

# The New Orphic Review

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Canada

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We at *The New Orphic Review* are proud to announce that Tyler Keevil's story, "Sealskin" (first published in Vol. 16, No. 2 of this magazine), won the \$10,000 Journey Prize Award for 2014.

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 46 books. The most recent are *I'm Not You*, *Heretic Hill*, *All Night Gas Bar*, *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow* and *Of a Fire Beyond the Hill*. 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*.

## Dysnarrativia

### Ernest Hekkanen

FOR THE PAST six months, I've been working on a collection entitled *False Memories and Other Likely Tales*, a book that will go to print around the same time as the Spring, 2015 issue of this magazine. Writing it has meant having to recall the landscape of my youth, which I've come to think of as a good exercise for the aging brain. But, as I say in the preface to the collection, the terrain of my childhood has changed quite considerably, so much so that the present-day geography has turned the geography of the past into fiction.

I'm one of those writers who has never found it fruitful to keep a journal. I have tried—several times—with poor results! As soon as I apply pen to paper I feel as though I'm fudging, as though I'm fictionalizing my life. My day-to-day existence is so ordinary in its dimensions, I either give up keeping a journal or the details get reworked into pieces of fiction. To tell the truth, I think I'd rather spend my time in the landscape of my imagination than in the real world, a malady I've suffered from since early boyhood.

Margrith Schraner, the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*, frequently reads books devoted to the craft of writing, and now and then, while we're having our morning coffee, she will read aloud passages she thinks might be of interest to me, because I never read such books, myself. During the fall of last year, she brought to my attention a condition known as *dysnarrativia*. Instantly I fell in love with the malady. The way it rolled off the tongue was so sensuous: *dys-nar-ra-tiv-ia*.

Dysnarrativia is a condition applied to people who suffer from various states of narrative impairment, due to brain injury or pathological deterioration affecting several neural network components. In the abstract to *The Neurology of Narrative*, Kay Young and Jeffrey L. Saver contend that "individuals who have lost the ability to construct narrative have lost

their selves.”

This gave me cause to ponder.

When I finish a writing project, be it a novel or a short story, I often feel at loose ends. Agitated. Depressed. Directionless. I tap around in the dark with my mental Seeing Eye cane until I bump up against a line, a smell or an image that results in the unfolding of another narrative, and then I feel alright. Well, most of the time, anyway. My Associate Editor and I were shopping in the local Safeway not long ago. A flyer had advertised a fantastic deal on heads of lettuce and, during the long months of winter, in Nelson, a good, inexpensive lettuce is difficult to find. That was the narrative we decided to subscribe to that afternoon: obtaining a good lettuce.

By the way, during the winter, we go everywhere on foot. I tote our purchases home in a backpack. I tell myself the walk is good for my health, another narrative I subscribe to. At the Safeway, we popped two heads of lettuce into our shopping basket. Goal achieved. My Associate Editor then decided to explore the rest of the store to see if there was anything further that might catch her fancy. Around this time, we ran into several people we know and began to chat with them; this is easy to do in a small town like Nelson, population 10,000 souls. Between run-ins with friends and acquaintances, we continued our journey up and down the aisles of the grocery store, in vague pursuit of a bargain. Here, I should make an admission: I have always found it difficult to drift, to float. I don't mind taking long, exhausting walks that lead me in an enormous circle, but I find it difficult to drift. It de-energizes me. I start feeling lethargic, immensely so. In the Safeway, I began to feel as if I were strolling an Alzheimer's ward, aimlessly, all sorts of colorfully packaged items shouting at me from the shelves. At this point, I knew I had to get out of there—to preserve my sanity!

It dawns on me as I write this editorial that I must have lost the thread to my narrative while in the Safeway. I might as well have been wandering King Minos' labyrinth. Any one of the grocery store aisles might have ended up with me running into the bone-crunching Minotaur—had that been the overarching narrative *du jour*! However, that wasn't the narrative; the day held no such surprise. All it offered was numbing lethargy—and lettuce!

My contention in this editorial is that there might be gradations of dynarrativia, and that people might be suffering from this condition to various degrees, even if the narrative-managing components of their brains haven't been destroyed by injury or disease. Also, the condition known as dynarrativia might be more widespread than the authors of *The Neurology of Narrative* have allowed themselves to contemplate. Dynarrativia might even account for why young men brought up in a state of relative comfort in the West have become warriors in the fight to

establish an Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East.

Allow me to briefly pursue my argument.

There are different types of narratives you may or may not have discovered by analyzing your life. For instance, there are personal narratives, familial narratives, social narratives, national narratives and grand narratives that pretend to explain our existence here on earth. In the beginning, our personal narratives interface almost exclusively with our familial narratives; in fact, one might contend that our personal narratives are inextricably bound up with our familial narratives. As protagonists, we come to learn the rules and mores of family life—that is, how we are expected to behave. Our families, in turn, introduce us to the society in which we live, and then our society begins to impose expectations on us, too—in the form of further narratives. We go to school to be familiarized with society's demands, and are educated accordingly. Also, around this time, we are indoctrinated in various national narratives we are expected to pay allegiance to and then, of course, there are the grand narratives we are encouraged to absorb without question, because they are deemed sacred. To make a long story short, we become protagonists layered with numerous narratives, and so it should come as no surprise to discover that there are neural components in the brain devoted to making sense of all of this, otherwise how would we be capable of navigating a world chock-a-block with narratives?

However, what happens when these intertwining narratives fail us, or when the neural components that sort them out decide to go on strike? This happened to me in the middle to late 1960s, when the United States offered me the chance to fight in the Vietnam War. The national narrative, which was based on the domino theory that communism would arrive on the shores of California if it wasn't stopped in Southeast Asia, had obviously been dreamed up by a bunch of madmen who didn't have a firm grip on reality, and it resulted in the loss of millions of lives, mostly Vietnamese lives. I became an anti-war activist and, later on, fled to Canada where I had to accommodate myself to a national narrative that wasn't terribly dissimilar to the one that had failed me.

In *The Neurology of Narrative*, the authors quote Aristotle as having said: "The more isolated I become, the more I come to like stories." I have trouble thinking of Aristotle as an isolated individual; after all, he was teacher to the rambunctious Alexander the Great. However, there is something about that quote which strikes a chord with me, and which harkens back to what I have said about feeling agitated, depressed and directionless when I'm not working on a narrative. You see, I have never found the overarching narrative of North American life all that inspiring. To simplify it, that narrative goes something like this: Get an education that will allow you to get a good job that will allow you to buy as much stuff as possible, especially after you've had a kid or two, and then, upon

retiring, enjoy the pastures of plenty.

I found that narrative uninspiring and, to endure the brain-numbing isolation it induced in me, I came to appreciate stories—in much the same manner that Aristotle did, I would bet. I have been writing stories since my early twenties, and have clung to that activity with frightening tenacity. I don't think it would be stretching a point to say fiction writing made it possible for me to survive 35 dead-end jobs and 45 years of near-anonymity in a country I have never fully adjusted to living in, especially after Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau left office and the country as a whole seemed to drift from pillar to post to tar sands to visionless future.

Believe it or not, this brings me to Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, the fellow who killed the soldier standing guard at the Canadian National War Memorial. I would bet anything that Bibeau was suffering from narrative failure—due in part to drug addiction, if we are to believe reports, but also because our national narrative left him feeling estranged. After earning big bucks with Labour Union Local 1611 (purportedly \$5000 a month), he drifted from one homeless shelter to another until finally he ended up in Ottawa where he single-handedly carried out an armed assault on the Parliament Buildings. Not long before taking his appointment with destiny, he was denied a passport that would have allowed him a one-way trip to Syria to fight for the Islamic Caliphate, and so resorted to Plan B. Another young fellow by the name of John Maquire, who purports to have been an average, hockey-playing Canadian kid, denounced his decadent country of origin in order to fight on behalf of the Islamists. (Recent reports indicate he is now dead.) Apparently, there are at least a dozen Canadian men who have chosen to go on this adventure. If we subscribe to what Young and Saver have said in *The Neurology of Narrative*, it looks as though these young men might have lost the ability to construct a meaningful narrative here in North America, and so lost their selves.

Analyzed in a somewhat different manner, what these young men had in common are narratives that failed them: personal narratives, familial narratives, social narratives, national narratives and grand narratives. Rather than suffer from a debilitating state of dynarrativia, they put their faith in a narrative that galvanized all of the other narratives in their lives, and which, moreover, gave them a sense of meaning, intensity, daring and grand commitment (a need that many young men have, it would seem). By so doing, they wrested their lives from meaningless anonymity and managed to become footnotes in Canadian history—that is, our grand, national narrative, mediocre though it might be.

Is this an acceptable way to deal with feelings of dynarrativia? For those who aren't capable of dealing with a lot of ambiguity, or what looks to be a visionless future, it would certainly appear to be the case.

A native of Thunder Bay, JOAN BARIL has had short fiction published in *Room*, *Prairie Fire*, *Antigonish Review*, *Other Voices*, *The New Orphic Review*, *Ten Stories High*, *Canadian Stories* and many other journals and newsletters. For ten years, her columns on women's and immigrant issues appeared in *Thunder Bay Post*, *Hot Flash* and *Northern Woman's Journal*. Her blog *literarythunderbay.blogspot.com* follows the Thunder Bay literary scene.

## The Monument

Joan M. Baril

May 1939

THE PRIME MINISTER glared at the photo of the King and Queen attached to the wall of his private railway carriage. The glass shimmered with the rocking of the train, emitting, he thought, a mocking gleam.

His eyes moved to the next picture. "Oh Mother," he said to the sepia figure, "if only you knew what I suffer for my country. I am not even allowed to take my meals with the royal party; nor can I sit in their presence but must deliver my message standing while all their entourage, all those ladies-in-waiting, secretaries, equerries, lords this and that, and heaven knows who else—sixteen of them—stare at me expressionless, fish-eyed; but, once I back out and their door is shut, oh Mother, I can hear them titter. Yes, titter. An English twitter. Tee, he, he.

"And today, dearest Mother, I heard quite clearly, above the noise of the wheels, that twit, the secretary, Mr. Lascelles, repeat my message. 'The full flowering of our nationhood is in peril' and then I heard the entire company break into gales of laughter. I find it so hard to accept that my beloved King and Queen would countenance such behavior. I know I turned red with mortification. But, luckily, no one saw except the footman, and he had the courtesy to look away as he opened the door to the next carriage.

"Dear Mother." The Prime Minister closed his eyes. "Help me now. I must make them understand. Canada approaches its hour of peril. War is imminent. The entire British connection must be strengthened; thus we can stand united. If only you, my dearest Mother, were still in the land of the living. Please send me a message from Beyond the Grave." He held his breath, waited, but heard only the endless clacking of the wheels.

The Prime Minister sat down at his desk, first reaching behind him to close the blind on the railway car window. He ignored the view, which



was always the same northern Ontario offering of trees, endless trees, a few bits of rock, the occasional glimpse of water and then back to trees. He checked his watch and the schedule before him. Ten minutes before the next stop. A place called Schreiber. Enough time for a second attempt to reach the Unseen World.

He put his head in his hands, trying to clear his mind of the last public appearance and, in fact, all the public appearances on this never-ending royal tour. At each small community, the train stopped for exactly three and a half minutes. Their majesties stepped out on the back platform and waved at the crowd who were always, he recalled with a brief twinge of happiness, waving, welcoming, cheering. Sometimes they sang *God Save the King*. They lifted up their children. The school kiddies, who'd been given a holiday, waved their little Union Jack flags. Exhilarating. Small numbers, of course, from small towns. Rather poorly dressed; but this was Northern Ontario after all.

Standing behind the royal pair, drinking in the adulation, as the Queen smiled her marvelous smile, and the King, who reeked of tobacco, waved his automaton wave, the Prime Minister always felt the warm flush of validation. Only he could have brought this off. His enemies in Parliament had been shown wrong once again. He beamed down at the happy crowd below. He was allowed to smile and nod at the cheers but not to wave. This was their majesties' moment. His time came after the royal couple went back inside. Then he had thirty seconds before the train started to move. And yet, now, he felt again the burning humiliation, for no matter how much he energetically pumped his hand and grinned, always, always, the crowd was turning away. All he ever saw were their backs. Only one or two waved in return.

Probably the local Liberal organizers.

He closed his eyes and whispered his mother's name again and again. Nothing. If only, somehow, he could've arranged for Madam B to accompany him. She could always get in touch with Mother, relate her wise words, and now that the country was facing war, (even though the Royals did not believe it), he needed guidance to lead his native land through the flames. He must speak to other military leaders. Get their advice. Caesar perhaps, or the Duke of Wellington. But, alas, one cannot take one's medium on an official royal tour.

He had also pondered bringing along his dog Pat, but that too was impossible. The sweet creature, even when it was alive, gave him such comfort and often a word or two of doggy wisdom. But once again, it would look odd to bring a stuffed animal on government business. Yet sometimes the dear thing, standing like a soldier by his bed in Ottawa, had given him heart. "You are doing right," Pat had once said to him quite clearly in the middle of the night. "Your decisions are always correct."

The Prime Minister closed his eyes once more, whispering to her who loved him best. "Come to me, Mother. Your own Willy calls you." Explosive knocking at the compartment door interrupted the seance. Purcell, his secretary, ran in, breathing hard, his mouth ajar, gasping, his face as white as the telegraph paper in his hands.

"Dreadful news, Prime Minister. Dreadful."

The Prime Minister reached for the paper. He read slowly, striving for calm. Two rifles had been discovered hidden under a tarpaulin on the roof of the CPR Station in Port Arthur. Another was found by an upper window of the nearby Customs Building. The Mounted Police were searching every building and rooftop along the route to be taken by the royal procession. The Prime Minister placed the paper on his desk and made a steeple with his fingers. A decision must be made. Should the Port Arthur visit go on as planned? Should they skip the city altogether? And indeed, should the entire royal tour continue? He refused to let his dismay show in his face.

Purcell was gasping for air. "A strong wind. Last night. Blew half the bunting up on the station roof. Workers went up. Found the guns. Surely anarchists. Lots of foreigners in Port Arthur. Italians. Finns. This is the end of it all..."

The Prime Minister stood. He pushed back his pudgy shoulders. He straightened his waistcoat over his ample paunch. "Sit down Purcell and get your breath. I will inform their majesties at once." He took out his pocket watch. Nine minutes after two. Very close to the auspicious moment when the two hands of the clock came together. Yes! A sign! Surely God was with him.

He strode out of the carriage, the telegram in one hand, his watch in the other. At the door to the royal carriage he waited until the minute hand and hour hand touched. Then he knocked.

When the footman opened it, he walked in without being announced. They were all playing cards as usual. The drinks were circulating and the air was blue with cigarette smoke.

"I must speak to their majesties alone," he called out. "Everyone out, if you please." They stared at him as if he were an animal in the zoo. The Queen's large blue eyes frosted with displeasure. The King looked confused as he reached for his cigarette case. But would Wellington quail before a lot of court toadies? Would Caesar? Never. "Ladies and gentlemen," he lifted his voice. "Outside please. At once. This is a national emergency." He flapped a hand toward the carriage door. Stunned, they fixed a collective gaze upon the Queen.

She nodded. "Mr. Lascelles will stay," she said.

Five minutes later, as he stood before their majesties and the secretary, swaying a bit with the movement of the train, he squared his shoulders, attempting a military stance as the three conferred in whispers. Suddenly,

Lascalles cried out, "Only one course possible. We must cancel this entire fandango immediately. Much too dangerous to go on. Let us get back to England and out of this dismal wilderness where anything could happen. The entire operation has been absurd from start to finish..."

The Queen quieted him with a glance. After a few more whispers with the King, she looked up. "We have decided, Prime Minister. The tour will go on as scheduled. No part will be omitted. We will hear nothing more of guns or threats. *Nothing*. Not unless we are immediately threatened, *imminently threatened*, will we hear one word about danger or for that matter, any change of plans. We three," here she glared at Lascalles, "will say nothing to anyone in the court about what you have told us today. I am sure you and your famous Mounties can look after us very well. The King and I thank you for informing us so promptly." The King nodded. He opened his cigarette case.

The Prime Minister bowed. Tears came to his eyes. What bravery! What gallantry! "As your majesties wish." He backed away and opened the door himself. He bowed once more. "You shall hear nothing on this matter. You can be assured every precaution will be taken..." The Queen waved a dismissive hand and he was out, walking tall, not acknowledging the clustering courtiers, some of whom were still holding champagne glasses and one holding a champagne bottle.

Back to his office and Purcell. There was work to be done, lots of it.

\* \* \*

On May 23, 1939, at five in the afternoon, King George V and Queen Elizabeth emerged from the silver and blue imperial train, the Prime Minister walking behind them. The military band played *God Save the King*, but softly, with no drums or cymbals, the Prime Minister's orders. All other music had been cancelled, causing the town's bandsmen to stand rather gloomily at attention, their instruments encased at their feet. The Prime Minister had also cancelled the bagpipes and the firework display. No noise to provide a cover for gunshots.

The Port Arthur crowd sang along as the royal couple walked to the platform. Their applause and hurrahs filled the area between the gleaming train and the funny round Pagoda building, so draped in flags and bunting it looked like the skirts of a Victorian matron. The audience never let up. They waved their flags, cheered, sang. There must be hundreds, thought the Prime Minister with satisfaction, perhaps thousands. He had been told that people from the outlying areas, the farms, mines and lumber camps, had poured into the city for the occasion. The greatest welcome yet. He glanced at the surrounding buildings all draped in red, white and blue. He could not help taking a quick peek up to the roof of the Customs Building and was pleased to note a flash of scarlet, the coat of a Mountie

on guard. Even though the back of his neck tingled with fear, his heart swelled with pride at the enthusiastic welcome, surely his greatest accomplishment so far.

The mayor, a Mr. Charles Cox, and the other dignitaries were presented. The King and Queen walked about, talked to the veterans of the Great War, some in wheelchairs, and to the war widows in their black veils. The Queen smiled graciously as she accepted a bouquet from a little girl. Mounties on each side of the special touring convertible held open the rear doors for the royal couple. The Prime Minister took his place in the front beside the chauffeur. The car moved off slowly, the people on the bleachers pouring after them to follow them up the main street, where the crowds were waiting six rows deep. The Prime Minister's joy was complete even though he still felt the ominous prickling at his neck. He could not help checking the tops of the buildings. Wondrously, people waved to him. To him! *They* understood how hard he worked. *They* knew how he planned every detail. He lifted his top hat and waved it enthusiastically in return for their cheers.

"God save the King! God save the Queen! We love you," someone called out to the royal couple, and he heard the Queen chuckle.

"I do b-b-believe they do," the King stammered. His arm relaxed into a flittering circle wave.

"My heavens," said the Queen. "This is quite more than one expected. One has become quite buoyed up."

Ahead, a single motorcycle led the way. The local police were doing an excellent job keeping the road safely clear. He would send them a note later. The touring car passed some plain-looking churches and then a few old houses. School children lined the sidewalk, the little ones in front, the taller bursting into song, *The Maple Leaf Forever*. He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to see the Queen's hand. "We'll stop a minute. I want to talk to the children." Somehow, in spite of the din, the chauffeur had overheard. He slowed the convertible to a halt and the motorcycle escort behind them stopped well back. The chauffeur got out to open the car door for the King.

Just then, the Prime Minister heard the shots. They seemed to come from the park on the other side of the street. Or perhaps the red brick school building close by. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the chauffeur's shoulders jump, his face flinch, even as one hand was reaching for the outer door handle. The Prime Minister leapt across to the driver's seat. He turned the key and the convertible roared as he shoved his foot down on the gas, simultaneously releasing the clutch. He heard the motorcycles behind him snarl to life. He gunned the motor, swooping past the motorcycle in the lead. Long ago, he'd memorized the route. Up a steep hill he flew, looking for the sign to High Street where they would turn left to head for Fort William. He had a glimpse of confused people

staring from the sidewalk. He wondered how the chauffeur fared and hoped he had not hurt him somehow, thrown him to the ground.

A policeman was standing in the intersection, which was blocked off from two sides. The Prime Minister put his foot on the brake and geared down. The policeman looked dumbfounded when the car stopped beside him and the Prime Minister asked him if he could drive. The switch was made quickly. Down High Street they went, quite slowly, the crowds a bit thinner as they moved to the road that joined Port Arthur to its twin city, Fort William.

The rest of the day passed in a shaky blur. The King and Queen signed the commemorative book set up at the boundary between the two cities. They received a beaded scarf from the chief of the Ojibway tribe. They shook hands with the Fort William dignitaries and walked about admiring the Ojibway costumes and chatting with the Indian children. As the car moved into Fort William and toward the waiting train, the Prime Minister thought he might faint. The crowds were as thick as in Port Arthur. His arm ached from raising his top hat. His mouth was set in a deathly smile. His brain was churning. Had there really been danger? Had he really heard gunshots? Perhaps it was just a door slamming. A car backfiring. Or firecrackers set off by mischievous children. He felt sick.

When at last they were back on the train, the Prime Minister went immediately to his private carriage. Purcell handed him a moist towel for his burning face. The train began to move. His valet had a clean shirt ready. He'd sweated right through the armpits and down the back of his jacket but the valet quickly brought out a replacement. Luckily, there had been no national reporters to see the dreadful business. Immediately after the ceremony at the Pagoda in Port Arthur, the entire press contingent had boarded the media train heading for Fort William and the farewell ceremony. But perhaps the local newspaper had a reporter nearby? How could he find out?

"What were those noises at the park?" he asked Purcell.

"What noises, sir?" The Prime Minister blinked. He realized Purcell had never left the train and so knew nothing. He felt a deep exhaustion.

A tap on the door. One of his majesty's footmen. "His majesty requests the honour of your presence at dinner," the man said, standing stiffly at attention. "In half an hour. At seven o'clock."

"Yes." The Prime Minister's voice was a squeak. "Thank you." His heart dived to his boots. Was he to be questioned by the King and Queen in front of everybody? How could he explain the incident? He had no idea what actually happened. What could he possibly say? Was another public humiliation in the offing? He could beg off, claim a headache, some sort of illness. But, would Caesar feign a headache to avoid a group of sissy courtiers? Would Wellington? Would Alexander the Great?

The Prime Minister made a steeple with his fingers. Purcell and his

valet stood silent. A twist of hope uncoiled in his brain. Possibly, their majesties would not mention the mishap. The day before, they had stipulated silence, in fact commanded silence, on the topic of danger. The long-awaited invitation to dine could be a sign, an expression of gratitude for his prompt action at the first hint of peril. The Prime Minister threw back his heavy shoulders. This could be the opening he was seeking. A new relationship might be forged between statesman and monarch. A new era of close cooperation might be dawning. One corner of his mind was already preparing his speech to parliament.

His exhaustion vanished as if it had never been. He danced on his toes across the compartment where his valet was waiting to tie his cravat. He stood, chin lifted, facing the picture of his mother. As the train gained speed, the picture swayed.

A sign? Surely it was a sign.

\* \* \*

“I can’t believe,” said Kimberley, rubbing the plaque with Brasso, “that Prince Charles and Camilla are showing up in Thunder Bay to unveil this here statue.”

“Well, they’re paying for it, eh?” said Dylan on the other side of the plinth, rubbing the second plaque. “Anyway it’s a pretty big deal. Canadian Prime Minister saves the lives of the old King and Queen.”

“Centuries ago,” said Kimberley. “And how come nobody knew about it until now?”

“Well, the PM had his papers sealed for seventy years. Modest, I guess. And a pretty quick-thinking guy. He jumped into the driver’s seat of the limo and gunned ’er.”

“Yeah, well,” said Kimberley, laying on more Brasso. “It says on this plaque it happened in 1939. How fast could a car go in 1939? Maybe ten miles an hour, tops.”

“Too bad they never found the shooter. What I think is they downplayed it. They didn’t want panic on the tour. That tour was a big deal. The *Chronicle Journal* says it united the country for the war. And supposedly, the Prime Minister got a nice gift from the King. Also, after that, he was always welcome at Buckingham Palace, whenever he got to London. And the story was passed down the generations to the royal children. So there you go. A bit of Canadian history recognized at last. Right?”

But Kimberley did not answer. She had put her ear buds in and was listening to her i-pod. Dylan shrugged.

The two kept polishing.

LINDA CROSFIELD'S poems have appeared in *The Minnesota Review*, *The Antigonish Review* and *Room*, and in several anthologies, including *Rogue Stimulus*. In 2012, she was the featured poet in *The New Orphic Review*. In 2013, she read at Nelson's Elephant Mountain Literary Festival; one of her poems became a miniature accordion book by UpDown Press & Bindery in Baltimore and another was published in a Leaf Press leaflet.

## Linda Crosfield / Four Poems

### On a Winter's Night We Take Refuge

In tandem or alone, every footstep tells a story:  
boots too tight, feet too cold to take another step,  
slippery patches concealed by a gentle crust,  
the fence iced over. Mailbox openings obscured,  
cars disguised as great white boulders,  
stairways rendered impassible,  
trees just waiting for the right open collar  
to pass beneath before they unleash their load.  
Unlit lamps relax, enjoy too-few daylight hours.  
A dog makes its way along the edge of the sidewalk.  
There is, and there is no, anonymity here.  
We all leave a trace.

Nothing for it but to wrap the cloak of winter  
round shiver-shoulders and stay indoors.  
Let the fire crackle on the hearth,  
let cider stay warm in the crockpot,  
let the squeak-squeak of passing feet  
blend with the rhythm of music from the stereo  
to remind us why we're here,  
wrapped in this hard-fought warmth  
on a winter's night, no venturing out of doors,  
no unexpected falls and broken bones,  
no black ice surprise disguised as dark pavement,  
waiting patiently to catch us on the road.

## After the Fire

after the fire was everything, everything  
after the fire came mongrels, staggering  
after the fire we sketched pictures in scorched earth  
after the fire swallows mourned their immolated nests  
after the fire you sang and sang and sang and sang  
after the fire the wee ones hunkered down  
after the fire sand poured like salt between our toes  
after the fire a stone cracked and would not be comforted  
after the fire cotton candy air tasted of ambrosia  
after the fire memories opaque as isinglass swaggered in the smoke  
after the fire you waited for me at the corner  
after the fire I didn't come to bed because I had to write a poem  
after the fire was nothing

## What If I'd Stayed in Van, Richard

I came to this poetry game late in life.  
Oh, not the writing of it; I've always written,  
but to the game, you understand, Richard,  
the who's-on-first earthquake of who's-who-ness  
in the book department, magazine department,  
that's shit/that's not school of subjectivity  
one must attend if one is to graduate with a fully-fledged  
manuscript (*manuscriptus interruptus*) before one  
is taken seriously. Richard, my favourite prof at UBC,  
you were the first to say I should get into  
(bed? your pants?) a creative writing class a.s.a.p.  
back in '69 when the whole of life stretched out before me  
like a roller coaster ride I was just about to crest.



