like. What she remembers is the Dutch inflection, the pronounced uvular fricatives that used to grate on her nerves each time he uttered the letter 'r', reminding her of a chair forcibly pulled back along a stone floor. Or the long pauses after each sentence; the swallowing, the hesitation. The uncertainty. She had thought of him as handsome. Tall, dark and handsome, she would have added, had anyone cared to ask her opinion. But she was a new immigrant and matters of personal passion never entered into her conversation with others.

* * *

She was enrolled in a night school course and was working the morning shift as a waitress at the newly opened Rembrandt Hotel on Davie Street, when she saw the sign. The place for rent was on Comox Street, a small bed-sitter with a burner plate and sink, on the top floor, under the eaves of a three-storey rooming house that overlooked a small park in Vancouver's West End. The tall, dark, handsome fellow smiled when he came to her door to collect the rent at the end of the month. He was working on behalf of his father, who owned several such houses.

She was ironing her uniform the second time he came to her door. He tapped his foot to the rhythm of *You're So Vain*, a pop song playing on her transistor radio, casually inquired how she earned her living, and confided that the real reason for her luck in finding a place with such reasonable rent was that an old man who had occupied the place for many years had died unexpectedly in the middle of the month, which had left him and his father a mere two weeks to find a suitable renter to fill the vacancy. And here she was, in suite number four.

"My name is Jasper," he said, handing her his card before turning to leave. "Call me if anything goes wrong."

But then he appeared to have changed his mind, for he kept standing there, hesitating in the open door, looking in. His eye had been caught by the sight of fresh daffodils in the blue Delft mug she kept on her window sill. "Delft." A drawn-out word, followed by a long pause. "That's where my family is from. I decided to come over to Canada and live with my dad when I was twelve."

* * *

She saw that his card bore his full name in cursive italics. Below it, in bold, were the words, *Pieces of Time*. And below that, *Long case clocks; Tall case clocks; Repairs*. He was a watchmaker. She had occasion not long after that to see the grandfather clocks that stood up everywhere against the walls of his spacious apartment, which was located in another part of town, across the Cambie Bridge. Repairing clocks was his specialty.

She was fascinated by the gleaming brass pendulums encased in elaborate boxes made of walnut, oak and mahogany, but the overall shape disturbed her, reminded her oddly enough of coffins. He pointed to one of the grandfather clocks. It had a silver champlévé dial, its square shape was unique, and he owned it. “Mid 18th century Dutch verge border,” he explained. The clock was in excellent working order. What made the pendulum special was that it swung only once every two seconds. She would listen for the tell-tale whir that preceded the proclaiming of each quarter-hour, as if the clock were intent on clearing its voice prior to each performance. There was something Baroque about the precise, melodic chimes that pleased her, something dance-like and predictable.

* * *

“Hoover.” The owner of the Pawn Shop in the small mountain town looks at her bemused after trying in vain to pry open the case of the pocket watch with his fingernail. “That’s hardly a name for a watch.” But he had taken off the small, optic lens that resembled a miniature telescope sitting in front of his left eye and had looked up at her shortsightedly, before moving over to his computer to check it out. “Hoover could be a subsidiary of Omega, a Dutch company that has relocated. They are now in Taipei.” He looked up at her briefly then turned back to the screen. “Replicas of antique originals,” he read. “It says here that the movement is Swiss. Tell you what.” He looked at her kindly. “If I were you, I would go up to Baker and talk to the owner of the watch store, there. He collects antique pocket watches, I’ve heard.”

* * *

She had continued attending night school while earning her living as a waitress in the daytime long after her return from the summer trip with Jasper. He drove her down to Frisco in a Volkswagen Beetle with a broken heater. She remembers listening to the *Best of Santana* and giving herself over to the whir of the motor when the cassette tape rewound itself, again and again, while outside vast avocado fields flitted by, extending into endless horizons on both sides of the highway. She had read about Henry Miller’s residence, which she gathered must be hidden somewhere along the Big Sur. If only she had a map that could lead them there. If only they had taken the steep path down the coastal cliffs, that stormy day along the Oregon coast. If only they had stopped for a longer break at the look-out platform, where they had fed coins into the telescope that allowed her to peer down behind the surf pounding against rocks, far below, strangely repulsed by the sight of the enormous, glistening bodies of sea lions as they heaved themselves up onto the cliffs to seek refuge in the caves. She came from a landlocked country and found the enormity of the Pacific exhilarating, albeit intimidating, a vastness much too wild for her to comprehend. An unnatural tiredness had begun to creep into her bones soon after her return. She felt lethargic at most hours of the day,

inclined to sleep away her time. Six weeks had passed by the time she booked an appointment with Dr. Schom. Although the copper-T was said to have shown a consistently high success rate, he regretted to inform her, she could quite possibly be among the one or two percent of women whose body had become accustomed to it. She stifles her despair. “Wrong time, wrong man to start a family with.” The heat that had immediately flushed her face refused to subside for some time after that.

* * *

In his closet, Jasper had installed an ergonomically proper watchmaker’s bench he had constructed himself, on which were spread brass dials and painted dials, alongside blue steel hands of various sizes and multiple parts trays that held components related to the inner workings of a wide variety of clocks. A strong light shone down on the smaller containers of springs and screws from an angle lamp. He wore a jeweler’s eye loupe designed for detailed, close-up work. He could replace the crystals on vintage watches and reach for exactly the right tweezers or precision screwdriver for the job at hand. But when she contacted him many months later to inquire whether he could fix her small pocket watch pendant—the one he had chosen for her, because the dial design was a precise replica of a famous Dutch clock face dating back to the seventeenth century, when in fact the precision movement hailed from the country of her birth—he had not been forthcoming at all. “The devil’s in the details.” She detected no regret in the short sigh he let out saying that although he was capable of repairing a great many things, that small pocket watch—well—that one in particular had presented him with challenges that were far beyond his capabilities. The problem, as he saw it, was insurmountable.

* * *

The steak dinner took place in early October. She still remembers the rays of slanting sunlight that were casting an oblong shadow alongside her bowl of clam chowder. She had had a vision of life continuing on as before, minus the inconvenience of the small mishap, of course. It seems that she had underestimated her strength. It was the second time since her arrival in Canada that she succumbed to an asthma attack. Jasper had gone off to Amsterdam, to visit his mother who had recently moved in with a new man. It was Christmas Eve. She was without friends, and her own family lived far removed, halfway around the globe. She was on her own, gathering up a few belongings and boarding the bus, making her way to St. Paul’s emergency in the freezing rain.

* * *

It was true, what they said about the light at the end of the tunnel. It was night. She had been panicked, fighting for her breath and pushing the night button to call the nurse to her bed one minute, and the next she was traveling along a dark, serene and velvety space, feeling completely at ease and getting ever closer to the soft and beautiful light that beckoned

to her from afar, when a voice called her back. “We almost lost you, last night,” Dr. Schom said, setting down a miniature white poinsettia on the small bedside table, a present apparently sent to her by Mrs. Schom, who worked in the Doctor’s office as his assistant.

In actual fact, she had been steadily moving toward the end of the tunnel and was approaching the clear nature of vast space, when a dream figure came walking toward her. An old man, she had thought from afar, but now she recognized him as the previous occupant of the bed-sitter she now inhabited. What had stopped her from journeying on was the presence of the two border guards. Would she be expected to declare the small, antique watch that hung like a medallion from the amber bead necklace she wore around her neck? “Here.” It was the walking spirit of the old man who intervened. He pulled out a pair of needle-nosed pliers and deftly removed the small gold watch before handing the string of amber beads back to her. “Timeless wisdom.” He transmitted the meaning without the use of words. The amber was a gift, apparently bequeathed to her by her mother. “You could immerse the beads in brine,” he counseled. “That way, they’ll appear valueless. The lack of luster will fool the guards.” Would the process be reversible once she had crossed the threshold? Would the luster be restored? Her questions were met by silence.

* * *

She comes upon Jasper sweeping the stairwell of the house where she has been living for a month, already. She has just finished working the early breakfast shift at the Rembrandt hotel and is still wearing the dark brown uniform the hotel provides, a blouse with short, puffy sleeves under a close-fitting, sleeveless peasant dress, tailored at the waist, and a short apron of ochre-yellow, heavy cotton, identical to the napkins they use at the restaurant. He looks appraisingly at her legs, then at her face. “I was at your Hotel, the other night.” She likes the way he says *your* hotel. “I admired that large painting by Rembrandt. It takes up the entire wall, right there, by the bar. *The Night Watch*. Quite a clean piece of forgery, I have to admit. But still—.” His gaze has strayed downward, along her unshaven legs to her feet planted in Earth sandals, distinct with the negative heels that are all the rage now, said to imitate the natural imprint of feet standing in the sand. His eyes have come to rest on her apron. “They’ve done a great job, matching the colors of the painting with those of your uniform.”

* * *

She was eating her supper when he came to collect the rent at the end of the second month. He bobbed his head to the rhythm of the pop song that had hit the Top 40 chart that week. “Carly Simon,” he said, indicating the transistor radio beside her narrow bed in the corner. “I like her.” She must have heard the song a hundred times by now. She likes the melody, but has never been able to grasp the meaning of the song. *As you watched*

yourself gavotte, for instance. The mystery implicit in that line makes her feel frustrated. She doesn't want him to know about her struggles with the English language. She has picked up a copy of Tomas Hardy's novel, *Jude the Obscure*, recommended to her by Belinda, one of the waitresses she shares the breakfast floor with at the Rembrandt. But she is hardly able to read it; not without constantly referring to the *Langenscheidt Pocket Dictionary* she keeps close to her elbow. She identifies with the struggles of the working class hero, and with his dreams of becoming a scholar.

She hurriedly finishes the last bite of salad on her plate. She must run to catch the bus, she tells Jasper. Already, she is running late for her night school class at the Adult Learning Center. He makes her a generous offer she can't refuse. His Beetle is parked down below. But first, he'll quickly inspect the suite located directly below hers, next to the bathroom with the tub she's obliged to share with another renter. She has to scrub the tub each time she wants to take a bath. "Some tenant or other is constantly moving out," Jasper says and turns to leave.

* * *

"I was at your Hotel, the other night," he tells her again, the following week, offering to drive her to her night school class. "My father and I were sitting together at the bar, enjoying a Heineken on tap, when he got up to talk to the painter, who apparently hails from Czechoslovakia. Joseph Gabanek is his name, a painter of gypsies in his own country. Apparently he has been at work on the creation of a life-sized copy of Rembrandt's masterpiece for over a month, now. My father goes by the hotel to check on him most days, when he finishes work. He thinks that no one except a Dutchman should have been given permission to tackle a job as important as this one." Jasper stopped the car to let her out. "Who else would be qualified enough, or possess the appropriate skills that are necessary for working in oils to cover such an enormous piece of seamless, imported canvas?" He looks at her, peeved. "Who else but a man hailing from Holland could possibly have the knowledge required to properly recreate the layers of glazes, and moreover, to lay them down in the precise manner Rembrandt had employed some three-hundred years ago?"

* * *

Once, Jasper dropped by her place unexpectedly in the afternoon, ostensibly to fix the dripping tap over the small sink in the corner. He thought he'd see how she was getting on. *It Never Rains in Southern California* happened to be playing as he stood listening. "San Francisco," he murmured. "I'd sure like to see that city. I could drive down with my Beetle." His eye had caught the sight of tulips that sat in the blue Delft beer mug on her windowsill. He wanted to know how she had come by the mug. "I received it a couple of years ago from a dance instructor, when I volunteered to step in. I was taking a course in ballroom dancing.

We were learning the cha-cha. The lady, who was his regular dance partner, had taken to her bed. She was seasick.” His face creases in a smirk. “Seasick?” Surely she must have chosen the wrong word. “Nauseous,” he corrects her. “I learned to dance the cha-cha while crossing the Atlantic,” she went on, unperturbed. “Lots of time—ten days between Rotterdam and New York.” His eyes lit up at the mention of *The Nieuw Amsterdam*. “That’s one big, gorgeous ship, if you ask me—one of the biggest on the Holland-America Line.” She thought she saw his chest puff out with a hint of Dutch pride. He beamed at her. “Would you like to go out for coffee?”

* * *

Jasper sports a handlebar moustache, which gives him an aristocratic look. At the impromptu gathering he has taken her to, late at night in the West End, at a penthouse suite on the twenty-third floor, she doesn’t see one familiar face. She has brought her red bikini and joins the other guests for a rooftop splash in the pool. Someone snaps a picture of Jasper. He appears to be flirting. She catches the look on a young woman’s face as he approaches the pool and slides the white terry robe off his shoulders, revealing a physique that closely resembles Michelangelo’s David.

* * *

“If you’re pregnant, I’m a Dutchman.” Jasper often used peculiar expressions whose meaning eluded her, non sequiturs that only served to confound her further. “How could a small piece of copper prevent anyone from getting pregnant in the first place?” He plays with the whiskers growing along his upper lip as he tries to come to some rational understanding. His question is utterly logical, but alas, it arrives much too late.

Afterward, at the day surgery, where she is sitting in a straight-back chair in the recovery room, keeping her head between her knees as instructed by the nurse to stem the rising waves of nausea and her eyes fixed firmly on the bowl of speckled, blue enamelware at her feet, she is unsure whether she will get to Captain Cook’s Restaurant under her own steam. She pictures Jasper waiting for her in the empty parking lot, glowering. His anger and disappointment have congealed into a blunt knife that results in a stab of pressure directed at her belly. “Something will have to happen to make this day count for something,” she remembers him telling her on the phone earlier that day, before heading out. She has no idea what that something might be. For the briefest of moments, she conceives of tossing the small pocket watch he has given her off the Cambie Bridge as the perfect solution to everything that has been ailing her, lately. She pictures a widening circle in the dark water, momentarily marking the spot where the brief disappearance occurs. Too romantic, she decides. Not long after that, she dismisses the idea as utterly ludicrous.

* * *

She stood in the hotel kitchen by the automatic open loop toaster and waited for the two slices of brown toast that had been lifted away from sight to drop down, into a tray kept warm by a heating lamp. She hurriedly withdrew the slices to butter them while they were still hot. She had never encountered grown businessmen who seemed so much like children, unwilling even to pick up their own knife to spread butter on their toast. Grown men, who sat back and waited for their soft-boiled eggs to arrive at the table freshly scooped out of the shell for them by their waitress. Business men, who smelled strongly of aftershave lotion that wafted upward when she bent close to fill their coffee cups, who had no idea that she had been fighting an insurmountable sense of nausea each and every morning, day after day, for a solid month, now.

* * *

By now, it is early October. No heat escapes from the electric fireplace. The clock above the mantel indicates 4 p.m. "What, no scallops or lobster?" It has become somewhat of a joke between the two of them, Jasper flirting with the waitress. The dinner menu won't come on until 5:30 p.m., the waitress patiently informs him. Regrettably, they have run out of clams as well. She doesn't think that it has anything to do with red tide.

September has been a blur. She feels hot at first and soon thereafter much too cold. Jasper makes a stab at conversation, dips the golden-fried shrimp in Thousand Island dressing and asks her about the new course she has picked up. "Social Studies?" She has been learning about the early settlers in Canada, she tells him, Samuel de Champlain and the many others from France, whose names she is unable to dredge up from memory, right now. Last week, in class, they debated whether Québec should be allowed to separate. "Where would Canada be without the province of Québec?" She finds herself repeating the question to Jasper. "And more importantly, where would it be without the Port of Montreal, one of the largest inland ports in the world?" Ah, yes. Now she is suddenly able to recall the name of Jacques Cartier, and the name of that great waterway he explored, the St. Lawrence River. "Think strategic placement," the teacher had prompted them in class. "Think of all the goods that must pass through that vast portal in order to supply the rest of this vast country." She silently agrees. "We need Québec." Geography may not be her strong suit, but when she thinks back to the moment of her entry into Canada, after her solitary overnight journey from Penn Station in New York, when she finally descends from the train in Montreal alone with her two suitcases, it is an entirely new emotion that fills her, something that resembles gratitude.

* * *

From the bedside table at the hospital, Dr. Schom picks up the book she has decided to tackle, *Primal Scream*, which is presently being read by

tens of thousands of Americans. Dr. Schom shakes his head. Why couldn't she read a more uplifting book? She bought the book having been attracted to its title and fascinated by its very premise, a new form of therapy, she gathers, that hints at the possibility of divesting oneself of all the pent-up rage that has been forcibly held in check for so long, and which makes her feel unable to breathe, the persistent anger simmering beneath the surface that won't be stomped out, no matter what. She imagines it as a visceral force capable of causing a great eruption, resulting in a veritable explosion of repressed material and granting an ultimate freedom and release she can only imagine as something that might come close to the experience of orgasm.

Earlier on, in November, she had agreed to be a participant in a scientific study conducted by two women in a university setting, designed to shed light on the subject of women and reproductive technology, focusing specifically on the after-effects on women, of what was elliptically referred to as 'the procedure'. "I don't envision any changes in our relationship," she had declared during the initial interview, feeling confident about its potential consequences. "No changes, whatsoever." She would have liked to share some of her own thoughts, newly-formed and rather philosophical, on what she considers essential in a relationship. She has been reading a book by Fritz Perls, *In and Out of the Garbage Can*, a couple of lines summing up a credo of sorts that seem to have implanted themselves in her memory: *I do my thing and you do your thing—and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.*"

* * *

From her small dormer window on the third floor, she looks out at a flock of crows that has lifted off from the park across the street. They have formed a black cloud that darkens the sky. The birth control pills have been giving her fierce headaches. She is distracted. Afraid of losing her job at the Rembrandt, she has picked up an extra shift at the Royal Center Mall, serving Dash-Away Specials on Saturdays. What were these drinks that businessmen ordered from the bar? Nobody drank martinis before lunch in the country she came from.

In the last glimmer of light at day's end, Neil Young is once again singing *Heart of Gold* on her transistor radio. Even now, she is able to recall at will the sound of the icy rain that whipped the small window of her bed-sitting room. She was looking up from reading *Silent Spring*, which had been assigned for discussion in her English class, and was thinking about the detrimental effects pesticides were having on the environment and on birds in particular, when she made up her mind: She would be handing in her notice on the thirtieth and move out in the middle of the following month.

"Still, that doesn't seem fair to me." Jasper holds up his hands, palms outward in weak protest. "You only give me two weeks to find a new

tenant? That's short notice."

Better than no notice at all, she should have told him. Hasn't he noticed? The bloom has long gone off the rose. He'd given her the rose prior to leaving for Amsterdam, at a time when she needed him the most. She whisks the darkened petals off the tablecloth, using the postcard he had obviously felt obligated to send her, a view of tulip fields so ordinary, she must fight the urge to howl. The thorns on the solitary stem she pulls from the vase bite back. Pieces of me, pieces of you, she thinks, unable to contain her loathing. She whacks the stem against the edge of the table repeatedly, until it bends, until it grows limp. Then she tosses it in the wastepaper basket.

"That's sabotage." She thinks the voice she hears must be his, on the other side of the door. Already, it has started to retreat. She listens to it reverberate, down along the entire length of the stairwell.

Sabotage? At last, he has given her a present she can use. Here's a brand new word; she'll be able to look it up in the dictionary. Right now.

* * *

Today is Trash-to-Treasure day in the small mountain town in the Kootenays, where she has moved to with her husband. She carries a hefty box of possessions out to the grassy strip that borders the sidewalk in front of their house and deposits it at the base of the crabapple tree billowing with May blossoms, hoping that passers-by will carry off the items that once contributed to the happiness in her life: A heating pad, a porcelain angel, an indoor fountain sporting a lucky dragon, an electric alarm clock radio, an old tent, a penknife and compass, all of which have seen better days.

"T2T, as it is known here in town, is much like a big, glorious garage sale," her neighbor Sandra informs her. "The difference is that no one makes any money and everyone ends up with a treasure they never imagined they would need." When the other women in her Walking Group discuss their Trash items, she joins in. She poses her question hypothetically, carefully avoiding details. Suppose, she were trying to dispose of an antique-looking item of questionable value that's been in her possession for much too long, and which may, at some time in the past, have been of significance to her personally—an item whose only drawback may be that it is no longer in working order—what do the women think would be the best way to go about it?

"Have you ever thought of getting it fixed?" Annette inquires. "Maybe you could keep it for your grandchildren," Gertrude suggests. "How about donating it to the Women's Auxiliary, at the hospital? That way you know it will go to a good cause." Ramona, a long-time friend who hails from Eastern Europe and has a gift for divination, gives her a knowing wink. "You could always give it a special place in that garden of yours. How about underneath that weeping cherry tree? Something else that's related

to your history is buried there, too—a placenta, ever since your granddaughter's home birth, if I'm not mistaken."

