

The New Orphic Review

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 47 books. The most recent are *False Memories and Other Likely Tales*, *I'm Not You*, *Heretic Hill*, *All Night Gas Bar*, *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow*, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, *Shadows on a Cave Wall*, *Kafka: The Master of Yesno* and *The Life of Bartholomew G. Hekkanen* is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*.

Pivotal Events

Ernest Hekkanen

WRITING THIS EDITORIAL seems an insurmountable task, as my frontal lobe is fogged, lethargic and rather mulish. This alarms me. I first attributed my condition to mental exhaustion. After publishing my latest collection, *False Memories and Other Likely Tales*, I wrote several stories I hope to include in a book entitled *I Seem to Recall This*. I put that project on hold because Margrith and I intended to travel to Vancouver on the West Coast; however, our plans fell through, when Margrith developed a back ailment and then broke her left arm. I decided instead to put some time and energy into doing badly neglected repairs to our house, hoping to complete them in time for the Elephant Mountain Literary Festival, where I was scheduled to sit on a panel charged with the task of discussing a facet of the creative process—namely, Reworking.

The moderator of our panel, Verna Relkoff, emailed us a list of questions she hoped to pursue and occasionally, while I was out jogging, I would contemplate how to respond to them. But that's about all the preparation I intended to put into the exercise. During the past few weeks, I've had to adjust my running schedule because of weather conditions. It's been extremely hot in the West Kootenay, with temperatures in the high thirty-degree Celsius range, and as a consequence, I had to head out on my run much earlier in the morning. Also, we've been plagued with forest fires that have filled the air with smoke. One morning, the smoke was so thick I dispensed with my usual run, due to the way it stung my nose and throat. You see, a cloud cover had moved in overnight, and was keeping the smoke close to the valley floor.

In other words, my mental condition seemed to reflect the weather conditions.

While solemnly sloggng along my 4.5 kilometer route, I contemplated how to expand the notion of Reworking. In the pages of *False Memories*,

I described a pivotal event that occurred in Seventh Grade, at Lynnwood Junior High School, one which came to shape the course of my life. I found myself in a block class full of misfits, underachievers and emotionally disturbed children. When I surveyed my fellow classmates, I couldn't fathom what I was doing among them. Our teacher, Tiny Thorton, ruled the class with an iron fist. He began the school year with an illustrated lecture, one that necessitated putting a "guinea pig" on display. That year the role of "guinea pig" fell to me. He strapped me into a straitjacket and proceeded to lecture us on how our bad attitudes had come to straitjacket our lives. According to him, most of us would end up failures of one kind or another, if we were unable to shirk the attitudes that had come to confine us. My role was to demonstrate how difficult it would be to get out of the straitjacket each and every one of us had come to wear. Were I to get out of it I would be allowed to smoke in class for the rest of the school year, but were I to fail, the other kids were given permission to throw spit wads and crumpled balls of paper at me.

Needless to say, I didn't get out of the straitjacket, and needless to say, I swore I'd never be put in one ever again.

During the panel discussion at the literary festival, I divulged to the audience that the theme of captivity and escape had often been reworked in my stories and novels, from *Medieval Hour in the Author's Mind* to *I'm Not You*. I then tried, somewhat ineptly, to expand upon the metaphor of the straitjacket—to include the act of writing. As authors, we discover ways to tell a story that become predictable, and that tends to constrain us in terms of the stories we will write in the future. The methods we employ become a straitjacket we are all too comfortable with. That idea, I tried to suggest, can even be applied to our personas. We find one that is comfortable to slip on, and we wear it for the rest of our lives.

I don't think my presentation went over terribly well, but what the hey.

Ah, some relief seems to be in sight. My frontal lobe is feeling less heavy, less like a lump of clay that refuses to be shaped. I feel a spark of intelligence attempting to ignite things in the crucible of my imagination. Was it due to writing this editorial, or am I simply reacting to weather conditions? Temperatures have dropped slightly, and there's a hint of moisture in the air. Perhaps it will rain.

In this issue of *The New Orphic Review*, many of the stories seem to deal with pivotal events. It might be worth pondering what the back-story to each of them might be, if for no better reason than to build a character profile of the writer. I've decided to put one such tale on the front cover. It comes with a back-story. Can you guess what it is?

TOM WAYMAN is currently enjoying Canada Council for the Arts grant support to complete a book of short stories about the Slocan Valley; “Mountain Grown” is one of these. Meantime, 2013 was the 40th anniversary of Wayman’s first book publication, the poetry collection *Waiting for Wayman* (McClelland & Stewart, 1973); to mark the occasion Wilfrid Laurier University Press published his selected poems, *The Order in Which We Do Things*, edited and with an introduction by Owen Percy.

Mountain Grown

Tom Wayman

I’M A MITE AFRAID nobody will attend the meeting I’ve organized, plus snow starts falling mid-afternoon and doesn’t look like it will ever stop. But the promise of free gourmet beers and the threat of the new legislation south of the border brings them out in droves. By the time I call the gathering to order, more than sixty people in ones and twos have pulled open the Vallican Whole’s wooden doors, stomped snow from their boots, and brushed the snow off their parkas and ski jackets in the entrance vestibule. The Whole isn’t the cheapest venue around—I could have booked something at the Hume Hotel in Nelson, or one of the local community halls. But the Whole’s cachet as the hippie community centre is a real plus, considering who I’ve invited, and the place is large enough to hold everybody, as well as being right here in the valley.

I have Donna behind a table down at the main doors with the list of invitees, for security reasons. Once the arrivals’ names have been checked off, and they climb the stairs into the hall, chairs for about seventy-five are set out facing a screen for my presentation. Along one wall I’ve got two big tables covered with white paper, an array of beers, and Charles behind the tables dipping into one of six portable coolers filled with ice and bottles, depending on what brand the arrivals want to try. Stacks of plastic glasses are on the table, though hardly anybody is drinking out of anything but a bottle. On the wall back of Charles is one of my advertising banners from when we have a booth at garden shows or the Nelson street market: WAY TO GROW! GARDEN SUPPLIES. The skunky scent of marijuana, outgassing from the arrivals’ clothes and outerwear, starts to fill the hall. “Eau de Kootenay,” as a customer of mine termed it after another customer positively reeking of weed left the store.

Donna thought the meeting was a crazy idea. “Look how much it’s costing you: renting the Whole, giving away expensive booze, paying

Charles overtime to work the evening. Why not just talk about your crackpot scheme to them one at a time?" I pointed out these expenses are an investment, not a loss. Financial acumen isn't her main attraction. Me, I'm a natural with money, which is how I launched Way to Grow. I'd been at loose ends between girlfriends about eight years ago and had travelled up to Nelson from the Coast for a week-long yoga intensive. I'd seen a poster about the workshop. Ever been to a yoga class? You should try it: chicks dig yoga. After a few days of checking out the talent at the intensive, and meeting a bunch of people around town, I could see that besides boasting some hot mamas, the West Kootenay is a gold mine for growing dope. And if I know one thing, it's that in a gold rush you want to sell shovels, not dig for gold. Most people go broke at the latter. Sure, a tiny number of them strike paydirt. But like the lottery: statistically, practically, realistically *you* aren't going to win. Plus those who do hit the jackpot generally ruin their lives: they can't handle it. Take it slow and steady, flog them shovels, is my motto. You'll end up rich and by the time you do you'll have learned how to properly handle all that filthy lucre.

After the yoga workshop, I went back to Quadra Island, sold my funky coffee shop, and set up Way to Grow! in South Slocan, within easy reach of Castlegar, Nelson, the valley. Hydroponics, grow lamps, security systems, everything for the grower. And enough regular garden supplies to be legit, too. Not that selling grow paraphernalia is against the law. Yet. But you never want to draw too much attention to yourself. If you know what I mean. That same yoga class is where I met Donna. To this day she's sure that true love is what led me to shut down my old life on Quadra and move to the Koots to be with only her. I wouldn't have her believe anything else. I know that's what she tells her friends, because I had a little number with one of them, Kaycee, a couple of years ago. Spacey Kaycee. What a bod. Actually, Donna's pretty good-looking herself, if I do say so. And she's good with my kids, who are now, what, 9 and 11? I get them summers for a couple of weeks and most Christmases if Donna and I aren't away in Costa Rica or someplace toasty. Donna really plans out the kids' visits: stuff they might like to do, places to go. She's got parenting chops I'll never have in a million years. Even though she's never had kids of her own.