What would you have done if I'd stayed around  
instead of getting on the first end-of-year plane  
I could find and heading back to Ottawa  
to continue getting my heart broken  
by André whose business it was to break hearts.  
*We'll drink champagne and laugh at the world*  
he said after he seduced me—again—  
in the back of his '65 Chrysler New Yorker,  
then promised we'd fly to New York to see *Hair*,  
leaving me delirious with hope and happiness  
until his girlfriend came back from Southeast Asia  
and that was that. What if I'd stayed in Van,  
taken up writing for real with all those profs  
who seemed so old and under the watchful eyes  
of friends like Henry who introduced me to gay bars  
and acid and the lesbians who lived on the second floor?  
And what if I'd paid attention when I sent some poems  
to Tom Marshall at Canadian Forum and they were rejected  
but on one of them he wrote *I like the general idea  
of this one?* Ah well. It was a very good year,  
Richard, in spite of my not realizing it at the time.  
I climbed the Grind, walked across Lion's Gate Bridge,  
saw *Hello Dolly* three times when I needed something sweet  
to get me past the horror of *Midnight Cowboy*,  
posed for topless pictures for Roger, a guy in my class  
who told me, as he shot, how incredible his girlfriend's cunt looked  
right after she came. Wouldn't I love to see those pictures now  
but they're gone, locked in the vault of memory,  
a fine remembrance of things past and it's probably  
a good thing, Richard, that I came to this game  
late in life after a modicum of sense set in or likely  
I'd be the one they talk about who fucked everyone  
back then though if I'm honest, to this day I can't see  
a New Yorker (the car, not a Human of) without getting moist  
and I still know all the words to *Hair*.

## What Became of Me

I can't say it wouldn't have been fun,  
you and your crazy friends,  
your unexpectedly doting families.

What was it my father said,  
*Just take it to my mother;*  
*she's always wanted a grandkid.*

And I'd have loved her, too,  
her market garden stuffed with produce,  
her prize-winning peaches,

the way she'd drizzle balsamic vinegar  
over thick slices of tomatoes  
that lounged seductively on lush green basil.

You really weren't ready for me,  
your party days at a zenith,  
less than no money in the bank,

and my father—seriously,  
what would you have done  
with him in your life forever?

Still, I appreciated those few weeks  
I spent with you. I know I was wanted.  
It was I who decided against staying.

As for what became of me—  
I live on as occasional memory.  
It's all any of us can do.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*, now entering its 18th year. Her first story, “Dream Dig,” was selected for inclusion in the prestigious *Journey Prize Anthology* in 2001. Ernest Hekkanen describes “Notebook One” featured below as “the perfect combination of emotion and reason, just like a Bach concerto.”

## Still Life with Mother

Margrith Schraner

*Our imagination is there to order our memories, if not  
to invent them.* Ernest Hekkanen

### Notebook One

*September 6, 2014*

My mother died this week—on Thursday, I believe. Or was it Wednesday? My youngest sister takes it personally. She’s rather annoyed, because September 4<sup>th</sup> coincides with her birthday. “I was shocked at the news—momentarily beside myself, if you must know.” She compares it to a snowfall in the middle of summer. “I mean, how could this be? I’m turning fifty-nine, this year, and now the party won’t be a party at all.”

I imagine her standing by the window, looking out at the garden. Her living room is shadowed by curtains of dark lace.

“But she died *before* your birthday,” I try to object, speaking loudly, as if into a long tube. There is a hissing sound, a long delay that is obviously the result of the sound being transmitted along cables lying submerged beneath the ocean floor. I don’t like to argue long-distance. We live in different worlds, my youngest sister and I—always have been, for most of our lives. Forty-five years, by my count. We seldom see eye to eye.

“By my clock, it was 10:15 at night, when she died—on the day *before* your birthday.” I feel uncomfortable with the silence that is beginning to stretch between us. The familiar interruptions of noisy grandchildren, which I have grown to expect over the years, seem absent this time. “Time travels. There’s a shift.” I feel a sudden need to lecture. “Remember? When you people are getting up to milk your cows, over there, in Switzerland, the rest of us, here in Canada, are just starting to pull the duvet covers up over our ears.”

By now, across the submerged hiss, my sister has found her bearings

again, it seems. She insists that she will never be able to celebrate her birthday unabashedly, ever again. “It will always be marred by the memory of my mother’s death,” she sniffs. A tremulous note is starting to creep into her voice.

The veil of lacey grief is lowering. I watch it descend ever so slowly, like a theater curtain, seconds before my phone card runs out.

\* \* \*

*September 7, 2014*

“What stands out for you when you think about your great-grandmother?” I ask my granddaughter, who recently changed her name to Samaya Dancer. Her great-grandmother was eighty-two when Samaya was born.

“*Grossmami?* I wish I had known her in person. I know her eyes twinkled like a thousand fireflies every time I looked at her picture. And once,”—Samaya pauses to give it some thought—“one time, when I looked really, really closely,”—she smiles to herself as the memory comes back—“she actually *moved*.”

\* \* \*

*September 9, 2014*

My eldest brother calls me all the way from Switzerland to ask whether Bruno should be invited to partake of the customary meal following my mother’s burial.

Apparently, Bruno has pushed his way into the family by showing up in Fislisbach at the Center for Advanced Adults; unannounced, just this Thursday, in fact, with a rose for my mother. He had come upon my brother and my sisters where they were gathered, on the visitors’ patio of the luxury old people’s home, stricken by the raw finality of the news that their mother had died.

“He spoke loudly—said he had come on *your* behalf,” my brother relates. “I hardly recognized him; he’s become an old man, all plumped up. Gout has set in, from years of drinking beer, no doubt. He was smoking—one of those mini Wilde cigarillos—La Paz, I think. We were all sitting together outside, on the patio, drinking non-alcoholic beer. I could smell the stale flag of alcohol on his breath. He had a notebook with him, with daily entries. We all had to sign our names. He kept mixing them up. Your sisters were rather taken aback,” my brother informs me. “They found his forwardness obnoxious.”

The image of a fox in the henhouse rises unbidden in my mind.

“He demanded to see our mother. I had the key to the room where she was laid out upstairs, on her bed, with a white coverlet strewn with lavender

blossoms, the ones from the bouquet your eldest sister had brought from your mother's garden the day before.

"I had to unlock the room for him, allow him a moment to say his final goodbyes. He claims a connection where there isn't any, other than for memories of skating on the frozen village pond with you, only once, while holding hands, apparently. How old? Did he say twelve? He claims he was invited in by our mother for hot chocolate afterward, at our house on the outskirts of Jonen. He was a year ahead of you at secondary school. He left early, to be transferred to the seminary in Fribourg, I believe he said. Mr. Meng had inspired him with his lecture about missionary work in Africa. But he didn't have the right turn of mind for that kind of work, he discovered.

"The robust, herbal spice smoke from his cigarillo kept drifting across our table. A tale of opting out, followed by another, about studies at the University of Zürich. That's where the smoking started, he said. He had invited you to the graduation ball; said you might still remember the name of the band, *Quiet Wave*. You kept up some kind of correspondence, over the years? That's what he said, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes—." I admitted to his letters, tied in a bundle and stored in the attic of the house on the outskirts of Jonen. They were discovered by my mother, who got rid of them, ruthlessly, without consulting me—years later, when the house was sold.

"The house was sold," my brother repeats. "You had been living in Canada for some time, by then. *Mami* obviously pictured him as a potential son-in-law, whereas Papa was in the habit of regarding anyone who wasn't a solid blue-collar worker as highly suspicious. And so, it fell to our mother, the onerous task of telling Bruno once and for all to lay off with his persistent enquiries, and much later, of informing him that you were now, finally, living a serious, artistic life with a good man, over there, in Canada."

"Ernest?"

My brother pauses; waits for me to add something.

"Ernest keeps teasing me: 'Bruno, your Swiss suitor,' he says. 'I don't think he ever got over you.'"

"An odd bird, that Bruno." My brother takes a deep breath. "At any rate, I felt obliged to buy him a beer. His eyes, they kept misting over. No—he wasn't crying; not exactly. But he kept dabbing at them. Very strange."

Still, the problem with inviting Bruno to the Last Supper, so to speak, hasn't been settled. My brother expects me to come up with the right thing to say. What should I tell him? What's more, I have a score to settle. I feel adamant. The image of the fox is looming in my mind, again.

"Shut him out." Am I shouting? The matter seems urgent. I'm off to work at the health food store—yes, it's Sunday; here, too—must get ready

to leave, soon.

“You’re still in touch with him?” my brother wants to know. “He found out from you that our mother was dying?”

I will admit it. “I thought that he’d want an update.” I mentioned my shock after her transfer to Fislisbach. “His own mother passed away earlier, in the spring, this year.”

I refrain from mentioning the e-mail to my brother, in which Bruno takes pains to describe in some detail how he comes upon his own mother lying on her bed, napping, on the very day he decides to come for a visit, a mere hour after the caregiver has made her daily rounds. He goes up to the foot of her bed. Tickles her toes. *And now I know for certain that dead mothers aren’t ticklish, anymore.* That was his conclusion.

My brother waits calmly. He wants to take down Bruno’s e-mail address. “Okay. We’ll tell him you’re sorry for the loss of his mother. And regarding the meal he expects to partake of, in the company of other mourners, once the funerary rites are over? Let’s mention the limited seating, the small restaurant, the immediate family members, and so on. Oh, and best of all, we’ll tell him that we won’t need him to show up on your behalf, ever again. Once is enough.”

More recently—just this week, in fact—I received another e-mail from Bruno, featuring a snapshot he had taken, on that sweltering day at the Center for Advanced Adults, of my siblings, seated in a half-circle at the table, sipping non-alcoholic beer outside, on the patio. His own seat is empty, except for his notebook. *I kissed your dead mother*, the truncated message reads. *Your beautiful dead mother.*

I felt compelled to register my annoyance, to fire off an instant reply: *The act of kissing a dead mother—and more importantly, a dead mother who is not your own—borders on—what word did I choose?—travesty?* I hardly remember, now. I pulled the translation out of thin air; reached back for the vestigial remains of the language I had grown up with. *A violation of the code of conduct?* I sorted through the subtle distinctions, the shades of meaning. I checked with Ernest.

“Uncouth?”

I was looking for something more in line with the macabre, I told him, something untoward.

“Necro-something, then,” he suggested. “You might find it in Goethe’s *Faust*.”

“Bruno? He sounds like he’s got a couple of screws loose, that’s for sure,” my friend Pat comments when I tell her on the phone. “Aren’t you glad you’re now with a guy whose screws are screwed on tight?” She laughs uproariously.

“You bet,” I giggle. “Ernest,” I say, riding a sudden wave of mirth. “I sure lucked out with this one.”

\* \* \*

*September 10, 2014*

“What stands out for you when you think about my Mom?”

“She married us,” Ernest says without hesitation. “That time in the Ticino. Remember the spring I turned fifty? It was my first time in Switzerland. We were walking along the footpath by Lake Lugano—I always forget the name of the picturesque village; Gandria, was it?—when she stooped to pick a sprig of rosemary off some bush that grew wild along the dusty trail, rubbed it between her fingers to release the scent of the blossoms and, facing us, stood on tiptoe to sprinkle it on our heads. She was rather short, even then, before osteoporosis made her bend down even further, like a willow after a heavy rain.”

The memory of a tiny person with a strong will reminds him of a more recent visit in Zürich, when we were changing trains. We were hurrying along, trying to keep up with her. She knew the quickest way, from three levels down, where we had come in on the local train, up to street level, from where our train to Lugano and beyond would be departing in less than ten minutes.

“She knew the way with infallible certainty, as though she had memorized it—where to turn in that maze of spiffy underground shops, which connecting corridor would lead us to what set of rolling stairs—and all around us, the ongoing commotion; the hustle and bustle of travelers, the overhead announcements of destinations, departure times, and gates. On the escalator, standing beside her, that’s when I turned and saw how short she really was, no taller than a child, really. We allowed ourselves to be carried along in her wake, and she herself, like a tiny paper boat amidst the billowing waves of travelers, passengers all surging on, toward their various destinations. But she was steadfast, your mother—a little woman with a formidable spirit.

“At the kiosk by the *Treffpunkt* with the station clock, she stopped to buy us something in a paper bag to take on the train. They’re called—what, again? Ah, yes. *Nussgipfel*. Those are the flakiest, buttery, melt-in-your-mouth croissants I have ever tasted. The puff pastry is somewhat messy to eat, what with the sugar coating on top. I salivate like one of Pavlov’s dogs each time I think of them. And that hazelnut-almond paste, inside—to die for!”

Ernest sighs. “I still long for those, every time I think back to Switzerland. I could use one right now, for my hike up to Pulpit Rock.”

\* \* \*

*September 11, 2014*

No one knew on that August full moon just how short time would be for her, or that it might be her last full moon on earth. Ever.

My mother had been suffering from bouts of dizziness, more acutely over the past two years. A follow-up procedure to correct an earlier cataract surgery, scheduled to take place three days before the full moon, was touted as a possible solution to the problem.

“No choice,” she reiterated, when I finally reached her on the phone. “Why, just the other day, I contemplated crawling to the bathroom on all fours. I was so dizzy I had to steady myself, holding onto the walls in the hallway. It’s my only chance for an appointment. The eye surgeon will be off on summer holidays, soon, to Norway with his family for a month.”

*No choice.* Her words echoed in my mind. I was concerned. My mother lived alone. My imagination was running ahead of me, creating fearful scenarios. I communicated my sense of alarm to my eldest sister, who lives in England. She wrote a commiserating reply: *Naturally, we tend to panic more easily, since we both live so far away from her. It’s rather hard to see clearly across time and space.*

Still, I knew that submitting to any surgical procedure so close to the full moon ran contrary to the way my mother was used to conducting her affairs. It would have been better to wait for the waning phase of the moon, she would have said, had she had the luxury of choice. My mother was a practical person: She liked to consult a lunar calendar to assist her in determining the optimal time for almost any undertaking, whether for a visit to the dentist or the hairdresser, seeding her lettuce, or planting her peas. She relied on the lunar phases of the moon for washing her windows and for airing her bedding. There was only a two-week window of time, each month, when the jam or salve she concocted could be guaranteed to turn out perfectly and keep for years without going moldy.

The propitious moment, the proper time; they became household words promising unailing success.

“Years of observation, carefully recorded and distilled, right here,” she said, gifting me with a copy of the *Guide to Lunar Know-How* and wishing me luck.

“But it’s hardly superstition,” she would protest, laughing, when I challenged her. “There are days when the dough for the yeasted *Zopf* bread you’re making absolutely refuses to rise; when the haircut turns out all awry; when every wart you remove grows back twice, with a vengeance. And then, there are days when babies, both human and animal, can be weaned without a whimper of protest, and still other days, when everything you plant in your garden comes up roses.”

She would certainly be the one to know; hadn’t she kept her entire family alive with the produce she grew in her garden, year after year?

“We are made mostly of water,” she would say. “Why shouldn’t the moon govern our tides?” Trees were cited as a perfect example. “Did you know, for instance, that there is a specific day, each year, when the wood from a tree that is felled after sundown is completely impervious to



fire? You must remember Sepp Odermatt's barn, the winter it was gutted by fire. You were still in grade school, then. The metal melted off all the farm implements, so enormous was the heat the blaze gave off. But the posts and beams of that barn,"—she paused to make sure I was listening—"although they were engulfed by flames, they withstood the onslaught of the fire. Only the surface of the wood was charred. The barn had to be demolished piece by piece, with a saw. They made use of that same wood again when they built the new barn. And the wood on the handles of Sepp's tools," she marveled. "Wouldn't you know it—it was as hard as stone. Sepp Odermatt insisted that it came from a tree that was cut down after sundown, on that special day I just told you about."

There were other notable days in the lunar calendar, she told me. "Those are completely off limits—for undergoing heart surgery, for instance. Not when the moon is in Leo. That's what happened to the Egg Lady's husband," she revealed. "Franz—you must remember her husband. I would have done well to warn him that Leo rules the heart. Everything went well on the operating table—the Egg Lady reported as much—until much later, in the recovery room. That's when, sure enough, he died."

She sighed. "We are made of so much water," she said, repeating the mantra. "Why shouldn't the moon govern our tides?"

Was it any wonder that my mother's appointment with the eye surgeon, scheduled so close to the full moon, had triggered my concern? I had marked the day in my calendar. Needless to say, I hardly slept that night.

A feeling of relief flooded over me the following day, when my eldest brother's e-mail arrived. "All is well," the subject heading proclaimed. "I accompanied her to her appointment this morning," the text read. "Mind you, she could hardly have done it without my support. The ordeal took the stuffing out of her. She went to bed straight afterward, exhausted, and won't be available for comment for the rest of the day. But tomorrow morning, when she opens her eyes," he went on with the optimism I have come to recognize as a coping method, "*Mami* will have perfect vision and see clearly, once more, with that right eye of hers."

My mother did not die after the surgery.

I open my copy of the *Guide to Lunar Know-How* to help me identify the most auspicious days for preparing the blackcurrant-raspberry jam recipe I have inherited from my mother, and finding myself checking, instead, what astrological sign the moon was transiting on the day of my mother's appointment with the eye surgeon. There, in the margin, on the very last page of the calendar that ends in 2016, I discover a note, written in my mother's own hand, many years before the present moment: *You must not grieve for me. I am beyond wishing, now.* My mother's words, they are full of foresight, and of the capacity to imagine a time, in some distant future, when they would be reaching a life beyond her own, on this day, precisely when they would be needed, at this very hour, in the

midst of my life.

My mother, the healer: How else would she be able to brush away the lingering sadness or remove the buds of sorrow and of regret that may have started to gather on my brow, even now?

\* \* \*

*September 12, 2014*

The alarm clock next to my bed seems to be ticking more loudly than usual.

Yesterday, the urn with my mother's ashes was placed next to my stepfather's, in the small cemetery next to the chapel on the grassy hill overlooking the community of Rütihof, near Baden, Switzerland.

The date of the burial is marked in my day planner. It is an event taking place far away, in another time zone, which I am forced to imagine and to which I have some sort of connection, yet from which I feel curiously removed.

It is as if my sleeping mind has been struggling all night to grasp the meaning of my mother's final departure, to come to terms with what the severing of my bond with her might entail.

I am not there, when the bell rings in the belfry of the small chapel and the bereaved are gathered outside, nor when the urn with my mother's ashes is being lowered into the ground. I find myself stuck in a nightmare, caught up in some mysterious enactment of a process that is as gradual as it is frightening and inevitable.

I feel trapped: A wooden crate resembling a lobster cage has been lowered over my body. I find myself crouched on the floor, made smaller and smaller by the moveable slats that continue to press in on me, until my limbs are compressed and I know without a doubt that this is the end.

It is from this place of atavistic terror, of deprivation and utter finality, from the sense of entrapment that is held deep within my chest that I cry out her name—*Mamma!*—in a desperate attempt to wrest it back from the seepage of light at the edge of remembering and forgetting, to claim her back for myself—she, my mother, who has known me since before the sky began, since before I came to recognize the sound of my name.

"*Mamma!*" It is a child's voice that is ringing out, anguished and fearful. But that child's voice is also mine, *my* voice that reverberates as if down a long, dark tunnel, caught momentarily in an interminable corridor of time, in an underground passage, somewhere between now and then, now or later; between here and the hereafter.

\* \* \*

*September 13, 2014*

I am clothing the so-called event in words. I add and distill, define and evaluate. I'm left at a loss when the phone rings.

"Your mother—are you doing the forty days of prayers from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* for her?" Ananda inquires.

I glance at the vase filled with tall sprigs of hot pink gladiola that gleam every time I enter the room. I have placed them on the altar, next to my favorite picture of my mother, held in a small oval silver frame.

"I am doing the forty days of writing about my mother," I tell Ananda. The suddenness of my realization takes me by surprise. I stand before the thought unveiled, a gift from a place of non-thinking. It lies before me, as if the answer had been a secret, kept from me all this time, as if I was the last one to know it, now that I had come to listen, finally.

\* \* \*

*September 14, 2014*

A gong rings somewhere, far away.

I immerse myself; envision all mothers, my mother, since beginningless time, countless mothers in an infinite sea of humanity. Mothers, millions of mothers before her in a continuous universe of unfolding: the mystery and the miracle of existence.

The gong rings again. Far off, you can hear words being chanted from the *Heart Sutra*. They are floating toward you:

*No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no mind . . . no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation of suffering . . .*

You lose yourself. You are lost.

And now, word reaches you that your own mother has died. You wake up. The world stops. You are brought to a place where you try to imagine—to re-imagine—what is essentially unthinkable: A world without mothers. What you lose is half your vision. One half of the equation, ripped away.

You hear the gong ring finally, unable to give words to what you dimly apprehend. You come up for air, gasping.

\* \* \*

*September 15, 2014*

I am far removed; dry-eyed, when the condolences start to arrive from afar. Letters obviously composed to ease someone's sorrow—could it be mine? Words that are an attempt to reconstruct my mother, a cut-and-paste job, this lauding of her qualities, enumerated one by one, as if by firmly re-establishing them in my mind, her presence could be restored, as if I could think of her as alive once again—*she who always, she who never*—as if they could be wrenched away from *she who no longer*.

Her uprightness. Her level-headedness. Her willful enthusiasm. *No longer.*

Her self-effacing humor. *No more.*

Her forthrightness at any cost: *Kein Blatt vor den Mund nehmen!*

Her steadfast perseverance. *Gone.*

Always: This sorting of the fossils of biography. The interlocking planes and viewpoints. An ephemeral collage is starting to take shape. I decide to add a new piece—right there, close to the top: *She knew her own mind better than I knew mine.* Another piece, joined at an angle, slightly askew: *Walking sticks? Bones of contention!*

The layering; the overlapping: The fierceness of her walking on her own two feet, of being obstinately, determinedly herself. Always? *She who no longer.* I have been calling upon her every day: *Always.*

My mother—she, who resists my obsession with fixating on such absolutes. She, who seems to be guiding my efforts to calibrate her life on the page. She, who leads me away from wanting to explore the liminal terrain of what was, and of what might have been.

She, who instructs me to look elsewhere, to follow the arc of progression toward the inevitable and to locate, perhaps, some key elements that might change the impression I have of her. *She, my mother.*

PRISCILLA LONG is a Seattle-based writer of poetry, science, history, creative non-fiction and fiction. Her book *Crossing Over: Poems* is forthcoming from University of New Mexico Press. Her most recent book is *The Writer's Portable Mentor: A Guide to Art, Craft, and the Writing Life*. Her work appears widely in literary journals and her awards include a National Magazine Award. She serves as Founding and Consulting Editor of HistoryLink.org, the online encyclopedia of Washington State history. See PriscillaLong.org and PriscillaLong.com.

## Priscilla Long / Four Poems

### Seasonal Affective Disorder

Dark early and dark late,  
Seattle squats metallic, ice  
cold rain. I'm on the bus.  
Below the bascule bridge  
a log-barge blocks the cut.  
Too near, two women wizened  
to chalk, small-talk the traffic-stuck  
route to town. Downtown  
I go to the museum. I muse  
in Morris Louis light.

Flame flares in blue air.  
Mint rises to violet, to rose  
gauze or smoke. I am  
log, earth, mud.  
This is no painting, but fire  
opal, opalescent desire.  
I paddle the slow green river of childhood.  
Color is reason to live.

## High Road Home

*Aurora Bridge, Seattle, dedicated February 22, 1932*

Do bridges dream their suicides?  
Bodies like birds, brief,  
a bright flash, then gone.  
The bridge trembles  
over still waters that split  
spirit from falling flesh.

Blue clay holds the footing,  
holds the logs that hold the piers.  
The high road darkens  
houseboat and backyard.

Do bridges dream their piers?  
Do they span their own years?  
The day in '32 they towed  
the tall-masted ship  
through the gap  
in the half-built truss,  
the schooner derelict  
and doomed, taken out  
to sea and torched.  
And then the center span  
drops to anchor arms,  
shuts Lake Union to sail,  
paddle-wheel, and steam.  
And America hits the road.

## Cliffs of Fall

*Yale Bridge, Clark and Cowitz counties, Washington state*

Lewis River roils through Doug-fir  
down to the Columbia.  
A County road rides  
the North Fork's north ledge—  
*cliffs of fall. O the mind,  
mind has mountains ...* The road  
veers to bridge earth's gash,  
to leap the sheer, to run  
Yale to Yacolt. Steel rope  
suspends the span, spurns  
the mind's abyss. Trestle  
and truss recant an older bridge.  
Backstays anchor to basalt.  
The live load is logtruck  
RV, black bear, mule deer.  
The dead load—a timber deck.  
Hawks nest high in steel  
tower trees. The bridge  
defies earth, defines sky,  
rock, river bluff, black waters  
whispering to infinity.

## Why the Fremont Bridge and the Aurora Bridge Don't Speak

They've stood side by side  
for so long. The Fremont Bridge, bascule  
built 1917, is older, lower, smaller.  
It's had its ups and downs.  
The Aurora Bridge is superior.  
When it opened in '32, thousands came  
to cheer. They ignored, even stood upon  
the older, lower bridge. The Fremont  
Bridge moans its horn day and night,  
its paint fading, its mesh deck  
decrepit, dotted with pigeon poop.  
But the old bridge has a tender,  
and now, an artist in residence  
to climb its little tower.  
The Aurora Bridge is the jumper's  
bridge. Beauty debated and hated.  
The Fremont Bridge, cracked,  
grumpy, groaning, is loved.  
That's why they don't speak.



MICHAEL WASHBURN is a novelist, short story writer, journalist and editor based in Brooklyn, New York. He has found inspiration in the short stories of Raymond Carver, Charles Bukowski, Gary Indiana, Ian MacMillian, John Hawkes, Raymond Chandler and many other writers. He firmly believes that e-books are, at best, a passing craze and that printed books and journals can and must endure. He has previously contributed stories to *The New Orphic Review*.

## Torrid Roads

Michael Washburn

GRAHAM AND LESLIE had not quarreled for several hours. Their weekend at the vineyard had been largely free of the bickering that had made people view their marriage as a thing they should have the decency to end. Now, as their Hyundai sped up a long straight road through the desert, Graham dared to hope that Leslie might come out and say that this trip hadn't been a bad idea at all. His wife was gazing out the passenger's side window at the gum trees and the ochre sands, leaving him to guess at what thoughts might be forming under her pretty brunette scalp. Graham had found the vineyard one of those hidden treats that made him proud to live in Australia, and he wondered just how he'd lived 45 years before ever setting foot there. Maybe, just maybe, this woman with whom he'd fought so bitterly was of a similar mind.

Now Leslie said: "Graham, I've been listening to clouds pass for the last two hours."

Graham stared at the road resembling a gray streak amid a landscape of hardening clay.

"You're not talking either, Leslie," he heard himself say as something moved inside his gut.

"I said something to you about the gum trees a while ago, and I mentioned the brushfires, and you just sat there like you're not programmed to have a conversation about such things."

In her voice was irritation compounded with something infinitely worse, a tinge of a legalistic tone he'd heard on occasions when he really wouldn't have bet money on their marriage.

"Listen, Leslie, I really didn't think you had said anything terribly profound—I mean, I thought what you said was right on target and didn't need elaboration," he heard himself say.

He kept staring at the road, feeling a touch of moistness creep into his

palms wrapped tightly around the wheel.

“Well, I was just trying to make conversation, Graham. Next time I’ll know better,” she said.

“That’s a little uncalled for, Leslie.”

He thought: *Oh, boy.*

“It’s about as called-for as saying not even an ungrateful wife can keep you from the splendors of this world,” Leslie said, referring to an aside Graham had let slip while they stood on a muddy trail on a hill of the vineyard in the heat of 1:00 p.m., watching laborers go about their work amid rows of short trees in full bloom, their branches and leaves forming a serrated, gently curving green blanket.

“Ungrateful *bitch*, I suspect that’s what you meant to say,” she added.

Clutching the wheel even harder, he flailed and groped for words.

“I didn’t know reading minds was one of your talents.”

“How *would* you know anything about my talents or interests?”

“Leslie. *Please*. I was just being ironic. If I’d known that remark would have meant anything at all to you, or that you’d even remember it, I wouldn’t have said it. Or I would have chosen my words quite differently.”