A fierce wind has sprung up. To the items spread out on the grass at the base of the crabapple tree, she has added a set of serrated steak knives. Surreptitiously, she carries out the small pocket watch still wrapped in its wad of yellowing tissue paper and places it in the empty basin of the fountain, beneath the gaze of the lucky dragon. Her husband gives her a sheepish smile as he brings out a box with four bicycle helmets and two anniversary mugs that predate his life with her. White petals in profusion are showering down from the tree when he emerges from the house a second time. She sees him pushing his old bike. Hooked onto the handlebars is an old leather briefcase from his university days. Behind the bicycle seat, attached under the saddle, is a small leather bag that holds a compact repair kit.

The blossom petals are beginning to resemble polka dots. The thought comes to her suddenly, as she watches them land on the grassy incline between the sidewalk and the street. She must take the small pocket watch away from the lucky dragon. No dragon in his right mind is in need of a pocket watch, she decides, whatever his luck may be. She makes a quick move to grab it away from his clutches, opens the zippered saddle bag and, almost as an afterthought, at the precise moment when her husband's back is turned, she deftly slides in the small watch, allows it to drop down among the bicycle-repair tools. And then she makes a wish.

Let it travel on. Let it go places. Let the turning of the wheel decide.

GREG MOGLIA is a veteran of 27 years as Adjunct Professor of Philosophy of Education at N.Y.U. and 37 years as a high school teacher of Physics and Psychology. His poems have been accepted in over 100 journals in the U.S., Canada and England, as well as in five anthologies. He is four times a winner of an Allan Ginsberg Poetry Award sponsored by the Poetry Center of Passaic County Community College. His poem "Why Do Lovers Whisper?" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2005. He lives in Huntington, N.Y.

Greg Moglia / Four Poems

Perhaps Love

Sue doesn't want me to say it
I'm surprised, but come to think of it
Never heard Dad say it to Mom
Fifty years of marriage, never heard it

Me, bodies entwined I'm ready to say it
But Sue's wish reminds me of the wise lover
Who said *'I love you' during sex doesn't count*
When you make eggs benedict for breakfast

I'll know all I need to know
Sue and I into a second year and I surely feel the word
What difference would it make?
Women in my past—I said it and whoosh—fun time

But did it last, the fun become something more?
Anyway, I don't say it to Sue
Instead I try to show it
I talk too much anyway

Don't blab, do...yes, that's closer
As Dad who detests sugary sweets
When Mom has terminal cancer he hands me a ten
Buy her a dozen Dunkin donuts

Don't tell her it's me...don't tell her
Sure Dad...sure

Oh, History

After the firefight my friend
Sits on his helmet, spoons out rations
With the dead lying about
The new guy asks *How can you eat?*

My friend says *We might not get another chance*
I listen to the story as one no closer
To the scene than some movie
Watcher of wars—reader of wars

Talker of wars
Standby to history
I am at that time a teacher
I broke out the books

Lectured on and on
Physics of Newton and Einstein
While across the seas men ate
Among the freshly killed

The Swerve

Lucretius explained it
Atoms never die

But couple then uncouple
Tied then liberated

What survives? *Love, only love*
Lucretius says *Let the lover go*

The beloved always slips away
We only borrow these ties

My cousin the gun in his mouth and then...
The swerve... oh Lucretius...the swerve

The mourners come to his ashes
Try to understand but

Clarity lies with the atoms
They say *We're off to be reborn*

Hear us...we're off
And beside the urn—photos

Atoms in place...ours for a time
And we cry...we loved these atoms

Stay... come back
Even as they remind us

Some day the swerve will be ours
We...cousins to the stars

No Door

Dear daughter, dare I tell you
Take charge...there right there...
Take charge
There are limits to kindness

Your husband owns the cloud
Carries it home each day
Squeezes out the rain
You cup it and try to go on

Another tough-times marriage
How can I help?
On my last visit
The bathroom door gone

The story slips out
Something about too much drink
His hard day at work
His sleepless nights

Forget how I asked you as a child
Before my daily marriage battles
To be peacemaker, comforter
Now, can I call you to take control?

Whether to continue
Or end it, I can't say
But choose
Take charge

JOHN LAUE, a prizewinning poet and prose writer, has edited *Transfer* and been Associate Editor of *San Francisco Review*. He presently coordinates the monthly reading series of The Monterey Bay Poetry Consortium. His fifth poetry chapbook, *Shadows*, came out in January 2013 from Finishing Line Press. Besides writing, Laue's main interest is mental health. He is a member and former co-chair of the Santa Cruz County Mental Health Advisory Board.

The Learning Curve

(My Time as a White Musician
in a 1950s Rhythm and Blues Band)

John Laue

IN 1955 I WAS a 19 year-old white kid in his first year at Hartnell Community College in Salinas, California. I'd played a little football for Hartnell, acted in a play, written articles for the *Panther Sentinel*, the college newspaper I later edited. One of my main activities, though, had been making music. From the time I was born I seemed to have snatches of melodies in my head, mostly pop and jazz tunes.

Five years before that I'd decided to study clarinet, a habit which later morphed into also playing the alto saxophone. I could play most tunes by ear and improvise on them, doing well enough at this to be asked by Pat Paterson, an older black piano player, to join him for gigs at local clubs. Pat could be a riot, especially on novelty tunes:

"You've got to get in the sun to get a tan, but I have mine all the time." And then the Viper song (a marijuana classic): "Dream about a reefer five feet long. Are you a viper?"

Besides playing my own brand of jazz, I wrote a column in the college paper about jazz players, including Charlie (*Bird*) Parker, whose alto sax style I tried to emulate, and John Burkes (*Dizzy*) Gillespie, the two main men in the birth of be-bop. That gave me a certain fame among black students at Hartnell, who appreciated and supported what I did.

One day my friend Joe, a trumpet player whom I jammed with, came up to me and asked, "Do you know who Lord Luther is?"

"I've heard the name," I said. "Wasn't he the guy who did the song *White Port and Lemon Juice* (a Bay Area hit the year before)?"

"Yeah. He wants to talk to you about joining his band."

That statement set me back a little. I liked the blues and could play them pretty well, even throw in some fancy *Bird* riffs, but wondered how I'd do in a band with no one but blacks. I hadn't been with black people that much. Pat Paterson could have been white for all anyone hearing

him could tell, except for his funny lyrics.

Joe said, "Here's Luther's phone number. Give him a call. He's got gigs coming up."

Probably they only play blues, I thought, a fairly basic music compared to some of the jazz I wanted to learn. I was pretty good at playing simple blues, which consisted mostly of four chords. I could improvise like lightning on them if they were in an easy key. I didn't want to be limited to the blues, although blues in B flat was my favorite thing to play.

Finally I decided: "What the hell! I'll give it a try. If it doesn't work out I can always quit." The next day I went to Soledad Street to meet Luther.

Luther was a black man about the same height and weight as I (5'10" 175 pounds), with medium dark skin. His manner was very businesslike. He gave the impression that he was in charge of any situation. I sat down in a booth with him and the first thing he said after greeting me was, "Do you play poker?"

I wondered why he was asking this but said, "I'm a pretty good poker player. I have games at my house, one or two days a month. We sometimes play all night."

"I got a proposition for you then: I deal every night in this club. I'll give you \$20 to play with. If you win, you can keep what you get; if you lose, you won't be out nothing."

A light dawned: he was asking me to be a shill, a guy who plays with the house's money and helps get the games going. I realized that with me, a young white guy playing, the local blacks would probably think I was a *doggie* from Fort Ord, the nearby military base. Usually no white man would come to this district except to buy sex or to get into an illegal poker game.

That night we sat in a window where we were visible from the street. Finally a full complement of four men joined the game. I knew they were probably there because of me. They smelled fresh meat. Luther dealt fast and before I knew it we had played several hands. In a half hour I'd lost the \$20 Luther had given me, but had achieved his purpose of getting the game going. For two or three more days, I did this. Then I began to be known, and the ploy no longer attracted players.

After my foray into being a poker shill, I practiced with the band at that same club. I got to know Lord Luther, whose actual name was Luther McDaniels and whose father had been a poker dealer, too. Also in the band was Jimmy Cole, our piano player, who sounded exactly like Nat King Cole when he sang. And I was befriended by a drummer called *Wild Bill Henry* who had two years of college—in contrast to most of the others who had street smarts, but little formal education. At Fort Ord, where he was stationed, Bill was in charge of *short-arm inspection*, which was to inspect men for venereal diseases.

A second drummer who more or less alternated with Bill was *Little Jimmy the Fox*. He was a small man, but quite flamboyant; he had the biggest natural I'd ever seen. That was before the Black Liberation movement when these became popular, so he always was the only one in the room to sport such giant hair.

Another guy who traveled and worked with us was Doyle, a young man from Seaside who played bass, and had more (white?) culture than some of the others. He also played classical French horn but didn't play that with us; no legitimate rhythm and blues outfit would have a French horn in it.

The last band member was John Robinson, a large man who could play piano a little and substituted for Jimmy Cole on the days he couldn't make it (for some reason I suspect was drugs or alcohol, he was periodically unavailable). John manned the door and collected admission fees. He also helped in schlepping the drum set and bass.

Our first gig was on Soledad Street, in a club owned by a woman called *Big Bertha*. She had the largest ass I've ever seen, a mountainous behind, a condition some blacks have which I found out is called *steatopygy*. Bill Henry told me that at Fort Ord when he had to give shots to soldiers' asses, the white ones were easy, but he could hardly get through the butt muscles of some of the blacks.

Before I got known, an incident very revealing about Soledad Street at that time happened at Bertha's. She kept the lights low, so it was difficult to see skin tones in her club. We had just finished playing a song (I think it was *Red Top*, an Albert Ammons favorite), when a large man got up from his table, and approached me.

He looked me up and down, then asked a question I didn't understand: "What are you?"

A little leery about being called out like this I said, "What do you mean?"

He answered, "You know what I mean."

I said, "No, I don't." By this time I was speaking very quietly because I was afraid of what this might lead to.

He said, "Now come on! Don't jive me! You a colored person or a Mexican?"

Besides a few Asians, there were only blacks and Mexicans on Soledad Street. But not wanting to blurt it right out, I said, "I'm partly German, partly French."

"You mean you be white?" he said, looking surprised.

I winced, thinking no good could come of this, then said, "Yes."

"My man over there bet me \$5 that you was Mexican. I said you was colored. Now both of us be wrong." He returned to his table, and spoke to his friend who looked up at me and said, "Mercy, mercy me!"

Luther was not only a good singer, but a great performer. He would

sing blues songs and pops, borrowing liberally from other artists of the day. One of his and the audience's favorites was the Elvis classic, *You Ain't Nothin But a Hound Dog*. Then he'd sing the Peggy Lee standard, *Fever*, which would get people going. He would end each of our gigs with the call-refrain song, *Let the Good Times Roll*. That would send everybody home in a good mood.

Luther had a special request of me: he wanted me to learn the sax solo on the Bill Doggett instrumental *Honky Tonk*, a hit record at the time, especially among blacks. That had been done on tenor sax instead of alto, but I managed a fairly accurate note-for-note version of it that our audiences liked.

At Bertha's we tried experiments on slow days, sometimes exchanging instruments. On one song I tried playing drums. I got a pretty good shuffle rhythm going before my arms got tired, and I started slowing down. I didn't try that any more. I also tried playing the upright bass, but didn't do very well on that either. The lesson was we'd better stick to instruments we knew how to play. Meanwhile Bertha was looking over the whole thing, and took a liking to me. She said, "Honey, you can put your shoes under my bed any time."

By that time I was known on Soledad Street, treated rather like anybody else. In fact Jimmy Cole said, "We think of you just like a colored person," which made me feel quite complimented. However, there were differences that came out. One night in that same club someone called another the *N* word and was told, "Cool it! You don't want to say that. There's a white man here!"

One word that I heard quite often was *motherfucker*. I met one black guy who thought white people were hilarious because we said *mothERfuckER* instead of *Mo Fo*. But many blacks I encountered didn't make fun of whites. They had legitimate grievances and usually called most whites, *The Man*. But they were nice to me; I didn't really get into trouble because of my race. The guys in the band looked out for me. And I liked and respected each one.

One day Luther said, "We gon join the Musicians' Union," so I applied, filled out the paperwork along with the rest of the group. We were inducted in a ceremony where I sat apart from the others because I'd brought along my girlfriend at the time, a white girl from college. I felt sort of awkward because of this, but I believe they understood. In some cities there was one Union for blacks and one for whites, but we were all together in Salinas.

A few weeks later, Luther took a second white guy into his group, Dale Ramey, a guitar player whom I'd played with before on jazz gigs. He was stubborn and refused to tune his guitar to treble as most blues players did, in spite of Luther saying he ought to. He was also difficult because of his drug and alcohol habit, but he'd been playing guitar since

he was five years old, and really knew his stuff.

One day Luther said, “We goin to play with a girls’ trio called the *Teen Teasers*. We got to rehearse with them, but we can’t do that at the club no more. We need a place with a piano.”

My parents’ place on Nacional Street in Salinas had a baby grand which Cathy, my stepmother, played. Having the group of us go into that middle-class neighborhood, along with the three black girls, would certainly attract attention, maybe some of it negative. But I asked Dad anyway. He said for us to come ahead.

One car came from Soledad Street; the other from Seaside; the *Teen Teasers* from Oakland joined us. I greeted them at the door, and they all filed into my parents’ house. A few people stared, but there were no problems I could see. Dale was the only white guy there beside me, my father, and Cathy. After we’d gone over several songs with the girls, Luther was satisfied, and the group broke up. They piled into their cars, and left while I stayed at home.

Cathy considered herself an authority on music because she played piano, and sometimes sang at churches. She announced that the only one of us who had any talent was Dale. I was quite hurt by this, but realized that she was narrow-minded and limited in her musical appreciation. My family weren’t at all acquainted with the type of music our band was playing. I believe we all had talent, as much or more than Cathy, although, like me, most didn’t read music.

The next week Luther said, “Get ready. We gon to play over in Seaside this week.”

I took the green and yellow Chevy my grandmother had given me for high school graduation, and proceeded to drive the twenty or so miles. Seaside was a town adjacent to Fort Ord where many soldiers’ families lived.

We played there two weekends in a large club with a raised bandstand, to a house of all blacks. I remember two things about that gig: one that the cigarette smoke was so thick I could hardly stand it; the other that, on the second day, Dale Ramey was so drunk, he nodded out while trying to play his guitar. Luther was disgusted and fired him on the spot. So, again, I was the only white person in the band.

In that club I saw violence erupt, something I was to witness often with Luther’s group. As soon as it started, we’d play slow tunes to calm the people down, but it sometimes continued. The third night we played that gig, a large woman began to throw beer bottles. Finally the manager got her to quit. But what most bothered me was that, after our gig, she followed me out to my car when I was putting away my sax to go home.

“You got some great music. I could sure make music with you.”

“No thanks. I haven’t got time for that right now; I’ve got to go home. Besides, I’ve got a girlfriend.”

“I bet she don’t treat you like I want to. Come on, baby. Come to mama!”

“I’m sorry. I have to go home.”

More than once she stood there watching me pull away.

The sexiest gig I ever played was also in Seaside, at a large club with a raised stage. We began playing to a crowd half white. I suddenly realized we were going to play for exotic dancers. Luther had us play *Night Train*, a song with three heavy beats at the end of each phrase. Each time we came to them, striptease dancers would bump and grind. I spent half the night looking sideways at the women. I got so excited, I almost forgot to play.

At that gig we tried some tunes we hadn’t played before like *The Lady is a Tramp*. I threw in fancy sixteenths and thirty-second notes trying to imitate *Bird*. One black man came up to me and said, “You play just like Gerry Mulligan.” Mulligan played baritone sax, while I played alto; but Mulligan was white, which is why he said it. I also got a compliment from Claude Gilroy, a tenor sax man who’d played with the Stan Kenton band (all-white but really good). I treasured that.

We played a few more gigs, then Luther said, “I got a job for us in San Luis Obispo. We got to get there by this weekend.” So we all piled into two cars, drove up Highway 101 to that city. The place we were to play was a rather rundown club that catered to an all-black clientele. There was no bandstand, so we stood on one side of the dance floor.

We were playing a tune called *Jimmy’s Boogie* by our piano player, Jimmy Cole. Luther picked one woman out of the crowd, sang especially to her. This technique was usually very successful, but in this case it caused a ruckus: a loud argument broke out between two of the women. They started throwing punches. I was almost in the middle of the action, so I put my sax down, fearful that they’d bump it while I was playing, and split my lip.

Finally the two women were ushered out of the club. We kept playing, and had a pretty successful evening, but when it came time for us to get paid, we only got a few dollars each. That was the beginning of my suspicions that Luther was taking an inordinately large amount for a leader’s fee, leaving very little to be split among the band members. I didn’t object, though. Luther got our gigs and made all of our decisions. I was a young white guy—a token, you might say—in a black band. I had no clout.

We all went our separate ways when we returned to Salinas. I got a gig through the Musicians’ Union to play a dance at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey. The saxophone player in their trio was unavailable due to illness. It was rather sedate, old-fashioned dance music. I did relatively well on *In The Mood*, and other jazzy melodies, but when we came to the tune *Tenderly*, I began in the wrong key. The drummer, whose

group it was, stopped the music before I had a chance to right myself. After that he never called me again.

Meanwhile, Luther was making other arrangements for us. This time we were to travel to Merced, play for a dance at the Castle Air Force Base. That took place in a large hall with a mixed, mostly white crowd. When I was taking a smoke break outside, a young white guy came up to me and asked in aggressive tones, "What are you doing with those jungle bunnies anyway?" I didn't give him the dignity of a reply, just snuffed out my cigarette, went back inside.

We stayed the night with relatives of a band member in Merced; then Luther told us he had another job in that area. We drove out to a large field muddy from recent rain, parked, and brought our instruments into what turned out to be an old ice house. I don't remember much of that night except I saw one man chase another past us with an ice hook.

Something was beginning to bother me about playing with Luther's group: I was experiencing a form of culture shock. I wasn't used to these guys and their ways. Also, every other time we played, we witnessed violence.

I was getting to be close friends with Bill Henry who invited me to his house in Seaside where he lived with his wife, and sister, Lily. Lily, who was Creole, was one of the best-looking women I'd ever seen. She had a sweet way about her too. She became my companion on most of my adventures with Luther and his men. She was a great girlfriend. The other guys accepted that; they treated me like a brother.

Next Luther told us, "Get ready. We goin to play at Fort Ord, at the Soldiers' Club. We goin to open for the Johnny Hartsman band." That was a group out of Oakland with a large following. When we got there and set up, we found that the Hartsman band hadn't arrived. We were told that their bus had had mechanical trouble. We played a set, and I remember wishing that they wouldn't show up at all, so we could do the entire show, but after an hour and some minutes, The Hartsman band came in and soon took the stage.

Before they went on they heard me play, and liked what I did. They invited me up on stage to play *Flying Home* with them. Later that night Jimmy conveyed their offer for me to tour the South with them. I felt honored, but refused. After that gig, Luther said, "Those *motherfuckers* wouldn't pay us shit, so here's \$13 for each of you."

A few days after that Luther said, "Get yo stuff together. We goin to San Francisco. We gon be there fo a while. Have youall got suitcases?"

Thrilled about going to the big city, we got together suitcases and some cardboard boxes. We had band uniforms consisting of colorful short-sleeved shirts with a Hawaiian theme, costumes we'd come up with to play gigs in Salinas at a club called *Maida's Bamboo Room*. We arrived at the Manor Plaza Hotel on Fillmore Street in the middle of the black

area everyone called *The Mo*. It was even more segregated than Soledad Street, and much, much larger.

Luther said, “We gon to play in the ballroom. They gon give us rooms. You and Doyle gon share a room.”

I saw the room had only one double bed. I was a little leery about that, but I had a policy to say yes to everything Luther proposed. Also, I liked Doyle. Later I was to find he was a hyperactive sleeper, would twitch and turn all night, throw his arm across my face, and wake me up, but at the time this possibility didn’t occur to me.

Jimmy Cole said, “Let’s go and see Little Richard. He playin in the city. You up for that?”

I said, *Sure!* We drove to the Fillmore Auditorium and went in. Hundreds of people were there. I didn’t see any whites, but nobody looked at me strangely. We stood in line, paid our \$10 admission fees. There was no cash register: all the bills were piled up on a large table with a couple of armed guards standing over them. I thought this very strange, but no one else seemed to care.

Little Richard’s band did a number or two, then he came on. I’d heard some of his songs, and liked them, but didn’t expect what he did, standing on the piano doing bumps and grinds while he sang. I’d thought Elvis’s leg motions rather obscene, but Little Richard outdid him by far. Like most of the black people I saw, he was right out in front when it came to sex.

The next morning, Jimmy told me he’d met a woman at the hotel and taken her to bed.

“She had hair clear up to her belly button.”

Jimmy was full of advice about sex for me: “You got to long-dick women or they don’t give you no respect.”

That afternoon our gig was advertised on a big sign in the window of the ballroom in the hotel’s large basement:

IN THE MANOR PLAZA HOTEL’S BALLROOM TONIGHT:
LORD LUTHER OF THE FOUR DEUCES WHOSE HIT **WHITE PORT
AND LEMON JUICE (WPLJ)** WAS NUMBER ONE IN THE BAY
AREA. COME DANCE TO HIM AND HIS BAND **THE KINGSMEN**.