But you've heard of the downward dog pose? In yoga? When it comes to chicks, I'm the original downward dog. Can't get enough of that *mm-mm-mmm*. I'm telling you, garden supplies are almost as good a chick magnet as yoga. In the store, you talk to some honey about nurturing little plants: I mean marigolds or echinacea or cukes, not bud. Their eyes get all dewy while they're clutching their little pots of lettuce starts or foxglove or rosemary. They can tell you're sensitive and caring. That's how I met Marcia last spring. After she'd dropped by the store about four

times, I suggest I drive out to her place and see her garden first-hand: conduct a soil test and recommend a fertilizer. A cup of tea later we're in her bedroom going at it like crazed monkeys. She'd like me to leave Donna. Marcia's never said as much, but I know because her best friend is married to a good customer of mine, Bart. He and I used to be in the same men's group in the valley. So when I run into Bart I get all the lowdown. Sometimes this valley is too small. I'm not in any hurry, though, to bail on Donna. Marcia pretty much agrees with everything I say, which is flattering, but Donna is like the Loyal Opposition. In business, sometimes you need to consider a different point of view. Think of those young MBAs who ruined Westinghouse, World.Com, you name it. Idiots who were so full of themselves they couldn't listen to what people who'd been in the business for decades, or the customers, were saying.

Despite Donna's opinion, I knew my night at the Whole was a fabulous idea. Make the pitch where the boys can see others listening. They'll be drinking my beer so at some level they owe me. That's psychology. Then, after my spiel, I'll field all the scoffing questions and negative comments I'm sure to land, since most of these guys are morons. Then they witness somebody step forward. That move is costing me, too, though just some grow lamps. Donna, thank God, doesn't know about *that* expense. Hey, I read once that when Elvis first performed, Col. Parker paid all these teenage tighties to scream. That got the ball rolling: people are pretty much sheep. And Jordan is a guy I can trust to keep his mouth shut. Still, the bulk of the crowd will go home full of beer, bullshit and bravado about what a dumb plan I've proposed. Then, starting tomorrow, one by one they'll be dropping by my store to sign up.

"Why rent the *Whole*, though?" Donna had asked. "It's more expensive than one of the community halls."

She's right, of course, but Slocan Park Hall or Winlaw Hall have pretty straight contact people, and I didn't want somebody hanging around my meeting who would make the boys nervous. I also had a more grandiose reason, and that's the one I shared with Donna.

"Tradition."

"Tradition? What's this, *Fiddler on the Roof*?"

I reminded her that construction of the Vallican Whole was a significant moment in the valley. In 1971 a bunch of hippies met and decided to put up their own community building on some land in Passmore, modelled after the Doukhobor and community halls all through these valleys. The freaks applied for and received funding from some federal youth program, and as you can guess work proceeded rather slowly since they had no idea what they were doing, other than how to ingest certain illegal substances. For quite a while the only physical manifestation of the hall was a hole dug in the ground for the basement. Straight folks used to laugh about the Vallican Hole, saying that was about the best that hippies

could do. But when the freaks got it together and the building finally opened in 1975, they kept the derisive name, only adding a letter to emphasize that, love 'em or hate 'em, hippies were part now of the whole valley community.

The construction of the Whole represented a big change, I told Donna. Before the building went up, people around here maybe thought the hippies, draft dodgers, back-to-the-landers were a bunch of transients, who would blow through the valley briefly and within a few years be back in San Francisco or Toronto or Detroit or Vancouver. The Whole said: "We're here to stay." The paradigm shift I was going to lay on everybody at my event, I assured Donna, was as momentous a change in the valley as the hippies erecting the building. She just rolled her beautiful eyes.

As people climb up the stairs into the hall, I'm over by the beer tables shaking hands, fist-bumping and high-fiving, making sure everybody selects a brew they like. Schmoozarama. Charles is a good worker in the store, and he's just as solid here, going full out dispensing the beer. After a while, a bearded young guy with dreadlocks I don't know approaches me—this was an invitation-only event, but I had told the growers to spread the word to folks they trusted, although pre-registration was definitely required. Beardie inquires if my name is Alan. When I plead guilty, he informs me that the lady down in the entranceway asked him to tell me to go down there, that there's a problem.

I head for the stairs. Nearly everybody who has already arrived is as freaky looking as you'd expect: dreads, sashes, embroidered jeans, toques, long hair, beards, face hardware, tattoos. In short, the swelling crowd mostly sports the official grower look that's a cross between hippie, Rastafarian and wannabe ghetto rap star. A few folks, however, are just dressed country pie: jeans and checked shirt, maybe some chainsaw-maker-branded suspenders.

Two-thirds of the people crowding into the hall are in their twenties and thirties, but there's lots of folks my age, too, or even older: fifties, sixties. Old Man McKay is here with his two sons: all of them drive logging truck, hard-working guys, and they all grow, too. Steady customers of mine, once we resolved that little disagreement about some seeds I sold them they claimed were defective. Dad McKay has a truck and the boys, Donny and Alvin, share another rig: Alvin is a heavy equipment mechanic for the highways contractor, but drives on his days off. The family are straight arrows: McKay's wife Irene, the boys' mom, is on the credit union board and the school board and was a spark plug in the group that got the seniors' home built at Passmore. When the family grow-op on their land up behind Silverton was busted, and Dad and the boys were popped, some people wanted her to resign. She claimed she had no idea what the rest of her family was up to. That was her story and she was

sticking to it. Old Man McKay took the rap himself and got house arrest except for going to work and eventually life went back to normal.

I navigate through the knots of people standing talking and drinking, and scoot down the stairs to see what Donna wants. At the table is a baby-faced guy, stocky, medium height, clean-shaven, late thirties or early forties, wearing sharply creased pants and a V-neck sweater over a button-down shirt. Three metres away I can pick up the sickly reek of cologne, as if he's a high school kid who doesn't know better and has drenched himself in Axe. His appearance just screams *cop*. Donna tells me his name isn't on the list.

"Good evening, officer," I say to him. "This is a private party, but what can I do for you?" He gives a half-hearted laugh and then starts to assure me that he's in the loop, part of the scene, reeling off four names that he says encouraged him to attend—major players. One of his references is already here, so I ask Mr. Green Team, as the Mounties around here like to call their dope squad, to wait where he is. Upstairs among the drinkers I find who I'm looking for, and when I begin to describe the guy who just showed up, his verifier starts to laugh. "Roger," he says.

"That's his name?" I ask. He swears that Roger is a conduit between a number of locals and some coastal wholesalers with a fondness for motorcycles. I ask my informant to accompany me to the door to positively ID the newcomer, which he does.

As the two start up the stairs together Donna gives me a look that says *I hope you know what you're doing*. I shrug: too late now to change course.

The next twenty minutes are more schmooza-palooza for me, lots of laughing and kidding around. I keep one eye on the stairs, though, and people are still trickling in. This is the Kootenays, after all, where a lot of people would be late for their own funeral if they could swing it. Every so often I thread my way downstairs to check in with Donna to be sure she's okay. Once she's chatting with Tricia Olsen, a hard-bitten woman in her fifties, slim as a fence rail with muscular arms and a permanent big grin, whom everybody likes. Tricia runs a small herd of cows on her acreage as well as operating a fence-building business mostly by herself. One of her barns is entirely set aside for a grow show. I get a hug from Tricia that leaves me checking my ribs as I head upstairs once more.

Another time I peek down at the entrance desk, however, and Donna is deep in conversation with my former men's group buddy Bart, whose wife, you'll recall, is the bosom pal of my current sideline, Marcia. Bart has parked his butt on the desk, and the two of their heads are close together as they talk, both with intense expressions. My sphincter tightens right up. To begin with, I wasn't even aware Donna knew Bart, other than me mentioning him as part of the men's group, back when I was involved.