Graham gripped the wheel as if it was a pickpocket he’d just caught up with, breathless and furious, ready to rip the thief’s eyes out. The straggly trees by the road and the expanse of desert beyond seemed to hold Leslie’s attention now. He realized he was going to be beside this woman, in this compressed space, for the next four hours. He told himself they weren’t all that far from civilization, there were trees and many signs along the road, but that just made it all the more frustrating that things should have reached this point. And she’d totally mischaracterized his words and motives yet again. Graham began to rack his mind for the most hurtful, the most lethal words a man could utter.

Then he ended this mental process and watched the streak of gray stretching into the distance before him. He was not going to say those things, he resolved. No sir. His mind had to be nimble now, in a way that had never come easily to him. *It had to.*

“Leslie. There’s been a gross misunderstanding here,” he began, carefully laying emphasis on his passive construction rather than accusing her of the misunderstanding, though mentally he did just that.

“Will you please, *please* hear me out,” he continued.

She stared out her window. Though she didn’t say anything, Graham sensed she had not completely shut him out. The sun coming through the window glinted off the pendant of Leslie’s bronze necklace. On the pendant was an image of the great Brazilian footballer, Pelé. Graham had given Leslie the necklace on her birthday for a lark, for Leslie had no interest whatsoever in sports. But she took to wearing it on holidays and special occasions, as if to affirm that she too had a playful sense of humor.

“I haven’t said a great deal because I just wanted things to go on

being the way they were over those two days. Anything I said was a potential distraction from what I saw, what I felt seated across from you amid the trees and sun and fragrant air. I'm not a poet and I can only tell you generally what I felt but I ask you, please don't doubt or disrespect it."

She was clearly listening, now.

"That remark that I made . . . I was mimicking the way that stupid blokes talk sometimes, to show you my distance from that kind of statement. That's what I mean by being ironic, Leslie. I really thought you've known me long enough to know that's what I was doing and it wasn't necessary to add to or explain what I said."

Even now Leslie did not make eye contact with her husband. But now she, too, was gazing at the streak of gray before them, contemplative, receptive. Graham felt emboldened.

"I know I've been quiet. But it's just like when you wake up from a wonderful dream and you want to stay in that dream. If you just leap right back into your waking life . . ."

"I get it, Graham," Leslie said, and her tone was surprisingly tender.

He wanted to add something but thought better of it.

To his amazement, Leslie's right hand crept until it came to rest on Graham's left leg, just a few inches below his thigh. She caressed his leg a couple of times before her hand straightened out and Graham was aware of a presence down there that was restful but not inert.

They rode on through the desert for another 40 minutes as Graham recalled how poignantly pretty Leslie had looked with her smooth pale features free of makeup, which would have run in the torrid climes of the vineyard, and her hair tied up in a neat bun at her crown. How he had liked to walk behind her while watching the effortless grace of something perfect in motion. Though Graham had never had any profound thoughts about Darwin and natural selection, the concepts had a logic and a music to them. When he saw the crease of one of her buttocks in motion extend toward the edge of her body and then stop and curve briefly inward, then the motion repeated on the other side, he could not escape thinking that the grand design of the universe had endowed her with traits calculated to drive her mate wild. Graham knew how easy it would be for others to impute simplicity to his motives when it came to Leslie, but he knew that he loved her above all as an intelligent, sensitive woman. Their hours together in the vineyard had put to rest for good any doubts about whether one of them was "right" for the other, or about the durability of their love, a love he now longed to convey but did not for fear of tripping over his words, looking absurd, and ruining the moment he felt still had not ended. But time worked in Graham's favor now. The thing was just to find another setting.

"We've got to stop and eat somewhere. It won't be someplace fancy

of course, but someplace where they serve wine would be ideal.”

Leslie smiled.

“We’ve still got quite a bit of driving to do,” she said.

“Two glasses, that’s it, I swear. That won’t kill my driving,” Graham said, and almost added, “How long have you known me?” but his tongue leap-frogged the phrase just in time.

“Okay. It will feel a little silly to stop and order wine when we’ve got crates of it in the trunk,” she replied.

“I know, I know. Now the question is where?”

He was thinking of a family-owned restaurant fashioned out of logs and mortar, with a garden, where they’d sit facing each other as a grinning, peppy 19-year-old boy in a white apron brought a tray with glasses and a carafe to their table. There were places like that between here and the city, Graham knew. Maybe he could get Leslie to fish the guidebook out of the glove compartment. He turned toward her side of the car.

“*Graham!*” Leslie screamed.

He didn’t take note of the south-bound black Volkswagen in the other lane until it was within 30 yards of the Hyundai. It was moving erratically, as if the driver couldn’t decide whether to go straight or turn around, and as it neared the north-bound car, it crossed the divide by such a margin that only its left rear wheel was still in the south-bound lane. Graham spun the wheel with both hands as abruptly as if trying to snap someone’s neck. Though his maneuver averted contact with the other car, Graham in his hot panic did not step on the brake until the Hyundai was shooting toward the road’s left shoulder. Now he hit the brake with all his force as if it was a trapdoor in an *Evil Dead* film, with a demon banging its head against the other side. The car surged and screeched with such force that Leslie, who was not wearing her seat belt, lurched forward and hit her head on the windshield and let out a cry. The car passed onto the shoulder and its right headlamp hit a sign stating the number of miles to various places before Graham could try to reverse course. In the rush of forces and signals, the car lost traction and began spinning. Graham had a queasy, weightless feeling as the front of the car rotated toward the south and the vehicle left the earth. It spun around, came down at a 45-degree angle on Graham’s side, flipped upside down, kept moving, flipped back up, and then upside down once more. Crowning the incident with a bit of irony, the flipped vehicle ended up pointing in the right direction, to the north, perfectly parallel with the edge of the road.

Graham’s seat belt held him upside down inside the Hyundai, his head inches above the roof and the road. Bits of glass were stuck in his face and inside his mouth and nostrils. Blood clouded his vision and in his neck he felt pain and numbness at the same time. He couldn’t rotate it in either direction. He could not see Leslie.

Graham feared that if he tried to talk, only blood would come out. He

tried flexing his fingers, then his wrists. He touched his shoulders. Then he reached down and groped for the button that would release the belt. Whatever the protocol was for this, he knew he wasn't following it, but he didn't care. He found the red plastic button, pressed it, and his body slid toward the ground. He reached up with both arms just in time to guide himself toward the shattered window. The window wasn't completely gone, so he had to hit glass with his fist to forge a way out. With his hands clutching the door where the window had protruded from, when there was a window, he used every bit of strength to slide and pull himself out of the car. The pavement was blazing. Soon Graham was lying on his back, gazing up at a sheet of cobalt blue without a hint of cloud. Even with the pains in his chest and legs and at a point on his forehead where glass had cut him, Graham realized now that he didn't feel half as bad physically as he'd expected. He began to try to pick himself up. Blood seeped into his eyes and he flopped onto his belly and began to weep.

"Leslie. Leslie," he moaned.

As he was pulling himself from the vehicle and lying on the road, Graham had an odd aural experience. Though his mind was on himself and his wife, he could make out the sounds of another car, *that* other car, speeding on down the road in the southbound lane. He heard the motor gun and roar as the car accelerated, until the noise faded and he couldn't hear anything but the wind. *It's gone*, he thought. *It'll be on the far side of the continent before anyone finds us, and I barely even got a look at the bloody shitmobile*. Then, as he was lying on his belly, weeping and muttering his wife's name, he heard to his astonishment what sounded like the same engine. This time the noise was growing louder, not fainter. His first thought was that he must get himself off the road. Whatever was coming could not pass him in the left lane and all of his body above the knees lay sprawled in the right one. Then he thought, no, he wasn't thinking straight, nobody was going to run over him at this time of day. The approaching car, he felt certain now, was the one that had caused the accident. Graham felt a stab of joy at the thought that the driver of the other car had some decency and had decided, as soon as panic retreated, to come to the rescue, and they'd sort out any questions about who and why at a remote point in the future when nearly everything was right.

He wanted to pick himself up off the hot concrete, get over to the other side of the car, and attend to Leslie. But he could barely see. As soon as he made an attempt to rise, he felt too dizzy to continue the effort and realized he might have seriously hurt his head. *Don't be ludicrous now, the cavalry's on its way*, he thought. More blood seeped down now, causing Graham to shut his eyes. He lowered his face until his left cheek rested on the concrete. So what if it singed his bare flesh. Whatever he tried to do now would be wrong. He must wait for others to make things

right. Within seconds, he heard the deceleration of the other car, until he couldn't hear it at all. He waited. The heat of the road on his cheek was pleasant compared to the sun on his exposed neck. Still he waited.

Someone was coming. Or was it two someones?

Graham told himself he must not lash out, he must not even think about those chaotic moments before he lost control of the car. He thought about due process, and all of that. Right now Leslie was the most important thing in the galaxy, the *only* important thing. He heard steps coming up the road. Now he was sure there were two people, one coming up on each side of the flipped Hyundai. The stranger on his side was close enough now that he would have made out a shadow on the hot tarmac, if he could see at all. He tried to talk, but emitted wheezes and gasps. It was confounding because he desperately wanted to thank these people for turning around and coming back when they could have raced blissfully down the road and never given this accident a thought. Now something was happening on the other side of the car, he was sure of it, someone was reaching into the passenger's side window. There was no conversation, but someone at least was talking to Leslie. The noises were muted, like voices from a TV in a neighbor's house.

A hand fell on Graham's right shoulder. It shook him a few times. Then he felt the right side of his body rising as the hands of a strong person with feet planted on either side of Graham pulled him up, clutching his damp armpits. He did not open his eyes. He wouldn't be able to see if he did. Then he felt a lessening of the density of things around his chest. The stranger had slid his wallet out of his breast pocket. *That's right, see if I'm a donor*, Graham wanted to say. *And then: What the fuck? Of course I'm not a donor and it doesn't matter because I'm not dead or about to die. Put that back!* But he did not feel the wallet slide back. Instead, he felt hands creep into the front pockets of his pants and rest there momentarily, feeling, probing. There was nothing in either pocket. The hands withdrew. Graham thought the stranger must have his ID in hand when contacting the authorities. So now it was a bit of a jolt to hear the engine of the other car again, and hear the vehicle cut around him, on and off the right shoulder, cross over to the north-bound lane, and speed away up the highway. Well, they needed to give his ID to the medical crew and police they were about to call, Graham thought before he nodded off.

An hour later, a rattlesnake farmer going north in a rusted red pickup witnessed the wreck.

Soon Graham felt two robust young men propping him up. They talked consolingly while wiping his face and eyes with sanitary napkins. He looked groggily around at the wreck, and an ambulance and two police cars. It was around 4:00 p.m., bright as hell, and he was sweating.

"You've had a shock, fella. Just stand still."

"Les," Graham said.

“Just stand still and don’t talk.”

To Graham’s astonishment, the pains he had felt in the immediate aftermath of the crash were mostly gone. They’d already stanching the cut on his forehead, and he could see and hear just fine. But his rescuers had yet to address the most important matter. A few of the medical people and cops had gathered around Graham. At this moment, Graham felt fine physically, though dazed.

“My name is Graham Fraser and the woman who was in the passenger seat of the Hyundai is my wife, Leslie Fraser. We got run off the road by a black car going south, but whoever it was came back to help. I would very much like to know Leslie’s status at this time.”

A policeman, about 25, six feet tall and with curly blond hair, stepped forward.

“We can’t tell you, sir. There was an ambulance here and it took her away and we don’t have an update on her status.”

“She’s alive,” Graham said.

“I don’t have any information at this time, sir,” the cop said.

Another cop, with short brown hair and a creased face, came forward.

“What did you say about a black car?”

“The first responders. The angels with my ID, the people who called you.”

“Sir, you’ve been through a terrible shock, and you should know you don’t have to give a statement just now. There’s an ambulance waiting right over here,” said the younger cop.

“I’m fine,” Graham insisted.

“Just to be safe—”

“I know, I fucking well know. You want me to go and have some tests and make sure there’s no internal bleeding. Well, I said I’m fine and that’s my decision. Unless you want to place me under arrest, that’s the end of the discussion,” Graham hissed.

The cops looked at each other. Their gazes acknowledged what they both were thinking about Graham. He didn’t want to tell these yahoos that Graham Fraser knew high-powered lawyers and politicians and he’d have both their jobs if they dared try to put pressure on him. Happily it didn’t come to that.

“The ICU doesn’t admit any visitors, does it?” Graham asked.

“No, sir,” said a member of the ambulance crew, a thin guy in his early 20s.

“Well, there’s no good I could do now. I need to get on the phone with her parents and her brothers and sisters.”

“Do you want to come to the station and make a statement?” asked the older cop.

“I should really do this first.”

Not knowing Graham, the cops and the medical personnel could hardly

guess that Leslie's death meant freedom from an often strained marriage. Or that her survival possibly meant the continuation of a relationship, on vastly improved terms, with a gorgeous, highly intelligent woman, of a marriage he'd often boasted about to his friends. As much as they'd resented Graham's boasting, his friends knew there was a basis for it. But right now, Graham was thinking about the former possibility, not the latter. He didn't recall the positive turn their interaction had taken before the accident. Though he didn't want to admit it, part of him was all too comfortable with the prospect of Leslie dying.

"Would you like a ride to a hotel up the road a bit?" the young medical guy asked.

"Where is it, exactly?" Graham inquired.

"Prescott. A cozy little place called Prescott."

"Okay."

He climbed into the ambulance with the two orderlies and the vehicle raced off into the bright afternoon. The young man who wasn't driving checked out the cut on Graham's forehead, dabbed on ointment, and touched it up with a moist napkin. Then he took out a notebook, wrote down names and numbers, tore off the sheet, and handed it to Graham. They had been on the road for just minutes when the ambulance swung onto an exit ramp on the right side. The ramp flowed into a desolate street, across which a filling station and decrepit, abandoned church faced each other. About 30 yards east of the station there was a narrow shed that looked disused. Within two minutes, the ambulance had progressed eastward along the road, navigated a few crude side roads, and deposited Graham outside a two-story, quasi-Victorian building, about 50 by 80 feet, its antiquated look offset by the presence of air conditioners in a few of the windows. There were no vehicles parked outside. He waved to the departing orderlies and proceeded up the stairs onto a rickety porch, opened the screen door, and walked inside.

In the musty, dimly lit lobby, a bald man with a black beard fringed with gray sat behind a desk, smoking. His deep green tank top receded far enough under his neck to expose a jungle of dark curving hairs. Upon Graham's entrance, the man smiled, exposing a tableau of yellowing teeth with many gaps.

"Hello, mate," the man said.

"Hi there. I need a single."

"Sure thing."

"Ah, listen, mate, this is a bit of an unusual circumstance. My wife and I were in a horrible accident out on the road, and I don't have my credit card. I'd like you to call my best friend Jim Wells in Canberra and he'll put it on his card," Graham said.

"Oh, no worries, mate," the man replied.

After a brief phone conversation, Graham had a room for the night.



Jim paid not only for the room, but also for sixty dollars which the clerk took out of the cash register and handed to Graham. Now the clerk's conniving round eyes looked directly into Graham's.

"I'm awful sorry about your wife, mate. How come you ain't at her side? Is she all right?"

"I'm going over to the hospital in just a few. Right now I need to make some calls."

A wooden staircase with scarlet carpet on each step led to the upper floor, a place of halls with oak panels, electric candles at intervals of 12 feet, and doors distinguishable only by the numbers on them. At the top of the stairs, Graham made a right, walked toward the front of the building, turned into one of two perpendicular corridors, and stopped at room 224. Inside this plain little chamber, he moved to the mirror, looked with dismay at the shocked face with tiny lacerations and a big one on the forehead, splashed water on himself, sat down on the edge of the bed. He had to call Leslie's family and friends. But they were going to want to talk to her or to a doctor. It was *insane* that she was at the hospital and he was here. But for Christ's sake, they'd thrown her in an ambulance and spirited her away before he knew what was going on. They wouldn't have let him into the ICU. In any event, he was heading for the hospital and would get into the ICU to see his wife just as soon as if he'd gone to the hospital with her.

Graham pulled out the paper on which the orderly had written down numbers. He dialed the taxi company, the only one in the area, he assumed, and asked for a cab to take him to the hospital. He had half an hour to kill. There was also a number for a local garage where they were going to try to salvage the Hyundai. No point in calling them in the next 48 hours.

Outside on the porch, Graham waited anxiously until the taxi drove up. It was a mildly tacky yellow-lime green vehicle driven by a man who looked like Harvey Keitel's self-effacing younger brother. The cab took him south, past the site of the accident, to an exit accessed from the north-bound lane, one that Graham hadn't noticed on the way up. Minutes later, the cab reached a place where sand and dirt gave way to a big paved rectangular lot where light gleamed on the roofs of well-polished Citroëns, Nissans, Mitsubishis, and Fords. Behind the lot was a medical complex with tinted windows lining each of its three floors. The driver quite kindly agreed to wait with the meter off. Inside the hospital, orderlies escorted Graham to a hall where he had to wait a couple of hours in a black plastic chair as rural folk passed on their way to or from rooms. At last, a pair of doctors ushered him into a room where Leslie lay with tubes in her nose. On the parts of her head bandages didn't cover, she had many bruises and cuts. One bruise above her left eye resembled a mushroom turned ill and purple by pesticides. Though her breathing was fairly regular, they had many tests yet to run. The hour Graham spent at her side passed without

a flicker of consciousness on her part. Nevertheless he moved his face close to hers to whisper that he'd be back soon enough.

Back in his room at the hotel, Graham set about calling Leslie's family and friends and trying to relate what had happened without making them hysterical. Not feeling up to calling her parents, with whom he'd rarely talked, he asked her 29-year-old brother, Daniel, to take on the responsibility. In Daniel's tone, Graham detected the unasked question. Daniel wanted to know what kind of man isn't in a hospital when his wife's there. Graham wanted to tell Daniel that even when he did arrive, he'd had to wait a couple of hours to see Leslie, but that would be kind of like a suspect in a murder case blurting "I didn't do it!" without anyone even asking. Graham also spoke again with Jim Wells, who was happy to cover the cost of a few more nights in the hotel. Many were the favors Graham had done for Jim over the years. Graham briefly argued with himself about whether he must go back to the hospital. No, that was crazy, he resolved. He had to conserve his cash and, besides, the nurses had instructions to call the front desk in the event of any developments. But he wasn't so hard up that a drink at the bar downstairs was out of the question.

When Graham walked into the dark musty area on the far side of the lounge adjacent to the front lobby, the first person he saw was the bald man he'd encountered on walking into that lobby earlier. The man grinned as Graham sat down. A young woman with glorious yellow hair down to her shoulders walked up on the other side of the counter and introduced herself as Molly. The clerk unwinding after work gave his name as Victor. Graham ordered a highball, thinking it would calm his nerves a bit.

"You all right there, mate?" Victor wanted to know.

"Come again?" Graham said.

"I know you been through a terrible shock. It's just that when you look at people, your gaze rests there a little while like there's somethin' you can't figure out."

Graham tapped his temple with a finger.

"My wife and I nearly got killed and things are totally scrambled."

"Of course, mate."

"Tell you what, stranger, you've got an open bar tonight," Molly put in.

"You're kidding!" Graham exclaimed.

How different Molly was from some of the rural ladies he'd encountered in bars, who mouthed a disparaging remark about Graham not being from the area and then retreated before he could say anything back. Yet she and Victor both had a guarded air, he thought. What weren't they telling him?

"You're right lucky the car didn't burst into flames. How's your wife, mate?" Victor asked.

“Somewhere between serious and stable condition, from what I could make out,” said Graham.

“Well you should be celebratin’, then. Often when we have wrecks out here, they’re scrapin’ the occupants off the ceiling. Blokes cut up that road at a hundred and—”

Graham cut the man off.

“You, ah, you didn’t see, like, a black Volkswagen drive up today, did you?”

The man looked puzzled.

“No, why would I have?”

“I mean, did someone pull up in front of the hotel looking for lodging.”

“No. You ain’t been around back yet, mate. That’s where the parking lot is,” Victor informed Graham.

“Sorry, I haven’t been in a state to do a proper survey of the place,” Graham muttered.

At this moment, two more people walked into the bar. Victor introduced Graham to Duane and Sharon, a couple in their early 30s who both had full heads of blond hair and an easygoing manner. They both wore jeans and short-sleeved button-down shirts of a thin material. Duane had a bit of a paunch.

“I heard there was a hell of a spill out there. I’m awfully glad to see you’re all right,” Duane told the visitor.

Silence prevailed in the bar until Graham realized he was staring at Duane.

“I, ah, you didn’t see a black—Oh, never mind. Thank you very much, mate. I need all the sympathy you can scrounge up right now.”

Now Sharon came out with something totally unexpected.

“The first thing I want to say is, we’re all deeply sorry. Let us know when you need a ride to the hospital. The second thing I have to say—”

Here Duane made eye contact with Sharon as if trying to dissuade her subtly.

“—is that you aren’t the only one who’s been through unimaginable trauma.”

Graham stared at her, dumfounded.

“What in the *hell* are you talking about, miss?”

“I’m talking about the fires, Mr. Fraser. They destroyed towns and displaced hundreds of people. I don’t think you know just how horrific they are. They move like leopards. They turn the sky black at noon. They can turn you to ash without even coming through the wall of your house.”

As Sharon said these things, her eyes flickered eerily and folds of skin on either side of her mouth moved up and down as if all of her face struggled to get the awful words out.

“I know about the fires. I don’t live in a cave, you know. What can I say? I’m sorry,” Graham replied.

“Folks in your parts weren’t in a big hurry to help out,” she asserted. How had things taken this turn? He locked eyes with Sharon.

“I’m not ‘folks,’ okay? I’m Graham Fraser. I’m accountable for the thoughts and deeds of one bloke. What the fuck’s wrong with you?”

Now Duane moved beside Sharon, whispered in her ear, and led her to a corner of the bar on the far side of where Victor sat. Molly spoke soothingly to Graham as she brought him another drink. He thanked her. He knew that he was staring at Victor and Molly and a few dim forms on stools around the place, but they must know what he’d been through.

After calling the hospital from the front desk and hearing from a doctor that they were running tests on Leslie, Graham retreated to his room. It was too early to go to bed, but he didn’t want to drink anymore or try to enjoy a game. He sat on the bed in his clothes with his legs making an inverted V. He dozed off for awhile, woke up, rubbed his eyes. It took a moment to remember where he was, then the awful reality came back. He tried to calm himself, repeating words that Molly had said. Suddenly Graham heard a laugh from one of the adjoining rooms. There were no other noises, so it clearly hadn’t come in response to something on TV or to another person’s joke. It was a lone, mocking chortle, from where exactly he couldn’t tell.

Graham thought, *Okay, this is extremely fucked up.* He got up and went out into the hall. Plain wooden panels of closed doors stared at him from either side. He told himself he couldn’t go banging on doors and asking who had laughed and why, but it seemed wrong to return quiescently to his room. He couldn’t have felt more bewildered. It hadn’t sounded like a kid’s voice. Maybe someone from the bar had come up to his door and then retreated downstairs. Graham ambled to the floor’s main corridor, approached the stairs, walked down to the front lobby. He must have dozed off longer than he realized, for there was no one at the desk. Anyone ringing the doorbell would presumably activate a buzzer in one of the chambers. Even now Graham didn’t know how big the place was on the inside or where any of the people he’d met slept. He had no idea what to do. Right now, he was miserable from having slept just a bit without getting the rest his body needed. Looking around, he saw something his eyes had passed over before without it registering. Behind the desk where Victor sat during business hours was a tall thin clock with a wooden frame and a pair of rusty hands with peeling black paint, indicating it was half past midnight. The frame ran straight through a rectangular hole in the floor, fostering, in Graham’s mind, the absurd impression that it reached down to the core of the earth. It was nuts for him to be up now after what he’d been through, he decided. But somewhere someone had laughed at his misfortune and he wanted to hurt that person. Well, not now.

Back in his room, Graham stripped naked, pulled his window as far

up as it would go, climbed under a thin aquamarine sheet on the bed. A tepid breeze barely ruffled the curtains, and outside the world was quiet and unwelcoming.

He had long had experiences at night, not dreams so much as bits of gibberish, as if he did not have the grandeur to dream. What he saw and felt now was relatively coherent though he was not awake. All the sands of the desert were moving, as if blown by an awesome force in another hemisphere, a deity from which all things retreated in terror. The sands moved with tidal force and took a form recalling the curve of a giant wave with a scum of foam at the edge, which was ironic for the idea of water, of moisture, was so outlandish here. He followed the progress of the sands, of the uprooted desert, over hundreds of kilometers until, to his amazement, the sands collapsed, the world ceased swelling and running and falling and all was still. But the viewer's eye did not rest. It moved on until the yellow and ochre sands with straggling remnants of bush and stalk at last began to segue into a greener terrain. His eye wandered over dwarf apple trees and bushes and paths of pebble and dust, and now lemon-scented gum trees, red flowering gum trees, eucalyptus trees. Leslie walked up a path toward him, threw her arms around his neck, and resolutely kissed him. Her lips were cool and moist as stones at the edges of a hidden waterfall. Then he was sitting at a table across from her, gazing into a pale soft face that would no more melt or erode than a Noh mask from the 18th century bathed in weird compounds. Yet in her look was infinite tenderness, and her look bid him to stimulate her lips and to rest on the softness of her cheeks. All around a breeze stirred the branches of the plentiful trees, vines rustled, warblers fluttered their wings and traded one perch for another in the gently swaying green. Though he stayed transfixed with Leslie, the green all around began to pull hard at Graham's eyes as if tempting him to cry and cry. Leslie's lips began to form words.

Now the face of a burned humanoid, a study in gray and brown with flashes of diseased orange, loomed in Graham's mind. Though fire had nearly annihilated the face, the eyes were intensely yellow and angry. Graham thought, *I've never known before what a demon is or how it got that way. Demons, I think, recognize and lure living folk of a kindred nature.* And now he envisioned a sheet of flame rising to the heavens as hundreds of people ran or tripped, in terror of its relentless advance. Even the ones who didn't fall down failed to outpace the fire, and Graham watched all of their mortal lives, all of their vain cherished hopes and desires, fall and burn as the fire swept over them.

Graham woke up with brilliant light streaming through the window, and the sounds of kids playing in the dirt behind the hotel. He coaxed his middle-aged body into a sitting position on the bed as thoughts came, unwelcome and unexpected as a sniper's bullet. He recalled now the three

occasions on which neighbors who heard the nightly tumult in the Fraser house had called the police. How they had fought! He'd said he didn't like Leslie's legalistic tone. She'd said that the "one percent" gets a bad rap these days but in reality it's about one percent of humanity that has the courage to be honest in a tough situation, and Graham wasn't part of that minority. The fighting escalated. No one who had not gone through it could imagine the humiliation of getting manhandled by robust boys half your age whose crisp uniforms were advertisements for order. Oh, to bring this on yourself again, then yet again. But he told himself he really cared little about the opinions of strangers and what upset him down to the deepest strata of his mind and heart was that he loved Leslie Fraser and had just been too obtuse to use his time well. Things had just begun to turn, and then . . . Well, he deserved Leslie, he wasn't one of the people who deserved to fall and burn with the advance of the fire demon.

At the bar downstairs, Victor sat eating a bowl of cereal as Molly wiped the counter, humming and warbling. Graham climbed onto a seat beside Victor before he realized that Sharon had sat down at the other end. Well, it was too late to get up and leave now.

"Did you call the hospital, mate?" Victor asked between bites of cornflakes.

"I will. Look, fuck—I mean, look here man, I need some coffee to function," Graham managed to say.

"You're doing it again, mate," Victor said.

"Doing *what*?"

"Making eye contact with folks for, like, an hour without saying anything. It freaks me out."

Graham let this pass. He asked Molly for coffee. When it came, it was pungent and coarse, just what he needed. Sharon watched him drink for a minute.