John Robinson was at the door to collect admission fees, but only one or two people showed up. We played for an hour and a half; still no one else came. I began to think that Luther was not as famous as I thought. Finally we gave up, went back to our rooms, leaving our instruments there.

Luther said, “This is only Thursday. Tomorrow all these cats in the city will get the news about the blues.”

Lily had made the trip with us, and was rooming with her brother. I was glad she was there, planned to take her to sample some of the city’s nightlife. I’d been to San Francisco before, had gone to a famous after-

hours joint in the Western Addition called *Jimbo's Bop City*. I thought of taking her there, but the caliber of musicians at that place was far above what I was used to.

I said to Bill, "I'd like to take Lily some place where I can sit in, but the only place I know is Bop City. Those cats are too much. I don't want to play with those guys."

Bill, who was familiar with the city, replied, "Why don't you go to the Champagne Supper Club? That's more your style."

I looked it up in the phone book, asked one of the desk clerks how to get there, picked up Lily, and arrived there at midnight. When we walked in, I saw it was an all-black place, but by this time I was feeling almost like a black man myself. Lily being as beautiful as she was attracted some attention. One guy said, "Look at that chicken dinner! Woo Wee! Ain't she a queen!"

There was a house trio cooking with a couple of horn men sitting in. I waited my turn to jam, and when it came, went up to the bandstand. They began playing *How High the Moon*. The tempo was so fast I almost couldn't keep up. I thought I was doing okay until the bass man said, "Man, get in the chords or get off the stage!"

That was enough for me. I didn't want to make a fool of myself so I returned to the table we had commandeered. For another two hours we listened to the guys, some who seemed to be great musicians and others just so-so. Finally, at about four in the morning, we returned to the Manor Plaza.

On Friday night we played in the ballroom again, but only a few people came. There wasn't enough money to go around, let alone pay the hotel's share. We cut our last set short, because the few people who were there had left. It was obvious we were bombing.

That night Jimmy Cole said, "Do you want to meet little Richard himself? I know his chauffeur and can get us in."

I said yes. Little Richard's music wasn't my favorite; he was more a pop singer, and I liked jazz better. But he always had a good beat going and I loved such rhythms. Often when I played I got into the spirit, swaying back and forth. Luther had us doing little dance routines, too, which I enjoyed. I think some people might even have said I had *soul*.

Jimmy and I drove to the Booker T. Washington Hotel. Jimmy hit the buzzer. A man came down, led us up to the penthouse. When the door opened, I saw Little Richard standing in front of us, but wondered why the room was so dark.

Jimmy said, "What's going down?"

Richard replied, "Nothing. Come on in!"

Then I saw light leaking into the room from a partially open door leading, I found out, to another suite. On our side of the door there were three men with heads above one another staring through the crack.

After introducing us to Richard, Jimmy said, "What they doin'?"

"They checkin out the bellboys doin a woman next door. Want to see? (This to me as well as to Jimmy)."

"That's all right," I said, somewhat embarrassed about the offer.

"I got a song for youall," Richard said.

He began singing: *Tuttii Fruitti, good booty. If it don't fit, don't force it. You can grease it, make it easy, Tutti Fruitti!*

"They want me to change it. They say it won't sell. What you think?"

"That sounds like a good song to me," I said. I didn't know what *booty* meant, but I liked the rhythm. Innocent as I was, I still realized that, by 1950's standards, the song sounded obscene.

"You know Don Allen?" (an Oakland promoter) said Richard. "He so hot he scream when he come!"

At first, I thought he was just making conversation, but it was obvious he was inviting me to have sex.

Besides the men at the cracked-open door, there were also one or two other men, and two women in the room beside Richard, his chauffeur, and us. I saw one man, apparently horny from watching the next-door scene, take a young woman out of the room. A few minutes later they returned with her staggering as if she were drunk or possibly from rough sex.

Another man, a large fellow I was told was Richard's manager, had a briefcase with a padlock chained to his wrist. Jimmy told me Richard didn't trust banks, so he had this guy carry around the cash from his gigs in the case.

After a few drinks and more talk, we exited Richard's suite. I was impressed that I'd gotten to meet this singer who was beginning to get almost as much play as Elvis, and also wrote most of his own lyrics. I knew Elvis had gotten famous by borrowing from and imitating black musicians, while Richard was more original in his act, but, being black, was discounted by many whites.

The next day Luther said, "We got another job in the city. Get ready to go!"

We drove to the Western Addition, disembarking in front of a large Victorian mansion. We hauled our instruments in. As soon as we began to play, several black women emerged from the rear of the house. Then in the front door came a whole host of white men who had hats, clothing, and other paraphernalia that revealed they were conventioners.

I asked Bill, "What's happening?" He just shrugged.

The men began conversing with the women. I saw one, then another, take women upstairs. It dawned on me: we were in a whorehouse.

Lily, who'd come with us, was standing by the front door. She was by far the best looking woman in the room. I thought that some of those men would be bound to hit on her. I went over to her and asked, "Are you

okay?”

She said, “Yes.”

I saw her wave off one or two of the men. She seemed to be handling the situation quite well. The men didn’t protest, just went to one of the other women.

After that gig, for which we didn’t get paid (I had the feeling we were doing this for the hotel to make up for not drawing in their ballroom), we returned, played that night to a very small crowd. It was obvious that we weren’t going to have enough customers to make serious money. We spent Saturday night in our rooms.

In the morning Luther said, “We gon play for Louis Armstrong’s birthday party across the street at the Blue Mirror, but first we got to audition.”

I worried about playing a gig for Louis Armstrong. I thought they might give us sheet music, and I couldn’t read music. I was naive enough to think that *Pops* (Louis Armstrong) was really going to be there, maybe sit in with us, instead of giving, at most, a short visit.

At three in the afternoon we set up our instruments and played for about an hour; then a tall, slim black woman with a blond wig entered, sat at the piano. I was told she was called *Tarza*. She started playing some of the best be-bop I’d ever heard, singing in unison with every piano note so she sounded like the white duo I had a record of: Jackie Cain and Roy Krall. But she did both, the playing and synchronized singing herself.

I was completely taken by her music. I’d have paid to hear her play under any other circumstance. But I didn’t know that when she’d first gotten there, and seen us playing, she’d made a phone call to the Musicians’ Union. We’d broken one of their rules by performing while she had the contract for the gig. A Union representative came into the club, told Luther we were on the Union’s blacklist and couldn’t play there any more.

That night we played our last at the Manor Plaza. I discovered we had never had a written contract: it had been done orally between Luther and the manager. The original arrangement had been that we’d split the house receipts from the ballroom with the hotel taking a share.

They realized we weren’t going to make money for them, so were turning us out. On Sunday, Luther told us we had to go. We packed, got ready to return to Salinas sans band uniforms, which the manager had locked up and kept as a kind of collateral.

Some of us were completely broke; others, including me, were down to our last few dollars. We were desperate to get home. But Luther, in his usual, unpredictable manner, said we had a gig on the way—in Watsonville. It was at a club called *La Frontera*. I wondered what kind of name that was for a rhythm and blues venue.

We entered a large room with no chairs, but a bare dance floor. About

twenty brown-skinned men sat on the floor in a half-circle around us. When we tried to talk to them we soon realized they understood no English. They were obviously field workers, part of the *Bracero Program*, a government sponsored deal so guest workers from Mexico could come to the U. S. for short stays to labor in the fields.

We started playing, and they were attentive, but looked rather confused. It was obvious they couldn't understand Luther's lyrics; however I saw a few tapping their hands on their knees. Then I got an idea. I asked Jimmy, who was on the piano, "Do you think we can play *La Cucaracha* (The Cockroach)?" the only song I could think of that the Mexicans would relate to.

I knew the tune, and could play almost any melody by ear. I could tell that Jimmy thought this a crazy idea, but he was game enough. He said, "Let's go ahead and try it." He played a fanfare, and off we went—with what was probably the weirdest version of that song that had ever been done.

The Mexicans listened, gave us a hand, and practically fell all over each other with gratitude. We passed around a hat; every one of them dropped in money, some as much as five dollars. I thought, "This isn't so bad after all." We divided up the money and each got a few dollars.

When we hit Salinas I retired to my parents' place at 14 Nacional Street. Bill, Lily, and Doyle went home to Seaside. The rest of the men returned to Soledad Street. After a few days, Luther called again. He said, "We got a gig at the Seaside Elks Club. We gon play there two weeks. We start Wednesday."

On Wednesday I drove over, saw that the club was a large one set back from the street, with many tables and chairs around a dance floor. It had a raised stage, and looked like a good place to play. I noticed that its clientele was made up of local blacks, including many soldiers from Fort Ord.

That night we played four full sets. I thought that if we could get gigs like this all the time, life as a rhythm and blues musician wouldn't be too bad. Some men danced with their women, while others tapped their feet. The only thing that really bothered me again was the cigarette smoke, so thick my eyes watered all night long.

Thursday night was a repeat of the night before, except that a fight or two broke out. We had to stop the music once, get behind the piano because of flying beer bottles. I didn't think we'd done anything to bring this on; it seemed to happen spontaneously, perhaps because someone had hit on someone else's wife or girlfriend. I wondered why the club hadn't provided more security people; they only had a doorman, and one other guy. The listed capacity was over 100.

On Friday, the Fort Ord soldiers got paid. They call it, *When the eagle flies*. It certainly did fly that night. Or I might say it turned into a vulture.

First one person, then another started fighting. I could see all these young men who'd probably just come from basic training at the Fort. Basic training makes you angry as hell, ready to fight at the least provocation, just what the Army wants.

People were lined up at the door trying to get in. There was standing room only. I believe there were many more customers than the club was supposed to admit. After an hour or two the place erupted into full-scale rioting. People were fighting over tables while still more were pushing to get in.

Luther tried to calm everybody: "Hey, you sports out there. We gonna give you good music, but you gotta keep yo cool. Come on and give us a chance. I'm not jiving youall; you gonna have a good time." But whatever he said didn't seem to have any effect. We played slow tunes to try to calm people, fast tunes to distract them, but it did no good: the place was out of control.

Finally someone called the police. I saw one white cop come in the front door. He was a large guy I knew from the Hartnell football team. He took one look, went back out the door to call for reinforcements. We stayed till a number of policemen arrived. Then Luther said, "Let's go." By that time most of the customers had cleared out. There was nothing but garbage and spilled drinks on the tables and floor. We exited gladly.

The next day the Monterey Herald reported on the riot at the Elks Club. There had been several people cut, and one person in front of the club had been shot. The Seaside City Council voted to close the joint.

That evening made me think harder than ever about being a blues musician. I'd had more than I could take of playing all night in a haze of cigarette smoke, sleeping half the day and spending evenings in a night club atmosphere where violence was just a hair away.

I loved the camaraderie with the other musicians, but traveling as we did to earn only a few dollars didn't add up to a very high living standard. In contrast to some of the guys, I had other options, not totally because I was white, or more intelligent (those men knew as much or more than I did, but about different things), but because I fit in better with the dominant culture.

I wanted to continue my education and earn at least a B. A. Anything else would have been unthinkable for me. The guys I played with sensed this; didn't begrudge it when I told them I was quitting the band to go back to school. I knew I'd miss them, and the excitement of the jobs, but a whole new life awaited me at The University of California, Berkeley.

My experiences with Luther's group were an education for me—about street wisdom, about the thinking and doings of people whose social class was significantly different from mine. Besides learning to play better blues, I learned much about black culture: I heard many sayings that some called *motherwit*. I believe the saddest of these was one Jimmy told

me: “This is how we say it—*If you’s e white, you’s e right; if you’s e brown, stick around; if you’s e black, stay back!*”

I found out about *conked* hair, a process where blacks’ hair was straightened. I wondered why some blacks weren’t satisfied with their hair the way it was—which they called *nappy*. There was the story of *The Signifyin’ Monkey*, a quasi African tale about a monkey who was always doing something wrong, and blaming it on others.

I found that being a *homebody* meant you were settled in your lifestyle, having your *nose open* meant you were infatuated with someone. I certainly had my *nose open* for Lily. I was sorry that I lost track of her and Bill when they moved away.

Black culture had become so much a part of me, I was even called the *N* word later by a black professor who wanted to compliment me, and have me sign up to work for his research group. I wasn’t one of the white guys who went to Alabama to protest blacks’ lack of civil rights, but I contributed in my own way.

When Barack Obama was elected President, I thought it a major victory for sanity. Along with almost every black person I knew, I could hardly believe he hadn’t been assassinated like Dr. Martin Luther King. Obama is a true *marginal man* (a sociological term describing people who succeed in diverse cultures). But that doesn’t mean he’s accepted by everybody.

My time with Luther taught me to empathize with all people victimized by discrimination. But it wasn’t the end of my learning. I did go on to the University of California, Berkeley, get a B.A. in psychology. Then, buoyed because I’d won a poetry prize at the University, I continued in creative writing graduate school at San Francisco State, a school nationally recognized for that. I found I had as much or more talent for writing poetry as I had for music.

While pursuing my passion for poetry, I stumbled upon a line of William Carlos Williams’s that puzzled and intrigued me: *The pure products of America go crazy*. It wasn’t till I lost my innocence that I was able to understand more of what I’d been through, what Luther and others in the band really wanted, why they were the way they were.

JOHN GREY is an Australian-born poet, and works as a financial systems analyst. He has recently published in *International Poetry Review*, *Chrysalis* and the science fiction anthology, *Futuredaze*, with work forthcoming in *Potomac Review*, *Sanskrit* and *Fox Cry Review*.

John Grey / Three Poems

Old Girlfriends From Across the Ocean

Again the time of remembrance is here.
Always and everywhere I repeat old actions
with a cynical laugh shot through with trembling.
It's years since I walked on native soil
or tossed a head in any way handsome.
Old loves, I'd like to name them all
but, in this country, they're on no currency.
And, if they remember me at all,
they're a very wide ocean too late.

And yet it's not for myself I speak,
nor why my accent points a little toward home.
I don't unbolt that door completely,
afraid of how un-American I'd suddenly become.
But across those waters, wryly claimed Pacific,
are all those who stood with me then.
They knew who I was in those days
but now there's no one to ask.

Was there black and blonde hair?
Did some cheeks puff up pink
and others succumb to the hours of tan?
If I'm in their memory, then I accept the honor.
But if I'm part of all that's razed behind them
then I revel in my role in the ash.

There are moments when the day turns dark all of a sudden,
when it seems as if a desolate, despairing shadow seeks me.
My life is just at that age. Time is still now.
But how easy the past get its hands on it.

Arcadian Spring

Forest no longer wheezes
like an overloaded cart
and I'm not bundled up in layers,
burning out my flame
from the inside.

My smile bursts wide and free
as puffballs,
too many, too much,
to linger in a room.

Gutted trees heal
and birds begin to catch up
with their hunger
and a bud once barely bigger
than a nail head
is now a fresh bouquet of leaves.

Melt pours down from mountains.
Earth taps into April's moisture, swells.
Even the stony meadow
glistens like life.

I wave my hand like a wand.
I am about to live
Sure the pains stay with the body
but when the sun warms,
nothing will hurt.

See who remembers me from last year
A neighbor, a child, the oak, the maple
or what's new to me—
the first butterfly,
tiny sparrows fledging from their nests.

In winter,
I fight against cold and white.
But spring is open to reciprocation.

Ocean Love

Having always lived landlocked,
raised on the moods of rivers and lakes,
how unlike this ocean affair.

The stream flowed,
the surface shimmered,
innocent rules that I abided by
but now, I'm apprised of chaos's true calling
in the froth tops of the surf,
in the way you rise at dawn.

It occurs to me
that shore and flesh are of a vastness.
I can no longer see the other side.

Lapping is one thing.
But the sea; your body,
align in mysterious swells.
Feeling is no longer smooth as a current.
It comes at me like a tide.

You're not a woman
bred in some Midwestern town.
You come with a coastline,
with the broad echo
of breakers continually slapping sand.

Here, love and liquid
are all of a surge,
a salty wind,
a breeding, halfway breathing ground,
constant death, constant birth.

The waters may rise at any moment.
And we're just two people
fitfully at anchor.

TOM STRUTZ is an artist, writer and thinker living the last third of his life in a gray cultural wasteland known as Harrison Township, Michigan and occasionally in beautiful Belle River, Ontario. He writes odd fiction laced with elements of stark reality and hard truth. Writing is a form of therapy he highly recommends. He has been previously published in *The New Orphic Review*.

The Runner

Tim Strutz

IT'S NOT A big deal.

Believe me.

It's just NOT:

The way my gushy brain case buzzes; the way it hums the sweet cobalt melody of dim wet pain, acid rain, inky stain; my electric wiring kicked every second or so by the rhythmic grinding motion of rusty knee joints that make the whole thing happen.

Running, that is.

Thump; thump; thump; my glacial white Nikes kiss the hard sweet earth, over and over.

Yeah; I'm a runner; have been a long time, too. And it's the "long time" part that starts every little race with the same dull gray but demanding aches and pains belonging to an audacious idiot long past his prime. My old counselor actually called me that one time – "audacious." Oh, and for the record she did not really call me an idiot. I added that part. I'm good at that; adding junk and gunk to make the gadgets and gags of everyday life much worse than they might be. And when I called my counselor "old," I was not referring to her age. She was only middle-aged at that time, the midline of the most important scale, and she was kind of foxy, too, as I remember. She had great legs and was prone to wearing the spike heels that drive me crazy. When I said old, I was referring to the fact that it was a while ago in terms of Earth years.

I gave up on the foxy old counselor, you see. That is another thing I am good at, giving up on all kinds of stuff; the good, the not-so-good, the crazy and everything else in the smoky twilight zone between the goalposts of life.

So that's where I am at right now; the start of my daily run:

thump, thump,

hump, hump.

Welcome. Glad to have you along.

When I call it a “race,” I mean a race of just “one.” I used to be a pretty damn good 10K racer. Now the only person I race against is... me: the tall, gray-haired, slate-eyed senior citizen with the ample shoulders, missing ass and spindly insect-like legs. I always laugh to myself when I think about my skinny legs. I’m a self-deprecating spider; a silver-haired daddy longlegs. Hey, the essence of life is brutality. If you don’t believe me, just read a newspaper. Yesterday I read a story about a seventy year-old grandmother who exterminated her roach-like grandson with the family pistol because he was a little too problematic.

Hey; I got news: we are ALL problematic.

We need to laugh a little each day. I remember a time, long ago, when I went to see my old supervisor at work. He was a real big, beefy guy like most of the other cops in the department that was dumb enough to hire me and let me wear a gun on my bony hip.

“Hey, boss. You wanted to see me?” You always had to be careful when talking to bosses; hell, anyone. Working there was like working in a fish tank filled with piranha. Someone was always ready to bite your tail off.

“Tim, are those fucking legs or bicycle spokes?” he asked, pointing to my calves when I walked into his office. I happened to be in my summer shorts before changing into my uniform. Boss Man was wearing the big phony shit-eating grin he was noted for. Bad energy was spewing from tiny reptilian eyes that were wide-set and laser-like. Burning holes were forming on my chest. I had learned that humoring the bosses was a big part of a policing career, so I just laughed a little. You know; like *laughing along*: Ha ha ha; blah blah blah; a big fucking comedian.

And it always got worse. Thirty years in the police service taught me all about the negative energy of the human race, coppers included. I was damn glad to get the hell out of there with my heart mostly intact.

Listen, this is funny: I went, not so long ago, to some special cardiac test place all sterile and white and Windex looking, where they had some high-tech gizmo that could look inside your body and your draped-around arteries for the telltale signs of some dangerous thing called *plaque*, the same kind of goeey junk that builds up on rotten molars. The test did not take all that long, thirty minutes or so. I was in the waiting area when a

young woman in a pure white, old-fashioned nurse's outfit stuck her pretty head in and said, "OK; come on in." I seated myself and smiled. But nothing like *her* smile. I could see why she was wearing the brilliant white outfit. It had to match those absolutely perfect set of happy, brilliant teeth in their scarlet-lipped frame. My God, it was an office super nova! And it was directed at ME. The news must be good.

"Your test was perfect and you have no concerns whatever, Mr. Brown," she said in a light, lilting voice.

"Ah, my name is, ah, not...Brown."

The smile vanished and all of a sudden the air in the room was as thick as the atmosphere of Jupiter. When she returned with the correct paperwork, there was no smile, not even a hint of a smile and in fact not even a bit of warmth at all. I suppose you can guess what the correct test results were. Yeah, my arteries were lined with concrete mixed from the hundreds of Cheese Whoppers I gobbled down as a denizen of the midnight shift, years ago.

Lesson learned from Miss Big White Smile: Why waste friendliness on someone ready to check out of the big picture? I guess that makes sense, in some fashion. I mean, you wouldn't waste your time waxing a rusty twenty year-old Chevy, would you?