Come to think of it, maybe there was a potluck or two that included the womenfolk, but mostly what the group did was strictly No Girls Allowed. Donna and Bart is not a linkage I want to encourage. All I need to hear is, "Bart and his wife want us to come for dinner next week. Sounds like fun." Worst will be if Bart inadvertently let the cat out of the bag with regard to me and Marcia. I'm jolted by the thought that he might have forgotten to associate Donna with me, and could say something that arouses Donna's suspicions. Say what you like about Donna, she's not dumb. I start to sweat, watching them chatter away with such concentration. I tell myself to keep calm. They could be talking valley politics, or road maintenance, or cross-country ski techniques. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth" is one of the few bits of the Bible I remember from Sunday school. But the last thing I need right now on the very cusp of making my presentation is a revelation of my little number with Marcia, accompanied by the loud, histrionic and generally unpleasant domestic fallout guaranteed to immediately ensue.

I square my shoulders, trip down the stairs with a smile pasted on my cake hole, and break up Donna and Bart's little party with a big arms-extended welcome to my old amigo Bart. Turns out the duo were exchanging zucchini recipes, not vital data concerning my infidelity, and I break into a sweat again, this time of relief. Luckily, a couple more bozos come through the front door at this moment, and I seize the opportunity as Donna gets busy checking their names to whisk Bart up the stairs with me while I babble on about the thirty-seven kinds of beer assembled for his tasting enjoyment.

I park him in front of Charles and his trusty bottle opener, and return to glad-handing the crowd. While I'm doing so, one part of my brain is whining: "Why do you complicate your life like this? Don't you have enough going on, implementing this project that will make you simultaneously rich beyond your wildest dreams and more popular than John Lennon? Imagine how you'll be rewarded when the grateful populace, or at least the dope-growing portions of it, finally understands what a benevolent genius has been living unheralded in their midst. Why do you also need to get involved with extramural pussy?" And another part of my brain is retorting: "Extra pussy has always been the prerogative of genius. Your ability to juggle successfully an overload of details that would stagger an ordinary person is precisely what defines your genius. Use it or lose it: if you don't have far too much happening, you might as well give up and start watching four point five hours of television a night, or whatever the abysmal national viewing average is."

Spacey Kaycee's term for my inclination to ride the edge was "negative excitement." Some term she picked up from her time in AA, as it turned out.

Eventually the voice in favor of multitasking wins the debate, as usual.

But then a face I recognize as an intermittent customer of Way to Grow! interrupts a conversation I'm having with Old Man McKay about the play-off prospects of the Calgary Flames. The interloper asks, "When's this fucking thing going to start?" So I know it's time. I lope down to the entrance again and tell Donna I'm going to begin. I open the front doors where, sure enough, four or five guys on the porch are sharing a doobie. I call them in. Then it's up to the hall, and shout that everybody should grab a seat, we're about to get underway.

People are having a good time with the beer social, so I'm more or less ignored at first. Water has pooled on the floor here and there, having melted from people's boots, but that's normal at a public gathering in winter. I slip between the assembled chairs to where the laptop and video projector are set up, and click them on. A photo of the valley in summer projects onto the screen, a paradisiacal image of green mountainsides as backdrop to leafy birch and cottonwood branches overhanging the lazy river. I chose this shot to put people into the mood of laid-back good-vibe days. Donna, bless her, has followed me upstairs and now flicks the hall lights off and on a few times, then configures the lighting so most of the illumination is up front where I'll be speaking. The clumps of talkers slowly peel themselves away from the beer tables and amble across the room to find places to sit. The noise of talking amplifies as they file into the rows of chairs, and then diminishes as the crowd settles. I'm standing at the front, and Donna is in position at the laptop.

After welcoming everybody, I run over the security precautions. Everyone present was personally invited, or otherwise vetted by invitees. The core list of people selected to attend was drawn up in consultation with a few trusted and respected names in the valley. I repeat what the written invitation they received said: they have been invited because of their reputation as important and influential figures in an industry that, according to many impartial sources, is the main economic generator for the region, surpassing in revenue lumber, mining and smelting combined, and bigger than health care and all other government employment.

"In the unlikely event," I continue, "that any police spies have been included among those invited, I'll stress that no one here to my knowledge is engaged in any illegal activity. All of you are simply local citizens concerned with the present situation and future possibilities of a vital component of our regional economy." That statement nets a big laugh.

I signal, and Donna brings up the next PowerPoint slide, a list of initiatives in U.S. states to legalize aspects of marijuana possession or growing. I briefly summarize the info on the slide, then launch into my spiel.

"The trend is clear, as everyone in this room is aware: state after state has begun legalizing, or minimizing the penalty for, simple possession. The next inevitable step is a tax grab by cash-starved state, county and

municipal governments who will legalize, control and tax the production of weed. At the moment, all this is illegal under U.S. *federal* law. Yet how long can the feds hold out if a significant number of states and cities are rolling in money obtained by legalizing and regulating the industry? And as the U.S. goes, so goes the True North Strong and Free.”

Donna puts the appropriate slide up on the screen. “In Canada alone, as you see here,” I continue, “the potential dollars at stake according to the best law enforcement guestimates indicate that, compared to pot, current government legalization and regulation of lotteries is a puny source of income.”

Up comes a bar chart showing every current provincial and federal source of income. I can’t resist underscoring how what is a crime today is good business tomorrow. “As you know, lotteries were once entirely illegal. For example, when I was a kid, selling an Irish Sweepstake ticket was a crime in Canada. And in the U.S. In fact, forty years before the Irish Sweeps were even inaugurated, the U.S. Congress in 1890 outlawed using the mail to buy or sell any kind of lottery ticket. Today lotteries, as these charts show, are a significant income stream for governments.

“However,” I caution, adopting my most serious face, “the question remains whether the small weed producer is likely to benefit from legalization. Or will you, uh, that is, will the small producer be squeezed out in favor of large corporations who are better positioned to, shall we say, bestow campaign contributions on the men and women at the various levels of government who will decide how the details of decriminalization play out? Never underestimate the speed with which a profitable free market business sector can go into the dumper due to government fiat or mismanagement.” I give Donna a nod and up comes a screen with dollar and employment graphs illustrating the sad tale of the Ontario tobacco farmer and the Newfie cod fisherman over the past half-century.

“You might imagine—” I try to counter an argument I’ve heard raised several times when the boys are chewing over the implications of legalization “—that even if the big corporations take over, you can sell your crop to them. But you’ll agree with me, I’m sure, that once the stuff becomes legal, how it will be priced is not at all clear. That is, will the small grower be able to survive financially? Will the corporations not inaugurate their own production? I’ll remind you that, with the rise of agribusiness, the small food-farmer is deeper in debt than ever. Most have to take non-agricultural jobs to make ends meet, if they aren’t squeezed entirely off their land. If you can’t make a living as a grower, what marketable skills do you have to put food on your table, never mind a new Lexus in your garage?” Dead silence at the last comment. Which is good: they’re thinking. “Especially in today’s depressed economy?”

I pause and survey the crowd. Rows of eyes watching me. I haven’t said anything they haven’t thought of themselves in the black of night.

“What to do?” I look around the room, meet a few eyes, milk this pause for all it’s worth, let the perilousness of their long-term prospects sink in. “What to do?”

A stir in the assembly. Nobody says anything, to me or each other, but they shift uneasily in their seats. A few take a pull on their brewskis.

“Not to worry, men. And woman: Tricia.” General laughter: a tension breaker. “I’ve given this a lot of thought,” I continue, a concerned expression plastered on my face. “I’ve consulted at length with various experts, as I’ll reveal in a few minutes. The route out of the morass that looms ahead of us, I’m convinced, the solution to the irrelevance and bankruptcy that is likely to be the lot of the West Kootenay small producer swept aside by changes in the industry, can be summed up in a single word. Coffee.”

A crescendo of murmuring starts, including a few people pointing at their heads with an index finger while they rotate their hands, indicating to someone seated beside them that I’ve lost my marbles. But I persevere. “I’m going to show you—” I override the increasing noise “—the benefits of starting to shift production from grass to high-end arabica coffee beans. First I want to—”

An arm is lifted and waving in the crowd, like a kid’s at school. It’s the chunky gatecrasher with baby face and V-neck sweater. “Excuse me,” he calls, his arm still up. “Excuse me.”

An adage from years in business flashes into my brain: the customer you go out of your way to help is invariably the one who causes the most trouble. No good deed goes unpunished. “Yes?”