Now Sharon spoke. To his surprise, her tone was conciliatory, almost friendly.

"Look, we're all thinking about your wife. I got upset yesterday because you seemed, at a glance, like a lot of blokes who've passed through here. They didn't know anyone here even had a family or a house. A fire to them was like something in a movie that you could choose to see or not see."

Graham nodded, sipped the brutal liquid.

"Well . . . I didn't know I projected that. These are hardly normal circumstances, Sharon," he told her in a condescending tone.

"I know. I do know. I apologize."

He nodded again.

"Listen, let me give you a ride to the hospital. You'll talk to Leslie, and then there are some things I could show you," Sharon offered.

He could hardly say no. Before setting out on the road with Sharon,

he went up to his room to call Jim Wells. Jim assured Graham that he had explained Graham's absence to everyone at the office. Graham told Jim about his plans this morning. Jim laughed and joked that he believed in a fire demon with a specific role in the world. After thanking his friend and putting the phone down, Graham heard the laugh again. It was the same laugh as before, right down to its tone and duration. For a moment he stood trembling in the unconditioned air of his room. Then he flung open the door and marched out into the hall, thinking he would not allow whoever had done this twice now to hide behind social etiquette. He flung open the door of the room on his right and found an empty chamber. He spun around and opened the opposite door. To Graham's amazement, he was gazing into the face of an elderly man with a scraggly white beard and a horseshoe of white hair on a sunburned head where veins bulged like worms in search of a way out. The man wore a dirty undershirt and a pair of soiled tan trousers. Apparently Graham had disturbed him in the act of cleaning a razor over the sink. The man made a vicious face and began snarling like a rabid dog. With profuse apologies, Graham shut the door and hurried along the hall and down the stairs.

Minutes later, he sat in a Ford Bronco next to Sharon. The road to the hospital was as barren as an undiscovered moon. In the room with Leslie, Graham lingered over the prone unspeaking form, thinking there was something the doctors with bland faces would not reveal. They were happy to disclose that Leslie's breathing was normal and she had had a conversation with a nurse earlier in the morning. Moreover, scans had revealed no bleeding on the brain. They blamed her general unresponsiveness on concussion and shock, but expected to have cheerful news for all who knew Leslie before long.

The Bronco moved back up the road toward the hotel, made a right onto the exit ramp, and progressed east past the hotel, out into the desert. Graham breathed uneasily at the sight of the vastness of barren sand all around. Distance, an inconvenience or an irrelevance in the modern world, out here, could annihilate one's hopes of ever getting off torrid back roads and reaching one's lover. He felt grateful when Sharon cranked up the air conditioner. But he wanted to ask Sharon about the old fellow he'd barged in on and whether the fellow had strong arms, powerful enough to lift a prone man. No, the question was too weird.

The Bronco plowed ahead through the monotony of sand relieved only rarely by bush or grass, battling its way toward the immaculate blue above. At last the desert segued into mixed terrain, with forest and hills rising amid expanses of sand. Out there was a network of settlements protected from the infinity of sands by the proximity of another town or village. But Graham knew there were gaps in the density of trees where desert ruled. After 40 minutes, Graham saw that they were coming to a settlement, or to the remains of one. Up ahead was a cluster of houses or

the foundations of houses from which a stray wall or door or chimney rose or teetered. A coating of blackness lay over almost everything as if the heavens had rioted and belched soot rather than rain on the earth. Though Graham did not want to be here, he felt he must not be rude to his host. The Bronco cruised along for another 100 yards before Sharon eased her foot on the brake and pointed out the ruins of a house, looking as if they'd only just ceased smoldering.

"There's our abode. Are you impressed, Graham darling?" she said.

"Good Lord."

"Well, *someone* definitely wasn't in a good mood," she replied.

"How many people died, Sharon?" he asked, surveying the crisp remnants of plastic deck chairs, the blackened chassis of a scooter, the odd discarded Christmas tree or paperback novel or children's doll with its eyes trained on the blue above.

"It was a town of 400 and about one sixth of the population got out."

"You're kidding!" he blurted.

"No, I'm not kidding. What did I say before? The fires move so fast you might not make it to your car. A lot of people left a smoldering pair of shoes to remember them by. Some died inside their homes, after forming human shields around the children and babies. Not a pleasant thing to happen upon, Graham."

"No, indeed."

"A lot of those who made it out are young people, kids who can run really fast," she added.

"Have I told you how sorry I am that this happened, and how much Leslie and I supported the relief efforts? Just because we live in the city, you shouldn't think—"

"I know, I know, Graham. Look there," Sharon interrupted him.

Over there were the remains of the church, one of the few buildings here that might have existed in three different centuries. Most of what remained consisted of the hinges of the scorched doors and piles of stones around the former entrance that had refused to buckle or fold in on themselves. Looking at the stones, too hot to touch at this time of day, Graham felt queasy again.

"I swear to you, Sharon, when Leslie and I get back to the city, we'll raise awareness in every way we can. I'm deeply sorry for you and the 60-odd others who made it out," he blurted.

Though Sharon did not open her mouth now, he thought that he had at least partly convinced her of his lack of callousness. As they rode west through the blazing afternoon, he thought of all those poor people, young and old, who had tried so desperately to make it off these torrid roads into a zone of safety and comfort where they could embrace their lover. Uncomfortable with where his thoughts were taking him, he decided to press Sharon about the old man he'd seen earlier. He described the



encounter point-blank. Sharon laughed, telling Graham that he'd blundered right into an encounter with Ezra.

"Who is Ezra?"

"An old man who quickly became a suspect when the fires arrived."

"You're kidding. Why?"

"Why do you imagine? The old sonofabitch hated everybody, and he had expressed a wish for revenge several times to people he thought were on his side," Sharon explained.

"I can't believe I ran into him. How did he end up at the hotel?"

"Well, Ezra grew up with Victor's mom, who's like 81 now, and when he lost his home, she made sure he had a temporary refuge."

"I'll be damned. I can't say I lack all sympathy for the man, if his home was one of the ruins we saw just now. How long had he lived there?" Graham pressed.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Graham, he was losing the home anyway," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I wonder who's the city slicker and who's the rube here, Graham. Never mind, it's a story for another time."

"I'm not the haughty person you think I am. I just believe that decent people reject violence and cruelty, and our capacity to love is the measure of our worth."

He saw the distant form of the hotel growing slowly more distinct. Though he wanted to press her about angry, mysterious Ezra, he realized to his dismay that he hadn't thought about his wife since they'd left the hospital.

"There's going to be a party tonight. Hope you'll deign to show up. It might just liven up your spirits a wee bit, sweetie," Sharon told him.

The next day was ANZAC day and nobody would have to work, so a lot of young people were converging on the hotel. The bar and lounge had been popular even before so many people got displaced, Sharon said as the Bronco pulled up before the porch. Graham decided that if he was going to be here, he might as well not play the curmudgeon, so after thanking Sharon he proceeded right to the bar and asked Molly to give him a highball and start a tab. He hung out for hours, downing gins mixed with cranberry juice, noticing how lovely Molly was, with her curly blonde hair and lips that seemed poised for a kiss. He talked at length with Duane, discussing football, rugby, horse racing. Duane was funny in a coarse way, but Graham's overall impression was of a sweet man who enjoyed nothing more than watching games with his wife on weekends. A typical Aussie, in a lot of ways.

"So big deal if you live in the city. Your crap has the same bloody odor. The downtown closes down on the weekend and people stay home. You might as well be livin' anywhere if your aim is to have a backyard

barbecue,” Duane said.

“Point taken,” Graham conceded.

“Don’t get me wrong, I like you, mate. You’re easily the nicest pompous ass I’ve ever met,” Duane added with grin, before buying Graham another drink.

Though Graham wanted to keep on drinking with Duane, he knew the latter must get up eventually to rejoin Sharon. Graham had felt confused of late, but his thought kept turning to love. People were pouring into the bar, he noticed now. Here were guys with unruly hair falling to their shoulders, young women in cut-offs and loose tank tops, drinking, laughing, eyeing each other. Their ebullience might have rubbed off on Graham, but in addition to his anguish over Leslie, he kept thinking and wondering about Ezra. Who was he? In Graham’s memory, the old man had more and more of the air of a felon hiding out after hightailing it out of the crime scene. Graham decided he must try to enjoy himself. He got up, carried his drink into the lounge, found a seat between two others, in each of which a guy lolled with a pretty girl on his lap. He was trying to look casual when Victor walked in and spoke to him with a deadly serious look.

Within moments, Graham was on the phone at the front desk talking to a Dr. Myers, whose voice was grave. Graham conveyed his impression that Leslie had generally looked all right. Yes, the doctor said, that’s precisely the case. She looked all right on the outside because most of her injuries were internal. There were ruptures to this and that, the doctor said. They’d known things were banged up in there, but at first they couldn’t tell exactly what, with so much internal bleeding. They wanted to perform a procedure, a long shot, but one that Graham must agree had to take place, given what was at risk.

Graham replaced the phone and retreated to the lounge, assuring himself he believed in these doctors.

“We saved the seat for you, mate,” said one of the kids in the lounge, a thin guy with straight dark hair, wearing a mauve button-down shirt. The girl on his lap was pretty, with stringy brown hair, a dimple on her left cheek, and a warm smile. Her denim cut-offs were tight.

“You kids from the area?” Graham asked.

“We been livin’ here since the fires destroyed our houses, mate. About 30 of us have,” the guy said.

“Really? They let you stay?”

“We’re not staying for free, of course,” the stranger informed him.

“I see. Do you happen to know a fellow named Ezra?” Graham asked.

“Ezra Jarrett? I sure do. Why?” the guy said.

“What kind of car does he drive?” Graham demanded.

The youngster laughed.

“Ezra sold his car a long time ago. The old bastard’s been in debt

since long before his wife died of skin cancer. And that's on top of his psychological problems."

"What do you mean?" Graham asked, trying to keep his voice neutral, tentative.

"Oh, he was a suspect for a while after the fires, but they don't know jack, he's not a violent type. Just a really sad, broken man, that Ezra. And his so-called shrink wasn't helping matters none," the youngster said.

"Shrink?" Graham asked.

"Yeah, that's right, Duane Lester—do you know Duane?—pretended to act as Ezra's shrink and maneuvered the poor bastard into doing all kinds of things. Taking out a reverse mortgage. Giving Duane power of attorney. It was a pretty clever way to fleece the old bastard, who was not right up here—"

Here the guy made a theatrical gesture, pointing his finger at his temple.

"—and I daresay Ezra was about to lose the house even before the fires came along."

"No way," Graham exclaimed.

"Believe it, mate."

"Did people object to this?"

"No, people were happy to see the preachy old bastard suffer. In fact, Duane and his wife ran a successful petition to keep him out of certain places in town, without the old bastard even knowing who was behind it. Got 360 signatures. That's out of 400 people, you dig? We *hated* Ezra. He just wouldn't let us love each other. Fucker was always goin' on about morals and living proper and such highfalutin' shit, and callin' the cops when his neighbors took a bong hit or enjoyed a call girl or a gang-bang," the kid finished with a wink at Graham.

Now the hour was advanced enough for people to have taken out bongs. The scent of pot wafted over the lounge from rooms nearby. Laughter was pervasive. Far too many people were moving in or out of the lounge for Graham to keep track of them all. Although the voices formed a babble all around, Graham kept hearing the word *love*.

"What's your name, kid?" Graham asked, but now the young man was busy doing something between kissing and licking the girl on his lap.

On Graham's other side, the young woman on a fellow's lap lit a clove cigarette and they began taking turns with it. The odor was way too strong. Graham picked himself up, walked over, and deposited himself into a chair across from the two couples. Over here, a cheap wooden table with a lamp and plastic ashtray on it divided Graham from the next chair to his right. Graham couldn't think about Ezra anymore, not with the words of Dr. Myers reverberating in his mind. *I'm sorry to say it's the Fallopian tubes, mate. There's a damn good shot she won't have kids.* He must not think about that! Everyone around him was having such a grand time.

Now, to his shock, Graham noticed there was an object in the ashtray beside him, but it wasn't any kind of cigarette. He transferred his drink to his left hand and picked up the bronze pendant with his right. The face of the great Pelé gazed back at him. Graham stared in disbelief. He looked around the room. He'd thought the kids in here were paying attention to each other, but that wasn't quite true. The girl with stringy brown hair and a dimple, who'd been kissing the guy Graham talked with, had half-turned her head to watch him. She'd been feeling up her boyfriend, whose eyes were closed now. The young woman was free to watch Graham. When she saw his reaction to the pendant, his agonized looks around the room, she discreetly pointed with a finger of her left hand. Graham realized she was pointing at someone who'd just strolled in from the bar. That someone was Duane. Sharon's husband, who did not notice Graham, had a drink in his right hand and had his left arm wrapped around Sharon. Their down-turned faces were close without quite meeting, and they were whispering conspiratorially. Graham picked himself up and slid into the reception area, clutching the pendant. He saw Duane and Sharon stroll across the lounge and sit down, Duane in the seat Graham had occupied, the woman in the seat to Duane's left. Graham realized they'd been sitting there before and had just gone up to get a round of drinks. Duane had taken the pendant out for them to look at, and now must think someone else had swiped it, if he thought of it at all. From the look of things, he did not.

Graham went out onto the porch. The kissing youngsters took no notice of him. Again the doctor's words recurred to him. *I'm sorry to say it's the Fallopian tubes, mate. There's a damn good shot she won't have kids.* His mind drifted. He thought there had been something odd about Sharon's driving, as if she was unaccustomed to the Bronco. Maybe she normally drove or rode in a black Volkswagen. As a breeze ruffled his hair, he thought of the accident, the faces of the last two days, the burned town, the infinities of sand all around, and his last hours with Leslie. How far, how far he had traveled toward an elusive fount of love and bliss. It was impossible to come so far and not feel something of the promised splendor. He basked in the emotions, rocking gently back and forth on his heels, sipping his drink.

A bit later, Graham returned to the bar, where the indefatigable Molly was still serving people. He told her Duane and Sharon had promised him a ride to the hospital early in the morning, but he'd forgotten to ask them where to meet. Without hesitation, she gave him their room number. Graham went upstairs, took the sheets from his bed, and quietly tore them into strips of equal length. He walked the halls and lingered in one of them, just around a corner from room 202. When the young couple came staggering back to their room around 3:00 a.m., they passed out on the bed almost instantly and failed to notice that their door didn't close

all the way behind them.

In the morning, the teenage clerk at the gas station thought nothing of it when a haggard middle-aged man who looked as if he'd gone a week without sleep came in and bought a gas can and a book of matches, because the man bought other things as well. Coffee, a muffin, a newspaper. He was so wasted not just because he'd been up all night, but also from the tying of limbs, the dragging of bodies.

About 30 yards away, inside the long-disused shed, two bound and gagged forms were beginning to be conscious. But there wasn't much of an argument even when the man came into the shed and began pouring a pungent liquid over both of them from a metal can, and then on the walls. Then Sharon began pleading, whimpered, pleaded some more. He lit a match and gaily flicked it onto Duane's reeking, dripping, sandy blond hair. Duane could not find his voice, but Sharon had found hers.

"Graham, please don't do this thing. Please. *Please!* You do know that love is the reward of all existence, and your decency is the measure of your worth. *Nothing's more precious than love,*" Sharon urged.

"Yep," Graham said.

JILL MANDRAKE'S most recent publication is a chapbook entitled "78", which consists of a dozen concrete poems about the late 1970s. Some of her flash fiction memoirs have appeared in previous issues of *The New Orphic Review*.

## If My Brother Could Have Married Hayley Mills

Jill Mandrake

SOMEONE SAID, "Tony hasn't moved on from that divorce. It might help if he talked about it."

When Tony was a kid, he liked to escape to the movies. He and I saw *The Parent Trap* in the early 1960s, and the next week he saw it again, by himself. He took off to see *The Parent Trap* shortly after Mum gave him hell for setting off firecrackers in the bathroom.

The year before, he refused to go with me to see *Pollyanna*. "That's just for girls," he scoffed.

The next film we saw together was *The Trouble with Angels*. Tony went to see it again, alone, a few days later. It was around the time Dad got really mad at him. Tony had spent some of Dad's coin collection on potato chips and Lime Crush. Oh, and cigarettes. Tony was in Grade 9, so he'd already started smoking.

*The Trouble with Angels* was held over at our local cinema, and it's a good thing because the next Friday Tony caught hell from both Mum and Dad for getting sent home from school. He had mouthed off to Mr. Cameron, the drama teacher.

Before Tony snuck out his bedroom window, I tried to get him to repeat what he'd said to Mr. Cameron. He sounded so wise and sincere when he said, "I'm not telling. If you feel badly about something, bringing it up again only makes it worse."

ROBERT COOPERMAN'S latest collection is *Just Drive* (Brick Road Poetry Press). His work has appeared previously in *The New Orphic Review* as well as in *The Sewanee Review* and *The Clackamas Literary Review*.

## Robert Cooperman / Four Poems

### In My Grandparents' Apartment

I stayed with my grandparents for a month  
while I recovered from whooping cough,  
my parents afraid I'd infect my little brother.  
One afternoon, Grandpa at work, Grandma  
down the hall complaining to a neighbor  
about another, mutually hated neighbor,  
and nothing on the TV except women vying  
for the most miserable lives, so they could win  
appliances, cash, or in one case, a guard dog,

I wandered the apartment, rooted in a closet  
with a badger's persistence, and found a shoe box,  
what sounded like marbles sliding around inside.  
When I opened the box, my breath flew away  
like Aladdin's first glimpse of Ali Baba's cave:  
a gun like the kind wielded by mobsters  
in murder mysteries, and not something owned  
by a gentle Jewish grandfather who bounced me  
on his knee to make me laugh with his false teeth  
like mustangs drumming in a prairie gallop.

A few bullets rolled next to the gun, I took one,  
then gripped the pistol: heavier than it looked.  
Hearing my grandmother walk back in, I rammed  
the gun back into the closet, and shoved the bullet  
into my pocket, knowing I could never offer  
that deadly lead for "Show and Tell," no matter  
how much that tiny torpedo tempted me,

and to ask Grandpa, even more dangerous.

## It Took Me Years

Years after I'd found the gun and bullets  
in my grandfather's closet one bored whooping-  
cough afternoon, I found out why he'd possessed  
those toys, not that I hadn't been tempted  
to take them: in fact, almost impossible  
to resist shoving the gun into a pocket,  
hoping Tommy Lockhart would try to bully me.

But I was afraid of being caught when Grandpa  
missed the rod, the gat, the heater, the roscoe:  
my speculations on why he had one wild  
as poison oak; for to me, he was the gentlest man,  
caressing my child-hair as if silk or strands  
of fairytale gold, plucking quarters for me  
from the air, telling me of his short boxing career,

"Before your great-grandmother stomped into  
the ring and yanked me out by my mortified ears,"  
he laughed so hard I feared he'd explode;  
and then there were all the years he'd wielded  
the honest iron dies that shaped ladies hat frames.

But years later my aunt let slip that Grandpa  
had been a mob bagman in his youth.  
"Cool!" part of me thought, the allure of the outlaw;  
and part of me horrified, though if I'm honest,  
the bandit won, except when I read about dumped  
bodies with single bullet holes to their head,  
or hear of stores burned to the ground,  
honest life savings vanished in smoke.



## His Life

Grandpa's young life was a Cagney movie:  
arriving from Poland, by way of Whitechapel,  
then a ship from Liverpool; and unable  
to find work in New York's seething,  
filthy city of golden dreams, he hopped  
a freight for the Pennsylvania coal mines  
with his little brother, who died there of black lung.

His parents blaming him for Carl's death,  
Grandpa hung out with Jewish mobsters,  
who convinced him he'd be the next  
middleweight champ, with his cobra-quick fists.  
But during his second bout, his mother strode  
into the screaming ring and dragged him out  
by his mortified ear, shouting,

"I'm ashamed of you, a common brawler!"

To continue his slide, he became a bagman,  
a collector of debts—from petty gamblers  
and small shop owners—whose harmless fingers,  
arms, and legs he'd break if they didn't pay up.

But once, at his bride's insistence, he started  
working in the millinery trade, he never talked  
about that life, and I never knew anything about it  
as a kid, until I found the .38 in the back of his closet,  
and some bullets, one of which I hid in a drawer.

When my mother found that tiny brass and lead  
shark, she sat me down for a long, serious talk.

## My Sock Drawer

I must've been the stupidest kid in America,  
never figuring out anything I hid in my sock drawer  
my mother would find: first, the .38 bullet  
I took from a shoebox in Grandpa's apartment-closet.

"Where'd you get this?" my mother held it up,  
disgusting as a cockroach; I told her, not smart enough  
as a ten-year-old to lie about finding it in the gutter.

Next, as a teenager, the condoms I'd worked up  
the wick to buy under the pharmacist's counter,  
who, when I'd asked for a Trojan, joked,

"Whatcha gonna do, after the first five minutes?"  
When I'd pivoted, my face mortification-red,  
he took pity and tossed a package on the house.  
At least my father rode to my rescue—  
when my mother held up the offending rodent—  
declaring he'd rather I be safe "than get a girl in trouble."

Finally, the marijuana she found in that same, notorious  
drawer, and which she'd flushed down the toilet,  
claiming, "I thought it was just some backyard soil."

"And the moon," I muttered, "is made of green cheese,"  
but refrained from accusing she owed me twenty bucks,  
knowing the hurt look she'd pierce me with  
would be worse than any slap to my insolent, stupid face.

Now, decades and decades and decades later,  
how I wish I still hid forbidden treasures in that drawer,  
and that she were still here, to ferret out my idiocy.

DON McLELLAN has worked as a journalist in Canada, South Korea and Hong Kong. He currently edits a trade magazine in Vancouver. His debut collection of short stories, *In the Quiet After Slaughter* (Libros Libertad), was a 2009 ReLit Award finalist. His second collection of stories, *Brunch with the Jackals*, will be published by ThistleDown Press in spring 2015.

## Alice Bird

Don McLellan

AFTER DOTTIE'S death, a respectable mourning period having passed, I signed up for a creative writing class at the seniors' centre. Whenever riled, I'd always fired off a letter to the newspaper or to a retailer who'd provided poor service. Was I as capable of writing something substantial? A short story maybe, or even a book?

Our instructor, Leanne Davidson, had published a few poems in an online literary journal. None rhymed, and most featured Leanne underneath or on top of a "partner" other than a lawful spouse—free verse about free sex.

My fellow students didn't seem to mind. They welcomed her that first night with vegetarian snacks and herbal teas. Before dismissing us, Leanne recommended we each produce a writing sample for our next meeting. It could be on any subject at all.

"Writers," she said, "this is your chance to say what's been on your minds."

From her poetry I knew what was often on Leanne's. In the parking lot afterwards I told her what was on mine.

"I look forward to reading it, writer," she said. "Everyone enjoys a murder mystery."

"Emmett," I said. "Emmett McNish."

\* \* \*

"The Birds didn't live in trees," my story began, "they lived next door." Hamish Bird was a postman. His wife Louise suffered from a nervous condition, which is how polite folks in those days referred to someone who was crazy. Alice was the couple's only child. When Louise required hospital care, and because Dottie had always pined for kids, we cared for the girl. There would be a shy knock at the door, and we'd know Louise had gone off her rocker again.

Alice lived with us for however long it took doctors to stabilize Louise. The girl needed us, and we her. We couldn't have been more pleased had we ordered a child from a catalogue. Dottie and I even talked about

adopting Alice. About putting her in our will. After a bath she smelled like a freshly halved mango.

Dottie taught Alice how to cook. I was a bookkeeper, so I became her math tutor. But Alice wasn't interested in recipes or numbers. She wanted to take one of those modelling courses advertised in teen magazines. She believed it would lead to a glamorous film career.

"I want to begin with small parts," she said.

"You don't want to be a star?" I teased. "Isn't that the whole idea?"

"Not right away," she said. "I want to work up to that."

I assured Alice something could be arranged: small roles to start, international adulation to follow.

\* \* \*

What remained of Louise eventually managed to stay clear of the hospital, and Alice left us. Soon after Dottie began feeling poorly. I took early retirement to care for her. And Alice? She changed. By the time she was in high school her visits had slowed to infrequent. That progressed to her pretending not to notice us when we were puttering in the garden. It was as if the girl we knew had been replaced by someone who skipped school and ran around with boys. Her default demeanour was a scowl.

"Alice," I wrote, "had become a stranger."

Louise, heavily medicated, didn't seem to notice; her "baby girl" could do no wrong. Hamish probably did, but he was uncomfortable with words and said nothing. But there was plenty to notice. Alice wore short skirts that in our day would have gotten a young lady indicted. Each time I saw her in one I was reminded of my mother's admonition to my sisters: if it's not for sale, don't put it in the window.

\* \* \*

Leanne returned our first drafts. Comments were scribbled in the margins. "You have my interest," went one, "but you have to remember that people bore easily these days, Emmett. With social media and the TV remote, attention spans aren't what they were."

\* \* \*

One day Hamish confided that Alice was going with Dewey Foster, a local delinquent I had always suspected of spray-painting filthy language on our garage door. Whenever we heard rock music, we knew Dewey and his transistor radio were in the vicinity. Angry guitar chords announced him. The drum solos made our windows rattle.

Dewey and Alice were inseparable. They would smooch and grope each other anywhere, anytime; it didn't seem to matter who was around. They did it in the park, they did it behind the school. They also did it on the Birds' back porch, which was visible from our kitchen window.

"They're lucky Hamish isn't seeing this," I said to Dottie, by then in a wheelchair. "The two of them are going at it again. He's sticking his tongue down her throat!"

“It’s called French kissing,” said Dottie, who didn’t anger often. I think she held out hope the girl would return to her old self someday, and then return to us.

\* \* \*

“There’s a phrase editors are fond of,” Leanne told me one night after class: “Cut to the chase.”

She was referring to my story. It was becoming unwieldy.

“A novel is a marriage,” Leanne said. “You can take your time, let things play out. A short story is a one-night stand. That means...”

“I’m old,” I said. “Not retarded.”

\* \* \*

One bone-chilling autumn evening Dewey Foster plunged a kitchen knife into Alice, or so it was alleged. Louise opened the back door to let out the cat and there she was, her baby girl. I joined several concerned neighbours in the Birds’ backyard.

“It poked up out of her chest like cutlery left in a heap of unappetizing food,” I wrote. “If it wasn’t for all the blood, you might think Alice was gazing up at the equinox.”

The police arrived promptly, blocking off the street.

“Any clue as to who might have done this?” a detective asked Hamish.

“Her ex,” he managed. “They split up a few weeks ago. Alice worked at a travel agency; I think she was sweet on someone there. Dewey was crazy jealous.”

One week after he was picked up the boy was charged with murder and held without bail. He’d only recently turned 19. In those days, in our neck of the woods, that made Dewey an adult.

\* \* \*

Everyone figured Dewey would confess, as it was rumoured Alice’s blood was found on his person. But then his legal aid lawyer, Ray Townsend, announced his client would be pleading not guilty. Dottie was bedridden by the time the trial started. A friend offered to look in on her while I testified. I stayed on for the proceedings. I’d seen plenty of murder trials on TV. I’d always wanted to see the real thing.

“You’d be surprised how many people were lining up for a seat,” I told Dottie, although I doubt she understood Alice was gone. “It was like they were queuing for a movie. A man was eating popcorn.”

\* \* \*

Neighbours accustomed to Dewey Foster swaggering along our streets in his leather jacket and tight jeans wouldn’t have recognized him in the courtroom, not with that white shirt and clip-on tie. His rat’s nest of a hairdo was shorn, too—on lawyer Townsend’s instructions, I’ll bet. Dewey the choirboy.