As you can clearly see, I did not keel over right away. I got back into running, and have been doing that ever since. Oh, but I did give up on Cheese Whoppers; not only good for me, good for the big old fat cows, too. Hey, that's important stuff, the *no meat* thing I've been doing the past few years. It helps my cholesterol and reduces some of the seemingly endless suffering that animals feel in this hard old world. Just because you never see where your juicy little hamburger comes from does not mean that sheep and cows and pigs can't feel the burning acid screech of fear and death.

Have you ever been to a slaughter house? If not, don't think of me as such a kook.

So I run: *thump*,

thump,

hump,

hump.

The running is what keeps me alive, keeps the coppery hot red sauce flowing, the cells replicating, although today the usual starting pain seems a little on the... *weird side*. It's not just the usual achy knees and ankles.

When I say weird, I mean weird like my noggin is starting to imitate a helium-filled balloon, to rise up and see what the stratosphere really smells like. For a moment or two, I seem to be lost, the tender sky and moist ground lulling me, pulling me, asking for an embrace. SHIT. A conscious part of my little brain case understands how bad that can be: *falling down*. A couple of years ago I broke my ankle during a run by stepping smartly into the Marianas Trench. OK; so it wasn't the Marianas Trench, but it sure was close. And the cussing that went on; WOW, Olympic caliber! That is another thing I am good at: swearing. Another cop thing, I believe. Police officers turn bad language into fine art every single day of the year, Christmas included. Did you know that cussing is one of the ways you can differentiate between a criminal and an undercover cop? The bad guy swearing is just loud and obnoxious and scary; the cussing undercover is a poet laureate, a fucking Mark Twain.

So I don't want to fall down.

That ain't a good thing.

I slow my *bumps* and *humps*.

Rest just a bit; cool down; try to let it pass. The vibrant greens and massive browns and cool grays and icy blues of my little big runner world swirl for a week or a moment or two.

Sit... just a bit; feel the noiseless clamor encircle my head like an executioner's hood.

Then it passes; I am OK again.

I think.

It's no big deal; I have seen this before. It happens occasionally; when I "over-do" things.

Some doctors warned me about that, you see.

Over-doing things, I mean.

Because the worst fall I ever took wasn't while I was running. It was a couple of years after I retired, while I was motoring on my Honda on the Interstate one fine summer day. Some crazed cretin hit-and-run driver put me on the shiny dark pavement so hard it split my helmet like a cracked oyster and caused my gray matter to weep and shut down for a time. For a while I was a one man version of that iconic piece of cinema, *Night of the Living Dead*.

But anyways, I eventually got back into running, after the intense fun of rehab. And thinking of that, it is time to get back into my run today;

UP, UP,

bump, bump,

hump, hump (stupid chump).

Yes, I'm back, and it is...good, I guess. My head is clearing. This is a special part of the track I run. I know where I'm at. I've been here a whole bunch of times. The trees in this section are big old oaks and maples, ancient beings, living Roman and Greek columns holding up the thin oxygen and nitrogen blanket with all the big fluffy pillows. And the little highway is not quite as close to the track here; there is almost no traffic this time of day. I hear a truck horn beep behind me, off in the distance, frog-like, oddly more animal than machine-like. I twist my head backwards, not such an easy thing when moving along at a few miles an hour. I see not too far behind a white ambulance parked on the grassy shoulder, next to the running track. Its cadmium strobes screech at the fine summer air, advising of some tragedy in the area.

Tragedies happen occasionally on the track. Believe me, I've seen plenty. None of them ever bother me (except for the toddler once who got his little arm twisted like a pretzel). The problem is the cyclists, you see. Some of these little schmucks get all dolled up in their cool metallic spandex and ride bicycles that cost more than my Chevy and they race up and down the track like they are qualifying for Olympic gold. Some of them use runners and walkers like race buoys.

But the tragedies of the track are nothing compared to the stuff I saw as a street cop; the shootings, the stabbings, the grisly accidents, the suicides. Talking about bikers (the other kind, that is), I once got a call to assist at an accident scene on the main freeway one late summer night. It seems some big lunk on a Harley was clocking along at a seventy roll when he ran flat into the back of a pitch-dark steel hauler stalled in the right lane. As you might guess, the guy was instantly dematerialized, a bad version of Star Trek. I was asked to help find some of the "bits" and "parts" that were strewn over a wide area of the road and grassy shoulder. I found one of the "bits" at the top of the shoulder about a hundred feet from the impact; the guy's helmet. I didn't realize until I picked it up that the helmet contained most of the guy's head.

Now *that* is a tragedy.

So as my thoughts run, so do I:

bump, bump,

hump, hump.

I hear a vehicle accelerating on the road to my left. The shiny

ambulance races past, glittering in a strange way, with no siren. It is apparently a private company, one I have not heard of before, “Happy Dog Rescue.” *Happy Dog*, I wonder. You’ve got to be kidding me. There’s a rescue service for dogs? I’ve seen lots of idiotic things in my day, but not that. Or is it a rescue service for *people* that is called Happy Dog?

Whatever.

As the unit races forward, I see a large red Buddha image, you know, the smiling fat guy, painted on the back door, where I expected to see a red cross.

Buddha?

OK.

I mean, I have nothing against Buddhists, nothing at all. I’ve been to the Zen Temple a few times, just to satisfy my curiosity. Everything they said there seemed to make a lot of sense; plain talk about finding goodness in life and spreading the goodness around. There was none of the droning mumbo jumbo and mindless ritual of the Catholic and Lutheran churches I have seen in the past. I sense that Lutherans pride themselves on thinking like it is the fourteenth century. Good luck with that.

I remember one time one of my in-laws found out I had gone to a Buddhist temple. As a Born Again, she was horrified that any American would “worship” a Buddha. I guessed it was OK in her mind to have godless heathens in distant lands consigned to hell for such an indiscretion. I had to explain that Buddhists don’t actually “worship” Buddha, just revere him as an enlightened spiritual being, to learn from him. Guess what her reaction was; hint, CLOSED EARS, CLOSED EARS.

Oh, the power of religion.

On a side note: When was the last time you heard of an enraged Buddhist strapping on a suicide bomb vest and slaughtering the guests at a wedding or a police station?

Think about it.

Oh, and while we are speaking of Hell: Do you really think that some Being, some Entity, could be so powerful and loving to have created this vast universe, with its trillions of planets and stars and galaxies, and would be so small and mean to create some kind of eternal torture chamber?

Come on!

Forward:

bump, bump,

hump, hump.

Yeah; running settles my thoughts, the switches in the big old computer upstairs, the ongoing cerebral slump. And when I say *slump* I mean *depression*, with a capital D. Thirty years as a cop, coupled with a brain injury, will do that. It will make you a master of the macabre, a wizard of woe, a medium of melancholy. I wish I had a dime for every time I had a mental picture of my own brains mashed against the plaster wall; a plate of thrown spaghetti WITH MEATBALLS. I've seen that plenty of times, believe me.

But at least it's fast, and that is a good thing. The only problem is the aftermath. In most cases, someone has to FIND the big red mess. I remember a police call one time, long ago, when an old woman found her husband one morning in the basement, lying on the gooey carpet next to his favorite pheasant gun. The powerful twelve gauge, having been placed in his mouth, had removed the top portion of his head. But more interestingly, the hot gases of the shell had disengaged the skin of his face before falling back. The woman actually asked us why her husband had worn a Halloween mask while committing suicide. She really wanted to know; why would he wear a mask?

How do you explain that one?

And you wonder why cops get depressed; why they drink themselves silly on occasion.

Yes; people are strange. As I think this, some *asshole*, oops, I mean some *cyclist* (I'm trying to improve) outfitted all in black and pedaling a black twenty speed whooshes past me like a shell from the Bismark. Hell, he must be going at least forty or fifty miles an hour. I have never seen anyone go that fast here on a bicycle. As I wonder at this, the guy, not even wearing a helmet, turns his head back and I can see that he is laughing. Twenty years ago, I would have given him the finger, but I am past that stuff now. Thank God. I still have a bunch of broken and chipped teeth from the idiots I have wrestled with over the years:

bump, bump,

hump, hump.

The bar fights were actually a fun part of the job. They were fun because you always knew back-up was on the way. You might lose the first round, but you always won the war. I remember one time I got a call to a local flea-bag joint well renowned for booze related brawls. A couple of drunk women apparently had suddenly discovered that they were sharing the same boyfriend and this knowledge generated some activity

reminiscent of people called Hatfield and McCoy.

“Offic...er...ah...I...ah...Oh, my God...I’m fucking injured!” Her face was red and scratched and her words were slurred, but I did not see any real injury.

“Are you talking about your face?” I asked.

“No, I’m ta...ta...talking about my...my TIT!”

“Excuse me?”

At that point, she reached inside her sweater and pulled out one of her ample breasts, which carried a perfect set of dark red bite marks, upper and lower. The wonders of forensic science!

A short time later, my team sergeant came to the scene.

“So what have you got here, kid?” he asked.

“Two women fighting over the rock star at the bar over there; just minor injuries, nothing requiring a rescue.”

“OK, I’m outta here.”

“I think you should talk with one of the witnesses, the one in the red sweater.”

“Why?”

“Trust me.”

As you might imagine, the drunken woman felt compelled to display her wounded mammary gland to my supervisor, who, like most cops, was immensely pleased by the demonstration. The sergeant later wrote up a fake commendation for my “investigative actions in a difficult situation” and presented it to me at the next roll call. *Ha, ha, yuk, yuk, another big fucking comedian.* Like I said, we have to laugh sometimes.

As I plod along, *bump, bump*, about three miles in now, I gaze at the joyous profusion of wildflowers next to the track. They are oddly larger than I have ever seen before, an immense jumble of yellows and violets and blues in a network of viridian shapes and crazy lines. I feel compelled to stop a moment, to admire God’s palette, to inhale the sweet energy of life and light and goodness. As I lean forward, I see something odd wriggling in the moist umber soil under the brush. As I tilt forward, I see that it is a hand, soil covered, pale and long past the point of being dead. My mind roils as I look again. Could it have been moving? I’m not sure. No, that is not possible. But what could a hand be doing out here? It must be a homicide of some kind. My old cop mind kicks in again; examine the scene, protect the evidence.

But I see nothing around, no footprints, no tire tracks, no pieces of

anything to gather or protect. I used to be a detective, you know. I've seen severed hands before, though not very often. I decide that this hand must have been thrown here from the running track by some sinister scumbag. But when I pull my cell phone from its special waist holder, I find that it is as dead as the fingers of the poor man's hand. I can see the hand carries the gleam of a gold wedding band. I think the best thing would be to flag someone down, to find someone with a cell phone to call the authorities. So I decide to wait.

And of course, as you might expect in a situation like this, no one comes. The highway is as empty as a lawyer's heart. As I wait, the silence is deafening until I hear a loud slithering sound, leaves cracking, grass bending. I look over and see a shape gliding toward me through the vegetation. Then the head becomes visible and I see the front end of the largest python I have ever seen. It's got a lime green head the size of a cinder block and it stops and stares at me, big red tongue lashing out, seeing what I might taste like.

Now, I'm not afraid of snakes. I'm the guy who handled the big blue racer that was put into Sergeant Kennedy's uniform locker when he transferred to the afternoon shift and almost had the big heart attack and everybody got into a big shitload of trouble for a time. So, I'm not afraid, but the SIZE of this monster; it's something from Loch Ness. OK; yeah, I'm scared. I can't believe how big it is, as thick as my thigh. I can't imagine what it is doing here, in the Midwest. These things don't live here. Some dummy must have let it escape. But then something really odd happens. It moves up to my new friend, Mr. Dead Hand, and snatches it in its jaws and swallows it and I cannot believe what I am seeing. I mean, what the hell should I do? What the hell CAN I do? Then the big serpent looks in MY direction and I decide I will not wait around and I take off again, running:

Running AWAY,
bump, bump,
hump, hump

Oy vey.

This is some of the most bizarre shit I have ever seen. I guess I will report it all at the next opportunity and let the authorities find the big snake containing all the evidence. And you know what they say, *be careful what you wish for*. Because just then, I hear and then see a member of local law enforcement piloting his black scout car down the street. I run

out and flag him down. As I run toward the driver's door to tell him my sordid tale, he bails out with hand on the grip of his pistol and yells some poetry, "BACK THE FUCK OFF, JACK."

"Sorry, don't mean to startle you, but..." I blurt out.

"Move back on the fucking track, asshole." Now, just so you know, the word *asshole* is probably the most commonly used bit of police jargon in the known world. Hell, I've used it myself at least ten thousand times during my career. But I must say that this is the first time a police officer has used it in relation to ME. And I can tell you, it does not feel so good.

"I was just going to tell you..."

"Look, if you don't move away RIGHT NOW, you will be wearing your ass for a hat."

I am frozen for the moment, not sure what to do. And I feel more than a little bit pissed, but the guy still has his hand on the butt of his pistol. He looks a lot more dangerous than helpful, with the massive muscles and gestapo haircut and mirror sunglasses. I manage to keep my mouth shut and back up a few steps.

"So you have a fucking problem," says Officer Friendly.

"Well, there was a severed hand back there off the track and this big snake came up and it was giant and it ate the hand and..." I stammer, sounding like some frenzied idiot, I think.

"Is that supposed to be some kind of big problem?"

"Excuse me?"

"Take a look," he says then pops open his trunk. I look and see that the trunk has dozens and dozens of severed hands piled up.

"Relax, we got it under control," he says, smiling.

I want to tell him I am a retired cop, but something in my throat, something rough like sandpaper, convinces me to shut up. The officer gets back into his scout car and drives away. There is a screeching sound, either rubber tires or some kind of distant insect, I'm not sure which. I get back on the track, start running again. What else should I do? Finish it up and call it a day, as they say:

bump, bump,

hump, hump.

My God, what does it all mean?

Nothing happens for another couple of miles.

As I round the next corner I see a large young man wearing black gloves emerging from a side trail in the woods, jogging lightly toward

the track. He is wearing spotless light red sweats, something that I would call *pink* if it were on a female, but I am simply amazed at the rest of his appearance: dark-skinned, six foot three or four, heavily muscled, a tree trunk neck with swirling religious tattoos. I am always amazed by the tattoos I see on the thin skin of peoples' necks; I think it must have hurt like hell putting it on. As Big Tattoo Man gets close I feel my gut tighten a bit; I don't carry a piece when I jog and at my age I doubt I could last more than twenty seconds in a fight with a guy like that. I can't remember how many people like this I have put in the can for one thing or another during my career. I hope he is not one of them.

"Good morning," says Big Tattoo Man with a warm smile.

"Yes, it is."

"It's a good day to be alive, to be on the track." The warm smile is slightly incongruent on his scarred, boxer-like face.

As we jog in the same direction I notice that the left side of his sweatshirt is soaked in blood. What the hell?

"You're bleeding, man," I say.

"Oh, yeah, it's no big deal," he says, pulling up the sweatshirt to reveal a ragged hole in his side with a greasy gray piece of intestine sticking out a couple of inches.

"JESUS," I blurt out, astounded.

"Oh, don't worry about it. It will all work out, I promise."

We run on for a couple of minutes, silent; I am not sure what to say. It will *work out*? He turns off at the next fork back into the woods. I sure hope he will find a doctor, but his lack of concern has floored me. What a day!

I think I will just finish now, finish this run.

This crap has just got to end.

Up ahead, I see someone sitting on one of the concrete and cedar benches placed at every half-mile mark. He must be one of the walkers, an older one I see as I get closer. He is a slight, frail little man with thin, receding white hair. His ocean blue eyes are accented by his pale, onion-like skin and he wears a fading, blue and white plaid short-sleeve shirt and gray slacks over white tennis shoes. There is a very casual, happy and wise look to the man. I slow, stop, face him and he looks up, smiling. He has on the bench two piping hot Starbucks dark roast coffees, my favorite, waiting like happy sentinels. How he got them here, out in the middle of nowhere, is beyond me. They smell wonderful, along with the

fragrance of the wildflowers nearby and the crisp orange and yellow sunshine dancing along the tree branches and I feel the moment has been arranged somehow; arranged for... me.

“You’re just in time.” His smile is wonderful, magnetic. I want to just...rest... stay here a while.

“Is one of those Starbucks for me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It’s my favorite brew. How did you...”

“Just relax. Let’s enjoy the moment together.”

And the moment does feel overwhelmingly good; warm; happy; peaceful. I glance over occasionally, looking at the old man. I know, I KNOW I have seen him before, somewhere good, I hope, although as a cop you don’t get to see people in their best moments. Even the good people you run across tend to be having some of their worst moments in a law enforcement interaction. But I KNOW I have seen this man before.

Then it hits me; I remember: Many, many years ago, as a young uniformed copper working at the big city festival, I saw this guy, this same guy right here. And I think he was wearing the same clothes, or something very similar. He was some homeless guy that my buds on the Afternoon Shift were picking on, demeaning, laughing at, threatening to arrest for vagrancy. I remember watching it for a while and then finally telling them to leave the man alone. He smiled at me and wandered off. I remember later that I wished I had given him a few bucks to get a decent lunch or something. I always regretted not doing that. And for some reason, I never forgot.

“Yes,” said the old man softly.

“But I...I...”

“I remember what happened. I appreciated it, more than you might imagine,” he said.

“I didn’t make it, did I? Was that *me* that the ambulance picked up back there, or was it the old motorcycle accident, when my head got busted? I mean, I get it, now, the Happy Dog Rescue thing. I didn’t know you had a sense of humor.”

“As to when, it really doesn’t matter, does it? And as for the sense of humor, that ALWAYS matters. As a former cop, you should know that. You have had quite a day, quite a run. And now it is time to go home.”

“Yes; time to go home.”

“But first, let’s finish our coffee,” says Happy Dog.

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Traverse

Andre Kocsis

"THE MOST IMPORTANT thing I can tell you about avalanches is ... avoid them! The mountains don't give a shit that you own a bee-em-dubya or have an MBA from Hah-vaad." Wolf swept a derisive look around the seven of us, and a couple of people grinned nervously.

"If you're buried deeper than a meter, your chances of survival are close to zero." He paused again. Strange marketing tactics, I thought to myself. Wolf was the guide provided by the mountaineering outfitter which had organized this five-day ski tour. Known as the Wapta Traverse, it would take us through the Rocky Mountains, across the Wapta Icefields, and over the Continental Divide.

Mary, mid-twenties, colour-coordinated clothing, hailing from the wilds of Rosedale, ventured a question. "Do you freeze to death?"

Wolf gave her his patented stare.

She turned red. Wolf grimaced, and you could see every fiber in the muscle bulging at his jaw. He was of medium height, but his light T-shirt revealed a physique forged for survival.

"I mean, it would take a while to freeze ..." Mary ran out of steam.

After a few more seconds of stone cold silence, Wolf spoke. "An ice mask will form around your face, and you will suffocate. The snow will lock you like cement. You will not be able to move. That's assuming that you haven't already died from being smashed against a rock or a tree."

He seemed satisfied that we were suitably terrified, because he then spent twenty minutes talking about the precautions we would be taking to avoid avalanches, crevasses, and the other assorted hazards of the mountains.

There were some in the group for whom this was redundant, because they had some backcountry experience. I was in that category, though it had been at least a decade since I went out last. I was counting on Nick being overwhelmed by the wilderness, and then Sue would see that he was nothing but a spoiled rich kid.

Yes, Nick, who looked like some character out of a seventies surfer flick. Young, tanned, sun-streaked blond hair. Well, my boy, we'll see how far your good looks will carry you when the chips are down. The fact that I was ten years older might yet prove an advantage.

Everything had gone according to plan. Sue and I had talked about doing the Wapta many times. When things fell apart between us, I struggled for a time, but finally I was gracious in yielding my place to Nick. However, I was secretly planning my comeback.

We shared the same circle of friends, so it was impossible to avoid seeing them together. On weekends we piled into jalopies and made our way to Whistler. We slept six to a room, freeloading off whoever had a house near the resort. Then, Sunday night, back to Vancouver, to whatever soul-sucking job we could hold, as long as it gave us the freedom for our real lives, which took place on the slopes.

I had met Sue while riding up the lift at Whistler. It turned out we had a few acquaintances in common. She had raced in high school, and had just dropped out of university so she could spend more time skiing. Just twenty years old, and in love with the mountains.

"Your parents don't mind paying while you're playing?" I asked. She was wearing a dark jacket with a blazing sun embroidered on the back, her raven hair spilling past her collar.

"They totally freaked when I quit school." She was silent for a few seconds, as if rewinding a tape in her mind. The chair creaked slowly up the mountain, our legs dangling above a deep gully studded with dark, angular rocks. "First generation from Hong Kong," she explained.

We got off the lift and boot-packed our way up Spanky's Ladder. My thighs were burning by the time we reached the ridge, and the wind nearly knocked me over as I looked down at the untouched powder. Sue was already clicking into her skis. With no hesitation, she jumped in, and with long, swooping turns, carved an aggressive course along the fall line. She had the grace of a born athlete and fearlessness unspoiled by experience. I took off after her, and by the time we reached the runout at the bottom, I was in love with her.