Baby face—what was his name? Ronald? Robert? *Roger*—stands. “I’m so sorry to break in,” he says, with a mirthless half-laugh, as though mocking his own audacity. “I just felt I had to correct something you said. Hope you don’t mind.” The thin laugh again.

“You have a question?”

“Thank you.” His face swivels to take in the crowd on both sides of him. “Umm, I think maybe you painted a rather bleak picture of our industry. Possession of cannabis for personal use may be legalized here and there in some jurisdictions. But in my view, we’re a long, long way away from the small grower being obsolete. I’ve been assured—”

Applause breaks out a couple of places in the room. I try to note who is clapping, but I’m too late. Somebody shouts, “Right on” and Bart, the treacherous weasel, yells agreement: “Totally.”

Roger looks left and right, ducking his head modestly. “Thank you. I want to mention I’ve been assured by associates of mine who are vitally involved in the industry that no matter what any *government* does, they’re interested in continuing to purchase your product. Of course, like you said, Alan, nobody here does anything illegal.”

A brief laugh.

“My associates,” Roger resumes, “don’t only spend their time riding motorcycles. In conversations I’ve had, they stress that they will find a use for crops from the West Kootenay for a long, long time to come.” He produces another half-laugh. “Thanks, Alan. That’s all I have to say.”

He sits down amid a buzz of talk and scattered applause. Somebody yells, “Good to hear, Roger.”

Another voice, one of the McKay kids, calls out over the ambient chatter, “He’s right, Alan. Change might be coming, but it ain’t nothing we can’t handle.”

A few shouts of approval from various parts of the hall, and another increase in the background decibels of talk. I figure I better counter this idea fast.

“People who grow spend a lot of time, effort, money and brain power,” I pronounce loudly, wishing I’d arranged to have a PA, “to try to stay one jump ahead of the cops, right? A percentage of folks nevertheless get busted and lose their crop. That’s not going to change in the short term. In fact, wouldn’t you agree the horsemen are getting more sophisticated? How many people still grow outdoors? Didn’t overflights and color spectrum analysis have something to do with that change? And the new smart meters the power companies are installing are directly intended, they tell us, to pinpoint power theft, a mainstay of lots of indoor grow shows. B.C. Hydro and Fortis claim that smart meters can tell who is stealing power, or who is using a lot of power at a time of day that isn’t normal for such usage. This pronouncement might be just scare propaganda. But what if it’s not?”

The room is abruptly quiet again. Faces are paying attention. “Some of you older folks like Roger here maybe are gambling you can finish your careers before the industry is substantially transformed. You might be kidding yourself. Who here can say that the new medical use legislation in California, for example, bringing in not just permits for own-use and medical cultivation, but also launching the development in that state of specialty strains, hasn’t already hurt prices and demand for Kootenay product? Think back even five years.”

The hall remains dead silent. “That’s just short-term, too. Not that what I’m proposing can be done overnight. But those who don’t start now to switch over from bud to coffee will be like those Ontario tobacco growers who were certain the drop in demand for ciggies and cigars was temporary. Which McDonald’s do you think those farmers are working at today? Especially since they couldn’t even get hired for factory jobs when their farms went under, because everything is made in China now.”

Bill Sevastapol, a grower from Lemon Creek who has never bought anything at my store, bursts out in a voice vibrating with resentment: “Yeah, yeah, but how the fuck can we grow *coffee*? Coffee comes from Central and South America. Or Africa. You know: *hot* places?”

Big laugh. Another mocking shout: “Mountain grown.” A joking voice, pretending realization: “Wait a minute, we’re *in* the mountains.” More hee-hawing.

Laugh it up, chuckle-heads, I don’t say. “I’m glad you asked that,” I state. “I’m going to explain next how coffee is grown. But first there’s something else you need to be conscious of while we’re considering the long-term. You think a lot of people are into weed? Millions of people everywhere, your ultimate customers? Dig this: coffee is the second-largest commodity sold in the world, second only to oil. The market for coffee is hundreds if not thousands of times larger than for smoke. Many people light up, but *everybody* drinks coffee.”

I nod to Donna, and in the renewed stillness the next screen shows the world’s primary coffee producing areas. “Coffee is presently grown outdoors,” I intone, “between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. As for ‘mountain grown,’ a supposed positive characteristic of some coffee? That’s a complete shuck. Arabica beans are *all* grown between 4,000 and 6,000 feet. The plants’ prime growing environment is 12-hour days and 20 degrees Celsius, which is why coffee is grown high up and in the tropics: that’s where the required combination of light and temperature is found. The plants also like rain, and volcanic or other rich soils. You can grow robusta beans lower down the mountains, but robustas produce shit-coffees even though they generate more beans per tree. And why would anybody want to raise robustas, especially now when more consumers are used to a good-flavored—”

“How high are *we*?” somebody calls.

Laughter again, accompanied by a hooted: “I don’t know about you, brother, but I’m pretty high.”

The first voice again, annoyed. “I didn’t mean that. What’s our elevation?”

“Nelson is about 2,000 feet. Six hundred metres,” Old Man McKay contributes.

“That means we’re too low to grow coffee, doesn’t it?” the guy sitting beside Bart wants to know.

“Hold on,” I tell them. “Let me finish. The real—”

“Hurry up,” a voice suggests. “I’m getting thirsty.”

Widespread hilarity. “The quicker I’m done,” I say over the guffaws, “the quicker you can get another drink.” I gesture toward the beer tables. As if on cue, Charles waves.

“‘Mountain grown’ as I mentioned—” I pick up the build of my argument “—applies to all arabica coffees. The real dispute these days is between shade-grown and full-sun-grown coffee. Coffee raised in the shade of the forest canopy, in the understory, has the best taste and is the traditional way to grow. All you eco-freaks know why forests are necessary for bird life, biological diversity, and all that good stuff. What’s been

happening, though, is—” I signal, and Donna brings up the slide of different shade categories “—extensive deforestation in order to grow coffee in direct sunlight. Coffee plants in open areas can be crowded together for better yields. But besides ecological impact, sun-grown coffee beans don’t make as good coffee. Coffee raised this way also requires chemical pesticides and fertilizers that shade-grown plants don’t. And you know what’s wrong with—”

“So we can grow coffee on the clear-cuts?”

Laughter. Before it trails off, Bruce Sherbinin shouts: “If we’re in trouble because corporations are going to take over, how is it any different with coffee? Won’t Starbucks and the other mega-corporations just control everything?”

Sherbinin. An operation up McKean Road in Winlaw so small he might as well be growing on a windowsill. But I have one of my strokes of genius—an idea I hadn’t thought of when I prepared my talk. “Think wine,” I tell Bruce. “The wine industry in the Okanagan was just about non-existent 25 years ago. A few growers started by selling grapes to the makers of plonk. Then someone realized there was a demand for estate wineries, that more money could be made producing classier, smaller volume wines. Result? An explosion of wineries and of free-standing vineyards, too. Right about when the fruit orchards were in trouble due to competition from imports, the demand for upscale B.C. wines stepped in to save the day. Provided, of course, you were an orchardist willing to make the shift to—”

“Screw coffee,” someone suggests. “Let’s all grow wine.”

A surge of applause, cheers, hoots. I wait until the noise starts to taper off.

“You *could*,” I suggest. Mr. Reasonable. “*If* you knew anything about viticulture. And if wine grapes would grow in our region. Which they won’t. That’s why—”

“Doesn’t sound like coffee will grow here either.” An objection from a different corner of the hall. “It’s not exactly tropical outside.” Much laughter. “And from what you’re saying—” the voice more confident now that the room has approved of his humor “—our elevation is too low.”

“Ah,” I respond. “You bring me to the crux of the evening. Donna, if you please?” She gets up the slide with the greenhouse schematic.

“Gentlemen, behold the future,” I declare. “Remember what I said about elevation and geography only having to do with keeping the little plants happy with 12 hours of sunlight and a steady 20 degrees? You folks may not know dick about grape-growing. But any of you with an indoor operation, and that’s most of you, do know lots about control of temperature and light. Sorry, I don’t mean ‘you.’ Whoever is growing. But you know what I mean.”

The room fixates on the drawing. This moment in the absolutely still hall is my payoff: hours and hours of research on the Net, a zillion phone calls, three trips to Vancouver to meet with suppliers, big-scale roasters, and more. Plus contracting with a flaky Nelson artist for this illustration: greenhouse dimensions, coffee shrub layout, irrigation and heating setup, ventilation fans.