I testified that in the months prior to the murder I’d often noticed someone dropping Alice off late at night. I saw a profile in the glow of

the dashboard lights and heard a voice, a man's.

"Was it the defendant?" Dewey's lawyer asked me.

"Dewey drive? He couldn't balance a bicycle."

The prosecutor, David Poole, quizzed a policeman about visiting the defendant's home the evening of the murder. Mrs. Foster said the boy had been out all day. The premises were searched.

"Was there any sign of him?" Poole asked.

"Our guys saw a young fella in the alley who fit his description," the constable said. "But he took off."

"The defendant fled?"

"Somebody did."

On cross, Townsend asked the policeman, "Isn't it true Dewey had several outstanding warrants the night you visited the Foster residence?"

"He was suspected of cruelty to animals and possession of a controlled substance," the officer confirmed.

"Is it possible he was trying to avoid being picked up on those charges?" Townsend probed. "That he didn't know what had happened to Alice?"

"Anything's possible."

A second policeman told of visiting the home of Alice's travel agency boss, Peter Dalrymple. It had been established that he was the man I'd seen dropping her off.

"Mrs. Dalrymple said her husband was sleeping," the officer said.

"Did you wake him?" asked the prosecutor.

"We apprehended him climbing out a rear window."

After the lunch break Dalrymple was asked by the Crown why he didn't exit his home via the door.

"I had to tell the wife about me and Alice before she read it in the papers," he said.

"How thoughtful," Poole said. "But why the window?"

"She was rummaging around in the closet..."

"And that is germane to this court because..."

"The Mrs. plays softball. She keeps her bat in the closet."

\* \* \*

The prosecution also quizzed Mr. Altonin, who lived next door to the Fosters, about seeing Dewey in the alley the night of the murder.

"I was taking out the trash," he said. "Dewey and the girl often smoked pot behind my garage."

"Did you notice anything unusual about him?" Poole pressed.

"Everything about Dewey is unusual," Mr. Altonin said. "But that night there was something sticky on the bottom of his sneakers."

"Tell the court what happened the following day."

"I noticed a footprint in the alley. When the police came around asking questions, they took a look. It was blood."

Poole held up a pair of Dewey's sneakers; they had been marked exhibit B. An expert testified that the blood found on the soles of both was O positive, the same as Alice's. (We didn't know about DNA back then.) Exhibit A was the rusty kitchen knife removed from Alice. Its wooden handle had been wiped clean of fingerprints.

\* \* \*

Defence lawyer Townsend must have concluded the jury wasn't buying his version of events, because he elected to have Dewey take the stand—a risky strategy, I'd heard. Defendants are usually advised to shut their pie holes and let the Crown prove its case.

There was a collective gasp in the courtroom when Dewey took the oath. All eyes seemed fixed on the right hand resting atop the New Testament—many, no doubt, picturing it slamming exhibit A into Alice.

When it was his turn to question Dewey, Poole requested a brief recess. An assistant hurried from the courtroom, returning moments later with a rectangular cardboard box. Of course Poole could have arrived with the box, but it was so much more dramatic halting the proceedings and having a subaltern waltz back in bearing evidence critical to the case. Besides, it left the defendant squirming on the witness stand, the eyes of the disapproving upon him.

The prosecutor asked Dewey to show the jury the contents of the box; it was a turtleneck sweater.

"Alice gave it to me for my birthday," he said.

"Why was your sweater in Alice's bedroom?"

"I returned it after she dumped me. I stuffed it back in the box and left it at her door."

Prosecutor Poole turned to the jury. "Is that why you stabbed her to death? Because she dumped you?"

Dewey responded with language I will not repeat here. Poole then asked if there was anything else in the box. There was: a note. It was sealed inside a plastic evidence bag.

"Could you read it to the court?"

Dewey studied the slip of paper.

"I can't remember what I wrote, but it wasn't this," he said.

Counsel for both sides conferred with the judge, who asked the court stenographer to read the note.

"You said we'd be together till the end of time," she read aloud. "You two-timing bitch, I'll get you for this."

"Is the note signed?" Poole asked her.

"The note is typed," she said. "So is the signature—Dewey."

Exhibit C.

\* \* \*

I knew from watching my crime procedurals that a trial is nearing its conclusion when the character witnesses are called. Besides his mother,

Dewey had only one, a church minister who said the boy was “misunderstood,” that his bad attitude was “harmless teenage posturing.”

“How many times, and for how long on each occasion did you meet with the defendant?” prosecutor Poole asked the clergyman.

“I didn’t actually *meet* with him,” the minister, reddening, admitted.

“But you told police . . .”

“We talked on the phone.”

“For how long? Remember, we can subpoena those records.”

The minister dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief.

“For at least five minutes.”

\* \* \*

It took the jury two hours to find Dewey guilty of first degree murder. It took the judge even less to decide his fate. Because the note proved intent, Dewey received a life sentence with no parole possible until he’d served 25 years.

A newspaper columnist attending the trial speculated that it likely took “all of two minutes” to reach the verdict, suggesting jurors might well have passed the time “playing a round of Hearts.” He concluded, “There was nothing to debate, no evidence to weigh. Dewey Foster is a cold-blooded killer. That’s what was good about the good old days. Back then, this punk would swing without further ado.”

\* \* \*

Leanne returned our stories at the last class. “Nice work,” she wrote at the top of mine. We had a little party for her, everything organic. I was hoping she’d elaborate in the parking lot.

“I think you’ve got something here,” is all she said. “Don’t be afraid to revise. The best do, endlessly. They say a story is never really finished, only abandoned.”

The story about Alice would be my first and only attempt. If nothing else, the class at the seniors’ centre had taught me that Emmett McNish was meant to keep books, not write them. I told Leanne that if I reconsidered, I’d send her a draft.

She handed me her card. “Do,” she said. “Maybe we can find a publisher.”

If I’d been writing a confession and not fiction, I might have mentioned the night I went next door to the Birds to return a bottle of Windex. I found the sweater box Dewey had left at the door; the writing on the outside was familiar to me. It was the same hand that had defiled my garage door. I took the box back to my garage. The letter inside bristled with anger and heartbreak, but Dewey had not threatened revenge. I chewed on things a spell before replacing the letter with one composed on my old Smith Corona typewriter. I inserted Dewey’s name at the bottom and returned it to the Birds’ back door before anyone was the wiser. Police found it in Alice’s room the night of the murder, still unopened.



As to how her blood made its way to Dewey's sneakers, I can only guess he testified truthfully—that he came by the house after the deed was done. He assumed he'd be blamed and ran off, but not before sloshing around in it.

There wasn't anything said during the trial about the validity of the note or the significance of the typewriter; we didn't have computers in those days. Still, I was expecting forensic experts to investigate, the reason I tossed my Smith Corona into a farmer's slough. I thought Townsend would put up more of a fight, anything to muddy the waters, like they do on TV, but he just seemed to run out of steam.

If you suspect I'm a dirty old man who molested Alice as a child and was trying to cover it up, you'd be wrong. I'm not that sort. You see, the girl we once thought of as our own had dropped us long before she dropped Dewey. Anger fades in some; it compounds in others.

As the end neared Dottie didn't have the strength to gum food. Just before slipping away she opened her eyes, a last glimpse of the world that had disappointed her so.

"Alice..." My Dottie never uttered another word.

Dewey took Alice from us. I think it was the pot and the rock music. It was the French kissing, her age, the times—a confluence of circumstances. To us—to me—Alice had died long before that frigid night on the back porch. How happy the three of us could have been.

All things considered, though, I'd say the books have been balanced. By the time Dewey is released from prison, I'll be gone. The lawyer handling my affairs was instructed to get this draft to Leanne after I'd passed.

If you're reading this, I have.

DON McLELLAN'S bio can be found on page 59.

## The Robin's Egg

Don McLellan

HENRY FOUND Stanton, the man he'd talked to on the phone, where he said he would be: concealed beneath a Canucks cap, in a pub called Your Father's Moustache. The waiter plopped down two Heinekens and Stanton plopped down two vials, one slightly larger than the other.

"A few drops from the small vial will make you drowsy," he said. "When you are, drain the taller one right away. It kicks in after you've fallen asleep. You won't feel a thing."

"Like I told you on the phone," Henry said, "it's for a friend."

"Of course it is." Stanton took a sip of beer. "I should go. Others are waiting."

\* \* \*

Corrine knew Henry would receive the test results on Monday. Neither mentioned the fact in the days prior, or slept much the night before, although in that drizzly dawn both claimed to have done so soundly.

Henry expected Corrine to call on her break, but he needed time to think through what he had to say, so he disembarked from the train two stops early and walked the remaining soggy kilometres. The message light was flashing on the house phone inside the rear door. Before his shoes were unlaced, it rang again. Henry knew Corrine was responsible for the impatient ring, and she knew he was incapable of ignoring one.

"Was I right?" she asked. "A benign cyst?"

\* \* \*

"You have cancer, I'm afraid," said Dr. Arlene Lehman, "and it has metastasized. But we have a few procedures that might buy you some time."

"I'm going to die?"

"We're all going to die, Mr. North," she said. "Some of us catch the early show."

Disease. Metastasize. Henry was having difficulty absorbing it all. Twenty minutes earlier he'd been sipping a decaf at Starbucks. At the

initial visit a miniature camera had been inserted into his nostril and down his throat. Dr. Lehman found nothing amiss. A biopsy did.

To Henry, bad news had always meant things like earthquakes and home invasions and pileups on the freeway. The list would now also include what he had contracted: squamous cell carcinoma. It began in the throat as a dry cough and spread like peanut butter to lymph nodes in his neck.

Dr. Lehman dimmed the lights and flipped a switch; his scan flashed on the monitor. There was the skull, a row of teeth...The largest tumour sat alongside his Adam's apple. It looked as though he had swallowed a robin's egg.

\* \* \*

"Henry?"

Corrine worked for a clothing retailer. In the background he could hear sales clerks chatting up customers, the cash drawer slamming shut. He'd been cool as an ocean breeze when the doctor delivered her findings. Now, despite several attempts, the words he needed to convey wouldn't form in his blighted throat.

"I'm coming home," she said.

Henry stretched out on the bed where years earlier he'd implanted into an ovulating Corrine the seedlings that would sprout into Jake, a high school physics teacher, and Allison, an accountant like her father. Corrine's Mazda was soon gliding into the carport, the railing shaking as she bounded across the porch. When it was done, his words liberated, her sobs echoed through the house. Henry, who hadn't had a good howl since almost crushing his nuts in a bicycle accident as a child, joined her, an alien mewl erupting from his lungs.

"Oh, Henry," Corrine sighed.

\* \* \*

"For the first few days we were in shock," Henry emailed William, a friend living in the U.K. "But now—and this might seem crazy—we're going at it like monkeys. It's like we're 19 again.

"Or maybe it's me saying, 'There's been a mistake! Can a sick man do this?'"

It began in, of all places, the laundry room, culminating atop a heap of soiled sheets and crusty socks, a whiff of detergent in the musty basement air.

\* \* \*

Some people, when they're ill, revel in the attention. Not Henry North. At the mining firm where he worked, each expression of sympathy proved awkward. He wished he hadn't blabbed, but it couldn't be helped: a replacement had to be recruited.

Henry realized he'd once looked upon those who'd been similarly cursed the same way colleagues, with their tight smiles and lowered eyes,

now regarded him. Hugs, backslaps...he felt stained. He wasn't in flight just yet, jetting off to the great hereafter, but he did sense he was in the departure lounge of his life, quaffing a final brew.

Several co-workers used the phrase, "If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask." Henry thought of talking to Peter Sharpe in marketing, who was one of them, about patching the roof. Dennis Collins, the vice-president, also expressed a willingness to assist. Over the winter raccoons had moved into the garden shed; Henry was afraid to open the door. Wasn't Dennis always boasting about his hunting prowess?

"My cousin felt under the weather one morning," said Carol Tyler, an administrative assistant, slipping into Henry's office. "He was dead by dinner."

Cataloguing the misfortune of others, he understood, was how some people handled such news. They don't know what else to say. He'd done it himself.

"I'll be sure to have a good lunch, Carol," he said.

Eve Westingham from personnel told him her first husband had also discovered a lump.

"Gord's was under his arm," she said. "They gave him six months. He survived four years, so what do doctors know?"

"I remember Gord from the Christmas banquet," Henry said. "He seemed like a swell guy."

"Actually," Eve corrected, "he was an asshole."

Each time a well-wisher requested a private moment, Henry felt obligated to share something. So he'd undo a button and loosen his tie.

"Touch it," he said of the robin's egg. "Go ahead: it doesn't hurt."

Most, squeamish, declined.

\* \* \*

"After centuries of war and plague," Henry emailed William, "you'd think humans would have developed a protocol for dealing with death; at the very least a manual, an app. When you really need them, words are as useless as paper bags in the rain."

Though they talked on the phone and exchanged dispatches regularly, Henry and Corrine hadn't seen William and Millie in years. Henry had other friends in town, and good ones, too, but none like his old amigo, who still hadn't responded to his most recent overture. But then Corrine reminded him the couple had mentioned something about a cruise.

"What was it William said about cruising?" Henry asked.

"That it was like imprisonment," Corrine recalled, "with a chance of drowning."

\* \* \*

Officially decommissioned, Henry found himself with plenty of spare time on his hands. He hadn't a clue what to do with it. Everything had happened so quickly. One day he had a fine head of hair, the next, the

first blast of toxins having made their way along his bloodstream, the locks were clogging the shower drain. The doctors, his employer, Corrine and the kids, all urged him to take it easy. But Henry knew how to take it easy about as well as he knew how to ride a unicycle.

It being spring, he began to mow the grass. Wednesdays he mowed vertically; Saturdays, horizontally. It was something he'd seen on the Home network. He trimmed the borders with a new gas-fuelled edger from Black & Decker. He might not be able to control his disease, but he was damn well going to govern his lawn.

In the park where he fed kitchen scraps to the ducks he became acquainted with a population he hadn't known existed, people who, like himself, passed afternoons wandering the trails and warming its benches, parsing the sentiments expressed on the memorial plaques. Since it was midday, he supposed most park visitors were unemployed or retired. A few, he suspected, were unbalanced or on the lam. He knew he wasn't the only one waiting to die.

"See ya, then," he would say after chatting up old Fred, who'd fought in the Korean War and had a wonky ticker.

"Hope so," Fred would reply, shuffling off.

Henry was happiest on the backyard deck with his Field Guide to Birds and powerful binoculars. Most of the avian action occurred next door, in Mel and Dotty Sprackmans' cottonwood. He jotted down all sightings in a log, recording the numbers, weather conditions and arrival time of darting chickadees and red-shafted flickers, of every purple finch and dark-eyed junco. He noted as well the daily presence, on the telephone wire at the end of the alley, of a sabre-beaked pigeon hawk, predator to all of the above.

\* \* \*

His slumping spirits rallied when William's name popped up on the computer screen.

"My name is Lynn, William's daughter," the message began. "My mother tells me you once worked with my dad, and that we met when I was a child. I'm sorry to tell you that he passed away while on a Mediterranean cruise. It was the smoking."

Henry took the news hard. He and Corrine commiserated with Millie on the phone.

"If there's anything I can do," Henry heard himself say, "anything at all..."

\* \* \*

A dog was loitering outside the rear gate. It appeared lame or lost. Henry had Munchy Mart deliver an assortment of dog chow.

"It seems confused," said Corrine.

"Who isn't?" Henry said.

Corrine snapped a jpeg of the animal, a male, and emailed it to the

SPCA.

“I think he’s blind in one eye,” she said. “And what dog doesn’t bark?”  
“The dog that only moments ago peed on your carpet.”

When the SPCA told them it hadn’t received any inquiries, the Norths decided to adopt. They named the dog Zero.

\* \* \*

After the second round of chemo, the nausea beginning to recede, Henry took advantage of a special offer on the local newspaper. Like many people his age, despite the regrettable loss of trees, he preferred the tactile to the virtual—newsprint in his hands, ink on the fingers. No online news sites for him. He’d always picked up the weekend edition for the TV highlights and sports scores, but he’d never studied current affairs. World events to him were whatever was in the headlines. He wasn’t sure why, but he wanted to learn more about the planet he might soon depart.

Early the following morning he heard a thwack at the door and there it was, wrapped in a plastic bag. He promptly retreated to the deck and read the paper front to back. He devoured minutiae about the battle in Benghazi. Same with the tsunami in Japan. All those people swept away like soap suds.

In the obituaries there was occasionally a face he recognized: someone from the clinic, a former neighbour or teacher, a long-forgotten playmate. The section was overpopulated by men portrayed as strong and selfless and women eulogized for tidy homes and artery-clogging pastries. If everyone who’d croaked had been so saintly, he mused, who caused all the misery on earth?

“And who,” he asked Zero—since William’s passing, Henry’s new confidante—“molested all those kids?”

\* \* \*

Corrine was the family’s fount of encouragement. She would insist the disease was something one fought; Henry considered it something you avoided, and if you couldn’t, something to endure. She believed in banishing negativity from every conversation; he in playing out your hand, being a good sport until the end. He had never been fond of Disney endings, and he didn’t believe in miracles. His had been a good life. If there was such a thing, he hoped for a good death.

Henry began to suspect Corrine wasn’t doing as well as she let on. He’d been mowing the lawn and had come inside for a glass of water. He could hear her weeping in the spare room. Over the following few days she developed a rash. The creases in her face multiplied.

Corrine’s friend Adele told them about several remedies she believed could do for Henry what his doctors couldn’t. Her business card said, Spiritual Advisor. *Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream, so shall you become.*

“Not interested,” Henry said.

“I don’t know why,” Corrine objected. “It doesn’t hurt to try them.”

But Corrine did know why. In the 35 years the Norths had been married, they’d had the same conversation many times.

“Her potions haven’t been tested,” Henry reiterated. “Any evidence of health benefits is anecdotal. We also don’t know how they might interact with my medications.”

Adele was forever going off on retreats featuring assorted swamis or faith healers. She’d paid a substantial sum to walk barefoot across hot coals. She appeared never to have encountered an unsubstantiated idea she couldn’t support. We’re surrounded by extraterrestrials! The government is reading our emails! The latter turned out to be true, but Henry didn’t think it prudent to replace his oncologist with someone who believed dropping nail clippings into cat urine could ward off evil spirits.

Her remedies for what afflicted Henry included shark cartilage from Mexico and a tea made from fungi growing on birch trees in China. Whatever concoction Adele flogged was never something as attainable as a dandelion pushing through a local slab of sidewalk. Before it could be sold to the gullible and the desperate, a marketable elixir required an exotic locale.

Yet Henry relented. He’d drink the tea. “I’ll do it for you, Corr,” he said. “But don’t assume I want to play for the team.”

The mixture tasted just as it looked—like mud—though it did the trick: Corrine returned to her vivacious self, or so she wanted the family to believe. The rash did disappear. She began applying makeup again and added a splash of colour to her hair.

Sensing a breach in his cynicism, she tried persuading Henry to try Adele’s shark bone soup.

“Don’t push your luck,” Henry replied, “or I’ll report you to the Martian police.”

“I’ll cast a spell on you,” Corrine said. “Don’t think I won’t!”

“If you coulda,” he said, “you woulda.”

\* \* \*

Henry wished he hadn’t learned so late in life the value of a good cry. Like most men, he’d been taught to suck it up. Out on the deck one day his mind began to drift. Afterwards he couldn’t remember what he’d been thinking, but his cheeks were streaked with tears, the front of his shirt moist. It got so that he could start bawling while standing in the checkout line at the drugstore. He could be changing his socks. Henry cried for days when William passed. A memory could unleash a torrent. Sometimes the melancholy was caused by an unmanly self-pity that embarrassed him, but most of the time it had something to do with Corrine and the kids. He feared most of all leaving them unprotected, prey to the pigeon hawks of the world. He suspected the medications were messing with his mind.

Would fate, he wondered, be kind to his successors? It was his greatest anxiety. He couldn't countenance the image that sometimes seeped into his thoughts—of Corrine, his ashes long since scattered, snuggling up to a pinch-hitter.

\* \* \*

About a year after the diagnosis, the robin's egg excised, Dr. Manwearing, a palliative specialist, informed Henry that the cancer had leap-frogged to his lungs, bowel and brain. The news didn't come as a surprise. His test results hadn't been favourable, and he could feel things weren't right. Corrine strained to remain positive.

So, too, did Dr. Manwearing. "We'll mount a vigorous defence," he said. "We haven't used up all our gunpowder."

In anticipation of the inevitable, Henry hired an elderly Japanese gardener to manicure his precious grass. Sasumo was selected from several qualified candidates because he shared Henry's appreciation of turf symmetry. He glided nimbly across the lawn, a kind of landscapers' jiu-jitsu. The yard had never looked so fine.

Whereas Henry's treatments to date had been exhausting but bearable, the new treatment wasn't. Days after the inaugural drip, crossing a room was like wading through wet cement. His mouth became as dry as the Sahara. Expensively crowned and annually cleaned teeth now wobbled in his blistered gums. Radiation destroyed his taste buds; he had to force himself to eat. Henry and Corrine's amorous afternoons were reduced to holding hands.

Soon he couldn't swallow without pain, and then, waking one morning, he couldn't swallow at all. Until the swelling abated he was fed through a tube threaded into his abdomen. In a month he lost the last of his paunch.

He began to view the cancer not as an illness, but as the devil to cast out. He lay on his back in the radiotherapy unit, white-frosted lab techs in their hermetically sealed booths bombing the marauding tumours. He imagined his caregivers as priests sprinkling his enfeebled limbs with holy water. This wasn't health care, it was an exorcism.

\* \* \*

Corrine drove him, if he felt up to it, to group meetings at the clinic. He found it helpful to get out of the house, to commune with folks in the same leaky boat. When ill, it's always salutary to see people worse off than yourself.

One day at the clinic he fell into conversation with a familiar face.

"I'm Roy," the man said. "Melanoma. Sure glad I'm not living in the States. I couldn't afford this."

He was referring, Henry assumed, not just to the excellent care but the native paintings lining the walls and the jazz on the sound system. Volunteers would soon be serving coffee and jelly donuts.

"Me neither," Henry said.



“In the U.S.,” Roy said, “you can get great medical care as long as you have the cash or some kind of insurance plan.”

“I heard that, too,” said Henry.

“Everyone can afford it up here...but you might not survive the wait.”

“Eat all your greens,” Henry advised.

They were joined by Earl, leukemia, a few seats over.

“I think it’s grand that people are running marathons and such to raise money for research,” Earl said. “Many cancers are now curable. Not mine, though. I probably won’t be here this time next year.”

“The way I feel,” Henry said, “the next few minutes are iffy.”

“Doctors can now tell many of us what we’ll die of, even when,” Earl said. “But there seems to be more cancer around than ever. In the old days people just got sick and died. Remember?”

“I do,” Henry said.

“Me, too,” said Roy.

“It was old age, people would say, and everybody seemed happy with that.”

A bald woman sitting nearby—Liz, both mountainous breasts—lowered her book and said, “Who needs advance notice? Imagine being told that in two years you were going to be hit by a bus.”

Roy said, “My father believed it was best to die in battle. It’s quick, and sure to come with a medal.”

“You can never have enough of those,” Henry agreed.

“With all the medicine they have nowadays,” Earl said, “people hang on for years. Me? I can’t take a decent shit. If that’s progress, then I’m Elvis.”

“I thought you looked familiar,” said Henry.

“What if they cured it, huh?” Earl asked, looking at each of them. “Think about it: where would they put us all?”

“You know why men usually die before their wives?” Roy asked.

Henry didn’t. Neither did Liz. Even know-it-all Earl was stumped.

“The husbands go first,” Roy said, “because they want to.”

\* \* \*

While Henry was waiting for his appointment with Dr. Manwearing, security guards chased off a man handing out a flyer. It was from a group called InCharge, and it talked about how final-stage patients like Henry could end their lives painlessly.

“You should be able to decide when to pass based on your own beliefs, not on medieval religious dogma,” it said. “We don’t allow our pets to suffer.”

The flyer advertised a website. That afternoon, Corrine at yoga, Henry made the call. A recorded message instructed him to leave a phone number.

Ever since the robin’s egg, Henry had thought about ending his life. About buying a handgun and disappearing into the woods or jumping

from a bridge. He'd considered locking himself in an idling car with a garden hose duct-taped to the muffler. But then he read on the Internet that carbon monoxide poisoning didn't always work because of lower emission standards. It could leave one alive, and with brain damage. Phenobarbital seemed best, but it was hard to get, and helium gas, another option, required the assistance of others. The InCharge website explained that its "solution" had been invented by unemployed chemistry grads.

Was taking your own life cowardice or courage? And could he go through with it? His replies to those questions would depend on what day he was asked, on the intensity of the fatigue and the resilience of his spirit at any given time.

This, though, he knew: it wasn't death he feared, it was the dying. The pain. The dry heaving. Shitting yourself and lying in it for hours. A quick passing would also save the family a load of grief. Corrine was ready to implode—the rash was back. And he knew Jake and Allison were having a hard time. A counsellor at the clinic had told him, "When a member of your family gets cancer, you all get it."

\* \* \*

Stanton reached Henry on his cell. They discussed the InCharge fee.

"That seems kind of pricey for a couple of vials and a how-to video," Henry said. "My friend isn't rich, and I'm guessing there aren't any pretty girls in your DVD."

"There are no tolls on most bridges, either," Stanton said.

They agreed to meet at a bar downtown, Your Father's Moustache.

"Bring cash," Stanton said.

"What, no easy payment plan?"

\* \* \*

On the deck, almost dusk. The shadows in the garden have lengthened and there is a nip in the brittle autumn air. Earlier in the day Sasumo made the last cut of the season. A tank of oxygen sits under Henry's chair; plastic prongs are pinned to his nostrils.

"You know," he addresses Zero, "I might be dying, but I've never felt so effing alive. The moments count. Weird, huh?"

The hound responds as he often does when Henry philosophizes: by lifting an arthritic leg...and noisily licking its balls.

\* \* \*

All the house lights are out and the back door is open wide when Corrine, home from work, eases the Mazda into the carport. A gust of wind sweeps into the yard, and a loose sheet of Henry's newspaper unravels, rolling itself into a ball. It skips up the flagstone walkway, coming to rest on his perfect lawn.

"Henry? Are you there?"

She runs through the kitchen and along the hallway, switching on the lights. She looks in the bathroom and down the stairwell leading to the

basement.

Out on the deck, Zero rests his snout in Henry's lap. A letter addressed to Corrine and one for each of the kids are held in place by a stone from the garden. An empty vial rolls between his legs.

"Damn it, Henry! Where are you?"

When he was in treatment, his mind muddled by the chemo, he used to have this dream. It's winter. Corrine is walking home from the Munchy Mart. Her hair has turned white as a fresh dump of snow; bereavement is etched into her brow. She looks up at their house and realizes—as she does now, stepping onto the deck—that, thanks to that goddamned robin's egg, her Henry isn't anywhere anymore.

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## Dancing with Celeste

Carl F. Thompson Jr.

### Edmond's Place in Life

AT TIMES THE boy sucked his thumb. He did this when he was alone, though he knew he never truly was. There were so many stimuli—so many inputs, *things* around—he was seldom bored, and intellectually he didn't loll about. Most of the inputs came via the big desk.

The desk was enormous. To hold the kid, it had to be big. Big enough to tuck inside it all but the raised upper end of a king-size hospital bed and into that the king-size boy, right up to his chest. The head of the bed sat where a desk chair would normally have sat. The kid's upper body—shrouded in a red Washington Nationals baseball jersey big enough to hold a trio of outfielders—lay against an enormous stack of pillows crowding the top of the bed. Before him—beneath fat, round eyes locked in a head the size of a basketball—the desktop stretched out like the flatlands of Kansas.