After that, we hooked up every weekend for the rest of the winter. Usually there were six or eight of us, but a few times I was able to entice her to come by herself to explore some secret stash of untouched powder. I remember those moments so clearly. Her hips gyrating in a dance with the mountain, and afterward, crystals of snow glistening on her dark lashes, a wide smile displaying perfect white teeth.

* * *

Wolf finally finished with his instructions. We were issued transceivers, avalanche probes, shovels, climbing harnesses, carabiners. More weight for our packs, which were already heavy enough, thank you very much.

The gear—skis, boots, backpacks—was loaded into a large rust-pocked

van, and then we squeezed in for the drive to the trailhead. I sat near the back, and took stock of the others. Sue and Nick, of course. Another couple, Jane and Tom, from Edmonton. They looked in their late twenties, in good shape, evidently with some backcountry experience. Keith, from Montreal, tall, well-built, looked strong as a bull. Hard to judge his age. Could be thirty, but there was something innocent and boyish about him. Gay, I was almost sure. And Mary, with her expensive gear. She was blonde, and looked athletic, but in that pampered way that many resort skiers have. And Wolf. He was in his late twenties, and originally from Germany. His colouring—coal black hair and swarthy skin accentuated by the outdoors—gave the lie to the Aryan stereotype. He wore a perpetual leer that showed off white teeth against his dark face. This seemed less than appropriate, especially when he was relating tales of death in the mountains. He would push his face close, as he searched for signs of fear in your eyes.

An hour's drive brought us to a gravel parking lot beside a small lake. Beyond the lake, a range of mountains; vertical rock faces dark against the gentler slopes below, which were covered in an immaculate apron of snow. This was only the first range that we would cross, and a minor one at that. Our route would take us much higher, above ten thousand feet, the air thin, the trails treacherous, crevasses, whiteouts, avalanches ... Nick, my boy, let's see what you're really made of!

* * *

It had not been easy to convince him to go on this trip. He was a good skier, but he was used to Lake Tahoe, and knew nothing of the wilderness. Only Sue's determination to do the Wapta Traverse had convinced Nick to come along.

What did she see in him, anyway? The sun-bleached hair? The family money?

It had occurred to me that, despite Sue's stated nonchalance about the future and disdain for material comforts, by some process of osmosis she must have absorbed her parents' values.

Personally, I felt immune to the lure of what passed for normal. My work career was checkered, with large gaps during winter, though I had been relatively steadfast in my current position as lead hand in a furniture manufacturer's warehouse. The work was physically demanding, paid well, and was flexible enough as long as I got things done. I could envision myself drifting along until retirement.

A few days before this trip, I was just getting some coffee, when my supervisor, whose window overlooked the warehouse from the mezzanine, waved me into his office.

I put my Styrofoam cup on the edge of his desk, and sprawled in the broken-armed chair across from Tony.

“What's up?”

“Yeah, I been wanting to talk to you, Richard.” Tony was rotund, his head a bowling ball stuck atop a large barrel. No matter what the temperature, beads of sweat glistened on his forehead and upper lip.

I took a sip of my coffee, and placed the cup back on his desk.

“See, I been asked to set up a new warehouse in Richmond, and I was thinking you could replace me here. You’re a smart boy, and the men like you, and I figured you could use the extra money ...”

“And I would get this great office, huh?” I said, sweeping my gaze around to take in the rubber plant in the corner, which was choking under a thick layer of dust.

“Yeah, you’d have your own office.” He gave me a calculating look, not unkind, but I could tell that he was having second thoughts.

“Of course, it would be a little harder to take time off. Your hours would be more regular, ’cause you gotta be here when the trucks are picking up.”

The offer triggered a certain amount of introspection about where my life was heading, and for a couple of days I actually agonized over how to respond. Finally, I promised Tony that I would give him an answer after I returned from my trip.

Would a respectable career tip the scales with Sue? If not, then what was the sense of locking myself into the corporate grind? These thoughts kept chasing each other around my skull during the drive to the trailhead.

* * *

I got out of the van, and turned toward the mountains. This simple act of tilting my face up toward the peaks made my breath catch. The petty concerns of my miserable life fell away; I half expected the mountain gods to announce themselves through the low timbre of a Tibetan gong resonating in the clear air.

Instead, I heard Nick grumble, “Shit, it’s cold. I don’t know why I let you talk me into this.”

“Don’t be such a wimp,” Sue answered, giggling.

We unloaded the van, assembled our gear, and attached the climbing skins to the bottoms of our skis. The lake was covered by a foot of snow, but Wolf broke trail. It was relatively easy going on the flat, even with the heavy packs. Mary was right behind Wolf, and he set an easy pace so she could keep up. I was behind her, then Nick and Sue, Jane and Tom, and finally Keith. A brilliant sun beat down on us, and despite sub-zero temperatures, I could soon feel sweat forming on my back, under the pack. Of course, I was too proud to ask for a stop so I could remove a layer or two of clothing, and an hour later, when we got to the end of the lake, my torso was totally soaked. Wolf called a halt so we could check the transceivers. These emitted a radio signal so that, in case we were buried in an avalanche, the survivors could find the carcasses of the casualties.

Theoretically, we would be able to uncover the victims within the few minutes that it would take for them to exhaust their oxygen, but that assumed that we were experts at transceiver search. The chances of winning big in Las Vegas looked positively encouraging compared to our chance of survival with a crew as inexperienced as ours. I tried to imagine how pretty Nick would look after we dug him up. His tanned skin would be as blue as the turquoise choker he wore, his face frozen in the rictus of death as his lungs struggled for the last few molecules of oxygen.

Once we stopped, I started to feel cold. However, I knew that the uphill portion of our trip was about to start, and I would be sweating even more, so I steeled myself against the sting of the frigid air against my wet skin, and removed all but the inner layer of thin polypropylene undershirt. I put my jacket back over it, but my teeth were now chattering. The others seemed to have similar problems, except for Keith, whose boyish smile never left his face. Wolf checked each of our transmitters, and then we started off again. This time, the path led up along a snow-choked creek bed, and it didn't take long before my thighs started to burn. As we gained elevation, I could feel my lungs straining. The lake was already at five thousand feet, and with every step we entered a region of thinner air. The sound of Nick puffing behind me was the only thing that kept me going.

At least I was warm again. Even the thin shirt and shell seemed too much. My body was throwing off heat like a furnace.

Wolf stopped again for a few minutes, and we all took a swig of water from our bottles. Hydration is crucial to avoid altitude sickness, and with the water I had lost through sweat, I knew I had to keep drinking. But the cold water in my belly made me cold again, and despite the fatigue, I was happy to get moving.

I could see that Mary, just ahead of me in the line, was starting to tire. The gap between her and Wolf would periodically widen. Of course, this meant that the rest of us also fell behind. Wolf would look back, and then wait for us to catch up.

I concentrated on keeping my skis in contact with the snow. Lifting them is a waste of energy, and sliding them forward smoothes the hairs on the skins to point backward, so that you have more traction when you push off on the next step. Slide, push, slide, push. It was a hypnotic rhythm, and some tune about a chain gang kept going around my brain. I was leaning forward, better to hold the heavy pack against the slope, which was getting steeper.

Whenever I tried to look up at my surroundings, my pack would pull me back, and I would lose my balance. My skis would go off the trail, and I'd come close to falling. Thus, I spent most of my time hunched over, staring at Mary's skis moving ahead of me.

We had been climbing for about two hours, and Wolf had to make

increasingly frequent stops to allow Mary to catch up. Finally, he called a halt. Mary clicked off her skis and sat down on her pack, totally spent. The rest of us followed her example.

“Get off your pack,” Wolf said to Mary. She looked up as he towered over her. The expression on her face was a mixture of fear and exhaustion.

“Get off your pack,” Wolf repeated.

She kept looking up at him, uncomprehending.

“Why?” Her voice trembled, and I knew she was close to tears.

“I want to look at your pack,” Wolf said gruffly, and started to tug at the straps, almost dumping her into the snow. Mary rose slightly, and he took her pack as she collapsed to sit, waist-deep, in the powder.

Wolf had taken off his jacket, and had spread it on the ground. His body, covered only by a thin undershirt, steamed in the cold air. I guess we were all supposed to admire his magnificent physique.

Wolf took the contents of Mary’s pack and piled them on his jacket. He examined each item in turn, sneering frequently.

“God, you don’t need half this junk,” he said at one point. Mary hung her head, for all the world looking like a discarded rag doll. Finally, Wolf took the heavier items, and stuffed them into his own pack. He was already carrying a huge load, and I wondered if he’d even be able to lift it now.

The remaining gear went back into Mary’s pack, which was now considerably smaller. Wolf put on his jacket, and laboriously hoisted his load.

“Let’s go,” he said. “We have an hour and a half, two hours max, of climbing. We want to get to Bow Hut before sunset.”

For the first time I noticed that the trees around us were getting smaller, and signs of animal life had disappeared. The thinning woods around us kept a frigid silence.

Mary struggled to her feet, floundering in the deep snow, and had trouble putting on her skis. Clearly, her fatigue was affecting her coordination. She put on her pack; it was obviously much lighter than before. Wolf looked back at her, and gave her a friendly grin. It was the first sign of encouragement he had shown anyone since we had set out. I could not see the expression on Mary’s face, but she set out with renewed energy.

In another hour, we were above the tree line. A slight overcast created scenery in monochrome, and only the occasional stony outcrop broke the unremitting whiteness of the snow. The ground fell away steeply on our right—a long apron of snow, and the trees a gray blur far below. On our left the terrain rose precipitously to a ridge four hundred meters above us. At the top, I could see ice, pale turquoise, shot with fractures, where the glacier tumbled over a cliff.

Wolf called a halt at a flat spot just before we entered the steep bowl which formed the flank of the mountain.

“If you look to your left, you will see a typical avalanche slope. It’s wind-loaded, about thirty degrees in pitch. Any disturbance, even a skier above us, could set it off.” He paused, and on cue, the late afternoon sun emerged. The ice on the ridge glinted with a venomous yellow. “See the icefall above? Chunks of ice the size of a house can come off there at any time. If the ice doesn’t getcha, for sure the avalanche it triggers, will.”

Great, I thought. What do we do now? Turn back? Surely, he knew about this spot before we set out.

“We will cross this patch one at a time. That way, if an avalanche hits, the rest of us can search for the victim. I will go first, and wait for you at the other edge of the bowl. Mary, wait until I’m about thirty meters out, and then you follow my trail. The rest of you keep that spacing. And whatever you do, don’t stop while you’re crossing.”

Without waiting for a response, he set off. After a few minutes, he looked back, and waved impatiently for Mary to follow. She hesitated.

“Come on, Mary. I’m sure it’s safe,” I said to her, despite my own misgivings. She looked back at me, gave me a tremulous smile, and set off. By this time, the sun had disappeared again, and a thin mist was starting to descend on us. When Mary was thirty meters away, she was only a vague darkish form against the snow.

I moved onto the path. I felt very exposed, and kept glancing up at the icefall, convinced that the fateful chunk of ice would come exactly when I was in the middle of the bowl. The mist seemed to get thicker, and I could now barely see Mary.

Finally, I arrived where Wolf and Mary waited, and one by one, those behind me also made the crossing. Tom, who chose to cross last, grinned behind his reddish beard, which was crusted with rime.

In the meantime, a stiff breeze shredded the curtain of mist, and a weak sun, now near the horizon, reminded us that we could not rest. We were soon on our way again, trudging up one more narrow trail. Mercifully, within a half-hour Bow Hut was in sight, perched atop a long incline.

Bow Hut is one of the largest of the shelters in the Rockies, capable of accommodating over thirty people. There is a large common area, connected by a short passage to three different dorms.

We entered, one by one, and the more experienced in the group immediately headed for the dorms, to secure the best sleeping spots.

I hesitated. This was not something that I had really thought about. Seeing Nick and Sue together was difficult enough, but being witness to their nocturnal coupling was more than I would be able to stand. At the same time, it occurred to me that if I shared a dorm with them, they would be less likely to indulge their passions. I hesitated while they chose their spot, but finally I headed for the dorm at the far side. It seemed appropriate, in any case, because this turned out to be the bachelors’ quarters. Wolf and Keith had already chosen spaces there.

Essentially, the dorm consisted of two shelves, two meters deep, and seven meters wide. The upper shelf, about two meters off the ground, was where my two room-mates had decided to sleep. I rolled out my sleeping bag on the lower shelf, which was about a meter high.

Once we had staked our territories, we gathered in the common area. The room was about six meters square, and Wolf had already started a roaring fire in the woodstove at the center. Along the sides, there were three long wooden tables with benches, and a counter with two small propane stoves. Windows on three sides displayed a magnificent view. The last sparks of light glinted off the seracs which had looked so threatening an hour before.

Wolf set to work making our meal, but not before issuing some instructions.

“We gotta have a steady supply of water, for meals, and in case someone gets an uncontrollable urge to wash their hands. One person has to bring in snow in these containers about every twenty minutes, so that we can keep melting it. Make sure you get the snow from well away from the outhouse, because I don’t like piss in my tea. Keith, you take first shift on snow duty. I’ll cook. There’s plenty of wood for the time being, but if we run low, don’t be shy about going out and chopping up some of the logs under the south corner of the hut.”

Wolf may not have been a gourmet chef, but we were all so famished that the praises of the meal were unanimous.

At one point, Keith asked Wolf how he had become a mountain guide.

“Yeah, it’s a long process. I lived in Chamonix for a few years, and did a lot of touring and climbing, and worked with a guide, and then I moved to Canada. I had to take a lot of courses, and serve as an assistant guide.”

“So how long would all that take?” Keith asked.

Wolf looked at him appraisingly for a second. “You thinking of it seriously?”

Keith turned red as everyone looked at him. “Well, uh, maybe,” he stammered.

“It’s not something you can do half-heartedly. Even after you get your guide’s ticket, it’s hard work, and you won’t get rich.”

“What attracted you to it?” Mary asked.

“It has its compensations. For one thing, I love the mountains, and to be paid for skiing and climbing is a sweet deal.”

Yeah, and then there are all these impressionable young women like you, Mary. I found it hard to see in Wolf the kind of purity that he was trying to project.

Strangely, though, that conversation opened a door that I had not even realized was there.

After we finished eating, one would have thought that opium had been

sprinkled into the soup, because everyone was immediately overcome by drowsiness, and we headed for the sleeping quarters. The dorms were frigid compared to the cozy dining area. It felt great to crawl into my sleeping bag, and within minutes I was asleep.

* * *

Everyone was in the common area not long after the sun rose. We ate breakfast, repacked our gear, and soon we were again on our way. This was to be a full day, as compared to the hike up to Bow Hut, which had taken us only about five hours. My legs felt refreshed by a full night of rest.

The day was overcast, and light flakes of snow drifted down as we climbed the steep first pitch. Wolf set a serpentine trail, zigzagging across the fall line about every hundred meters, so that our ascent would not be too steep for our skins to get traction. Periodically he would stop to see whether anyone was falling behind. At one stop he pointed to a peak on our left, and said, "Does anyone know what that's called?"

We looked at the steep conical spire rising out of the windswept snow.

"It's called Mt. Saint Nicholas," said Wolf. Indeed, it resembled nothing as much as Santa's peaked cap, tilting jauntily in our direction.

Nick pointed to the almost vertical face opposite us, and asked, "What would that be, Wolf, a five-nine, a five-ten?"

I was startled. Clearly, Nick was showing off, but he apparently knew something about rock climbing. Perhaps I had underestimated him.

Wolf stared for a moment at the limestone crags, which were generously afflicted by fractures. Finally, he said, "There are lots of holds, but it's rotten rock. Much easier just to walk up the other side."

I stared where Wolf was pointing, and, indeed, there was a narrow ridge connected to the spire. An experienced mountaineer could scramble along the narrow spine to gain the peak, without having to do technical climbing. I looked back at Nick. He avoided my eyes.

As we moved on, I was starting to feel the altitude and the weight of my pack. I had had the foresight to wear fewer layers, but now the cold started to seep into my body, conquering my extremities bit by bit. Sensory connection disappeared first from my feet, then my hands. My world contracted, consisting of my wheezing chest, burning thighs, and the pounding in my head. Hunched under the weight of my pack, I marched forward in what had been reduced to a death shuffle. Oblivious of everything except my tiny little hell, I was suddenly startled by bumping into Mary's skis. I looked up. The line had stopped. Around us, everything was totally white, as if we were inside a ping pong ball.

"We are coming out onto the main part of the glacier," Wolf said. "Visibility is very poor today." No kidding. He was only four meters ahead of me, yet I could not see him clearly. The mist swirled about him, giving the appearance of a specter in a cheap movie.

“We have to rope up,” he announced.

Mercifully, we had to drop our packs for this procedure. We put on our climbing harnesses, and Wolf hitched each of us to a long rope. We were separated by about five meters.

“Keep a steady distance, so you’re not jerking each other on the rope. The snow bridge over a crevasse may collapse, and the person in front of you may fall in. If that happens, drop to the snow and dig in, to arrest his fall. Then wait for my instructions. Don’t try to pull him out on your own, because you’ll just get pulled in yourself. Everyone understand? Let’s go.”

We set off into the whiteness. The terrain seemed to have flattened out, now that we were on the body of the glacier. The only problem was that the visibility was so poor, you could not see small variations in slope, so you would stumble when there was a slight rise you had not anticipated. This, of course, caused a jerk on the rope, pulling the rest of the line off balance.

It was worst for Wolf, who had no one ahead of him. I could see him faintly, periodically throwing one of his ski poles ahead to see whether the terrain sloped up or down, to try to get some perception of depth. Aside from the figures in front of me, I saw only featureless white, the sky blending with the ground. A couple of times I stumbled simply from vertigo, not knowing any more which way was up.

Wolf stopped again. He kept staring at the compass he held in his hand, shaking his head.

He unclipped himself, and proceeded down the line to Keith.

“Here’s your first assignment as guide-in-training. You’re gonna have to break trail. I will be at the back, and yell to you whether to go left or right. Otherwise, there’s not enough visibility to get a compass bearing.”

The habitual smile never left Keith’s face. The fool was actually pleased! He moved to the front, and clipped his harness to the rope. We started off again, this time more slowly.

“A bit to the left,” came the yell from behind. Keith adjusted his heading, and we trudged on. The rest of the morning proceeded in this manner. At least it was not as strenuous, the pace being slower, and the terrain relatively flat.

Gradually we started going uphill again, but the rise was gentle. Around midday we stopped for lunch. As I looked around, we seemed to be inside a milk bowl, but occasionally, as the mist cleared for a moment, I saw what looked like mountains to our right.

Much of the afternoon passed in the same way, with Keith in front and Wolf yelling course corrections from behind. Later, a breeze started to blow, and we could start to make out terrain features again.

Eventually, the mist all but disappeared. Around us was a flat desert of white, with gusts of snow being whipped up by the rising wind. A

prominent peak was on our right, flanked by others in the distance. Ahead of us the glacier tilted gently upward toward a series of peaks glistening in the weak sun. No sign of vegetation or other life. I was overwhelmed by the sheer scale and the magnificent desolation.

Wolf resumed the lead, and took us off the rope. The pace picked up as we neared our destination. Soon we could see Peyto Hut, a tiny structure above us, flanked by a large promontory with dark bands of sedimentary rock.

There were already five people in the hut: a couple from Holland and three young guys from Colorado. The space was cramped. Nick and Sue took a spot in the middle of the bottom bunk, so I rolled out my bag on the top shelf, as far away as possible.

Soon, Wolf was making soup and pasta, and I realized just how hungry I was. The sun was dipping below the horizon when we polished off the last scraps of food.

The shared experiences of the day triggered the beginnings of camaraderie within our group. Darkness flooded in from the outside, pooling in the corners of the hut. Wolf lit some lanterns on the table, and we gathered around the light, the scene a composition in yellow, orange, and black.

Tom started kidding Wolf about his navigational skills, and Wolf admitted that our route had been anything but direct. Apparently, he had had to veer well east of a straight line, in order to “handrail” along the bottom of Mount Thompson. There was no way to check positions along the immense flatness of the Wapta Glacier without seeking prominent formations.

I sneaked a glance at Sue, who was squeezed between Nick and Wolf at the other end of the table. I took in her glossy black hair, the glow of the lantern on her flawless caramel skin. My stomach tightened, and I felt a wave of longing and loss sweep over me. It wasn’t over, I told myself.

And for the first time since the trailhead, I remembered that I had to give Tony an answer when I got back. But until the situation with Sue was clear, the issues were too confusing. My brain raced feverishly, like an engine with no load.

“You look like you’re in pain, Richard.” I was startled by Mary’s voice next to me.

“I’m okay. Just tired,” I said. “How’re you holding up?”

“I’m getting used to it, especially now that my pack is lighter.” She smiled in self-deprecation.

“Have you ever done touring before?”

“No. I raced cross-country in university, but this is different.”

“Yeah. The packs, the altitude,” I agreed.