“You’ll agree this greenhouse layout looks rather familiar,” I point out. “Except for the retractable cloth gizmos up top. Shade-grown coffee needs thirty-five to sixty-five per cent shade for maximum effect. The experts think shade increases bean-ripening times, improving the taste. Did I mention that coffee is actually a fruit? That the plants produce what are called cherries, inside each of which are two coffee beans? Anyhow, depending on the weather you can deploy the shade cloth or not.”

I can almost hear the wheels churning inside the dreadlocked-and-toqued heads. Smoke is pouring out of ears as they try to assess what I’m saying, what’s on the screen. Their synapses may be clogged with resin like the inside of an old hash pipe, but I can sense repeated attempts to get them to fire. Now to set the hook.

“That’s it in a nutshell, boys. My beautiful assistant and myself both have handouts—” I hold one up “—providing prices for coffee plants, and for specialty products like the shade cloth. I assume you are familiar with the other indoor growing costs, though these are listed on the handout, too. The info package I’ve prepared also has some likely return on investment estimates, which you’ll see are quite favorable. I won’t bullshit you: this isn’t the quick buck that weed is. But if you factor in increasing pressure from the nation’s finest in the short haul, plus being bypassed by post-legalization corporate growers in the long haul, you’ll see the idea makes sense. These plants take three to five years to come on stream, so the sooner you begin to shift over, the quicker you’ll be making legit money. *Big* money, if I dare say so. The whole trend—”

“You’re not known to be in the running for Good Citizen of the Year, Alan.” Sherbinin again. He’s rewarded with a huge laugh, and he grins briefly in acknowledgement. “What’s in it for you, with all this? Why do I feel you’ll be raking in serious dollars whatever happens to the rest of us?”

More hee-haws, and applause.

“I’m a businessman,” I admit. “But so are you, or people you’re acquainted with. I’ve done the research, I’ve made the contacts, I can supply you with advice, or contacts if you want to check out this stuff on your own. I’d be happy to sell you the coffee plants, and otherwise assist you to get started. You already know I offer everything you need for greenhouses. I can give you the names of processors who are interested in buying West Kootenay beans, or I can act as your agent and sell them for you. Needless to say, you’re free to keep on as you always have, and

be squashed like a bug as the economics of how you've made your living completely change. But, yeah, I probably understand the coffee market better than you at this point. So I have a better idea of what you should be getting for your—"

"How much per kilo *would* we get?" a voice interrupts.

"It's not that simple. Coffee prices—" I begin, but jeers erupt from a few corners of the room.

"Look, for those of you who can read, I spell out, *as* I've mentioned, likely rates of return on these handouts." I flourish one. "Coffee base prices have been on a steep upward slope since the start of this century. My estimates are based on where they're likely to be in three years and five years, since, as I say, even if you plant tomorrow you're not going to be seeing a return for three to five years. But—" I speak louder over an increasing level of talk in the room—"the coffee world is changing, too. Only in this case, to the benefit of the small producer. Some of you are old enough to remember the consumer shift from blended scotches, which emphasized consistency of taste, to single malt scotch, each of which has a recognizably better but unique taste."

The mention of expensive scotch dampens the side-conversations. When these folks juice, they have a fondness for pricey single malts. Most in the room are listening again. "Coffee drinking is heading the same way. Even Starbucks tells you the origin of the beans they've blended for the garbage coffees they flog. A one-off local roaster like Oso Negro in Nelson does exactly the same. The trend is—" troublesome Roger's arm is waving in the air again—"people soon are going to walk into a coffee shop and ask for a coffee from a specifically-sourced bean, a named bean grown in a specific country, or even from a particular grow-op, sorry, farm. Just a second, Roger. Last slide, please, Donna."

On the screen is the clincher. "Look at this. Sourced beans that customers request can sell to roasters for ten times the general market price for coffee. And the market price itself is rapidly rising, as I've said. So the price you'll get from your coffee depends on which beans you grow. Below the bar graphs, that's a photo of new hybrid cultivar that one supplier I represent claims is perfectly adapted for greenhouse growth. When I mentioned to him my idea that I've been explaining to you good people this evening, he turned out to be way, way ahead of me. Great minds think alike. The supplier—" a universal groan fills the hall, which I ignore.

"The supplier already had been developing an arabica designed for the discriminating customer of tomorrow, yet a plant that thrives in an artificial environment. They call this cultivar 'cascadia.' They poured me a cup of cascadia coffee, and I have to say it's hard to go back to even Oso Negro's best after that. Of course, cascadia is only one of several plants I can set you up with. The others have a longer track record, although

my money's on this one." Roger's hand has started pumping energetically in the air like that of a grade four keener who is sure he knows the answer to some teacher's question, or else a kid who really needs to go to the can. "Roger?"

He climbs to his feet. "Sorry to interrupt again," he begins, ducking his baby face deferentially and issuing his half-laugh. "But maybe I don't understand? You say the small producer has done better as the market changed for wine, scotch, and coffee? But people should stop growing cannabis because the small producer will disappear if the market for cannabis changes? Why wouldn't the small producer in our industry *benefit*, like with wine or scotch? B.C. Bud is already a desired commodity among connoisseurs, I think." He sits down.

"Fucking-A," and several other shouts of approval lift on a thunderous wave of applause toward the rafters of the Vallican Whole. I have a couple of simultaneous thoughts. One is: can I identify a slight lisp in Roger's voice that wasn't there before? Hopefully an indication of stress? Did he really say, "B. C. Bud ith already a dethired commodity among connoitheurth"? Could Roger's latest attempt to screw me be a product of worry, a desperate rearguard effort as he senses the boys are leaning toward adopting my idea? The second thought I have is that when this is over I am going to kill, via slow dismemberment, first this turkey and then whichever assholes invited him to attend my pitch.

"The difference has to do with effect," I manage to interject into the chatter ballooning throughout the hall. "Effect," I repeat, while I wait for the racket to fade a little. "With wine, scotch and lately with coffee, customers have learned to tell the difference between plonk and a varietal with definite qualities that they enjoy. Everybody in this room can distinguish between a Starbucks coffee and one from Oso Negro, correct? On the other hand, to be honest, a stone is a stone is a stone. As long as smoke isn't so harsh as to burn your throat, who cares what it's called? That was true of the market forty years ago, and it's true today. I don't see any sign the situation will be different in the future."

Roger's arm is waving in the air again. I press on. "Most important, though: it's not hard to grow your own grass. Especially when it becomes legal. Tend four or five plants in your garden or apartment balcony, pluck a few leaves now and then, dry some for the winter, and you're set. That's the future small grower: the individual consumer. In contrast, people are not going to distill their own single malt, or grow their own coffee. A few people will make their own wine, or, mostly, pretend to do so at a U-brew place where the owners do ninety-five per cent of the work. But that wine isn't very good, or at least, not good enough to be a threat to the small estate wineries. Whereas people can get satisfactorily ripped on the fruits of their own labor. That's why small coffee producers have a future while small weed producers do not."

I hear applause from one source: my man, Jordan, finally springing to life to earn his grow lights. “I’m sold,” he announces to the room. “How do I sign up?”

“Just come talk to me,” I say, smooth as silk. “Now, I’ve bored everybody long enough, but there’s still beer left, isn’t there, Charles?” He nods from behind the tables. Roger’s hand is still madly oscillating. Is there an armpit equivalent to carpal tunnel? “Stick around if you have more questions, and please pick up one of these info sheets from either Donna or me.” Donna, on cue, kills the computer and the screen goes white. “I’ll have them in the store, too, of course. Thanks, everybody, for coming out and listening. And drink up, unless you’re over the legal limit.”