The big desk sat in the mansion's mammoth ground floor bedroom. In function, the room best resembled a hospital patient's, except that it was outsized—with high ceilings and taking half the floor space of a tennis court. Every wall was painted antiseptic white. When at max wattage, variable recessed lighting rendered every surface, every individual thing (crumb, fly wing, human eyelash) distinctly visible. Natural light came from a tall window facing the desk. Attendants in white came and went through a single doorway leading to the parts of the house the boy—stuck in place—could never visit.

Edmond's tummy, legs and feet lay out of sight beneath the desk. Because his legs were nearly too heavy to move, the desk did the moving for him: clever, unseen devices now and then raising and lowering that thigh that belonged better to an ox, that calf that was like a hippo's.

The bed had been specially built for this boy who at age thirteen weighed nine hundred pounds and who, at adulthood, could weigh two hundred more. The blame was body chemistry, laid at the foot of malfeasant genes. Even for 2022, the bed was a marvel. Wholly automated, it monitored vital signs, took labs and dosed meds, managed elimination, sponge baths, massages, and exercise. It purred in response to Edmond's slightest movement, adjusting bed angles for comfort, fending off bedsores and cramps—doing at home what would normally have required a fleet of nurses.

Where the bed was a survival system, the desktop was a playing field. A thirty-seven inch touch screen, canted at an angle for easy and maneuverable access, hung on a swivel rack mounted in the ceiling. Comfortable, but not so large as to block his view out the window, it provided a host of amusing simulations: sporting games, a combat-ready force of supercommandos, complete with replica controls for supporting space, air, submarine, and surface vessels. From the desktop he summoned caretakers (his only companions) and accessed the TV, cooking, lighting, and air controls. His Kindle Alexandria reached every major library of the world, supplied any map or image, took and transcribed dictation, and automatically translated twenty-one languages from text or voice. Best of all, he could tap ongoing observations (he loved astronomy) at observatories all over the world.

But there was one question that could not be answered by his Alexandria: *Who was he?* It was the question of identity. He had a name, but that was not an answer. He didn't know who his parents were or where they were from, not even whether they were alive. He didn't know how he had come to be who he was, how he'd come to a life in which he was the center of attention in a house he could explore only by television, how he'd been born so *foreign*.

For answers, he fell back upon the authority of his caretakers as they came and went: For example, Richard Wainwright, the man whose smiles breached a war-ravaged face pocked with tiny, purplish shrapnel scars—as if lead pencil points had been injected into the man's cheeks and upper neck. To accompany his scars, Wainwright, thirty-six, was known to have a prosthetic left foot gotten in Afghanistan.

But whenever asked, Wainwright would give only an unfortunate downturn of mouth and tell Edmond that he knew nothing about the boy's parents. He might state regret at not knowing, but that's the way it was. Not that this hindered the way they got along. Wainwright could do so many things that amazed the boy and made him trust him from the start: He could quiver his tongue at a moment's notice and, without peeking, could tell as soon as he popped one into his mouth whether an M&M from Edmond's desk top stack of M&Ms was red or blue or yellow. Occasionally, Wainwright also made wonderful lamb with mint jelly,

though naturally the big desk could cook up virtually anything wanted.

Edmond of course continued to pursue an understanding of his origins when talking to his other four caretakers, named Gibbons, Ballard, Carter, and Rivers.

At fifty, Gibbons, was the oldest. He had the battered look of an ex-pirzefighter. Tattoos covered his neck and his arms. He said he'd been a merchant mariner, which Edmond mistranslated to soldier of fortune. He had a transcript showing two years' attendance at Boston U, and though he may have looked Southie, he spoke excellent Brahmin Bostonian. He said he liked his job in part because it exposed him to Virginia horse country. Ballard, who stood the shortest at five-foot-five, had spent six of his thirty years on earth in Egypt. While teaching English to young Cairenes, he'd proved an autodidact at reading hieroglyphs.

Like Wainwright, Carter and Rivers possessed culinary skills. In winter, though the big desk prepared excellent soups, Carter brought him delicious bisques, chowders, gumbos, and consommés he'd prepared by hand. On occasion, Rivers made him tapioca (which the boy richly loved), or puddings of rice or bread or chocolate, though the big desk made them all very well, too, thank you.

Everyone did his best to bolster the boy's confidence. Ballard noted the trust fund that ran the household and the small countryside estate—surely this came from his parents and proved their interest in his welfare. Rivers professed once hearing a rumor that the boy's father wasn't fat, but thin. Doctors had told Edmond his problem was genetic, but had never elaborated. Rivers speculated a recessive gene was involved. About the mother, Rivers knew nothing, though he, too, emphasized the parents' obvious concern. "Look at all these systems. Doctors brought right to the house—a mansion on seven acres—and every one of *us* a trained paramedic. Your parents are *somewhere*, wanting to come, but for some reason unable."

In his pursuit of identity, Edmond considered even the most outrageous ideas. Was he perhaps the result of an errant attempt at making the world's first fully test-tube baby (conceived, gestated, and born *outside* any biological womb)? But even a test-tube baby required sperm from a male donor and an egg from the mother: hence, he'd still have at least virtual parents. He ruled out the perverse theory that he was the progeny of space aliens. Though he believed in the existence of extraterrestrials (somewhere out there, light years away), he couldn't buy the notion of humans mating with space sponges. Edmond dispensed as well with certain other ghastly theories: rape, incest, or the like.

No, somewhere he had—or had had—real parents. Somewhere there was a birth certificate (he'd never seen it) that said he'd been born July 1, 2009. Yet: What was his *story*?

Weird theories hardly fit the dreams that from time to time invaded

his sleep and on rare occasions left camera flash-like afterimages of his parents when he woke.

Some nights he dreamed about his father. In the dreams, Edmond was a young boy, lithe and fleet of foot, but standing alone, gazing up at a tall, unfinished stone sculpture. Even at this early stage, the work depicted strength. The head, now but roughly carved, led to even more roughly hewn shoulders. A high forehead with a good brow rose nobly out of stone. Ears jutted; but already the boy visualized someone gritty and substantial, tall and fence-rail lean, with a thick, black head of hair. His father had to be a man of strength, someone to emulate.

But he feared the dreams about his mother. In these she assumed gargantuan size and walked about on elephant legs. He couldn't fit together the images of lean father and elephantine mother. Had she once been normal, only later in life developing an addiction to chocolate—or plain, good old food? He didn't know any fat people and wasn't sure he'd like knowing any. The caretakers—who in effect were his parents, educators, and nurses—weren't fat. And though he didn't blame himself for being fat, he didn't like it.

But he didn't spend all his time mooning about himself, either. There was the whole outside world to consider—the fate of all the outsiders he never saw in person. Oh, in theory, he knew a great deal about the outside world, even at age thirteen.

Education came from the systems and inputs whose antennae burst from the desk like bushes and shook like feelers on the heads of ants when touched. He knew about the world's too many poor; its great upheavals, political, economic, social, and sexual; the ravages of wars and sickness, volcanoes and earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes; the madness of shootings and rampages. The systems taught him that no matter how many safeguards you had, the world was never safe. But many novels and movies also taught him that there were such things as romance and love—and plain friendship, too.

Naturally, he was lonely. And caretakers (servants, really)—even well-paid ones—might one day leave. Edmond, who was immobile, certainly felt the bite of wanderlust, as he assumed these men with tattoos gotten in Egypt or Afghanistan or Morocco did, too.

Past experiments to introduce playmates or friends his age had resulted in cruel disappointment. Confronted with the physical reality of a nearly half-ton boy stuck in a desk, most candidates turned into tongue-tied gawkers. Edmond was not immediately pleasant to look at, and to some he was scary. His sad, fat eyes gazed from between the meaty folds of his cheeks and the pink, fleshy bulge of his brow. Merely looking at Edmond caused one boy to bug his eyes and crinkle his nose in repulsion. When by chance the boy mentioned he enjoyed astronomy, Edmond lied and said he preferred gastroenterology. When another after five minutes of

ogling him cross-eyed, said, “Maybe we can do this again some time,” Edmond advised that he’d just wet his pants.

But indeed he did have wanderlust. Though he could see the world every day via the TV or Internet, he wanted to crawl out his window and touch it. Not that—freed from his desk—he could likely even stand on his own.

His window looked out onto the land of Linden, Virginia. Sixty miles west of Washington, D.C., Edmond’s house sat on prime acreage in rolling farm and vineyard country. Along the property ran a ten-foot-high chain-link fence. Edmond didn’t like the fence, but it didn’t block the view. Out his window, meadows stretched onto pines climbing a hill that rose from a valley. At a distance to the north, he could see two cabins and a farmhouse, each separated by low rail or rock-piled fences. The farmhouse had a stable with horses.

Weather fascinated him. Often when it rained, he stared. Rain could be clever. It could come down fast and hard, in streaks so swift they fooled the eyes. At one minute they were clearly there and yet—a blink later—contestably, not. Unless wind drove drops against the window pane, unless he heard it thump the ground or drum the roof or drive itself into puddles and currents, he couldn’t always be sure. He loved the days when rain fell silently. Days that looked as if a gauzy curtain had been drawn across all of it, the field and the trees, the hills and the sky, a skein so sheer and misty it teased and perplexed the mind. Then rain in ghostly diagonals shimmered in and out of existence. Absent sound or visible runnels, you could never be sure unless you were out there in the rain itself, in the fields or among the trees. And that’s where Edmond never was: Outside.

### The President Shoots

At noon on a July day not long after the boy’s thirteenth birthday, Gibbons, the fifty-year-old Bostonian and former merchant-mariner, advised, “You might want to turn on CNN. The President’s called a news conference.”

Wow, thought Edmond. Although he was a novice at politics, he knew this President rarely called news conferences. In only his second year in office, the press had begun calling Layton Thomas’s the “Hidden Presidency.” For the past six months, the President had turned half hermit, avoiding the press, sometimes teleconferencing instead of traveling. (Teleconferencing saved energy and reduced air pollution, his goateed press secretary, Arne Larson, pointed out.) The opposition howled, of course. Had the Administration mothballed Air Force One? A recluse in the White House couldn’t be a *real* president. And then he’d fly to eight far-off countries in a row, stifling his critics.

The media sought any theory that might explain this perplexing performance. Some raised questions about the murky circumstances



surrounding the loss, more than a dozen years ago, of his twenty-six year-old wife. Within weeks of their third anniversary, she'd had a sudden sickness and then a fall. The death certificate read "septicemia." From a private gravesite near St. Joseph, Missouri, a single photo on the White House website showed a tombstone of granite bearing an epitaph from Yeats:

Jennifer L. Thomas

1983-2009

*Encircle her I love and sing her into peace.*

The icon for *Jennifer L. Thomas* opened an album of photos and video clips showing a fetching and happy twenty-three year old bride and a rugged, broadly smiling thirty-seven year old groom. Other images showed a blond preteen Jennifer Latrimeen on horseback, laughing; squealing at sixteen on a roller-coaster ride; a year into the marriage, splashing Congressman Thomas at an outdoor swimming pool; two years into the marriage, beaming as thirty-nine year old, Layton Thomas took his oath of office as a United States Senator. Absent were any posts of the Latrimeens.

The President was now fifty-three, unattached, and some said, celibate. His once blue eyes had retreated to black. Armchair clinicians diagnosed depression. Some dark cloud had overtaken him well over a year following his Inauguration in 2021.

Depression was a charge iteratively swatted down by Vice President Dunning, whom some in his own Party were now seeking to assume the President's seat as permitted by the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment, covering cases of incapacitation. Dunning was a formidable speaker. Tall and thick-bodied, he was a self-made billionaire who'd given hundreds of millions to fund public art projects and varied scientific ventures. The Vice President's denials were forthright and clear: "The President's not incapacitated. He's conducting the nation's business, he's perfectly well, he's an Atlas, if you care to know the truth, and that's an end to that."

But a press conference now—who'd been expecting it? CNN's live feed showed reporters still taking their seats in the White House's tiny press room. All six rows of the press (seven seats per row) stood as the President, from behind a curtain, stepped forward to take the podium.

He was tall, lanky, and a curiosity to look at. Not uncommonly it was said he resembled a beardless Lincoln. The same rangy hair, but iron black, not a whit of gray. At the podium, his face, even softened by the lights, was craggy and solemn as Lincoln's.

He looked at the e-tablet bearing his speech, then studied the press. Speaking at a purposeful pace in the uncannily high-pitched voice that had never matched his rough exterior, he began:

"I have an announcement. I shall not take questions. Supplementary

information shall be provided after I have finished.

“Five months ago, an observatory at Mauna Kea on Hawaii’s Big Island, operating the Pan-STARR telescope—whose mission is to survey the northern skies for large bodies such as asteroids—detected, in the deepest reaches of the solar system, an unusual object. Astronomers had found what is known as a rogue planet, that is, a planet traveling freely through space, orphaned from any star or solar system. This planet, now named Erewhon, is roughly twice the size of Jupiter, the largest planet in our solar system. We know Erewhon’s orbit and its fate. It will skim the outskirts of our solar system, not approaching Earth, and it will not be captured by the sun’s gravity. It comes in as a rogue planet, and it will leave the same way. In itself, Erewhon poses no threat to us. However, given its massive size, Erewhon will exert a strong gravitational force on those objects it nears. Erewhon *has* influenced the course of a small number of deep space objects known as Trans-Neptunian Objects, or TNOs. TNOs are planetoids—objects smaller than planets, that is, smaller than Earth or Mars or Mercury—whose orbits lie beyond the orbit of the planet Neptune. One Trans-Neptunian Object you all know about is Pluto, formerly considered a planet. Since Erewhon’s arrival, we have discovered a hitherto unknown planetoid now named Celeste. While smaller than Mercury, our smallest planet, it is our solar system’s largest known planetoid or dwarf planet, as they are also called. Celeste is more than half-again the size of Pluto; in fact, it is larger than Earth’s moon. It is cold, barren, icy, and dense. It does not harbor life. Since the creation of the solar system, it has resided billions of miles away. Were it not for Erewhon’s gravitational pull, it would have remained at that great distance. But Erewhon changed Celeste’s orbit.

“We now know that in roughly two years, Celeste will pass the Earth at close range. It will not strike the Earth. But as Earth and Celeste pass near to each other, each will pull at the other. Earth will pull on Celeste, and Celeste will pull on Earth. As in the way the Earth and the moon tug at one another, causing the tides.”

Here he had to pause. When he’d read the speech in draft, the same line had brought him to conjure an incoming tide ... which was like ... ripples on an incoming sea? Was an incoming sea like a wheat field rippling under wind? He had no idea. He was a Midwesterner; he knew nothing of the sea. Not a man for beach towels, surf, or sand. But could he imagine it? Well. He raised his eyes above the rows of heads (so many shiny, bald heads, so many immaculate, glossy foreheads); and farther to the cameramen at the back, some in neat jackets bearing their network’s logo; then he raised his eyes to the lighting itself—yes, how those little suns imprinted the retina with splotchy, bright blobs if you stared ... And yes: Still before him, that sea of waiting heads, mouths open, tongues gristly red; all waiting for his next verbal confection. Huh. He thought of

stalks of cotton candy. He had a sudden, vivid image of teleprompters ... even though there weren't any in the briefing room. Yet now he could imagine them—like so many stalks of grass—that could be standing just out there—just beyond reach; between him—and *them*. Those fifty people hotly crammed in this tiny room. Once, he'd visited a place where there had been a field of tall sunflowers, bowing in a wind. How angry had Van Gogh been at the impermanence of beauty?

Um. The President saw Arne Larson behind the curtain just off to his right, the man thumbing his goatee—next, tapping his bare teeth—with the blunt end of a hefty ballpoint—click-click-click. A worrier if there ever was one.

And right now all those fire-breathing dragon-red tongues out there waiting to immolate him with the questions he'd said he wouldn't take.

Anyhow:

“But gravity is of course not a function of an object's size, but of its mass.” He shook his head, smiled apologetically. “I'm beginning to sound like a scientist. As you might imagine, I've been the attentive guest of many distinguished minds lately. You members of the press will get to talk to some of them yourselves not long from now.

“—What I mean to say is, that *despite* the fact that Earth will dominate Celeste in size, Celeste has the advantage in *mass*. Despite being smaller, Celeste is *heavier* than the Earth. It will therefore exert a *stronger* pull on us than we will on it. Our scientists are still studying Celeste to determine why this is so ... what its precise composition is that causes this.” Here he closed the cover to the tablet holding his speech and stood quietly rubbing his fingers in a circular motion on the cover's soft, plush surface. ... “There is of course a plan—including a full organizational structure—an org chart ... with personnel. I'm putting the Vice President in overall charge ... nothing titular, mind you, this post; this is the real sombrero. But tonight, before getting into mechanics, I wish to consider something ... else.

“I wish to assure you ... spiritually ... and emotionally ...” He winced. How to find a path *into* his audience? ... When he opened his eyes, he hunted out a single reporter ... this time Lynn Forsythe, a blue suit in the third row. A young, talented reporter, nice to look at. Then he lifted his gaze over the heads of those in the room—why wasn't there a way to speak over the heads of simply everyone?

He needed something like Beethoven's opening to his Fifth Symphony—

“I want to assure all of you, every American—indeed, the people of the world—that when Celeste begins to pull people into the sky, our scientists calculate that the uplift will not last forever, and that you will return to Earth. To ensure this, I have planned for the timely distribution of parachutes to every citizen of the country or its territories. Our factories

will furthermore increase parachute production to assist less fortunate nations to ensure that their countrymen have adequate supplies. In addition, we will begin producing oxygen masks along with oxygen canisters adequate for a full hour's use. We will begin work at once on pressure suits and helmets. This shall be a first, as no one has ever devised pressure suits for persons other than pilots or test subjects. But I assure you that every American dragged aloft by the tug of Celeste will be adequately protected, and will parachute safely back to Mother Earth within an hour of being uprooted. It is a close bet, but luckily for us all, Celeste's advantage in terms of mass is not *so* great as to pull us all away for good." Just as the President knew they would, all six rows were already rising from their seats, like runners bunching at the starting line of a marathon, ready to hurl forbidden questions.

So he continued: "For those who desire, jump training will be provided. I am directing all military airborne training facilities to begin work to provide this public safeguard. I encourage other nations to similarly train their citizens. Everyone—children and infants included—should have the means to safely parachute from twenty-six thousand feet—that's over a half-mile short of Everest's summit. I can announce tonight that we have already gained the support of the Prime Ministers of Canada, the United Kingdom, India, and the leaders of other member states of the Commonwealth of Nations, as well as the support of the President of Mexico, and the Prime Minister of Israel. I call today for an emergency meeting of the U. N. Security Council. Special envoys are now being dispatched to the E.U. and nations throughout the world, including the Vatican. Our ambassadors to Russia and China will meet within hours with the Presidents of those two nations. I shall solicit support of leaders from essential U.S. and international industries, including members of the Board of the U.S. Chambers of Commerce." He stopped, took a visual dipstick reading of the room. He could see them writhing before him, all fangs and snaking neck cords, a great reptilian pile. Now, buoyed by the general consternation and sheer outright bucking at the gates of the press corps, he appeared to gain a second wind, jauntily announcing, "Swords into plowshares, everyone! That's what this is! Who says government can no longer act boldly on behalf of the people?" Was he, at this moment, really a replica of Lincoln, as people so often said? Or—sans cigarette holder—was that an FDR knock-off grin he had just revealed?

"This shall be the greatest public works project in the history of the world. What we do now shall be the envy of the pharaohs who built the pyramids of Egypt! We're about to engage in a great adventure that will require the cooperative work of everyone on the planet! For the absolute, undeniable good of all mankind." Again two fingers meditatively rubbed the tablet cover's soft surface. "So now everyone knows the clock is ticking. Rest assured, we *shall* outpace it." Momentarily, his neck twitched,

his head bobbed, his teeth clacked. As he looked out at the nearly strangled, snakelike mass of the media, he smiled. In the softest tone possible, nothing more than a whisper caught by a few well-placed microphones, he said, “And it shall all be good.” Abruptly, he executed a sharp right-face and exited.

### Only the Messengers

The press bellowed, howled behind him. *Parachutes?* What about a mission to blow the damned thing up? *Parachutes?*—Why not just tie people to heavy objects? *Parachutes—really?* Why *wasn't* the Earth more massive than Celeste? Why wouldn't the Earth pull objects away from Celeste and not the other way round? What was that about the Vice President? (The “*real sombrero?*”) He did promise access to scientists, right? (Yeah, but: “*And it shall all be good?*” Did he really say that?) Where's the press release?

The CNN commentators couldn't talk fast enough. No one could.

In a steady stream of invectives, two reporters railed about the President's sanity. Clearly this long-kept secret—who knew how long, really?—had driven him past the point at which the maps of ancient mariners read *Here be dragons*. The greatest public works project in history? This was an *f-ing* (in the briefing room, discretion obliged the *f-ing* contraction) *transformative global emergency!* Could the U. S. really lead anything anymore? (This was all so *déjà vu* global warming—all the acrimony and moaning about scientific prognostications would now just switch topics: Instead of climate change, Celeste would be the new ogre—with its own believers and its own scoffers.) Would the U. S. really begin spinning silk into parachutes? (Do they still use silk?) For the entire *f-ing* globe? What the deuce had the President been drinking?

Meanwhile, the President's press secretary, Arne Larson, a small, taciturn man rendered curiously complex only by his scarlet-and-rose bow tie, off-setting his black-framed eyeglasses, gray goatee, and customary sweaty brow, had—as if magically from behind some black cloak—boarded the podium. Without waiting for the room to settle (why give anyone an opening?), he asked them to wait. For what, he didn't say. “It may be a few minutes,” he noted, and just like that, disappeared.

\* \* \*

“Huh!” Gibbons said, staring at Edmond's TV.

Edmond muttered, “Pan-STARRS,” then, “*Celeste.*” Why the name Celeste? Sure, it meant “Heavenly Being,” or something close. But that sounded like a name for something *good*—and offhand, Edmond had a nagging suspicion that the name Celeste had already been given to a small asteroid. Although typically the privilege of naming TNOs was extended to the discoverer, the discoverer could take suggestions from anyone. And be overruled in cases. So—who had named it Celeste?

“T-tidal forces?” Gibbons stuttered, rather as if he were a sci-fi robot stuck in the process of thinking. “Do they really think people will be lifted up? Like in the rapture, but lifting all of us—not just the righteous? What else do you think could be hauled up? Things like this house?”

Edmond switched from CNN to the NASA channel. It showed engineers milling about the Houston control room: a normal night at the office. When NASA wanted to talk, it always showcased a panel of experts.

“Not if the foundation’s OK. But I wonder whether the atmosphere could go,” Edmond pondered. “Mars once had an atmosphere. Not that a passing TNO ripped it off. Nor did the President hint at anything so catastrophic. I need to see what *S&T—Sky and Telescope*—will say.” But his thoughts were really on the President. Mysteriously, Edmond felt as if a hand had reached out and steadied him. “For now,” he said, “I rather think I trust the President. I know he’s got enemies and this is a huge task. Which means, like Lincoln, he’ll need to find a few good Generals.”

Gibbons was taken by what sounded to him like a mature observation for a thirteen year-old, even if he had studied history.

Then Edmond noticed that the NASA channel had switched from the Houston control room to a static and silent picture of NASA’s famous “Meatball” Seal: a red vector with a glowing phosphorous-white object swooping like a starship (or a TNO?) around a planet floating in a sea of stars.

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For a full hour now, the White House press corps (a mob in Spartan-like quarters) had waited, milling about, sweating and swearing, emailing and texting, trading tales, reaping info and rumors.

A half-hour into the wait, a curtain opened to reveal a widescreen TV, sans image. Whatever size it was (70, 80 inches?), it would never be big enough to satisfy anyone sitting past row two. The media kept a speculative eye open while continuing to scribble copy or carp about the air conditioning. Given an hour to reflect upon a message that sounded rather like the end of the world (and of themselves), some were shaken. But the true pros—most of this crowd—never lost steam. Two years—the time until Celeste’s anticipated arrival—was a long way off, and who knew—maybe the damn thing would miss wide, anyway. (Why toss a career based on what Layton Thomas said?)

Finally, at two o’clock, the briefing room’s sleek widescreen snapped to life. Under a banner that denoted NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center, three men sitting at a conference table introduced themselves: a physicist, an astrophysicist, and a space flight engineer. Ah, yes, a panel of young (not one of them probably yet forty) experts.

The den full of lions, finally served its dinner, leaped:

Why *hadn’t* the President ordered a missile strike? Why *didn’t* he

organize a mission to tow some asteroid into position to divert Celeste's trajectory?

One by one, the officials answered—and kept at it for nearly three hours. They began by stating NASA had been working on the problem for months, starting well before it was known with certainty that the near-Earth encounter would indeed occur.

As for answers to questions:

First, Celeste was too big for nuclear warheads to break it apart. And fractures might cause rubble to impact the Earth, an unfavorable outcome.

Moving even a large asteroid (never mind a dwarf planet like Celeste) required a *mega*-spacetug, and who had any spacetugs? The long-awaited heavy lift launch vehicles were still long-awaited. Though (with funding) they could speed things up, that would divert attention from—i.e., compete with—manufacturing parachutes. Further, they'd need to find a readily available and suitably-sized asteroid. Most were tykes compared to Celeste. They'd need to capture something big, and thus far, no vehicle imagined could do the job. All the Earth's proposed defensive systems had been planned to defend against asteroids, not Moon-sized dwarf planets. Esoteric-sounding proposals for (1) a space tractor or (2) "laser bees" were quickly put down. The idea of a space tractor—placing a spacecraft in orbit around Celeste to slowly modify Celeste's trajectory by the gravity of the orbiting spacecraft (the tractor)—was out of the question; no spacecraft on the drawing board would be big enough. "Laser bees"—launching a mini fleet of small spacecraft to focus laser beams en masse at a concentrated spot on an advancing object was also too anemic; again, it was a proposal aimed at an asteroid, not a planetoid. But engineers were calculating whether glancing blows from numerous yet substantially smaller objects might push Celeste to an eventual safer passing distance from Earth.

New question: Why weren't they using or enlarging Earth's cave systems or building protective tunnels to shelter mankind?

NASA said this was a nice-sounding idea, but it was impossible to house, provision, and provide sanitation for Earth's eight billion people—even for a single day. Yes, NASA admitted, people could briefly forgo eating—and yes, even proper sanitation (look at Calcutta)—if needed to ensure humanity's outright survival; but still that left the issue of the shelters themselves. What about caves for the U.S. population? But even the U.S. boasted 340 million. And how were people (nationwide or worldwide) to be transported to cave sites—there would have to be an enormous number of caves, either natural or man-made, handsomely spread over vast and remote regions. Digging tunnels (look at the Chunnel) or adapting existing caves required time, safeguards for the builders, and inspection to ensure the results were sound, capable of withstanding the threat.

What about cities, then? Didn't cities have underground garages—enough to hold millions of people? Many cities had subways, too. And didn't high-rises and skyscrapers have space enough to hold millions? Would buildings be pulled into the air? No? Well, if Celeste's gravity wouldn't in fact yank buildings out of the ground, why couldn't people stay right in their high-rises and towers?