“And you?”

“I didn’t go to university.”

“No, I meant, have you done this before? You seem to be keeping up.”

“I haven’t been out for many years.”

I noticed that Sue had started talking to Wolf, and caught snatches of their conversation over the general hubbub. I wondered where Wolf had developed this strange habit of shoving his face close to his listener. Perhaps it was effective when talking to people in the middle of a gale. I could hear words like “base camp” and “summit”, all delivered in that macho manner that young guides affected. Mary’s incessant chatter prevented me from following their conversation, but Sue was looking up at Wolf, smiling, dark eyes glowing, taking in the line of bullshit the guy was spinning. Nick was in deep conversation with Tom. How could he be so oblivious? His girlfriend was being seduced right under his nose, and he didn’t even realize it!

“... so then I decided to re-evaluate things, and that’s how ...” It seemed that in the meantime Mary had been telling me the story of her life. I was overcome by a great wave of fatigue.

“I’m gonna turn in,” I interrupted. Mary’s mouth snapped shut in mid-sentence, her eyes wide open. Her expression reminded me of a goldfish. I stood up, extricating myself from the tight seat on the bench, and clambered up the ladder to the bunk. It took no more than a couple of minutes before the buzz of talk below faded from my consciousness, as I sank into a deep sleep, cocooned in my sleeping bag.

Unfortunately, the oblivion of slumber lasts only so long. I woke from a bizarre dream, where Sue was pursued by some rabid animal, and my feet were stuck in molasses. For some seconds, I did not remember where I was. I heard the soft breathing of a dozen others in the small hut, and felt another sleeping bag right next to me.

When I raised my head, I could see the outline of a window with a weak light filtering in, but here, in the bunk, I could see nothing. It made my hearing that much more acute. I lay on my back, staring into the darkness above me. Occasionally I’d hear someone shift, or a soft grunt or moan, but otherwise peace reigned.

I thought of Sue, not so far from me, her limbs relaxed in sleep, just the way I had gazed at her so many times in my own bed.

* * *

We had been skiing together for most of that first winter. I gave her a ride back to Vancouver, and helped lug her gear up the narrow stairs to her small apartment. It was the first time she had invited me in.

I think we were both a little sad that skiing was over for the year. She offered me some wine, but soon we ran out of conversation. She went to the kitchen to put our glasses into the sink, and after a moment I followed her. I embraced her from behind. She averted her face, so I kissed the

hollow at her collarbone, inhaling a faint aroma of pine from her thick black hair. I felt a shudder run through her slender body. Finally she turned her face up to mine, and our lips met for the first time.

* * *

It lasted only one summer. Sue went to visit her sister in California at the end of October, and when she came back, she avoided me for a week. Eventually, I cornered her. We were standing in the same kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Richard,” she said, her eyes downcast. “I met someone in California.”

I had to hold on to the counter, otherwise I’m sure my legs would have buckled. The shirt stuck to my back as my whole body was drenched in flop-sweat. I was glad Sue was not looking at me—my face must have been ghastly.

For a long time, we stood frozen, silent. The gears in my brain spun, unable to engage. Finally, I said, “Yeah, but now you’re back.”

“You don’t understand. He’s coming up here.”

“He’s moving to Vancouver?”

“His family owns a condo in Whistler.”

* * *

I convinced myself it wouldn’t last. On occasion, they would ski with our group, and I affected a nonchalant attitude, all the while plotting on how to pry them apart. I pushed the Wapta Traverse; I was sure that a week in the wilderness would show Nick to be just a spoiled rich kid.

And now Sue was flirting with Wolf. The way she had looked at him! Black-hearted slut! I hated her for the pain I felt.

I heard someone stir on the bottom bunk. There was whispering, and a feminine giggle. Perhaps it was Sue and Nick! I could feel beads of sweat form on my forehead, as I lay rigid in my suffocating sleeping bag. I can’t stand another night of this, I thought. I have to do something. There were only three days left. It had taken so much scheming to get them on this trip, and I was letting the opportunity slip away.

The noise in the bottom bunk had died, and I heard the door open. Someone making a nocturnal pilgrimage to the outhouse.

In the darkness of the hut, the boundary between waking and dreaming became indistinct. Images of Nick, Wolf, and finally even Tony, whirled round my fevered brain, and I struggled like a rodent tortured by the steel teeth of a leg-trap. I’d wake with a start, not realizing that I had been sleeping, and then the cycle would repeat until I thought I would go insane.

Eventually I understood that I had no choice. Time was running out, and I could no longer wait for some random event to resolve the situation in my favour. I had to act; clinging to this resolution I was finally able to escape to the sanctuary of dreamless sleep.

* * *

With the cramped quarters, everyone prepared their packs and left them

outside while we ate breakfast. As I returned from the outhouse, I took Nick's water bottle, and hid it in a snow bank. Dehydration is the main cause of altitude sickness. Without water, I was confident Nick would be in rough shape by the end of the day.

He didn't notice that his water was gone until our first stop, at mid-morning. He was irritated, but since the terrain had been flat, he did not recognize the magnitude of his problem. He tried eating some snow, but I knew that the moisture content was so low that this was useless.

We set out again, and now we were getting into steep terrain again. Under brilliant blue skies, we left the flat plain of the glacier and mounted the flanks of Mount Olive, toward Vulture Col. Wolf zigzagged up the precipitous apron, as the sun beat down on us. There was a stiff wind which seemed to come from all directions, but mostly we could feel the radiation, both from above and beating back at us from the snow. Once again, I was sweating heavily.

We stopped after an hour, and everyone took deep swigs from their water bottles. Nick swallowed handfuls of snow.

"Where's your water?" Sue asked him softly.

Nick seemed embarrassed. "I must have lost it. I know I filled it up before breakfast."

She offered him her bottle. "Have some of mine."

"Nah, it's okay."

"Nick, you gotta have water!"

"Don't worry. There's lots of snow."

She gave up, and I could see a combination of irritation and worry on her face.

We were once more on our way, and our route ground uphill again. As I looked up, it seemed that this portion would never end. By the next stop, I was exhausted, and the day was not even half through.

Nick and Sue had the same conversation about water, and Sue was really worried now. Nick refused to take any water from her. When we started off again, he stumbled as he put on his pack.

An hour later we reached a broad bench, where Wolf called a halt for lunch. Mount Olive towered far above us. The wind was whipping a plume of snow off the peak, and I could see that major cornices had formed all along the ridge line that stretched south. It reminded me of a friend in Whistler telling me not long before we set out on this trip, that one of his acquaintances had died on the Wapta Traverse. They had been traveling in white-out conditions. Not realizing that he was on a cornice, the leader had skied out on the fragile formation, which collapsed under him. He plunged several hundred feet onto the rocks.

Well, at least we could see where we were going. And, for all his posturing, Wolf did seem to know what he was doing.

We huddled in our jackets to protect ourselves from the wind which

whipped sharp needles of snow against any exposed skin. A few clouds scudded across the sun periodically, and the temperature would plummet each time. As we gnawed our sandwiches, I watched Nick surreptitiously. He kept swallowing snow, but had trouble getting his sandwich down. He again refused Sue's offer of water.

Wolf walked down the line, asking whether everyone was alright, and Sue started to say something, but Nick stopped her.

"Okay, we gotta get going," Wolf announced. "We're coming to the hardest part, the last push to Vulture Col. It'll take a couple of hours to get up there. After that, we can take our skins off, and ski down to Balfour Hut."

The next two hours were hell. The trail became steeper, the air thinner, and the wind more fierce as we neared the top. At the next stop, it was clear that Nick was having serious trouble. He accepted the water that Sue offered him. His face was white, despite the exertion. When he removed his sunglasses, he squinted from the pain of what must have been one incredible headache.

We started up again, and I could hear Nick struggling behind me. His breath came in short gasps, and he was wheezing. At one point I heard a retching sound, and, as I looked back, sure enough, there was Nick's lunch on the snow. For a moment, I felt remorse. It *is* possible to die of altitude sickness. But Nick smiled wryly, pushing on, and I stowed my second thoughts.

By the time we arrived at Vulture Col, there was a full scale gale trying to blow us off the ridge. We had to take the skins off the bottom of our skis. Wolf had warned us not to get them wet, because this would destroy the adhesive next time we wanted to use them. Trying to handle them with numb hands, the wind whipping the skins around, was like wrestling with flypaper. I finally managed to fold mine together, adhesive to adhesive, and put them inside my jacket to save the time of having to open my pack. We were all thoroughly frozen. We clicked into our skis, and, one after the other, slid down the other side of the ridge.

Even with a heavy pack, few things can compare to skiing in fresh powder. Like a bird riding thermals, I swooped down the flank of the mountain in long, lazy turns. It had taken hours to gain this elevation, and only fifteen minutes to lose much of it. Still, it was a small price for the sense of freedom, of harmony with the mountain, that was attainable in no other way.

The rest of the way to Balfour Hut was a gentle downslope. Once we were off the ridge, the wind dropped, and the sun warmed our frozen bodies. In another hour we arrived at our destination.

Nick was not in good shape. When Wolf found out what had happened, he was furious.

"Don't you people realize that I'm responsible for you? You have to

tell me if you're having a problem!"

He gave Nick some Ibuprofen, and then made some weak tea, instructing him to drink as much as possible. Sue and Nick climbed up to the top bunk, where he lay down to rest. Periodically she would reach down to get a refill on the tea.

The rest of the group was quite solicitous of his condition, and dinner that night was subdued. Nick stayed in the bunk. Sue took some food up to him, but he ate little. I wondered how he would fare the next day. We would be crossing the Balfour High Col, the highest point of our trip.

* * *

Next morning, Nick ate a substantial breakfast, and his colour had returned. Sue was still concerned, but he embraced her reassuringly. Wolf had given Nick his extra water bottle, and Nick took frequent drinks throughout the day.

I, on the other hand, continued to struggle, and started to fall behind on the uphill portions. After lunch, we had a short downhill, and we removed the skins from our skis. It gave me a chance to recover somewhat, but it wasn't enough. Then the terrain flattened out, and finally the long uphill to Balfour High Col started. We stopped to put on the skins. It was cold, my hands were numb, the wind was tearing at me. I tried to smooth the skin onto the bottom of the ski, but it kept getting tangled and sticking to itself. I was cursing mightily, getting more and more frustrated as the rest of the group waited for me to finish. Finally, Wolf walked back to me, and quickly attached the skin to the other ski. The group started off, and by the time I put on my skis and hoisted my pack, I was last in line. I didn't care. At this point, I was just trying to survive.

We marched steadily up a slope that seemed interminable. On occasion I would see what appeared to be the top, but as we crested it, I would realize that my view of the real summit had simply been blocked. But this again turned out to be false, and there were still a series of false summits beyond it. My body was drenched in sweat again. I watched drops of perspiration course down the lens of my glasses, as I struggled to move one ski in front of the other. The world shrank to hold only my gasping lungs and the ache in my thighs. I became totally unaware of my surroundings, except for the fact that the pitch of the slope kept increasing the higher we got.

Finally, the ground started to level off, and for the first time in hours I looked around. The sun had reappeared from behind the clouds, and I realized that we were at the top of the pass, on the Continental Divide. Mount Balfour towered on our right. The Waputik Glacier was below us, and beyond that, rank upon rank of peaks, jostling for our attention. Our little group stopped and gazed, awestruck, silent.

I was overcome by some sort of religious ecstasy that had me almost in tears. I wanted to prostrate myself in the snow and wail to the mountain

gods, "I accept, Magnificent Ones! I shall forever worship you!" No doubt, some sort of chemical imbalance in my brain, triggered by exhaustion.

The rest of the day went by quickly, mostly consisting of a long gentle ski down to the Scott-Duncan Hut. There were whoops of delight as we carved lazy curves into the powder.

The hut was extremely cramped, but no one seemed to mind. Everyone was jubilant at our triumph in getting over the pass.

"It's all downhill from here," Wolf said. "We ski down Niles Glacier, then we are into the trees. From there, it's only a couple of hours to the highway."

"I can't wait to take a shower tomorrow night," said Tom.

"Honey, I was just starting to get immune to your smell," Jane said, and kissed him. Sue and Nick pulled closer together, beaming at each other. Keith put his arm around Mary affectionately. When had that started?

Wolf smiled at Keith. "You did pretty good on the glacier. You made a decision yet?"

Keith blushed. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm gonna do it."

"Come by my house when we get back. I could use a slave for next season. In the meantime, you can register for some courses. You'd have to move out here, you realize?"

"There's nothing holding me in Montreal. Thanks, Wolf, thanks for giving me the chance."

* * *

After dinner, I pulled on my jacket, and went outside. The hut is situated on a bench below the peak of Mount Daly, sitting only ten meters from a steep precipice dropping a couple hundred meters. It's an ideal lookout point, with an unobstructed view on three sides.

I looked at the skis stacked against the wall of the hut. I could still hurl one of Nick's skis over the cliff, but what was the use? Somehow, he'd make it out. It seemed that Sue was committed to him, and any further hardship would only draw them closer together.

I gazed around. There was a full moon, and the panorama was awash in a white glow. To the north, the icefields, and to the west, below me, the Daly Glacier, its enormous mass creeping, century by century, toward the Yoho River Valley. Beyond that, I could make out the President Range, with its serrated ridges and sharp peaks, brilliant white and blue in the moonlight, reaching toward the inky sky. I turned my gaze to the south, the direction we would be following the next day. I could see the narrow passage around the pyramid of Mount Niles, dropping off along Niles Creek, toward the tree line.

I did not want to think about tomorrow, about civilization and career decisions.

I gazed again to the north, and the vast whiteness of the icefield we

had traversed. Balfour High Col could be seen above it. By now the wind had, no doubt, erased all signs of our passage, as if we had never even been there.

I looked up at the sky. There were more stars there than I had ever seen, twinkling against the black void. And, perhaps, each of those held a world like mine, with its own special beauty. It was all so huge, so endless.

I was startled by the spilling of warm light from the door of the hut, as Nick came out. When he saw me, he hesitated, then came over. He stood for a moment, looking at the mountains, and then he said, "Richard, I'm glad you talked us into coming on this trip."

"I hope you're feeling better."

"Oh, yeah. No worries," he smiled.

Then he walked off toward the outhouse.

* * *

I looked back at the mountains again. I wanted to etch that view permanently into my brain.

I was thirty-two years old. I thought back to the buddies from high school who had chosen the life of the dirtbag skier along with me, vagabonds who sacrificed a stable life, so we could ski every powder day. Most had long since disappeared, seduced by normalcy, jobs, girlfriends, families.

It seemed I was the only holdout, stuck permanently in a time warp conditioned by the values of an adolescent. How long could I continue? Until I was forty? Fifty?

Perhaps my obsession with Sue was beside the point. Maybe I was at the edge of a life-choice precipice, and Sue had been a distraction from the terror of having to make a decision. I could feel myself being sucked down into the futility of consumer civilization, or, worse still, being shown inadequate to achieve the lifestyle that I had mocked for so long. Yes, I had the makings of a first-class bum.

It was different for the others. Sue would go back to university, if not this year, then next. She would look back with fondness on the few years she had spent skiing, but think of it only as a phase, something she had to get out of her system. Nick would go to work for his father's company, and become successful by society's standards.

Keith, on the other hand ...

* * *

It was time to take an honest look at myself, to make a decision. What did I really want?

In truth, Tony's offer held little attraction. Even if by some miracle it would change things with Sue, it would still be slavery.

But what other option did I have?

It was simple, really. I just had to open my eyes. The mountains would

never break their promises, because they made no promises, beyond always being there, pure, impassive, permanent.

THOMAS J. RICE was born in rural Ireland, emigrated to the U.S. as a teenager, graduated from Cornell University, and earned his Ph.D. at Purdue University. Along the way, he's been a farmer, breeder of border collies, construction worker, tractor driver, bartender, licensed carpenter, social activist, co-founder of a social justice institute and CEO of a consulting firm. He's also been a Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University and a Research Associate at Harvard. He has co-authored four books on social inequality and workplace democracy, and published *Far From The Land: An Irish Memoir* in 2010. His novella, *Hard Truths*, first published in *New Orphic Review*, was selected as one of *The Best American Mystery Stories* of 2012.

All Souls' Day

Thomas J. Rice

ON THE NIGHT in question—November 2, 1948—Myles Hogan was only five, and saw it as the start of a game, a game that sometimes left him in convulsions of terror when the sisterhood got carried away.

“Hush up! Did ya hear that?” Maureen, the oldest and chief terrorist, always heard it first, that blood-curdling wail that put the fear of God in all six of them. “No, what?” his other four sisters would ask in chorus, knowing full well what was coming. “The scream down in the valley. Oh, Sweet Jesus, it must be her,” Maureen would affirm, and the rest would join in with creative riffs: “Right. I can hear her now. She's coming this way. I think she's coming after Myles.”

That was the game, of course, with Myles as the target; he was the youngest and only male in a family of six, headed by a single mother (“Mammie”), who, that night, was away tending her dying mother—the children's beloved Granny.

Their farm was tucked in the rural outback of Ireland's Leinster province, and the long, dark winter was a juicy opportunity for mischief makers. As anyone growing up rural knows, nocturnal animal cries can be of any feral creature out there in the dark: a vixen calling to her kits, a goat in rutting season lusting for a mate, a rabbit caught in a trap. But given the sisters' well-honed theatrics, these sounds were invariably converted to one of two nightmarish apparitions: Satan or the banshee.

Satan, the devil, known to all Catholic children as evil incarnate, was always thirsty for the blood of young boys, like Myles. Armed with horns, a long, forked tail, and wolf-like fangs, he had a nasty habit of ripping his victims asunder, one limb at a time. The sisterhood used him sparingly, reserving him for special occasions, like saving the joker for a trump moment in a card game.

This night, though, featured the banshee who was, for Myles, a lot scarier than the devil. She was rumored to be a Celtic goddess, a ghostly harbinger of ill tidings, usually a death in the family. To Myles, the banshee was a real woman, but unspeakably weird.

Myles's aunts and uncles swore they'd seen her on many occasions, and he had no reason to doubt them. They'd described her as young and beautiful. Wronged in some horrid fashion—by a lover, no doubt—her tormented spirit roamed the earth, keening and combing her golden locks.

In those awful moments, when the death of some loved one was nigh, she'd glide past your door, appear in your mirror, stand by your bedside, and then fade away. And God help you if you heard her wailing, as they all just had.

* * *

The stage for this night's drama was set months earlier, when Granny started having small strokes, which ended in profuse nosebleeds and temporary, but total, memory loss—which memory would then have to be slowly restored, one painful conversation at a time.

Granny's farmhouse was visible across the valley from Myles's house—directly in the foothills of majestic Mt. Leinster—where his mother had grown up, before she married his father and moved to Kilgoran, three miles away.

Granny had left Billduff farm to Aunt Catherine, Mammie's younger sister, who now lived there, cultivating the small farm with her husband and seven children. This became the arrangement after both sisters, immigrants to Chicago in the Roaring 20s, returned to Ireland during the Great Depression to raise their families.

Mother, as they all called her, formerly Kitty Cusack, was raising the six of them on a rocky, hard-scrabble farm without the presence of their Da, who had been killed on a building site in Manchester. Still, as the oldest daughter and consummate caregiver, every time Granny fell ill, Mammie would rush to the rescue, driving her pony and trap up the dark, steep roads—convinced she was the only one capable of saving the day. Mammie was like this about most things, so Aunt Catherine and her easy-going husband, Peter, just went along.

The communication between the two farms was simple but effective: when Granny had a stroke, Aunt Catherine would hang out a white sheet on her clothes line, which all could plainly see from Killgoran—if it was daytime. If it happened at night, she'd blink the kerosene lantern three times—the SOS signal. All hands on deck, pony harnessed, Mammie barking instructions, sister Maureen in charge, and be quick about it.

The children were used to the drill but, in his heart of hearts, Myles dreaded Mammie's rescue missions. They'd happened several times in the course of a year; all false alarms. Granny would be right as rain in a few weeks, joining the family for Sunday dinner after mass, all decked

out in her fashionable hats and heirloom brooches.

She smelled of exotic perfume, brought sweets for all, and read Myles stories that were enchanting and memorable. Afterwards, they'd drive her back to Tomduff in the pony and trap, the entire crew squeezed in like sardines for the outing. By then, it would be dark and Myles—as the baby—would invariably fall asleep and have to be carried up to bed when they got home. He loved those Sunday visits, loved Granny—in his five-year-old way—and prayed for her recovery each time she fell ill.

He never even thought about her dying, even when she was felled by the strokes with increasing frequency. That's why that Saturday afternoon didn't seem any big deal when Mammie rushed, once more, for Billduff. For him, it had been just one more futile rescue mission, one more night to dread being alone with the sisterhood.

As it turned out, it was a night unlike any other—and someone or *something* was determined to make it so. And this night, it was not the banshee, after all: it was something else, something that for once the sisterhood could not have conjured up.