The last brings a good-natured laugh. People stand and stretch, blabbing with each other as most of them amble toward the side of the hall to see which beers remain. I’m suddenly weary. My optimism, I’m aware, is draining away. Growers are quick-buck, live-for-the-moment types, I note gloomily, and coffee requires more forward thinking. Anybody who picks up my handout is sure to grasp the required scale of the conversion project if his brain is still functioning. Multiply the pounds of beans a single coffee bush produces times the wholesale bean price, and the return is considerably less per plant than weed. You aren’t going to make a living from a basement grow show of coffee. But, as I stress on the info sheet, you don’t *have* to grow it in a basement hidden from the relentless eye of the law. You can build multiple greenhouses on your acreage, and don’t have to worry about neighbors or jealous colleagues ratting you out or ripping you off. You don’t have to hide electrical usage to heat the greenhouses. Plus there’s no risk of having your whole crop busted. Still, given the brain power of most growers, my entire venture is probably doomed.

I try to shake off the negativism, to Velcro a smile on my face before stepping over to the clusters of people by the beer tables to receive some feedback. Maybe one or two of the more adventurous sort will buy into it. Which is better than nothing. “Why don’t you grow coffee yourself to show them how it’s done?” Marcia had asked me when I’d mentioned the idea to her. “You know, be a role model, like a demonstration forest?” That’s the difference between Donna and Marcia. Donna understands that the only way to get rich is to sell those shovels, and never be tempted to start digging in search of the mother lode.

Donna can read my moods, too, and suddenly she’s standing beside me holding out a beer. I take it gratefully and knock about a quarter of it back. “You did good,” she says as I lower the bottle from my mouth. She leans in to peck my cheek. My frame of mind considerably brightens when I see standing behind her two young guys shifting their weight from leg to leg, fingers pulling at the labels on their beer bottles, obviously waiting to talk to me. A few seconds later they’re holding copies of the

info sheet, and I'm walking them through the deal one more time. I know one of them, the husband of a yoga instructor here in the valley I've taken classes from, and remember he was laid off when the sawmill at Slocan shut down. So the concept of economic changes putting your livelihood at risk isn't foreign to him.

The boys I'm talking to don't commit, of course, but when we're done I can tell they're mulling the prospect over. This evidence that my presentation didn't fall entirely on deaf ears cheers me up even more. My smile is genuine as I saunter over toward the beer drinkers.

Too late I see baby-face Roger detach from where he has been holding forth earnestly to a couple of guys taller than him. "I hope you didn't mind me asking my questions," he starts, in that self-deprecating manner which I can tell is completely phony. "You're on to an interesting scheme, though I don't quite see how it could work. But I've taken one of your handouts—" he pulls a folded paper out of a rear pocket of his slacks to show me, before stuffing it back "—to study. Oh, and before I forget." He pauses for just a microsecond too long. "Marcia says hi. I grew up in New Westminster with Bart. You know Bart, right? He knows you, anyway. His wife is good friends with Marcia, and I was over at Bart and Andrea's for supper last night. Marcia was there, too. When I mentioned I was going to attend your event this evening, she said to be sure to say hello."

Roger's face is expressionless. I can't tell if he's trying to let me know that he's aware of my fling with Marcia, that it was talked about over dinner. Is he vaguely threatening me with disclosure? Or is he just making a pathetic attempt at connection? I have a flash that he's the kind of creep who likes to have a dossier of information on everybody, especially how people are vulnerable. Just in case those details ever come in handy.

"Be sure to say hello next time you see her," I shoot back. "She's a good customer, and I like to keep my customers satisfied." The last is just in case he has the hots for her himself—she *does* have a body that won't quit. Why not rub it in that I'm getting a piece off her and he isn't? "Now if you'll excuse me."

"Actually, I do have one more quethtion," Roger begins. "How could coffee—?" But I step past him toward where Mickey Vosin and three other older growers are deep in conversation. I interrupt them with my smile and "Well, what do you gentlemen think?"

"Alan, your idea is completely full of shit. Here's why," Mickey begins, bluster being his modus operandi, especially when he's in the wrong. But I'm happy to half-listen to him repeat some of the objections I've already dealt with in the meeting, while I chew over one more time whether Roger really could make trouble for me with regard to Marcia. Or in some other way. I'm also wondering whether five years from now I'll be recognized as the far-sighted founder of the thriving West Kootenay coffee industry, or I'll still be flogging grow mixes and irrigation systems for two-bit

dope operations. Also seedlings, wind chimes and plant pots for the general public.

I decide it's a win for me in either case, like with Donna and Marcia. If you can't take a few chances, step out of the well-worn path that leads ahead, you're going to end up living somebody else's dream of what your life should be like.

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David Sapp / Four Poems

The Black Snake Corpse

I sensed him first
as I reached beneath
the tangle of pine limbs,
yanking at crabgrass and thistle,
cutting out the deadwood,
a recognition in my peripheral vision,
a remnant of animal instinct,
and flinching hard, jerked my hand
away from the black snake corpse.

Transfixed in his coil,
seemingly poised to strike,
a thick spiral of cable wire,
an expressionistic whorl of paint,
he died some time ago of age,
peacefully in this small copse
or violently, desperately
fending off the hawk; maybe
a piece of mouse stuck in his gullet.

It was a while before my dread
abated, a thudding heart slowed,
supplanted by a little pity; still,
even dead, I wouldn't touch him
except for poking timidly with
the shovel; I know
he would only flee from my boot
and skulk off, preoccupied
with his own peculiar tasks.

The Hurricane

At the back of the yard,
along the fence row,
raveled with wire, briar,
rust and rabbit warrens,
the wild cherry branch hung,
a dislocated arm turned downward,
twisted by the hurricane, the brute
that punched fiercely along
the Great Lakes all the way to Ohio.

Many, more majestic trees
were beaten, but in my path
this limb lashed out,
thwacking me across the brow,
a stinging, open-handed wallop
as if I were to blame
for its predicament; indignantly,
I wrenched at this unexpected rival,
but the bough wouldn't give.

Though crippled, it endured,
obstinate, leafing out, sap flowing,
flowering inconsequential blossoms
and grudgingly, offering little, stemmed
berries, the color of dark, red wine,
more seed than fruit,
appealing only to birds
unlike its voluptuous cousins –
fat cupids for women's pies.

For two summers we grappled
like muscled wrestlers, stubborn
wills thrashing about the arena;
at the end of this long winter,
after months of thwarted moves,
on a whim I gave it another tug
with no anticipation of victory,
and the branch pulled free;
I am content with this small triumph,
but oddly, I miss the battle.

The Hen

Soon after Hoover
promised “a chicken
in every pot,” the hen
embarked upon a grand adventure,
a ride into town in
the farmer’s jalopy, rust,
bailing twine, and fence wire
strung together like the leather
and laces of a loose-jointed shoe.

The hen sat up front beside
the farmer’s dog, a venerable geezer,
an odd couple that got along
in a curious unison cocking
their heads at passing sights;
she clucked as a fretting wife
in low, wary comments
and the occasional, excitable cackle,
from him, a growling “humph.”

Long before the farmer’s
dentures rattled in his mouth,
like a clacking tractor engine,
he needed a tooth pulled
and didn’t have a quarter;
the hen became the barter.

In the dentist’s waiting room,
in her cushioned chair, she
gracefully laid an exquisite egg,
warm, smooth, spotted, and tanned
like a girl’s freckled shoulder;
she seemed to know – she seemed to ask:
“will you pluck my feathers
to the skin for a single meal or
fry my lovely, yellow yolks
forever in your skillet?”

Bees

We fought the bees
every summer when
we were a swarm of gangly kids;
the bees were our mortal enemies,
soldiers everywhere pillaging,
drunk on the nectar of clover,
wild rose, and apple blossom.
Some say the honeysuckle asked for it,
flaunting those slutty stamens,
curvaceous, jutting sex.

We skirmished in backyards,
along the creek, at the brackish pond,
in the tall meadow wildflowers.
We were proud walking wounded,
stingers pierced skinny arms and legs,
our tears boiling fury searing our cheeks.
No wonder the bees' allies raged,
waged a vicious war, the barbarian cousins,
wasps, yellow jackets, and hornets;
we hacked at their nests
like papier-mâché piñatas.

Then I worried over the bees.
Were they sleeping?
Did they forsake us, retreating
to an exotic, African land,
weary of fighting pesticides,
microwaves, thoughtless children?
I was happy when a swarm
blocked my usual path;
their buzzing hum a joyous chorus,
I reminisced over ancient crusades.

Now I know their barbs
were meant to defend

a sacred *corbicula* chalice.
What will we eat without
the bees' bellies round and fat?
A veteran marauder,
surrendered in my window,
here to visit old battlefields,
is the sad, remaining warrior,
and all we have left
to spar are stories.