We wish it were so, said the panelists, who then laid out a worrisome picture. Geotidal forces would be at work. As in the Earth-Moon tidal system, Celeste's gravity would generate tidal forces—earthquakes—resulting in tidal waves that could flood subways and garages in port cities, drowning shelter-seekers and inundating many cities outright. Inland cities would likewise be subject to these same geological forces. The structural integrity of buildings would be compromised. Simply put, buildings could collapse one upon another. Earth might see quake activity on a scale unknown since the birth of the planet. Severe rents in the Earth's crust were possible. And yes, these prospects of upheaval meant that safety could not be guaranteed in subways, underground garages *or* in tunnels or caves—none of them. All might be subject to fissures, collapse, and flooding from underground aquifers or city water or sewer systems, if not from ocean swells or tsunamis. This meant the use of underground havens would have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

As for people living in the above-ground floors of high-rises or skyscrapers, they, too—and the furniture and knick-knacks around them—would still be subject to the gravity effects of Celeste's passage. All would fall upward, to the ceiling. There was really no way to guarantee safety. Trying to strip buildings of all furniture—all obstacles of any kind that might first fall up, then down, injuring, even killing, persons in the room—was impractical. Apartments and condos held a lot of furniture and a lot of loose things. Yes, those living in multi-room dwellings could move their furniture (and *objects d'art* and whatnot) into other rooms, leaving a single room solely for people (meaning no objects except those medically necessary to sustain life), but this would leave a lot of space stacked with furniture—space that might otherwise be available—in an ideal world—to house and protect *non*-residents, too—i.e., outsiders or refugees brought into the building. While NASA had been working to design a protective shield—a sort of cocoon made of durable plastic—used to keep residents safe from falling household items, there still had to be a way to secure any “cocoon” (to the floor? the wall?) to safeguard against debris from a ceiling collapse or other possible earthquake damage. Any one ceiling collapse could lead to pancaking—a pile-on of collapsing floors. Collapse one ceiling and you could collapse them all. No one could make a cocoon to protect against that.

Further, take even a single residential house in the open. Depending upon construction materials and design, though it was unlikely the house



itself would be plucked free of its foundations, that didn't mean the roof might not be peeled back and the interior pried out—gravity could wreak the same havoc as a tornado—especially if the ground also shifted beneath it. Siding could fly away, plaster could shatter, sheetrock fracture and break.

The simple lesson was that safety in any of these cases—houses, caverns, tunnels, subterranean garages, subways, tall buildings, short buildings—couldn't be guaranteed. The best solution was to arm everyone with a parachute and provide proper training.

Okay, a reporter said, I get it. Objects that go up will come back down. But surely, just like people surrounded by furniture in a room, those parachuting in the open won't be safe from flying objects, either. What about rocks, for instance? Suppose a person is hauled aloft, parachutes safely back, and then a rock that went up lands on him.

Parachutes will *drift* down, noted the experts. Rocks won't drift, they'll fall. Your parachutist will not be done in by falling rocks, whereas the man or woman in a tall building could be hit by a coffee table, a chair, a guillotine wedge of mirror glass.

Rebuttal: Sure, but couldn't a rock fall on, and collapse, a chute just as it was opening?

Panelist: Not if the individual has been trained to maneuver in free fall by what I'll call bodysurfing—to turn left or right, say, to dodge dangerous objects before opening the chute.

Reporter's Follow Up: You're really going to train people for that?

Panelist: To the extent possible. The thoroughness will depend upon time available, and the individual's ability and willingness to take practice jumps. But all trainees *will* be trained in free-fall maneuvering. (The panelist decided not to mention potential objects that might glide or fly about, for instance, sheets of plywood, or maybe the occasional toilet seat—things that had no business being aloft and that might take unpredictable flight paths.)

New Reporter: Well, I once took a tandem jump from an airplane. Me and an instructor on a single chute. We jumped from 3,000 feet. My instructor talked about jumps from ten- or twelve-thousand feet—but nothing like the President's 26,000 feet. How safe is that?

Panelist: We're not sure people will be pulled up that high. Right now our best prediction is for safe jumping.

Next: What about atmospheric effects? Winds?

Same Panelist: Yes. (Oh, Lord: Let's not dawdle here.) Using networked supercomputers, a team of meteorologists continues to refine atmospheric models. Although this will be covered in a later briefing, it is reasonable to expect some atmospheric effects. More will be known downstream, as Celeste's orbit is ever more precisely refined.

Then came a shift in the wind: Without identifying sources (a White

House leak, already?) two reporters raised claims that despite all that had been said so far about the inadequacy of tunnels, the U.S. *was* building tunnels, but only to store artifacts and preservable knowledge: as much art and history and science and mathematics as possible. This sounded like a doomsday measure—the preservation of the knowledge and art of homo sapiens, for whomever or whatever survived or came afterwards: alien archaeologists, for example, in the event any someday found us.

The panelists disavowed knowledge, asked for sources, but none were given.

Yet now, three hours into the conference, this last report launched a thriving debate. Surely the U. S., *if* building such tunnels, would want to guarantee that these particular tunnels were *built* to be safe. Assuming so, mightn't some people also be sheltered in the tunnels? Again, the panelists indicated the question was speculative; they wouldn't budge. But, within the press colony itself, sidebar speculation was rife. Assuming there was limited room for people in these presumably safe tunnels, how would occupants be picked? Academics, media critics, and commentators (e-meditating on it) proposed two methods: (1) Utilitarian (pick scientists, engineers, and doctors because their skills would be needed); (2) Equity-based (choose by lottery, the only fair process). And the rebuttal: How could a "fair" process that led to survivors lacking critical skills ensure justice for the *planet*? Again, no panel members would touch these issues; they were matters for editorialists and opinion columnists conjecturing about unsubstantiated "facts" (i.e., that tunnels were being built). Among the press (as they *e*-texted back and forth), few believed a solution could be agreed to and put in place in time. Unless the President proved he had the balls to issue an Executive Order.

And back once more to that silly parachute idea. On Twitter, some people (no trouble guessing their Party affiliations) had launched the rumor that the parachute idea was the President's own. Even stranger, a rumor had already begun that the President—not the object's discoverer—had named it Celeste. Did the President consider it an honor (and have the hubris) to name Earth's possible annihilator? Anyone of intelligence would simply have left it to the standard Hindu default: the god Shiva, the destroyer.

Last came some cleanup questions about the discovery itself. Was Pan-STARR the only telescopic system capable of making this discovery? Wasn't there an army of amateur astronomers, armed with backyard fourteen- and sixteen-inch telescopes, ardently trying to discover and track new asteroids and comets? Had any of them independently identified either Erewhon or Celeste? If so, they would have reported their observations to the International Astronomical Union's Central Bureau for Astronomical Telegrams (or CBAT), the body responsible for verifying newly discovered comets and asteroids. But CBAT had been silent. That

meant, either Pan-STARRS alone had made the discovery (announced only today, months after the discovery had been made), or CBAT had failed to act on sightings made by others. So: Had, in fact, the White House muzzled CBAT (for instance, by having CBAT tell observers the objects they thought they had discovered were misidentifications of already known objects) in order to gain time to put a plan together, the very plan—i.e., the parachute plan—that the President had just announced?

But here the press was delving into conceivable national security issues. None of the panelists were intelligence officers, and none would take the bait.

In the end, the parachute issue would long outlast the day's exchange. While some supported the idea of parachutes, populist dissenters said it was a placebo only—meant not to solve the problem, but to quell argument and ensure civil order. To their view, it was a way to keep everyone busy while the world went quietly about its demise.

### Tractor Life

The next day, Gibbons bought Edmond a dog. The terrier pup was white except for occasional islands of brown or black. Right off, Edmond loved Daisy. He liked to cuddle her. But within days he fell asleep and rolled on her. It made him think of giant pandas when they rolled over their own tiny cubs. Gibbons offered to get a replacement, but Edmond was afraid he'd kill it, too.

In the weeks and months that passed, Edmond's indistinct dreams of his father were replaced by ever more distinct dreams of Lincoln. He began telling his caretakers, "The President is like Lincoln now, but he's trying to save the whole world."

But by July 2023, shortly after Edmond turned fourteen, some of the caretakers had begun to re-examine their situations. Carter and Rivers left. The others stayed—for how long?

Almost daily, Edmond studied the new images of Celeste that appeared on his monitor. What had early on been as indistinct as a distant drop of rain resolved in weeks into a tangible disk: a tiny sugar cookie with wavy furrows? Ah yes: chains of ice-mountains! And unlike Pluto, Celeste had no moons: It was a single, ice-encrusted, morbidly dense rock 2,350 miles in diameter, pretty much heading for Earth.

The arrival date was July 27, 2024. The fact that it would be an election year changed nothing. Candidates launched campaigns. Layton Thomas made no announcement.

In late December, 2023, Edmond commissioned his "escape hatch." By spring, he wanted access to the world outside. He had to see Celeste for himself. When the time came, he wanted to be raised with his own parachute, like anyone else.

A contractor was hired, plans developed, and by April 2024 it had been accomplished. First, the wall in front of the desk was replaced by an insulated bulkhead that could be raised and lowered like a garage door. This allowed the big desk, now mounted on a wheeled platform, to be hauled by tractor along tracks leading thirty feet into the yard, and pushed back in at night. Edmond's monitor was now attached to the desk rather than the ceiling. To keep out insects, the new door was closed except to permit passage.

For Edmond it was the New World. He experienced buzzing insects—and slapped them. He nursed mosquito bites. In summer he'd never been without air conditioning, and now he sweated in mid-May. In June, he drank ice water and iced tea and lemonade and Gatorade and Diet Pepsi. He bound his forehead in a sweatband and regularly towed down his arms and face and under his Nationals T-shirt to mop his sweaty back. He wore sunglasses and—after experiencing his first-ever sunburn—routinely applied sunscreen on sunny days. For the first time he could remember (except by TV), he could see the whole mansion—at least its backside. Wood-framed, two-and-a-half stories under a gabled roof. He knew a tall chimney climbed the far end of the house, but it was out of his line of sight.

He liked studying his new environment. He even liked peering into his bedroom from outside and seeing the emptiness created in the space he normally occupied. He surveyed the surrounding landscape using binoculars. He saw the sun gleam off the clean metal tops of the chain-link fence. And of course, as Celeste turned star-bright, he aimed his binoculars at it.

When it rained, he asked for a hat, and let it rain on him the first time, a sprinkle. He sat through a brief rain shower, too. True, the desk now had available a huge, automatically activated umbrella. But twice he let it go unused and sat through downpours, loving every minute. Yet, though he loved cloudbursts, he preferred clear sky—Celeste hung there now in daylight, visible to the naked eye, a frightening, glaring yellow M&M in the sky, a Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse, racing onwards at a death gallop.

On June 15, his specially ordered parachute arrived. The chute was a heavy ordnance parachute adapted to suit a heavy-ordnance sort of man. His oxygen and mask arrived a week later. He knew there wouldn't be an air pressure suit—none were made to fit him. He hoped he wouldn't be carried so high into the atmosphere that a pressure suit would be needed. Months ago he'd had a bomber jacket and fleece-lined pants tailored.

Time counted down. Wainwright and Ballard left. Gibbons alone remained. Celeste grew into a death-orb, not yet the size of the visible moon, but rivaling.

On July 20, a young girl showed up at the perimeter fence. She sat

just outside, picking at the grass, and studied the boy in the big desk. She said, "What are you?"

He ignored her. He'd been thinking of the date—July 20, 1969, fifty-five years earlier, when Apollo 11 had landed on the moon.

At most, the girl was thirteen. He'd turned fifteen nearly three full weeks ago.

The next day she climbed the chain-link fence. Gibbons was indoors and must not have seen. She wore an orange polo, brown shorts, and pink trainers. She had blond hair tied in a ponytail.

The girl ambled along until she got quite close. Her eyes were big and brown. She stared at him and tilted her head, rather the way Daisy, the lost pup, had done.

She asked, "Why is that big fence there?"

"To keep people out."

"Why?"

Edmond sat with a blue towel on his head, breathing heavily in the heat.

"Well, to guard me."

"From what?"

He said, "People." Then, pointedly, he added, "People who don't control themselves."

"Control themselves, how?"

She was so clearly a young kid, but other than her question from the day before—as to *what* he was—she'd said nothing offensive.

"Bad manners, let's say."

"Oh. OK."

He liked her blond hair. As if a comet had arrived and its tail was sunlight.

She walked up to the big desk, ducked and looked under. She looked at the tracks that led from the house.

"Are you in a bed under there?"

"Yeah. A king-size bed, steel reinforced, electrically controlled. I can recline and it adjusts if I move, it even tilts."

"Like in a hospital, on the medical shows?"

"Yeah." *Was* she even thirteen? "You've never been in a hospital?"

She vigorously shook her head. "Nuh-uh."

She was an innocent, he decided. Safe to deal with.

"Well, that's good. The longer you stay out of hospitals, the better, I'd say."

She grabbed the heel of one of her feet, pulled it into the air behind her like an ice skater, and balanced on the other. "Have you ever been in a hospital?"

What was the right answer? "When I was born, I guess. And maybe sometimes when I was a child. I don't remember. I can't go to a hospital

now because I'm too heavy to move. So they send doctors here."

Still balanced on one leg, she pushed her belly against the desk. He decided she was at best modestly plump. A little sheath of pink fleshiness girdled her body. "Huh. Doctors come to you. I never heard of that." She let go of her leg and returned to standing on both feet.

"Well, in my case, it's practical."

She pulled at her lower lip.

"Do you feel heavy?"

"Sure. But I only *know* heavy. I can't move my legs or even my arms very well."

"If you weren't in that thing, could you stand up?"

Edmond looked around the edges of the desk, as if contemplating getting out.

"No. I don't think so."

Avoiding the desk's bushy antennae, she hiked her bottom onto an edge of the desk top and sat. "Would you want to stand?"

"I'd like to be able to walk around and sit in a truck bed and go places. I'd like to go to Washington, but I never can. I can't go see the White House or the Capitol Building. I can't go visit Mount Vernon. I can't go to the Air and Space Museum and see the space shuttle. I've never seen a movie in a movie theater. I'm fifteen and I don't know that I'll ever get to date a girl. Once I had a dog, but I rolled over on it."

"Well, if you lose weight."

"Yeah. But I never can."

"I can't see your legs under the desk, but if you're as big as you look, it'd probably be hard. Unless maybe with practice."

There was a gap before Edmond said, "I can have sexual relations, just so you know. I'm normal that way."

"I'm only eleven. But almost twelve."

*Eleven*, he thought. He couldn't even tell a kid's age. He'd never met real people.

"Well, someday I could theoretically have sexual relations. I'm just saying."

She stared past him, into the house where she'd never been.

She said, "I'd have never thought you were different than anyone else that way. Girls know more about these things than boys, more than most let on. Earlier than boys, too." She hopped off the desk.

"I have to go. What's your name?"

"Edmond."

"I think you're interesting, Edmond. I live in the Spenser house, over there." She pointed. "The house in the woods." Skipping, she circled the desk once, then started toward the fence, but stopped. "My name's Elian. It's a funny name."

"It sounds nice, I think," Edmond said.

She wrinkled her brow.

“Are you an honest person, Edmond?”

“Sure,” he said.

“I hope so,” she said. “You’d disappoint me if you weren’t.”

When she’d almost reached the fence, he shouted, “If you want to, you could bring your parachute and stuff here when Celeste comes.”

“I don’t think so, Edmond. Thank you, though. Our family’s going up together.”

She climbed up and over the fence, turned to wave, and was gone.

\* \* \*

On July 24, three days before Arrival Day, Gibbons told Edmond he was leaving. He didn’t say where. “The desk has a two-week supply of food. You have plenty of blankets if it gets cold at night. Your parachute and gear are in this box. I’m leaving you here rather than in the house, because I think you’d prefer to be outside.”

Edmond figured it was the time to be heroic. “Thank you, Gibbons,” he said, as nobly as he could, “for everything.”

“It’s been my pleasure.”

Edmond wondered whether Gibbons might ever return if the world survived. He hoped, but didn’t ask.

Was it really going to be any different being alone? In his way, Edmond had always been alone, no matter how abundantly his helpers helped. That was the truth of it. But never before had such dark danger placed a shadow over the whole of mankind.

Each night Edmond watched Celeste take over more and more of the sky. It ate and ate. It didn’t look like it would ever stop eating. It was five times as big as the moon and still it wasn’t satisfied. Edmond felt one single thing: incomprehensible awe, an uncontrollable and shivery shake of his whole being.

He told himself that by being alone he would more fully understand what was about to happen, would concentrate better and more acutely. He would have Celeste under the gaze of his binoculars, his emotions under the magnification of his own internal and tenaciously exacting mental microscope. Yet now, at age fifteen, in what might be the last days of Earth, he wondered whether he was lying to himself about everything.

## Celeste

On July 27, in the very last hour of the Arrival Day countdown, Edmond, resting his eyes from the image of a relentlessly oncoming Celeste—now as big as a harsh-white bowling ball held overhead—picked up the unexpected clink of an oxygen bottle against the chain-link fence. Next, he heard the thud of equipment being dropped—from over the fence? He looked up just as Elian crawled halfway down his side of the fence and let go, dropping to the ground.

Dressed in pressure suit and helmet, and wearing her parachute, she clutched her oxygen canister to her chest as she scurried awkwardly across the field under the burden of her equipment.

Edmond sat watching in brown bomber jacket, pants, and ski hat, together with his parachute. He had his oxygen mask at the ready and his oxygen bottle in its carrier.

Over both of them, over the field, over the hills and the trees, over every dog that barked or bayed, loomed the invader. How deadly bright it was now, saturated with light stolen from the sun, a masquerader as Moon-turned-ice-mirror—but ever so much fatter, and still so hungry. In Linden, Virginia, it made silvery-gray shadows for a young girl doing her best to sprint.

\* \* \*

Elian was gasping when she reached the big desk.

“Is it okay if I go with you, Edmond?”

“I thought you were going with your family.”

She flushed, embarrassed. “But is it okay?”

Edmond wondered if something had gone wrong, but didn’t ask.

“OK, get in. But be careful not to let me roll on you.”

She made a face. “How can you roll on me if we’re going to be lifted up by the planet?”

Edmond prepared to correct her by saying “dwarf planet,” but didn’t. “Well, be careful, anyway. But if you get cold, you can huddle against me. The higher we go, the colder it’ll get.”

“Like on a mountaintop?”

“Exactly like on a mountaintop.”

She slapped her pressure suit. “I hoped this would keep me warm.”

“Maybe some. They don’t make them big enough for me. I can’t say what’ll happen if we go too high. Maybe I’ll pop.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe I’ll burst. The outside air pressure will be less than the pressure inside my body, and my skin might rupture and let my insides out. And my blood could maybe boil, too. You didn’t know?”

She bit her lip. “Yeah, my dad told me.”

“You’ve got a dad and yet you’re here with me.”

“I don’t want to talk about my dad right now.”

Edmond said, “I’ve never known my parents. Not even who they are—or were.”

\* \* \*

What had been a bowling ball overhead grew to a fat, solid beach ball. With a face leering at them. Nothing beach-fun-loving about it, and not a curious Man-in-the-Moon face, either; the mind could make out teeth (fangs?)—no, claw marks—in places.

It began to rain. Dimly at first, a hard-to-tell case. But soon he could



feel drops. Just as suddenly, the drops stopped. Now the moisture seemed to evaporate off his skin. Wind. Yes, certainly ... or ... was it raining ... *upward?*

Over them Celeste hoarded sky—Edmond couldn't even conceive of the term *dwarf planet* now. It was as if Mars had come to make war. As if the Red Planet had moved inside the orbit of the Moon.

Elian held on to his neck.

"Don't let me go!" she said. "Promise."

"I promise!"

He felt it—actually *felt* it!—at the same time he watched a dog bark at the ground it *rose* from. *No dog parachutes*, he suddenly thought. Whoever said anything about a world without pets? "Or so many farm animals," he muttered ... as gravity took them up.

"Hold me!" Elian screamed.

The desk floated off Edmond. He was free and ... *light!* Half of him felt the cold grasp of fear tight upon his neck, another half felt the pleasure of a slow, easy free fall ... into weightlessness. The fear that gripped his chest and pressed upon it was countered by the indescribable feeling of utter physical *freedom*.

As incomprehensible things happened all around:

To the west, he watched a mother holding a small child (both in pressure suits), rising.

Everywhere, he saw mothers and fathers—entire families—falling up.

Overhead, Celeste had grown so bright with reflected sunlight that it was too dangerous to look at through binoculars. But by blood instinct, Edmond could visualize its real face—all pocks and ice fissures, like one of Jupiter's frigid moons. He could feel the cold of its icy surface stiffen the very air around him. He squinted at Celeste: Ice mountains were melting in the face of the sun! (Or was he imagining it? Did icy mountaintops on earth ever melt instantaneously? Why then on Celeste?) *And all of this is gliding through the sky just as if we were in a spaceship orbiting a planet!* But how could anything that moved so silently be real? It was like watching the dance of the spaceships in the movie, *2001*. His mind put in sound effects, air rushing in a wind tunnel, gutting Earth's atmosphere as Celeste ran past like a ghost warship. *No!* It was real—the wind was howling, pushing! And cold—

"I know there's a purpose in this!" he yelled, hoping he'd yelled loud enough.

"How do you mean?" (Even though he could see she was hollering, he was convinced only his good hearing let him make out her words.)

"We're going to discover the meaning of life."

She held on with all her might. "I've always known the meaning of life!" she yelled back. But her teeth were chattering uncontrollably inside her mask. He could see the size of her eyes. Globes filled with fear, darting,

shuddering, wanting what could not be given back.

Far below he could see the hills, meadows, and houses. He watched the fenced perimeter of his home as it dwindled into a tiny trapezoid, a toy fence for some child's toy house. Elsewhere he saw fences disintegrating as they began to rise in pieces, stone after stone, rail after rail. The posts of the chain-link fence were cemented in and so his fence stayed put. Somewhere else he saw a cabin roof erupt in a spray of shingles first, quickly followed by the truss supports, and next something dark that came from within the house ... bits so distant and indistinguishable they looked like a rising cloud of incinerator scraps.

Edmond and Elian kept on going up. They might have risen through the clouds, except it seemed even the clouds were rising. Edmond remembered the cold, nearly airless surface of Mars and wondered if a passing TNO really could have ripped away the Martian atmosphere.

And up they went  
    and up  
    and up  
to a place where everything froze  
                    and the air cut them.

And up more and more until  
    far, far below them,  
        the Earth tumbled away  
        and  
                vanished.

### Beller

When he landed, he landed on his feet, precisely as the video had instructed. And fell back flat, of course.

His heart hammered against his breast. For the first time in his life, his chest heaved like a sprinter's—one who'd just crossed the finish line in a race.

"I must have blacked out," he said out loud. Had he run out of oxygen? Forgotten to turn the valve on? Overhead, he could see Celeste running away from the sky. Like a mad witch fleeing on a broomstick, with the screech of demon winds still left behind—! Winds that came from out of the skies of Earth. At least that frigid world hadn't taken them captive, he thought. But his eyes stung and his vision was filled with confusing stars—red, blue, yellow lights—not real stars, but the ones that signaled the body's exhaustion.

Then it hit him like a rail flying through the air, slamming broadside against his chest: *Where was Elian?*

His head rested against a small rise of earth. He craned his neck,

searching. She was gone!

The big desk was gone, too. And the bed with food and blankets and ... all of it.

So where was Elian?

He couldn't think, fearing what might have happened to her. And still his chest heaved, his back ached, his heart jumped in his throat. Then he began thinking. Wanting to if not making himself believe in certain things.

Elian would be OK. Because Elian was stronger than he was. If he'd survived, she would, too. Somewhere. Even now, as he looked up, he could see one ... two ... tiny, far-off clouds of descending silk (or nylon, or Kevlar, or whatever variant materials it turned out canopies were made of), people locked in their harnesses, peering down quixotically, the Earth still far below them, a strange land welcoming newcomers. People could be scattered like unfortunate paratroopers, taken by grander winds than any seen in even the greatest battles of World War II. Could that be possible?

As for himself, he was clearly in a meadow. One unfamiliar to Edmond, but an easy, peaceful place. A pasture edged by pines and poplars.

But he was heavy again ... and he didn't like that one bit.

Yes, now he could see others landing, too. Tumbling, wrapped up in silk, etc. A quarter mile away, a half mile away, still others were drifting down even farther away.

Was he still in Virginia? Could he have ended up in Maryland? Ohio? Then like a dagger he suddenly visualized: All the people in the world who'd landed in oceans and seas. Who'd drown within hours. The frail and old who'd never have survived either the ascent or the return. The children who'd be scattered like grain without their parents or siblings.

Had the world lost half its people? Was the Internet still there? (How could it be? Celeste would have run off with every satellite the world had.) Had oil pipelines, like tinkertoys, been pulled apart and wrecked?

What would he eat? He knew there were special government programs to protect *some* supplies of livestock, although still, animals must have been killed by the millions. But fruits and vegetables, surely they'd be OK ...

Somehow he would get food, and he would survive.

Nothing would be impossible—if he could find Elian. If he could find a way to get up and move about. Why hadn't he thought of two-way radios? (Because he hadn't known Elian would be coming until the last minute? No: Because he hadn't thought out contingencies—hadn't asked Gibbons to get radios when Gibbons could have been asked. He'd been lax and lazy and too practiced at taking things for granted.) But yes, he knew he had to think positively.

He took it for granted that the President would have survived. It'd just take time to put everything back together. Time and leadership. How

could it be so bad, if a government had actually managed to deliver parachutes worldwide? If there'd been one miracle, why not a second? The miracle of restoration. Indeed, the chance to make better what had not been better before.

But where *was* Layton Thomas now? Where was there even a working radio?

Then he heard the mad hoots. The hollering. The crazy bellowing.

“HEY, YOU DOWN THERE! Yes, YOU! Look out, for heaven’s sake!”

It didn’t take much looking. Above him, Edmond could see a large, irregularly shaped parachute, the kind he’d seen several times on TV, in which a skilled sport parachutist would bulls-eye perfectly down upon a dinky landing site. The kind where the jumper lands smack dab midway between the hash marks on the fifty-yard line at halftime in a football stadium.

But this jumper—this *bellower*—was a woman in monstrous yellow coveralls, carrying—a second person?—in her grasp. The jumper was *enormous*—someone who stretched all normal meaning out of “full-bodied figure.”

“I’m heading over *there!*” she bellowed, pointing at a spot in high grass perhaps fifty yards away. Edmond waited to hear a gigantic crash or something like the earth-shaking *krump* of a mortar shell as this creature—larger than himself—dropped from the sky; but he watched, amazed, as she suddenly stopped dead in the air less than a foot above the ground and landed erect upon two feet, rather like a ballet dancer having completed an athletic leap.

Momentarily things disappeared under an airy, collapsing proscenium of canopy, as the woman unhooked herself and set down her small passenger. They’d landed behind a slight depression in the land, a hollow that partially obscured their movements from Edmond as they stripped themselves of their gear, shook arms and legs and tested body parts for wear.

Then Edmond saw coming toward him an unmistakable blond ponytail. Holding Elian’s hand was a veritable giant of a woman. She had to be forty years old and six feet tall and—yes, absolutely, he was sure now—must have weighed as much as Edmond did. She had legs like the legs of elephants.

She was advancing quickly across the field, the tall grass giving way before her.

When Elian got to him, she said, “You’re not gonna believe this lady’s name!”

But Edmond had already puzzled out the too familiar outline of the woman’s gargantuan body—clearly this was the lady from his dreams—his nights spent thinking of his thin father and his elephantine—*mother?*

Above him, her face took up the space formerly occupied by the passing TNO. There she stood like a statue, elbows akimbo, looking down and shaking a smiling head.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Celeste.”