November 2nd happens to be All Souls' Day—popularly known as the Day of the Dead—the day Roman Catholics celebrate the departed and pray for the sanctification of their souls. This, on the safe assumption that they wouldn't die in a perfect state of grace: more likely they'd die as works in progress, mere mortals who'd require a probationary stint in Purgatory.

In the meantime, it might soothe their tribulations if the living were to set a place at the table, leave some food out, and pray for their acceptance at the Pearly Gates. That was the children's understanding of why November 2nd was a special day.

And night.

* * *

In addition to Granny's imminent death and the wailing whatever-it-was down in the valley, consider the setting and the season on that November night: Northwestern Atlantic island in winter: Dark, darker, darkest—that's what the Irish winter ushered in. A tangible, inky blackness that is unimaginable to those born with electricity and modern lighting amenities.

Drape that darkness over the souls of the ancestors, on furlough from Purgatory, craving a decent meal and a bit of warmth at the hearth, and you have the perfect set-up for aspiring young tricksters, especially when they happen to be five sisters—all under fourteen—with a much younger brother at their behest, home alone.

"Listen, here she comes," Maureen whispered, turning off the lantern and lighting a candle, the better to see our dancing shadows. This was par for the course, so Myles was braced for another medley of horrors, aware that the sisterhood seemed even more animated than usual.

That's when the wailing stopped abruptly, as if passing the baton to

the massive border collie, Captain—known to family as simply, “Cap”—and his ferocious, attack-style barking, amplified across the silent farmyard. And that’s when the game stopped being a game, even for the sisterhood.

Cap was Myles’s fearless protector and edgy bodyguard in all matters of physical danger. That’s why Myles felt mostly relief when he first heard the familiar bark at the gateway entrance to the farmyard. Cap was a huge, broad-shouldered border, always spoiling for a fight, sniffing out would-be aggressors. His strategy was simple: attack first and never let up until his master called him off. Above all, *win the fight*, then beg forgiveness with a wag of his white-tipped tail and a wide, aw-shucks smile.

Myles loved Cap’s swagger and total self-confidence, qualities he couldn’t even imagine in himself. He felt perfectly safe when Cap was with him. In fact, it was the only time he felt safe—given his pitiful role as the ball in the sisterhood’s loaded game of five on one.

Cap’s barking suddenly changed register, becoming more intense, more of a growl, deeper in his huge barrel chest. Even children know that dogs can sense things that humans are not privy to, so they all felt a new presence in the pitch-dark farmyard. For once, everyone—not just Myles—was scared witless.

Maureen was on lookout from the small, gable-end window—more like a peephole that would accommodate only one body at a time—in the upstairs bedroom. The rest were huddled under the window, clinging to each other in terror on the wooden floor, as the terrible racket in the farmyard intensified.

Mammie had told them to be on the lookout from the window, in case the worst happened. If Granny died, she’d signal with three blinks of the lantern. Now, as they clamored for a peek at the action with Cap, they forgot all about Granny, Mammie, and her mission of mercy.

The moon slid up from behind Mt. Leinster, lighting the farmyard all the way to the iron gate—about thirty yards away. Florence, the second-oldest sister, was taking her turn at the lookout. “Oh, Jesus,” she gasped. “There’s somethin’ comin’ through the gate, but I can’t see it. Whatever a tis, it’s gettin’ the best o’ Cap. He’s backin’ down the lane.”

At that, the sisters screamed in terror, “What are we goin’ to do? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, what are we goin’ to do?” Myles cringed by the wall, hugging my knees, listening to his protector’s mortal struggle.

Cap’s bark changed again—from a defensive growl to a high-pitched whine—a cringing, defeated whine—the kind they’d heard from his canine challengers dozens of times.

The gateway that had just been breached was a second iron barrier—designed to keep animals out—at the end of a long laneway leading to the farmhouse.

Hogans was the only homestead on the eastern side of the Mt. Leinster foothills, so their isolation was stark. No other neighbor within shouting, or screaming, distance; no one to call for help. But they'd always felt completely safe, as long as their fierce Cap was on guard.

Until tonight.

How could this be happening to such a champion fighting dog? What kind of creature, or presence, would it take to intimidate an animal like Cap? All the dearly departed barging through the gate at once, skeletal, desiccated, hungry—thirsty for Myles's blood, perhaps, as the sisterhood had suggested earlier.

As these and other horrifying images raced through his mind, Myles fought for his turn at the tiny window; he was just in time to see Cap sliding down the driveway, haunches grinding in the mud, snapping and snarling at some unseen ghoul as he was being driven back, back, until he disappeared under the window, which was directly over the hefty kitchen door. Immediately, his hindquarters began slamming against the door, as though he might shatter the oak timbers.

They could hear him, just below the window, whimpering and snarling, in some kind of death throes with his ghostly foe, as he banged against the door repeatedly, with no more ground to give.

With the exception of Maureen, the sisters were still huddled under the window, tight as a tick, yammering hysterically, wailing in unison, outdoing any creature that might appear. But Maureen, always a daredevil, didn't budge from the lookout, and Myles decided on a move to save his dog.

"Please, someone, come downstairs with me so we can let him in!" he pleaded. "He's gonna die down there. Whatever that thing is, it's gonna eat 'im." He could get no takers, of course. The sisters just clung to each other in the flickering candlelight, completely petrified. And there was no way Myles was walking down those creaky stairs alone, not knowing what was out there once he opened the door.

So no one moved; they just cowered under the window, a whimpering chorus, leaving poor Cap to his fate.

Myles had no idea how long his torture lasted, cornered against the door, but it seemed like a lifetime. Then suddenly, the battlefield went silent, and no one dared move a muscle.

A moment later, the grandfather clock downstairs struck twelve, its somber chimes amplified in the silent farmhouse. It was midnight, the end of All Souls' Day.

As the big clock went silent, Maureen's anxious voice broke in: "Look, look, it's the light in Billduff. There a tis: the three blinks. Granny is dead! Oh my God, Granny is dead!" All six of them started up again in howls of grief and terror. Then, as if on cue, they quickly fell silent.

It took Myles a few moments to remember that Cap had gone silent,

too. His first thought: “Maybe my best pal is dead, like Granny. Maybe the same thing that got Granny....”

The sisters began to disengage from the huddle and Myles seized the opportunity to grab Siobhan—his youngest sister—by the hand and drag her downstairs. She didn’t protest; just let him lead her in silence.

They opened the heavy kitchen door, numb and jumpy in the ghostly moonlight. Cap streaked past them—a black and white meteor—wet and pungent from his demoniac ordeal; he cowered away from them inside, drool frothing from his mouth, and dove under the table, stinking up the whole house.

He stayed there until Mammie came home a few hours later. Even then, she had to coax him out with some milk.

For the next several days, that great dog refused to eat or go outside. Only after some hand-feeding and—unusual for Mammie—a steady dose of kindness, did he finally venture forth.

By the end of the week, he responded when Myles called him to help fetch the cows and, by the time they got home, he’d regained most of his swagger. And Myles was back to feeling safe in Cap’s presence.

This is a famous ghost story back in Killgoran, having been passed along and embellished hundreds of times over the years, now with a life of its own among local *shanachies*—storytellers. Several claim they witnessed it with their own eyes, ears, and nose—as did, apparently, the great border collie, who, of course, experienced something truly ethereal, as only dogs can.

Myles did notice that, mysteriously, the sisterhood never mentioned Satan or the banshee again. For that, he felt eternally grateful.

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Jellyne

Carl F. Thompson Jr.

OUR TEN-YEAR-OLD daughter Jellyne renamed herself Jewell. Jewell is our dog. Was. Jewell our dog is dead. When he died, our daughter took his name.

This happened in July, in the middle of the long arc of summer, when kids are free to be kids.

Naming our daughter Jellyne (that’s Jell-EEN) was my wife Serafina’s doing. She’d already made up her mind the baby would be a girl. So she worked on the name. Making dinner one day, she nearly burned off (well, singed) an eyebrow over a gas burner, a tough job to do; you’d think carelessness. A week later while making a jelly sandwich, she looked up and in a glass cabinet caught a reflection of her gapped eyebrow. Not unnaturally, she began thinking about mascara. She liked the sound ‘Maybelline,’ but she was dealing with jelly, not eye makeup. “I was so pregnant,” she reminds me whenever she recalls the story. When she does this, she tells it to me as if I were new to the facts—all because back then I wasn’t the husband, just the clueless father. The husband was someone else.

Not everyone knew how to pronounce the name. Perhaps wanting to say Gillian, a few people said JELLIAN until corrected. Our daughter’s teasing nickname Jelly lasted right through kindergarten. But when our dog died, it was as if Jellyne had been waiting to steal the name Jewell all along, she gobbled it up that quickly.

So. Do dogs have heart attacks? I’m told they don’t. But our dog Jewell died crossing the street in front of our house. She simply flipped over, like the horse in that Mel Brooks movie, socked by a crazy cowboy. We live on a quiet street in a Delaware beach community—but this wasn’t a car accident. Drivers gazed warily as they slowly passed by what regrettably was not a sleeping dog.

Jewell, our renamed daughter, said Roman Polanski stole Jewell’s

body. When it was lying dead in the street she didn't want to look, and when hours later she did look, the dog was gone. "But I got her spirit," she asserted.

"That's silly, honey," Serafina later tells her, painting a chunk of driftwood in the new home studio which used to be our sunroom. The studio is Serafina's. Situated at the back of the house, it faces Big Wetlands Creek.

Serafina's convinced our daughter is confusing Roman Polanski with Charlie Manson, which would be natural if Jellyne knew the association. Not that Charlie's girls hid the bodies, as we'd buried the dog's.

Serafina dips her paint brush and pauses to assess her work. The driftwood, now mostly sheathed in bright beach-marine layers of acrylic, stands on a worktable in good light. "She's buried right back of the pines."

Behind our Bay area home there's a stand of tall pines before you get to the Big Wetlands Creek that's about two football fields wide. There're plenty of eight-foot high reeds back there, too. Plus brambles and wet, mushy ground you can sink ankle-deep into if you're not careful. We didn't have the money for a house directly on one of the canals where you can tie up your boat. We didn't have a boat put on a canal, either. Though we've talked about a kayak. With that march through the muck to launch it.

"Buried?" says Jellyne.

"Under all the pine needles," I elaborate, watching my wife paint.

"And stop making up stories about Roman Polanski," Serafina scolds our daughter. "He's Polish and he makes good films."

The Ghost Writer, she may have in mind, possibly as a way of reminding me to reestablish an earnest relationship with my laptop. She fell in love with me because I was a novelist, after all.

Not to mention that our ten-year-old knows that her mother, who prides herself on her Polish ancestry, hates Polish jokes. She hates any and all pokes at the Poles. The last thing Serafina wants is for Jellyne to grow up insensitive to the forces of social injustice.

* * *

A week after the dog died, Serafina and I decided to accept our daughter's new name. Also, the house across the street burned down. No, this is not a Poles-to-Klan segue. We had a widower guest for dinner. He didn't have anything to do with it either. The dinner was adults-only. Jewell, already fed, played outside with a friend.

Beforehand, I'd worried a bit about how to carry the conversation. Ever since he lost his wife to a hit-and-run, our guest has had moments where he seemed distracted. Serafina specifically vetoed inviting a female guest, as she does not like set-ups, which she likens to "entrapment." It's been three years since his wife died, but who knows a widower's clock? So he arrives, and ten minutes later the house kitty-corner away lights

itself up.

There had to have been ten red fire trucks and another nine white ones. That includes the EMTs. Serafina prefers the reds. When the blue lights start flashing against that gaudy red background, she says the colors literally seep into her eyeballs. With all that fire, I almost get to feeling it, too. Add to that the heart-seizing effect of my wife's torchlight red hair. Take it from a man of forty, for a woman who's thirty-eight, she's an arresting addition to any adult male's aesthetic environment.

Trucks from three different townships "responded," as they put it. Heroic photos emblazoned their websites the next morning. Those guys did everything but put the fire out before the house burned down.

Over the years, I've tried imagining being a volunteer firefighter, but I don't like the idea of those bulky suits which look hot to begin with, before you even approach a fire. Serafina's first husband was a firefighter anyway, so why repeat? Nice formals for parades and funerals, though. Navy blue and enough gold braid to tie off a ship.

Our dinner guest, Neal, works as an outfitter. He has his own shop supplying kayaks, canoes, and apparel to tourists and Bay area locals. Before being an outfitter, he'd worked in wall and floor coverings. He was the first among us to notice how the siding on the house next to the roaster house was crumbling.

"All that water in that big creek back there," he observed, "and not a bucketful on those flames."

He was right—not a single fire hose was up and working. We could see a snarl of loose hose near the hydrant, and a befuddled collection of firefighters engaged in debate.

Only days before, we'd visited Neal's place a few miles away. The house had been his mom's originally, and it sat smack by a canal. In back he had a nice little nineteen-foot runabout tied to a dock. Plush, cushy seats. It looked inviting. But he said he didn't take it out much. Plus, he kept a big canoe in the garage. Not to mention the rafts and canoes and kayaks in his shop.

Our lawn and much of the street were overrun by gawking neighbors—many we hadn't met—mesmerized as forty-foot flames turned to rouge cloud bottoms backlit by a gibbous moon. I'd say fifty or sixty of us stood in the clutches of all that fire truck glitter, making fodder of ourselves for a fire warden with over-aggressive crowd control tendencies. Back and forth he went, bellowing with a bullhorn for everyone to keep back—even prodding occasional bellies with his baton. The gathering might have recalled those Washingtonians in 1861 planning to picnic at Manassas while watching the First Battle of Bull Run, except that I won't claim I saw any neighbors snacking while fire-gazing. Bad enough, you could count nearly as many cellphone cameras as people. Though admittedly folks seemed a little sheepish to be seen taking lurid photos of someone

else's misfortune.

* * *

When Neal left that night at eleven there were still a good dozen trucks sitting out, mostly red ones. He thanked us for an unexpectedly interesting evening. "I like your wood floors," he'd said. I considered it polite of him not to mention they were laminate. His place looked like it had the real thing.

The next day we discovered one of the trucks had crunched up several sections of sidewalk. At least they didn't hit any parked cars. Or people.

* * *

"Owen didn't do it," Jewell, the next day, says yawning at breakfast.

Jewell is tall for her age with long legs and a lean, fluid body. Put next to a maple tree (none here), she's an agile climber. When she was younger she had big, wide open eyes, but now she's learned how to mesmerize you by very slowly batting her eyelids. Serafina nods at me when she sees Jewell close her eyes and then cleverly look up, to see if she's caught you staring.

Owen, who reportedly "didn't do it," is an Adam's apple parading as a kid teenager. Owen lives a couple of streets down.

"Of course, he didn't," Serafina says, pouring two glasses of orange juice. "If by that you mean, start it."

"I take it you're saying he doesn't smoke," I say, as if we're supposing a kid's tossed cigarette might have ignited the blaze. We're naturally concerned about what did start the fire, as we now lived in a planned, single-builder community where everyone will start wondering if the houses have some defect like faulty wiring. But it's no good to go blaming innocent children. Owen's ... what—fourteen? And everyone's so litigious.

"No, he's not the one who cremated Jewell," Jewell says.

"Damn!" Serafina declares. She'd been gingerly pinching English muffins hot from the four-slice toaster but now shakes a singed finger. She's missed what Jewell said.

So while Serafina sucks her finger, I repeat it. "*Cremated, Jewell?*"

"Does all of it really burn up?" Jewell says, searching for the jelly jar to apply jelly to an already buttered muffin.

That's when I see our daughter's eyelids slide down, then, like an antique window shade too strongly pulled, snap back up, her pupils drilling me. Then off my little magician goes with her muffin.

* * *

In the old, Hubby-1 days, Serafina was keenly sensitized to anything having to do with fire. Fires had been so much a part of her life. When we'd first met, she'd been trained to the point where she liked the smell of a good burn. The black litter of tar shingles disintegrating as they lifted into fiery air carried for her the excitement other people might find

in watching tornados on the Weather Channel. The hellish sport of firefighting stirred her blood.

Serafina still has Hubby-1 Hubert's plaques and commendations on the wall of what had been his office until it became mine when Serafina and I married. I was the writer, so I got the office, she said. Hube's certificates, citations, ribbons, and photos possessed (and still possess) the walls, the space. That includes his splendid old-style fireman's-red hardhat. Hube's boots stand in a glass case in one corner. Hube died in a coma five months after a wall collapsed on him in a five-alarm blaze. In a way my office is Hube's mausoleum.

The house itself is twelve years old. It's Serafina's, from her husband Hube. Whereas Neal inherited his canal house from his mom, Hube's mom left money Serafina still uses to pay the mortgage. Even without a canal, I've always loved the house.

The office is a converted bedroom in a loft that at its apex stands seventeen feet above the ground floor. A stairway with a landing rises from below to reach an open area in the loft. The open area abuts the office. The office's chief peculiarity is that it's the only room in the house without a substantial window. A small, dome-shaped pane stands high up the wall near the ceiling. That one little window is the room's only source of natural light.

Since I've had the office eleven years, technically and historically it's mine, even though the memorabilia's Hube's. You do find a copy of each of my dozen novels on a shelf, with two additional copies each in a box in the office closet. I also have two framed keepsakes, one a letter from my agent announcing my first sale, and another a page from a 2006 issue of *Publisher's Weekly* showing sales of *Enemy Down* hitting twenty-fifth.

If truth be told, today I sit at my laptop not out of a manic desire to write but because Serafina expects miracles. She wants another bestseller. Hube's mother's money can't last forever, so absolutely, we need cash. Her idea is to make me want to best a dead man. "Hube never really brought me miracles," Serafina says, as if it's now up to me.

But that's when I remember the miracle she long ago said I already brought her—Jellyne. And again I try to remember when and how we conceived this big-lidded girl.

* * *

My last two novels haven't sold well, so I appreciate Serafina's reserve. Last night in a very weird way, under the red clouds and the white moon, things seemed so dreamily unreal, and eerily—how can I say this and be believed?—romantic. In daylight, of course, that sensation vanishes. Yes, I know that saying romance vanishes with the end of night makes me sound like some lady romance novelist, and not the hard-fiction guy I'm chiefly known as. (Though I did once write a Christmas story.)

* * *

After her ambiguous remarks about ‘cremation,’ Jewell disappears for a few hours. I can hear her playing in the yard, so I suspect it’s with Roddy again, the new kid who’s only two years older. I wouldn’t call him Owen’s rival. Jewell says Owen is “gawky,” and I admit they never seem to “hang,” as kids say. What fourteen-year-old boy is ruled by a ten-year-old girl, anyway? But I think somehow the new kid (he’s twelve) is under the spell of our little wonder-child, maybe because being tall she looks more his age than her own, or maybe it’s the hypnotic power of her eyes. Or maybe because Roddy is pudgy and self-conscious.

“Okay,” I report to Serafina, checking notes I made last night about the evening’s capers, “I make it 22 minutes for the first EMT to arrive, which is 26 minutes before the first fire truck shows, and roughly another 40 minutes before they get water flowing from the hydrant. That’s the hydrant right across the street. Because somebody didn’t bring the right connection. What if next time it’s our place?”

“Yep,” she says, “what if?”

As if it’s not working right, she stares disaffectedly at the coffee maker, which is new. The last one burned up just a month ago. I wasn’t the one using it.

* * *

From a back bedroom window I see both kids—Jewell and Roddy—run past. Coincidentally, the lawn irrigation system ignites in five separate, circumnavigating arcs. Jewell with her bouncing Harper Lee Scout-like hair trim leads Roddy on a roundtrip through the water blasts. In a rainbow of water and sunlight I see the ghost of Jewell, our dog, bounding behind, all tongue and tail and sun-bright flick of water.

Someone tell me: Why is it that we ever leave childhood?

Roddy’s fair-skinned while his dad Gilbert has the baked-brisket look of an islander, a creature out of a Carl Hiaasen novel. Or a regular Tarzan, as Serafina recently put it. This was at one of the Friday night adults’ swimming pool parties. At poolside those parties are theoretically never BYOB, but sometimes people’s antics make you wonder.

Outside, there’s no wind to speak of, but I’m pretty sure the yell I hear is the drawn-out cry “Cree-MAY-Shun” coming through the window from the back lawn.

On our lawn last night I met a retired print designer turned home entertainment system installer, a landscaper, a dog trainer, and two State of New Jersey governmental retirees. And wives. The print designer asked if I had any idea who the two children were (a young girl and a chubby boy) he’d seen running around, their skin all coppery in the glow of the flames. “Their parents should have better sense,” he said. I told him childhood’s to be cherished.

What I remember out of childhood has nothing to do with flames. It’s a fascination with microscopes and frogs and Technicolor-like powders

boxed in a mail-order chemistry set. I remember retorts and flasks but never a Bunsen burner in my safety-first home laboratory. I remember, too, baseball and the itch of bare skin on summer grass.

But right now, this boy and this girl go pinwheel-wild through our backyard. Our daughter is quite the thing, I marvel. I feel absolute pride.