ROSS KLATTE is the author of *Leaving the Farm: Memories of Another Life*, and of short stories that have appeared in magazines in Canada and the United States. He is a 1990 winner of the CBC Literary Competition for what became the opening chapter of his memoir, and in 2011 was shortlisted for Canada's *Journey Prize Anthology*. He has written a novel about back-to-the-land dissidents, circa 1970, in British Columbia, and is now looking for a publisher.

The Lights of the City

Ross Klatte

TOM WALKED INTO the party and immediately saw her, standing in front of the nearly floor-to-ceiling window in this apartment on the sixteenth floor of this south-side residence hotel, her drink held before her like a shield between herself and the sleek-looking guy talking to her. She caught Tom looking at her and smiled. He smiled back—his cautious show of interest—while behind her the lights of the city gleamed and shimmered and she seemed to embody them and all they promised.

She turned away from Mr. Sleek and Tom, disregarding his usual shyness, crossed the room to stand beside her. Together they stared out the window at the flow of lights below them along the South Shore Drive. There seemed to be more cars than usual. Of course it was a Friday night.

“Lots of traffic,” Tom commented. “You have to wonder where everybody’s going.”

“They’re fleeing the city!” she said gaily. “It’s the evacuation!”

“Right.”

It was a joke. Only it wasn’t. It was an anxious time.

“I’m Tom.”

“Sharon.”

She had dark wavy hair, a coffee and cream complexion, and was soft looking, almost matronly, despite her young age. Like everyone else here, she must be somewhere in her twenties. He himself was twenty-seven and starting to dread the arrival of his thirtieth birthday.

“You alone?”

“Not exactly.” She motioned toward Mr. Sleek, now off in a corner and apparently putting the make on another girl. “His name’s *Charles*,” she said, broadly pronouncing his name so as to suggest a certain phoniness. “He’s in advertising.”

“I’m not surprised.”

She gave a throaty laugh.

“What do you do?”

“I work at the *Tribune*,” Tom told her, then qualified it by adding, “in the Neighborhoods section. It’s where they start you out on that paper.”

“So you’re a reporter. That sounds like such a glamorous job to me.”

“Hardly, not in Neighborhoods, anyway. My partner and I each have to produce an average of eight hed stories, that’s stories of at least five graphs, that is paragraphs, that’ll warrant at least a fourteen-point hed—*hed*, spelled h.e.d., *Tribune* style—a day to fill our Sunday section. It’s what you might call a glorified weekly. We’re chained to our desks, to our telephones and typewriters. Never get out on the street. I’ve been stuck in the section for a year. What do *you* do?”

“Me? I’m a lowly researcher for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you. Mostly it’s just tedious. I’m starting to hate my job.”

“So am I.”

“The cry of our age!” she exclaimed.

Tom saw her sleek date approaching. She touched his arm, said, “Brief encounter. Want to keep it that way?”

“No!”

She told him her number and he wrote it on his hand with his ballpoint. Mr. Sleek sidled up, glared at Tom, and they were gone.

* * *

It was the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. October 1962. Around the paper it had started with rumors of a Soviet military presence in Cuba that to Tom and his fellow reporters sounded like just another Cold War scare. But then President Kennedy appeared on television to announce that nuclear missile sites were being built on the island, only ninety miles off America’s shore, and that his ‘unswerving objective’ would be to remove this menace to the Western hemisphere. He would start with a “quarantine” (that is, a navy blockade) of Cuba.

That was scary all right, and it got scarier when a fleet of Russian freighters, presumably carrying nuclear missiles, began approaching the island. Things didn’t look good. There was a rash of anti-war demonstrations, on and off college campuses. There was something like a collective holding of breath as people read or watched or listened to reports of the intense negotiations going on while striving to continue with their normal lives. At the *Trib* there was excitement in the newsroom, but in the Neighborhoods section the concern was still community news and the same dry reporting of it went on. In the midst of the crisis, in fact, as if nothing else concerned him, Tom was called into the office of old man Sinclair, managing editor of Neighborhood News, to talk about his “lack of production.”

This can’t go on, he was warned—for the second time.

So what? Tom thought. They were facing annihilation. But a couple of days later, the crisis winding down, he decided no! He was not going to get fired; he was going to increase his production, impress the copydesk

and get Sinclair off his back by letting go of the effort to write exceptional prose (what had made him an outstanding graduate of the University of Minnesota's journalism school and got him hired by the *Tribune* in the first place) to simply bang out the kind of cliché-ridden, stock-phrased copy the desk of the self-proclaimed "world's greatest newspaper" demanded. *Then* he would walk into the old fart's office and give his notice.

Meanwhile, he'd met this gorgeous girl.

He called her after the crisis had passed, hoping for a weekend date. She said maybe; in the meantime he could come over, if he liked, and she gave him her address. It was on the north side, in Old Town. He lived on the south side, in Hyde Park—not far from where they'd met, in fact.

It was a Tuesday evening, already eight o'clock. Wednesday was deadline day, and he'd better not be late for work. Regardless, he caught the Illinois Central commuter train into the Loop, and then a cab to her place.

It was on North Avenue, a loft apartment in a converted coach house just down the street from the Old Town Ale House, a hip watering hole that Tom knew, and liked, for its variety of imported beers. Old Town was Chicago's new Bohemia then, but it was quickly becoming as fashionable, as gentrified as its predecessor, the Near North. It already felt artificial, whereas Hyde Park, run-down and with whole blocks razed for renewal, seemed more real to Tom.

He climbed the outside stairway to her door and knocked—there was no bell. She opened the door, with a warm smile, wearing a housecoat and slippers. "Hi. Come in. I'm just out of the shower."

He expected her place to be a little classier than it was. In fact it was small and rather shabby, just two and a half rooms furnished with what looked like castoffs from the Salvation Army. The box-like living room was barely large enough to contain an old couch, a portable TV on an overturned wooden box, and a worn stuffed recliner that Tom sat down in. The kitchen had a table and two unmatched chairs. The bathroom only had a shower, she said. Her bed was a Murphy, folded now into her single closet.

"You live alone, I guess."

"At the moment. I might move in with a couple of stews that fly out of O'Hare. They have a nice place on Wells and need a third roommate to make the rent. I'm not sure, though, that I'll *like* having roommates."

"I have a roommate. He's a salesman and out of town most of the time. We get along, but I like it when he's gone."

"The best of both worlds."

"Wanna go for a beer?"

"Not especially. I have some wine if you want a drink."

"No thanks."

“We could watch television.”

“Okay.”

Her casualness, the fact that she remained in her housecoat (he supposed she was naked under it) excited him. They sat together on the couch and watched *Viva Zapata* on an art channel. They’d both seen it before. During the commercial breaks they talked about Mexico, where both would like to go someday, and revolution and Marlon Brando as Emiliano Zapata. “He isn’t all that convincing,” she said. “He’s too self-consciously acting, I think.”

She took his hand, and toward the end of the movie laid her head on his shoulder. But when the movie was over, she walked him to the door.

“Can we see each other again?”

“I’d like that,” she said.

“I’ll call you.”

He leaned toward her and she raised her face to him. They kissed, a sweet, rather chaste connection, and he felt a rush of tenderness toward her.

“I’ll call you,” he said again, and seemed to float down the outside stairway to the street and then down the street to the Old Town Ale House where he drank a pint of the British porter they had on tap before hailing a cab. It was so late, and he was so excited, he let the cab take him all the way home to Hyde Park.

* * *

They had a real date the next weekend—Tom, by way of comps to the paper, had tickets to the Bolshoi Ballet, on an American tour that year—and not long after that they began sleeping together. They took to meeting after work at the Water Tower, which was near both their offices. Then they might walk along the Chicago River to the sidewalk bar across from the Marina City Towers, a big project under construction then on the opposite bank. After a drink, unless they were going to her place, they’d walk over the bridge and down Michigan Avenue. Darkness would be falling and the city already glowing and life starting up again after the deadening work day. Their reflection in the store windows they passed was like a movie of themselves in which he saw the bobbing waves of her dark hair, the length of her fine brown bare legs flashing out of her fashionably short skirt, and himself beside her, *with* her. She was everything that was exciting about the city, he kept reminding himself, its romance, its allure. Chicago was his New York, his Paris, and he was here, despite that he had joined the navy and seen some of the world, and was still basically a country boy in the big city. She was *of* this city, one of its beautiful young women who, until now, had seemed as unobtainable to him as movie stars, who’d made him feel as if he was starving in the midst of plenty.