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## Swamp Luck

Ernest Hekkanen

IN THE MID-1950s, before the Rabbit Lady and her husband sold their farm, the lower part of their acreage, comprised of meadowland and an alder grove, ran all the way down to Snake Road, the same as ours. Three milk cows could be seen roaming the meadow, all of them Jerseys. Old Mr. Olafson turned the milk into his locally famous cheese, a kind of cheddar, which you could buy in bricks by venturing up the driveway and ringing a service bell. The service bell wasn't really necessary because the Olafsons had two border collies, Jane and Jack, and they always made a lively racket whenever anyone drove into the yard.

We called old Mrs. Olafson the Rabbit Lady because there were dozens of rabbit cages on the Olafson farm. Mrs. Olafson turned the rabbit pelts into fur hats, fur muffs and fur coats for little girls. At the entrance to the driveway, a sign advertised everything you could buy from the old couple: rabbit meat, potatoes, apples, pears, raspberries and By the Bee Honey, which you could get for a lot cheaper if you brought your own container. Later, when the Olafsons sold their farm, my father kicked himself for not buying it, because it would have expanded our holdings by a further fifteen acres.

At one time, a rickety barbed wire fence separated our two properties. It ran all the way down to where the former logging railroad line traveled across both of our estates. At the railroad line, the fence took a dramatic turn south and followed it over to the woods on the other side of the meadow. It was here, between the former railroad line and Snake Road, that a swamp had formed in the alder grove, due to run-off from the road, for the most part. Because in the Northwest it rained quite a lot, the swamp never dried up, even during the hottest of summers, and oftentimes we boys would go there to hunt bullfrogs or to raft around until we finally fell in and got all muddy.

"One of these days you're going to catch some sort of strange disease playing in that swamp," my mother was fond of saying, hoping, of course, to frighten me.

One summer my friend, Andy, *did* come down with rheumatic fever, which our mothers conveniently blamed on the swamp. Mainly what they disliked was the fact that we'd come home covered from head to toe in gray mud. Whenever that happened, my mom would make me hose myself off in the yard.

"Right down to your underwear, Mike. I don't want to see any of that mud being dragged into the basement of the house."

Then, one day, we found a dead cat in the swamp. And after the cat, a dog. We gave each of them a decent burial; however, a couple of days later, when we went back to play in the swamp, we discovered that the dog had resurrected itself. It was propped against the trunk of a tree, staring straight ahead as if it were watching TV. Its lower body was buried in the ground, and its upper body was teeming with maggots. Its eyes and mouth were wide open. A stick had been used to prop open its mouth. You could see where somebody had used a screwdriver, or a similar tool, to pry open the dog's mouth, because a couple of teeth were broken off.

Nailed to the alder directly above the dog's head was a warning sign: "Keep out, or else!"

When we went home to tell my mother about the warning sign, she gave us this incredulous look. "Stop it with your Tom Sawyer tales," she said. "I haven't got enough time for them."

"But it's true, Mrs. Hekkanen. We all saw it. Didn't we?"

"We sure did."

"If you don't believe me, Mom, come and take a look. We left everything just the way we found it."

"Why would I want to look at something like that? It sounds absolutely horrible. Now if you keep bothering me with this sort of nonsense, I'm going to find some chores for you to do, and I mean it."

Larry Ludwig managed to get his dad to take a look at the dead dog and the warning sign. His old man drove down Snake Road to where the swamp sat in the alder grove and tramped off into the bush. According to Larry, his dad said it wasn't such a good place for us kids to play anymore.

"Some pervert must've spotted you catching frogs there. Stay away."

\* \* \*

That summer, a boy who lived in Alderwood Manor was abducted. He was attending a summer enrichment program at Lynnwood Junior High School. A music camp, I believe. During lunch he went missing, never to be seen alive again. Nobody could figure out how the abduction had taken place. He had been eating lunch with some other kids in the cafeteria, when he got up to go to the bathroom. By the end of lunch, the uneaten half of his sandwich was still holding down a square of waxed paper beside his lunch box, and that's when everyone got alarmed.

I could easily picture the place where the boy had disappeared, because I had attended a Boy Scout Jamboree there, in the cafeteria. All the Boy

Scout dens in our area had gotten together for what amounted to a monstrously large show-and-tell event that culminated in the awarding of Boy Scout badges and the like. My exhibit had to do with the mountain beavers I trapped and skinned. It included a black-and-white snapshot that showed people what a live mountain beaver looked like, because most people had never seen one, and there was another one of me holding a mountain beaver up by a leg-hold trap. I arrayed some different-sized traps on my exhibition table and tacked a pelt to a plywood board, one that was still curing. I also displayed some flint scrapers used by Natives to clean hides. In addition to that, I had a couple of mountain beaver caps I had sewn together. I was still doing the leather work on one of them.

“You’re gonna win, for sure,” many of my fellow Scouts said.

Nearly all of them wanted to try out the leg-hold trap I had on display in a cardboard box with the word ‘danger’ printed on the side. I’d give them a stick to trip it with. When the trap clamped shut it made a loud snapping noise. It’s a good thing I brought along a lot of sticks because the trap chomped through at least four of them. Some of the Scouts wanted to trip the trap more than once. They’d run off, and bring back other Scouts to try it.

“God, that’d really hurt if you got your finger in it,” one Scout said.

“It’d probably break your finger in half,” I advised him, rather proudly.

An adjudicating committee comprised of three men and one den mother perused the exhibits. They carried clipboards and pencils and rated each exhibit on grounds that had to do with inventiveness, its informative nature and to what extent it reflected Boy Scout values. As soon as I saw that one of the judges was the assistant pastor at the local Methodist Church, I felt my hopes sink down into my shoes. He was a long-faced guy with bushy eyebrows and had this thin smile on his lips, plus he was the only judge wearing a Boy Scout shirt with Boy Scout badges plastered all over it. The other three judges wore uniforms you typically saw on November 11<sup>th</sup>, in parades that ended at the local cenotaph.

“My, yours is an awfully gruesome little exhibit,” the assistant pastor said. “Your name is?”

He knew perfectly well what my name was.

“Mike. Mike Hekkanen, and my exhibit is called *How Trapping Conquered the Wild West*.”

“Obviously, the Wild West hasn’t been conquered yet, if this is still going on,” he remarked.

“I see you have a signed photograph of Fess Parker,” the woman judge piped up. “Isn’t he the actor who played Davy Crockett?”

“I sent away for it, ma’am. Davy Crockett was the original Boy Scout, if you ask me. He killed himself a bear when he was only three,” and at this point, I broke into song, “Davy, Davy Crockett, King of the Wild



Frontier.”

One of the male veterans gave a harrumph, kind of like what a walrus might make. “I don’t know if I’d go quite so far as to say he was the original Boy Scout. He was a lot of other things, though. Like a congressman.” He nodded at the mountain beaver pelt tacked to the plywood board. “That skin is attracting a lot of flies. Must be the smell.”

“It’s still got some membrane stuck to it, sir. You see, I skinned it out just this morning.”

“What are these stone thingamajigs?” the woman veteran asked me.

“Those are genuine, Indian-made, stone scrapers. I found them in Wyoming—out on the plains! My dad showed me where to look, because, you see, he grew up there.”

“Was he a trapper, too?” the assistant pastor asked me.

“He sure was. Every chance he got. That’s how he made his pocket money when he was a kid.” I offered him the stick. “Would you like to try tripping the trap?”

“No thanks. I’m aware of how a trap works.”

Later, when the awards were handed out, I was confident I would win first place—and if not first place, then second or third. After all, my exhibit had garnered more attention than any of the others in the cafeteria. Contrary to my expectations, the three awards, in descending order, went to Mapping the Night Sky (a telescope and some pictures of constellations), Pictographs in Clay (some stick figures inscribed on kiln-baked tiles) and Baby Rattlers. Baby Rattlers consisted of a bunch of magazine photos of rattlesnakes glued to some colorful pasteboard and a cardboard box with a wire mesh on top. The viewer was led to believe he’d see a knot of baby rattlesnakes in the box, but that wasn’t the case. What you saw were some baby rattles lying on a baby blanket. In other words, it was a visual joke.

After announcing the three winners and awarding the three prizes, the guy who referred to my exhibit as ‘gruesome’ stepped up to the microphone. “We have one further category to announce the winner of, and that has to do with the most popular exhibit at today’s jamboree. I’m sure you all realize there was one exhibit that garnered a great deal of attention; however, the judges felt it didn’t garner the *right* kind of attention, due to its less-than-humane content, and so we have decided to award the most popular exhibit to Danny Tibbs, for Rudimentary Paper Making.”

Danny Tibbs was the kid who later went missing at music camp. I’d run into him at a number of Boy Scout functions. His brown hair was tinged with red, and he had these really startling blue eyes.

\* \* \*

After the Boy Scout Jamboree, I went home feeling pretty dejected. I’d put a lot of effort into my exhibit and all it had earned me was a big, fat

zero. Worse than that, it hadn't even resulted in my taking home any Boy Scout badges—due, presumably, to the content. “You got robbed,” my little brother Steve kept saying in the backseat of the car.

“I know I did.”

“Robbed. Robbed, robbed, robbed...”

Dad was driving the car. Mom draped her arm over the front seat, and said: “Please stop that, Steve. Your brother is feeling bad enough, as it is.”

“I think that judge with the Boy Scout badges plastered all over his chest might've had it in for me,” I said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Don't you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“He was one of the missionaries who tried to convert us to his religion. Remember?”

I reminded her of the incident that had taken place nearly a year before, when some Methodist missionaries had shown up at our house. My dad was an atheist, but my mom was a lapsed Catholic who wasn't all that comfortable with being 'lapsed'. The missionaries had managed to make her fear for the souls of her children, and soon after that she started taking us up the hill to the Methodist Church, which sat across the street from Maple Park Elementary School. After a week or two, my sister and I started walking there on our own. The most enjoyable thing about going to church had to do with the buxom, identical twins who sang these shout-and-holler songs. They really set my imagination on fire, due to their figures more than anything else. The rest of church was a deadly bore. The whole time I was there I felt like I was on the verge of falling asleep, and sometimes I'd even nod off. My sister would poke me in the ribs, when I did that.

One Sunday, without any warning, my sister and I were driven home—in separate cars. We were quickly hustled into the back seats. The car I was driven home in was a dark blue Desoto. I was the only kid in the car, which kind of frightened me. The front seat was occupied by the pastor and the burly guy who made certain you put money in the donation plate. If you didn't cough up your coins fast enough, he'd shake the wooden plate in your face. Sitting to the left of me in the backseat was the assistant pastor—Bruce Something. He was so tall his knees practically touched the back of the front seat.

Anyway, on the drive home, the burly, donation-plate guy pulled the Desoto onto a dead-end road near the bottom of the Cherry Hill Housing Park and switched off the engine. I knew that road would eventually become a trail that turned into the former logging railroad line, and that my friend Ed Delong had fallen in a well hidden by some salal bushes. I feared I might suffer the same fate. I became even more concerned for

my welfare when the pastor slung his left arm over the back of the front seat and smiled at me like a Halloween ghoul. His dark hair was slicked back in the style of the times, kind of like Elvis Presley's. By the time Sunday service was over, his cheeks always had a 5 o'clock shadow on them. Also, there was a dimple in his chin, with some wiry whiskers stuck in it.

"So, Mike, I'm curious. Have you been saved yet?"

Right then, I *did* feel like I wanted to be saved—by the Lone Ranger or Superman. "Saved? How do you mean?"

"I mean from your sinful nature, of course."

"My sinful nature?"

"Yes, we're all born with a sinful nature that we have to be saved from—a very powerful sinful nature it is, too."

"We are?" I said, feeling choked in my upper throat.

At this point, the assistant pastor pointed at the crotch of my pants. "The pastor would like to know if you ever touch yourself—down there?"

"Well, sure, I have to go pee and stuff."

"Yes, but do you ever let your fingers linger down there?" The pastor smiled very broadly, showing the tips of his teeth, which were none to white. I would later learn that the discoloration was due to smoking cigarettes, way too many of them.

"Yeah, well, I have to take a shower and wash myself down there, you know."

"Yes, but do you ever feel good about touching yourself, down there? Does it ever make you feel all tingly and warm?"

"Should it make me feel horrible?"

"It should, if you let your fingers play with yourself—down there," the assistant pastor told me. "We've seen the way you gaze at Barbara Ann and Sally Ann when they play their guitars and sing, and we're pretty sure you might be having some indecent thoughts about them."

"They sing really well," I spoke up in my defense.

"Yes, but do they ever make you tingle—down there?" the pastor said.

"Kind of, yeah, I guess so."

"Well, that's a sin," he told me, "and only Jesus can save you from that sort of sin. But first you have to accept him into your heart—into your heart, Mike! Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

I don't know why it didn't occur to me until that moment, but I grabbed the door handle and tried to bolt from the car. The assistant pastor grabbed me by my left shoulder, but I clawed his face and scrambled. By this time, the pastor had jackknifed out of the car. "Don't run, Mike. We're not going to hurt you. We just want to save your soul."

I ran across Snake Road without looking for cars and hightailed it into my parents' wooded property as fast as my legs would carry me. It

turned out that my sister had gotten home first. The women in that car hadn't been nearly as adamant about saving her soul as the pastor and his buddies had been about saving mine. When I told Dad what had happened to me, he took off in our car—straight up to the Methodist Church. He was gone for a long time. When he came home, a police car followed him into our yard. The policeman asked me what had occurred on my way home from church, and I told him. Nothing ever came of it, though, not that I was aware of, anyway.

“So, he was the guy who tried to grab you in the car—the guy with the Boy Scout badges all over his chest?” my mother said.

“Yeah, that was him, alright.”

A week later, my mother told me that my Boy Scout days were over. It wasn't because I didn't want to go to Scouts anymore; no, it was because I'd been accused of promoting un-Scout-like behavior.

“Un-Scout-like behavior?” I said. “What's that?”

“I think it had something to do with your exhibit.”

“B.S.,” I said, even though I wasn't supposed to use that expression. “I bet it's got more to do with that guy who had the badges plastered all over his chest.”

\* \* \*

Being kicked out of Boy Scouts didn't affect me all that much. Boys have a way of forming their own packs, and that was the case with me. My friends and I started what we came to call The Black Dagger Gang. We built a tree house in the woods and then we constructed a fort all around it, using slabs that somebody had dumped in my parents' woods. Dad figured the guy who dumped the slabs there must have been driving a dump truck. In the middle of the night, he heard what sounded like a tailgate slamming shut, and in the morning we awakened to find this mammoth pile of slabs near the entrance to our old driveway. For you who don't know what a slab is, I'll explain. Slabs are the rounded sides of the log that get sawed off before the rest of the log is turned into planks. Back then, slabs usually fueled beehive burners, but the closest beehive burner to us was way up in Everett, so the slabs must've been dumped by a gyppo sawmill operator of some kind. My dad wasn't terribly concerned about the slabs. He figured he could saw the slabs into lengths and burn them in our fireplace.

“Or I could build a tree house with them,” I suggested.

Dad encouraged me to use his tools, and I'm pretty sure he saw the tree-house project as a way of furthering my carpentry skills. We scouted out a prospective site for the tree house and started working on it. Six years earlier, Dad had had a massive snag cut down and turned into rough-cut lumber. The tree had formerly been a roosting place for vultures, back when we'd had the chicken farm. He wanted to make sure the tree house wouldn't fall down with a full compliment of boys inside, so he

helped me construct the floor and roof joists out of rough-cut lumber. The rest was left up to us kids to build, and we did a damn fine job of it. When the tree house and surrounding fort were done, we raised the flag we'd sewn together—that of a skull and crossed daggers.

The miles and miles of wooded acreage around my parents' property would eventually give way to housing projects. Prospective developers had pushed interconnecting dirt roads into the forest. Up above the four-way junction known as Perrinville, there were several roads that came to a dead end, and there, an informal garbage dump had sprung up. My friends and I found a lot of great stuff in the dump—everything from teapots to a .303 rifle with a broken stock. We also discovered a couple of end-rolls of rolled roofing and some chunks of coal-black tar that could be melted over a fire and spilled on the roof of our tree house so it wouldn't leak during rainstorms. Every couple of weeks, we'd haul our wagons over to the dump to pick up the valuable stuff we'd set aside. It was a two-mile round trip, at the very least.

Another gang had built a fort near the southernmost end of the swamp, and now and then we'd engage in pitched battles with them, Alamo-style. That gang was led by a seventeen year-old who'd gone from being a Boy Scout to becoming a member of the ROTC. Brad's gang, known as Guerilla Company 5, often raided our wagon trains as we hauled stuff back from the dump. Brad even tried to bully us into paying a 'crossing' fee. The guys in GC-5 had booby-trapped the area all around their camp, but not very well. It was easy to avoid the pits with the sharpened sticks in the bottom or the nets that sprang up out of dead alder leaves on the ground. You just had to know what to look for. We in the Black Dagger Gang came to suspect that Brad and his fellow Guerillas had propped the dead dog up against the tree. There was something mean about Brad. He let everyone know he was going to become a Marine as soon as he turned eighteen. He had this motorbike he'd roar up and down the old logging railroad, and if he saw you coming, he'd run you off into the bush, laughing his head off.

One of our favorite things to do was to watch horror films at the Princess Theater down in Edmonds and then sleep overnight in the tree house. Once, when we did this, we were raided by Guerilla Company 5, around two o'clock in the morning. GC-5 arrived with flashlights and crowbars and attempted to dismantle our fort. They had no idea we were sleeping inside. Right away, we manned the barricades and started raining stones down on them, as well as whacking them with our home-made wooden daggers. The battle became so noisy, it roused my parents up at the house. Dad drove our 1950 Dodge down into the woods and pointed the headlights at us, and soon after that GC-5 melted back into the darkness of the forest.

My old man was really annoyed at being woken out of a sound sleep,

and he banned us from having any more sleep-outs in the tree house until we signed a Peace Pact with GC-5. We posted Peace Pact terms on the alder trees where the former logging railroad line went through the swamp, and a few days later it was signed, under the watchful eyes of parents on either side of the conflict.

It was the Peace Pact that saved my life.

\* \* \*

On Saturday or Sunday mornings, my big sister and I would walk down to the Perrinville Grocery Store to buy ourselves some treats: bubble gum, penny candies or, my favorite, jawbreakers. Sometimes I'd tell Mom I was going to check my trap line, when, in fact, I'd steal off down to Perrinville. It was always a delicious feeling to stand at the penny-candy counter jingling a bunch of change in my hand, trying to decide what to buy. At this time in my young life, I was making a fair bit of money selling mountain beaver caps and lucky mountain beaver paws that you could hang by a leather strap from your belt. Invariably, my earnings were turned into something sweet to eat.

One day I was walking home from Perrinville when somebody called out to me from a Chevy parked on a dirt side-road that led to the dump. Whoever it was had called me by my name, Mike. At the age of eleven, I wouldn't be caught dead wearing my spectacles, except in the classroom (so I could see what was written on the blackboard). So, at first, without squinting, I couldn't make out who was sitting in the driver's seat of the Chevy.

"Mike, I'd like to speak to you, please. Actually, I'd like to apologize—if you'd let me do that."

When I got a little bit closer to the car, I realized the driver was the assistant pastor of the Methodist Church.

"Why would you want to apologize to me?" I asked him.

"It's got to do with a little misunderstanding you might have."

"What little misunderstanding?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure you think I'm the one who got you kicked out of Boy Scouts. But I'm not. It was a mutually arrived-at decision and, believe me, I fought it like mad. Truly, I did. I was outvoted, though."

"Well, thanks, but I don't care about the Boy Scouts, anymore. It's for sissies. I've got better stuff to do."

"Can I offer you a ride home?"

"No thanks. I'll walk."

"Awh, come on. I'm just trying to be friendly, is all."

"My mom told me never to accept rides from adults—especially after what happened at the Methodist Church."

He shrugged. "It's up to you. See you around."

A couple of weeks later, the Black Dagger Gang was in the dump looking for stuff to salvage, when we came across a reeking burlap bag

that must have once contained Idaho potatoes. To tell you the truth, we wouldn't have discovered the bag if not for the help of my dog Rip, a collie-malamute cross, who kept digging and barking at whatever was buried in the garbage. Rip was so mad-insistent about pawing his way down into the trash, we figured we better give him a hand. That's how we came to discover the body of Danny Tibbs, stinking to high heavens in the burlap bag.

I ran down to the Perrinville Grocery Store to use the proprietor's phone, and a little while later both my dad and the cops showed up, and I led them up to where we had discovered the body. To tell you the truth, at that time, we didn't know it was Danny Tibbs. That was discovered later on, after the authorities hauled the body to a forensic lab. My friends and I had to stick around to answer some questions, the first of which had to do with why we were in the garbage dump in the first place.

"There's always lots of useful stuff here," I told the policeman. "The other week we found a kitchen cupboard that we nailed up in our fort. That's where we store our battle gear."

"Your battle gear?"

"Yeah, for when we have to fight Santa Anna's army. So far we've won every battle. That's way better than Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone ever did."

Our discovery of Danny's body made it into the local newspapers, and even the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, under headlines like: *Boys find body of abducted Scout* and *Illegal garbage dump discloses foul play*.

\* \* \*

It didn't take long for me to figure out who had killed Danny Tibbs. I woke up one night with his visage emblazoned on my mind, and couldn't fall back to sleep—not even for a second. Even though the members of our gang weren't mentioned by name in the newspapers, it soon became general knowledge at Maple Park Elementary who had found Danny's body, as none of us could keep it a secret for very long. The news spread like wildfire. It elevated us to a kind of legendary status among the other kids in our neighborhood—for a short while, anyway.

It wasn't long after discovering Danny's body that I realized I was being followed by Bruce Something. I'd often see him over by the Methodist Church, when Maple Park Elementary School let out for the day. Usually he'd pretend to be doing something to his Chevy while watching the kids from my neighborhood walk home along 180<sup>th</sup> Street. Either that, or I'd notice him sitting in his car down in Perrinville when my buddies and I went to the grocery store to buy ourselves some treats. Back then, you could buy baseball cards with flattened bubble gum in them, and that was always a big draw, because you could trade the cards later on. I didn't have any definitive proof that the assistant pastor was the killer of Danny Tibbs, but things just added up that way—in my mind,

at least. My suspicions led to the Black Dagger Gang and Guerilla Company 5 convening a secret powwow, at GC-5's fort at the southern end of the swamp.

"I always figured that guy for a creep," Brad said during the meeting. "Back when I was in the Boy Scouts, he let his hand drop in my lap—like it was an accident or something. Now I think he was trying to cop a feel."

I told the guys how the assistant pastor kept following me around, and how he'd even tried to coax me to get in his Chevy, and after that we hatched a plan designed to catch him, red-handed. Oftentimes on Saturday, we'd play a game of sandlot baseball at Maple Park Elementary. The bare dirt field sat at the corner of 64<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 180<sup>th</sup> Street. I had often seen the assistant pastor watching us from over at the Methodist Church. Once he even came over to the ball diamond to offer his services as an umpire, but we turned him down, saying we didn't need an ump.

The day we decided to put our plan into action was the second-to-last Saturday of May, just before school let out for summer vacation. The guys in our gang played baseball for about an hour before breaking up and going our separate ways. Brad had a couple of walkie-talkies he'd picked up at an army surplus store. The plan was for me to head south along 64<sup>th</sup> Avenue, with my friend Derk Blaine. At 184<sup>th</sup> Street we were supposed to turn west and head down the street through the Sunset Housing Project, which was still under construction, back then. In fact, it had barely gotten underway. I was supposed to say goodbye to Derk at his house and continue downhill via the dirt road that later came to be known as Blue Ridge Drive. Derk had one of Brad's walkie-talkies in his possession. As soon as he saw the assistant pastor go by his house, he was supposed to communicate that to Brad, who would come zipping up Blue Ridge Drive on his motorbike, before circling back to the swamp. Brad going by on the motorbike was supposed to signal to me that Bruce Something had taken the bait.

At the bottom of the hill, Blue Ridge Drive met Snake Road, roughly in the vicinity of the swamp. Sure enough, when I got to that intersection, the assistant pastor pulled his Chevy up beside me, with the passenger window already rolled down.

"Wanna lift?" he asked me.

"No thanks. I like walking."

"You sure have it in for me," he said. "Why is that?"

"First of all, I don't like you. Second of all, I know what you did."

He tried to make his face look exceptionally blank. "What are you talking about, Mike?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You're the one who killed Danny Tibbs, and I can prove it, too."

"No, you can't."

"Yes, I can."



“You’re a liar, Mike, and you know it.”

“No, I’m not. You’re the liar.”

I took off at a run—across Snake Road and into the alder grove that surrounded the swamp. I hid behind the burned-out stump of an ancient cedar tree, and waited to see if the assistant pastor would take the bait. By now, he had pulled his Chevy into a flat area at the bottom of Blue Ridge Drive and, after looking both ways, as though he were out for a casual stroll, crossed the road into the alder grove in search of me. I waited for him to catch up. He was looking around like he was afraid he might’ve lost me. That’s when I jumped out from behind the burned-out stump and taunted him about being a murderer. I let him get fairly close before taking off again. I wanted to enrage him so badly he’d only think about one thing, namely, killing me. I wove in and out of the trees, playing a game of cat and mouse with him—having some real fun, actually, calling him a murderer every chance I got. On the west side of the swamp, a huge fir tree had fallen down nearly all the way across the swamp. By now it was so rotten it had become a seed tree with firs and salal bushes growing out of it. The plan was for me to head out onto the log so it would look to my pursuer as though he’d trapped me. The plan worked really well. Instantly he got this sadistic smile on his face while he stood there catching his breath.

“You just made the worst mistake of your life,” he told me. “The very worst.”

“Oh, yeah. Just try to get me. You’ll regret it like you can’t believe.” I pulled a big old jackknife out of my trouser pocket and snapped open the blade. “I’m pretty good with this. It’s carved up a helluva lot of mountain beavers.”

“I hate to tell you this, but I’m a helluva lot bigger than any little mountain beaver you’ve ever done in.”

The assistant pastor picked up a stout branch and headed out onto the log, after me. I kept backing up, very slowly, and he kept coming toward me. He was about ten feet away, when Brad started up his motorbike and came roaring out of the woods and up onto the log. Bruce Something turned to look over his shoulder. That’s when I rushed forward and shoved him off the log into the swamp. The assistant pastor went down under with a mud-gray splash and rose to the surface, flailing his arms, coughing like he’d swallowed a good part of the swamp. By then, the rest of our combined gang had emerged from the alder grove, all of them carrying clubs. Brad switched off his motorbike, got on his walkie-talkie to Derk, and Derk phoned the police.

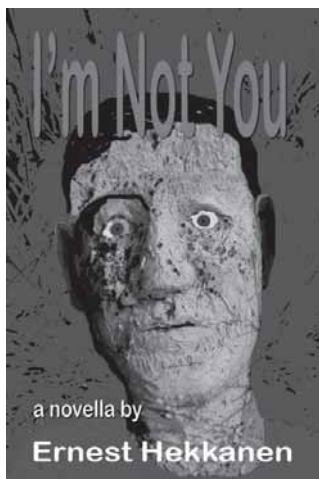
By this time, the assistant pastor had gotten his feet under him. As I’ve already mentioned, he was a pretty tall guy and so the swamp came up only to his waist. “You fucking little scumbags,” he yelled. “You attacked me without any provocation, whatsoever. Your parents are going

to pay for this. They're going to pay like you wouldn't believe. Especially yours, Mike. Just you wait and see."

"I think you're gonna fry in the electric chair long before you ever get around to suing any of us," I said. "That's swamp luck for you, though, you pervert."

"Yeah, you pervert," some of the other guys joined in. "Pervert, pervert, imbecilic pervert...."

We kept the assistant pastor surrounded in the swamp until the police arrived about ten minutes later. Bruce Something didn't fry in the electric chair, but he did die in prison. A fellow inmate stabbed him to death.



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