* * *

From 9:20 a.m. to 1:10 p.m. I'm deep at work on *Sproing!*, my tentatively titled novel dealing with a couple who have both a leaky Caribbean yacht and a leaky marriage and a box of cash belonging not to themselves. For the boat part, I need to do a lot of Internet legwork, burrowing into navigation, yacht design, candidate Caribbean settings.

On occasion, *Sproing!* takes a backseat to my daughter's outdoor maneuvers. Jewell and Roddy stir about at the far edge of the lawn. They wander beneath the tall pines that gird the creek. They pass in and out of sight. At times I see Jewell carrying—a stick?—high overhead, with something like a scrap of cloth atop it. Lunch comes and the kids eat PB&Js stuffed with potato chips. I'm still ruminating on *Sproing!* (these days some readers go for frivolous titles) when it occurs to me the stick hoisted by Jewell looks like something used to roast a hotdog over a campfire. What the thing on the end may be, I have no idea.

* * *

Sitting at the kitchen table after lunch Serafina says she wants to go skeet shooting or to the firing range or to a gun shop.

"There's the pool," I remind her. It's the middle of summer and half the pool is always reserved for adults, given this community's numerous retirees.

"Or maybe I'll rent a kayak," she speculates.

Without thinking, I say, "Did you hear Jewell mention cremation this morning?"

Serafina says, "No. I doubt she knows the word."

I slink back to the stairs once more and hike up to my office and the laptop and the happy toils of *Sproing!*

* * *

A half-hour later Serafina has left and I move the laptop into the open area of the loft, where I have a view of the great room's windows below, looking into the backyard. For periods up to an hour, I can manage to work with the laptop resting on my lap.

I'm typing, but my eyes wander.

Something like a mop head, filthy and decrepit, flies off the end of Jewell's stick like a projectile from a sling. I see it pass over Roddy's head as he ducks. They're weaving in and out through the pines. I have at best a distant, centerfield bleachers point-of-view.

Kids. What are they up to?

It's the line I have just typed in *Sproing!* The novel doesn't even

mention children.

* * *

In the early evening, thinking back to Jewell's PB&J, I remember that the English call potato chips 'crisps.' Serafina and I once took a cottage in the Cotswolds. It was on the cheap, on the heels of a hoof-and-mouth disease scare. When would that have been, now? Long after those reports of Mad Cow, right? Is the world coming to contagion, to disaster, its people ripe for a new let's-get-out-of-here diaspora? Are the continents shifting ever farther apart? So far back it is to Pangaea! The sister of the neighbor from across the street, the one whose house burned, spent a half-hour walking the broken sidewalk, preaching the Rapture. She ended more lucidly, briefly wandering the circumference of the burned-out home like an insurance investigator doing a survey, talking into a cellphone. She was visiting from Omaha, where apparently there's decided interest in the Rapture. Soon, one of the burned-out refugees came by in a Ford and picked her up.

* * *

Dinner is a few hours off. Roddy has left and I don't see Jewell. Her words have set me to thinking. I abandon the laptop and release myself to the backyard where I trek to the pines at the foot of the wetlands.

I hate the spongy ground back here. All the reeds and dead tree limbs and who likes snakes? The smell of pine needles is dashed by the odor of creosote and brackish water.

Yep. Old Jewell's remains have been dug up. A bone trail is what I'm following. A little bit here and a few yards farther, more. Then skin. Hide. Dog hide. Flung through the air and caught on low brambles, close to the ground. Dishonorably skewered and crisped.

At the house, standing in Serafina's studio window, I make out the face of my daughter as I emerge from the tree line.

When I return and open the door, she says, as if one of us has done a job of detective work, "You're right. Roman Polanski didn't steal it."

Serafina would be glad for the sake of the Poles.

By the way, I had an epiphany this afternoon. In my novel *Spring!*, regardless of the ostensible plotline, I intend to write chiefly (or at least eventually) of happiness. I shall mention neither Jews, nor Sikhs, nor Armenians, nor Poles, nor any form of true pure-bright terror ... Then I recall the Congo and Cambodia and the luster of green jungle. For the list is so long. My thoughts grow cold in the recollected plentitude of oppressive rainforest locales—icy cold inside a plethora of hothouse images.

* * *

"She may have set the fire," I quietly suggest to Serafina that evening in my office. I mention the neighbor's reports of two children at the scene, I mention Jewell's cremation of Jewell. I soft-speak in golden tones, as

graciously as possible. “Although, yes, there’s no proof that the fire was started by *anyone*.” I admit the latter, but fear the former. “It’s just an idea.” It does sound crazy, doubting my own flesh-and-blood.

“You saw that movie *Firestarter*, didn’t you?” Serafina retorts. “One of those Stephen King things?”

“We saw it together, yes,” I agree. “Ages ago. DVD.”

“You’re working off of that.”

“That involved the supernatural,” I remind her, dismissing the notion.

“I frankly find your whole imagination supernatural,” she nimbly responds. I don’t mention that I’m also seeing images from *The Long Hot Summer*, Paul Newman playing the tortured Barn Burner loosed from the drink-tormented mind of William Faulkner. Or what about the movie, *The Bad Seed*?

Then I notice eyes peering in through the half-open doorway.

“I just wondered where the two of you were,” she says.

* * *

“I lit it *from* a fire. I didn’t start a fire. Ask Roddy.”

Her story is that she lit Jewell’s cadaver (cremated it like a kabob on a stick) from another fire: not necessarily the fire already consuming our neighbor’s house, though she leaves that unanswered. But how could a child have gotten close enough to those huge flames to light an animal’s corpse? And without anyone seeing? (The neighbor hadn’t really seen two children light the fire; he’d merely seen them close to the fire.) Could there have been both the house fire *and* another fire? Where?

Serafina won’t participate. She accuses me of persecuting our daughter. Whether she’s in denial or I’m overzealous, I’m uncertain.

I’m, yes, holding the inquisition still in Hub-1’s old office, and at least the subject of the investigation hasn’t clammed up yet. “Listen, honey,” I gently and concernedly prod, “I’m not going to go off and ask Roddy who started the house fire. I’m just asking if you know who started it. It could be anyone, after all.” Or (yes) no one.

Our child’s face displays a mass of crevices, like fracture lines on the face of one of Saturn’s moons. She’s not crying. It’s more disbelief, a question of trust. It bothers me that she might not trust me. Or isn’t that always the way with kids and their elders?

So she says, “Do you really want me to say I know?”

And then it hits me. I don’t. I do (or so I tell myself), but I don’t.

It’s conceivable, isn’t it, that Roddy did start the fire? (If, again, anyone did.) She told me to ask him, not her. Even if egged on, he’s twelve, the elder, right? When’s a ten-year-old girl a ringleader in a thing like this? And who—certainly not me—is saying she taunted him to start a fire to begin with? She hasn’t said that Roddy started it. She just said to ask him. And I’ve already assured her I’m not going to ask him. Meaning that, if she doesn’t tell me anything, I’m not taking it further.

* * *

An hour later, it's Serafina holding forth in Hubby-1's old office, this time with me as the squirming subject.

She lights a cigarette (she rarely smokes) from a butane lighter I've never seen. If the flame is adjustable, it's quite an adjustment. It carries up well over a foot. Handy if you're Indiana Jones stuck in a dark cave without a torch.

Her hair is disarrayed, strands hanging. It's remotely possible the flame could set her hair on fire. Her brow settles into a tilled field. Her eyes, as if to keep the smoke away, narrow but peer out. Do they really glow within that swirling mask of smoke?

As she sucks on the cigarette the ash brightens. I can see why she should be upset with me—though she says she's had a good day. She says she shot the hell out of the clay pigeons. I tell myself it's ridiculous to think she might stamp out that burning cigarette on my forearm.

"Need I remind you again of my story?" Her question is not insignificant. It's the Forever Burden. It's a story of blame and retribution, of guilt and ignorance and the predilection to hate. Serafina's maiden name was Kucar, changed by her parents from Kucharski. Not that I've ever had the pleasure of meeting any of her family. "In that country they thought we were Jews. Before that, we lived where people said we were Gypsies. It's why I dye my hair this color. Do you think I don't like raven-black? They burned my grandparents out. But here in this country I found acceptance in the arms of a firefighter, a profession of lifesavers. I'm not speaking for those idiots last night, who couldn't even connect a hose—what miserable stooges!

"You, too, were a hero in my eyes when I saw your first book. You stopped at nothing. You! With words alone! And now—! What? You accuse my daughter of—starting fires? I think you have a phobia about fires. I think you are a *firefretter*." At which point Serafina flicks the smoldering butt of her cigarette onto the carpet. It's not the old dropped cigarette on a golf green; it's a declarative statement of a kind I'd never have supposed possible. I'm bending to police up the butt as she hikes out the door.

* * *

My first book was *Smoldering Illusions*, published eleven years ago. A science-fiction novel which projected in the near future a politicized citizenry and a divided Congress in which scientific research dependent upon government funding would not be authorized if it threatened any dogma held by effective lobbies. In one example, Congress would fund a proposed weather satellite if used for *weather measuring* but not if augmented to monitor *climate change*. That topic may not even be fiction anymore.

But was it the fact that the novel was issue-oriented (and therefore

“heroic”) that attracted Serafina, or was it merely the title? From the very start, should I have more carefully weighed what I knew about Serafina’s interest in things incendiary? I don’t mean just about her being married to a firefighter. How many times did we watch the DVD *Body Heat* in those weeks after we met? Or Kurt Russell in *Backdraft*?

Sometimes I go back over those early days that brought us together. We met when I was working on *Intensity*, a novel about head trauma patients in treatment. Serafina’s husband Hubert had been in a coma for a month after the accident that eventually would kill him. He was being treated where I did much of my research. Gaining administrative clearance from the hospital had taken hard work. Interviews took place in a small room. Serafina, a frequent presence, was a natural candidate. She was also very beautiful and wearingly provocative. Hube lived four more months in a coma before his body finally shut down.

If I think hard about it, I can bring myself to see Serafina as a woman who gets absorbed in the interests of the man she’s with. It’s a feasible hypothesis. If her husband’s a firefighter, then her interests align with firefighting. If her husband’s a writer, she takes, as she did in the first years of our marriage, community classes in English literature. The craft of the novel, first; next, 20th century American literature. One April Fool’s Day morning, April being National Poetry Month, she gave me a greeting card bearing a cartoon of a man kicking a non-functioning coffee machine. Inside, the message read, “April is the Cruellest Month.” She fed me a superb breakfast of apple buttermilk pancakes, a favorite of mine. For a year or so, there were book clubs. I suppose I should mention the times she tried to get me to speak to this or that group and I wouldn’t. I felt more comfortable writing than speaking, not that I was always writing.

So, that’s one way to examine things: with charity.

* * *

How much do I care about this marriage? She is my wife. This is my family. They are my terra firma. So I say nothing more about Jewell and any fire. I accept everything with humility and thanks. I have a healthy daughter to watch grow up. I need to protect her. Doing what I was doing wasn’t protective.

Soon enough I buy Jewell a new dog. A big dog for a tall, growing girl. A one-year-old Golden Lab. It’s a handsome creature she names Starfire. I call him Star, for short. Theirs looks to be a healthy relationship. Dogs tend to love unconditionally, except for strangers and mailmen.

Serafina and I make up. Ten days after Star arrives, we share an intimate dinner for two, our eleventh anniversary dinner, at a French restaurant in a small town in Maryland’s Chesapeake region. Once upon a time you had to call a month in advance to get a reservation. This last time I called three days ahead without difficulty. It’s a Wednesday night, and business is viable but hardly robust. We hadn’t come in years. Now I see sprinkled

among the old and trusted faces of staff, those of newcomers, youngsters, who, when you ask for something, reply, “No problem,” as though possibly you were concerned that you *were* causing a problem by asking. When I select a wine, the newcomer politely assures me, “Awesome.” The wine costs plenty, but not so much, I’d have thought, that our waiter would have been awed.

“I wonder why we haven’t been here for years,” I say, remembering how much we’ve always liked it.

“Oh, the fire,” Serafina reminds me, and I give a start.

I haven’t thought of their kitchen fire in ages.

“Oh, yes, they had to shut for a year, didn’t they?” I wonder about my memory.

“Helps lose clients,” Serafina notes. “Plus, competition is growing.”

“How could I have forgotten the fire?” I chide myself out loud.

“Are you getting forgetful, Alex? Is that why you’re having so much trouble with this novel?”

She stares at me as she forks a snail and ravages it. I watch her lips turn round and round and imagine that soft, delicate creature inside, cycling over and over between gnashing teeth.

* * *

On the drive home, I try to recall whether the last time we ate at that restaurant, not long I think before they had the fire, Serafina had broken a tooth. Too much shell in something with crab, she said. Perhaps subconsciously her breaking a tooth had made me think of that poor snail. (Albeit, dead already.)

* * *

Three weeks later, deep into August, hurricane season punches the Atlantic Coast with Hurricane Boudicca. The storm skirts Florida, savages North Carolina’s Barrier Islands, spins out to sea miraculously bypassing Norfolk, then bears in on the Chesapeake and on Delaware Bay.

The predictions are dire. It’s a Category 4 storm, larger by far than anything we’ve ever encountered. It’d be bad even if it downsized to Category 3 by the time it hit.

I immediately buy plywood in quantity and cut to size.

When the governor orders an evacuation, I start marshaling items into our SUV.

“Whatever are you doing?” Serafina asks.

“Evacuating,” I say, announcing the obvious.

“Nonsense. We’re sticking it out.”

She’s made up her mind.

“I’ll at least do this,” I say, and begin nailing plywood over the windows.

Serafina complains about nail holes, but doesn’t interfere.

By evening, darkness envelopes the house. Wind wails, walls groan.

Objects carom against the sidings.

“The house could get holed by two-by-fours from that house fire-skeleton across the street,” I say. No one has yet razed the burned-out house. Possibly the investigation is still ongoing. It took enough time to put the fire out; possibly equal time is being put into sniffing out the cause. “Something could fly off and kill someone, or inflict brain trauma, snap a spine. Jewell—”

“You sound like a high school Thespian in a Shakespearean tragedy,” she dryly interrupts. “Jewell will be fine.”

“They’re predicting a water surge. Category 4 is a really *big* storm. It can push water up the Bay, into the rivers, into the creeks, our own damn creek, right up to the back of the house. We’re in the flood plain.”

“The 500-year flood plain,” my wife remarks.

“The 50-year flood plain, isn’t it?”

“You’re such a wuss.”

* * *

Past midnight an immense downfall of rain has filled the neighborhood run-off swale skirting our lot. Water overruns the driveway and infiltrates the garage. It crests the ridge of the back lawn and I see trickles entering our doorways, front and back. The creek is coming in.

I sit on our living room couch with my arms folded, my teeth clenched, and the soles of my feet wet.

“Don’t worry, help is coming,” Serafina informs me.

“Who?” I demand. “The governor said those who don’t evacuate will have to sit tight.”

Two hours later the water is nearly up to our knees and edging higher.

“Hullo! Hullo!”

I retreat to Serafina’s studio door, which is made of mullioned glass. I had not boarded up entry or exit doors. Outside, in the great gyration of trees caught in wind I make out the cry of a male voice.

There, in the pitch of the storm, I see a bobbing light.

“Good God, it’s—”

“Good old outfitter Neal,” my wife says.

I remember Neal’s runabout, the nineteen-footer we had the opportunity to inspect, but not the pleasure to try out.

It’s impossible to open the backdoor without breaking the glass or letting a deluge in. Not that the door has been holding the water back, anyway. We have nothing to dam the water now that it’s open.

Serafina and Jewell are now arrayed in what looks like Maine fishermen’s raingear.

“Get the dog, get the dog,” Serafina is telling Jewell.

“Fire! Fire!” Jewell calls, and Starfire forthrightly runs.

“Well, go ahead,” I say to them, grabbing a flashlight and bracing against the studio door to help them through it.

“Hullo!” Neal calls out to me.

I warily smile. He’s in a canoe. How nice to have neighbors who live only three miles away come canoeing to your rescue. Serafina has already managed to step aboard and Jewell is sure-footing her way, too. The dog, enormous thing that it is, demonstrates surprising alacrity.

“Are you coming back?” I ask, certain there’s no more room.

“Sure,” says Neal.

“When?”

But already they’re disappearing into the blackest, cruelest of nights, the harshest of rainfalls.

The wind puckers my cheeks and rips at my shirt. Now all I can think of is snakes swimming into the house.

Waders would have been useful. But I’ve never owned a pair.

Inside, I’m informed by AM radio that luckily the storm is now a Category 3, landfall having weakened it just perceptibly from Category 4, though gusts are still, uh, way, way, up there. (The announcer, having struggled for descriptors, has finally run out, it seems.)

The stairs to the loft rise to a landing that’s maybe five feet high before reversing direction and continuing the rest of the way up. Utterly soaked, I sit on the landing and wait. Cold, shivering.

Then something unexpected happens. Not that I’m a drowning man, but as I sit and wait and watch the water rise I see my life run before my eyes like a video. It’s the old tale turned true.

I’ve enjoyed my life with Serafina. I liked her liking me right off the bat for the fact that I was a writer. You might say she was my first real “fan.” Her “fandom” helped me believe that maybe I really could make it as a writer. I was making money, after all. And I’m sure it took her mind away from her troubles. Hube being in such a bad state, she was naturally depressed, and I guess meeting someone else—an author, as it turned out—helped bring her around. *Smoldering Illusions*. Just looking at the title, she said she liked it. Soon she could see life going forward.

It just had to be that we conceived Jellyne that very first time. There’s no getting around it, our first night, our first act of affection. Serafina had some magical sort of craving that first month. All it took was her girlfriend telling me about my book. She said it filled Serafina with awe. Plus I was doing all those hospital interviews for my upcoming book, *Intensity*. And intensity—something almost frantic—rather describes all that early sex with Serafina.

Yeah, it’s true that at the time Serafina had all this firefighter kind of fascination built into her. I’m sure that by the end of that first month with Hube in a coma, she had to be missing that firehouse camaraderie you hear about. Beer parties and bowling and whatnot.

Fire stuff.

I always liked fireworks, at any rate. In college, my classmates held

an annual bonfire, but I was always a bit spooked by them, as if they might get out of control. But fireworks were different. For us, for Serafina and me, Independence Day was always an extravaganza, something we put effort into. Yes, once, we drove into D.C. to watch the big professional display on the Mall. But what Serafina and Jellyne really liked were the fireworks they could light with matches. As a kid (to be totally honest), I'd been a bit gun-shy about matches. My dad had to work to teach me that you wouldn't burn yourself lighting a match unless you were a total klutz. I didn't learn until I was maybe nine. Jellyne had it down pat by five. So igniting those fireworks was really very much a mother-daughter kind of thing in our family.

What I regret was not more calmly accepting things as they were. I should never have expressed any doubt about Jellyne's forthrightness at all, and never, never should have even considered she could have set that house ablaze. It was all simple misfortune.

When the water rises to the landing, I step up the next seven steps into the loft, the open area outside the office.

The other thing I should never have doubted was that Jellyne was mine and not Hube's. Surely I did impregnate Serafina that first night, a whole four months before Hube's passing, and yes, Jellyne was borne about four months and maybe a week after the funeral—six weeks after the wedding. Four pounds fourteen ounces. A maybe two-week preemie is all. And Jewell's tall like me whereas Hube, though tall, wasn't *all that* tall.

Will my family ever forgive me? Will this water level ever diminish and let me prove myself to them?

When the water reaches the level of the loft, there's no holding it back. Before I have to start dog paddling, I wade into Hube's office, the storehouse of my novels, my reputation. But the water rises. Already it's midway into the boxes in the closet. But the ones on the bookshelf, I stretch and set one-by-one on the base of the little dome-shaped window.

In the morning I see the sure sign of rescue when the tawny rays of sun enter those same little dome-shaped windows high up in the ends of the loft. These little windows I never nailed shut. I figured them too small for the wind to find good purchase. And they're still intact. The books are dry, but the water's lapping my chin and still rising. Tall as I am, I'm standing on tiptoes. Soon I will indeed be dog-paddling. In the long run that won't help. I can't swim out the dome window both because it's too close to the ceiling and too damn tiny.

But outside there is the warm, yellow sun. So all is well ... if only I can get out! Out of this office, out of the loft, out of this house

Maybe if I find the courage to get out of here I can actually write about it. Writing may be the one sure way to win my Serafina back, to restore Jewell's faith in her Dad!

I hyperventilate and dive and kick, knowing that at age forty the human body contains much more water than at twenty and therefore wants to float rather than help keep its tail end down when swimming underwater. It's a long journey, seventeen feet down and a good sixty feet to Serafina's studio—the closest way out, then through the door and finally up, and up, to find air. My lungs have burned up all the oxygen there is and my chest is aflame. But the white-hot furnace in my chest only rekindles my desire to again embrace Serafina, my life's true companion. The struggle's so intense! Thinking finally of *Intensity* as no doubt my last copy soaks, I'm still kicking—on my way to finding the fire of the sun!

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