If his roommate was away, they’d head for his place, plunging into

the subterranean Randolph Street Station, crowded with workers let loose from their jobs, all going home on the IC to their apartments on the south side or their houses in the southwest suburbs.

They'd join the rush through the turnstile, follow the crowd to their train, and sit holding hands together as the train rolled south out of the tunnel to stop at Van Buren, at Central Station, then clipped along in a race with traffic along the South Shore Drive. After only some fifteen minutes, accompanied by the screech of steel on steel, the train would slow, then jerk to a stop as the conductor called out, "Fifty-first, Hyde Park Boulevard!"

They'd walk the one block east to his apartment building on Cornell, sometimes stopping for groceries, for wine or bottles of the dark German beer they both liked, before riding the elevator to his fourth-floor efficiency with its one window looking down on the alley and across at the brick wall of the adjoining building.

They'd make a supper together while starting on the wine or beer, then eat, looking across the table at intervals to smile at each other, for weren't they lovers now and wasn't this an adventure?

After their meal they might read, or listen to jazz or classical music on the radio; their love of books and music was the one sure thing they had in common. (He had no television; she professed not to miss it.)

Around ten, because they both had to get up early for work (except for Friday and Saturday nights when they usually went out—to dinner and a movie, sometimes to a bar), they went to bed. They'd make urgent, almost desperate love, and then entwine, spoon fashion, and go to sleep. He woke sometimes in the night to feel the warmth of her body and hear her light breathing. He might still be awake when the IC's midnight passenger train roared by, shaking the building. Usually he didn't hear it anymore, but his first month or so in this strange city, in this apartment building only a block away from the tracks, he'd be jolted awake by the roar and the shaking and fear a Midwestern tornado was upon him—like the one that churned past his folks' farmhouse in Minnesota one night when he was a boy, uprooting a tree in the yard and tearing a swath through the cornfield across the driveway. Remembering the farm and the gusting winter storms that blew against the house while he lay snug in his upstairs bed, he thought how lovely it was now, in bed with this soft young woman, in this warm, sweet nest they made together.

She whimpered in her sleep and he loved that; it made him feel protective of her. In the morning she'd often wake up cross and whining, like a spoiled child, then suddenly grin and become playful as a child, which tended to arouse them both. If her changing moods were symptomatic of something, a self-absorption, a neurotic core inside her softness like the stone inside a peach, it was okay. Because didn't they all, he told himself, in this day and age—especially at *their* age—possess

that stone?

He loved her. He loved her profile. He loved her dark hair, her light brown skin—she had a Shawnee maternal great-great-grandmother, she told him one night; that she was part Indian only increased her allure—and with hardly any awareness of it he let go of his studied coolness, his self-protective containment of himself. He opened up his heart to her, but she didn't, he soon realized, quite open hers to him.

The trouble was she didn't know what she wanted. She didn't know what she believed in or where she was going or *should* be going. She didn't know who she wanted to be *with*, she finally confessed to him, or whether she wanted to be with *anybody*. She could not make up her mind—about anything! Her education—she had a degree in sociology from Oberlin—had only filled her with questions, without providing any answers. Her father was a lawyer—she never said what kind—her mother on the board of their country club in Cleveland. Of course they were Republicans. She came from money! That explained her, he thought. And yeah, that made her all the more attractive.

One night, together in his apartment, they were surprised by Tom's roommate, supposed to be on the road visiting college bookstores on behalf of his employer, a textbook publisher. They heard his key in the lock, the door opened, and there he stood, a conspiratorial grin on his face.

He'd forgotten something, he said. Thought he might as well spend another night at home before hitting the road.

"I can't stay here now," Sharon said.

"Why not? Fred doesn't mind, do you, Fred?"

"It's okay," Fred assured them.

"I have to go," Sharon insisted.

"Then I'll go with you."

"No, stay. I'm going, though."

"Look, I'll go," Fred said. "I'm sorry I barged in on you."

The upshot was that Tom stayed that night with Fred in their apartment, and Sharon went home to hers.

The next night, at her place, Tom broached the idea of moving in with her, in Old Town.

"I don't know about that."

"Why? It would simplify things. Besides, you don't like Hyde Park. Too grungy, you say, too ugly. Too much urban renewal going on."

"It's not that. I like being close to the University of Chicago. I like going to Jimmy's."

"Why then?"

"Oh, I keep wondering if what we're doing is right."

"Of course it's right! My God, Share, we love each other, don't we? We can get married, if you like."

“You kidding? We hardly know each other and I’m not ready for that. Anyway, it’s not a question of *morality*. It’s . . . is this doing us any good?” Her voice went a little hard. “Is it doing *me* any good?”

They were in bed and he was holding her. Her warm back, her warm buttocks curved into him. They fitted together perfectly. But then she stiffened and rolled away from him.

“Something’s missing,” she said wearily, not for the first time. “This isn’t *enough*. There’s got to be more.”

“You sound bitter.”

“I’m not bitter! It’s just that everything seems so—oh, I don’t know, so *incomplete*, so unfulfilling. I think I love you, Tom, but that doesn’t *solve* anything.”

“What’s to solve, for godsake? Life? Is life ever *solved*?” He was angry suddenly, exasperated by what seemed her bottomless well of dissatisfaction. “You know what you can do about it,” he told her sarcastically. “You can end it. Anyway, the end comes for all of us—soon enough.”

“You sound pretty bitter yourself.”

“I’m realistic, is all. Live each day, as the poet says.”

“Horace. *Carpe diem*,” she said. “That’s Latin for seize the day. I learned that in college.”

“So did I. Then there’s Omar Khayyám. ‘The Bird of Time has but a little way to flutter—and the Bird is on the wing.’”

“Aren’t we literary?”

And they laughed at each other.

He moved in with her the next weekend.

* * *

One night, cosy together in her apartment, supper eaten, the dishes washed and put away, they sat reading, she on the couch, he on the stuffed chair opposite her. He was into Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, which he’d started about a year ago and was finally finishing; she was reading a library copy of *Another Country*, James Baldwin’s new novel. Baldwin was the rage then among people hip to the Negro Movement. Tom raised his eyes occasionally to look at her. She, reading intently, never looked up at him.

“I love you,” he told her—from the heart, he thought, a declaration of how he felt about her, their intimacy, the domestic comfort they were enjoying together.

Seemingly startled, she threw her book down, jumped up, and raced to the phone. She dialed, her back to him, and he felt their separateness, how schmaltzy he must have sounded.

“Hi,” she said into the phone. “This is Sharon. . . Yeah, I know. How long has it been?”

He tried to resume reading. Then he noticed he was gripping the pages

so hard he was smudging the print.

“No particular reason. I was just thinking about you.”

He looked up to see her studying him as she talked, an appraising glint in her eyes.

“Yeah, you’re right . . . my fault.” She nodded into the phone, her face starting to glow. “So whattaya think? Wanna meet sometime?”

He looked down at his book.

“I’m with someone too now. . . Oh, at a party.”

Her voice went low. “Nooo, he’s . . . and you’re . . .” She gave her throaty laugh. They talked for a long time. Finally she placed the receiver down, smiling to herself, and went back to her book.

“Who was that?” He was wonderfully in control.

“Oh, just a guy. Somebody I used to know.”

“A guy you used to sleep with?” He was still beautifully in control.

“What of it?” She held her book up to her face. “It’s kind of rude of you to ask.”

“Is it? You’re the one who knows how to be rude.”

Tom stood up and walked over to her.

“You going to hit me?” she asked. And sat there on the couch, smiling up at him.

“You want me to?”

“Yes. *Yes.*”

He leaned over her and her face took on a wildly expectant look that aroused, disturbed him. Her eyes glittered. Then he saw there were tears in them. He fell down in front of her and she put her arms around him. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I was terrible. I wanted you to hit me.”

“I would never hit you.”

They wound up making delirious, completely satisfying love, he thought—until afterwards, when he felt sad for some reason. Didn’t Hemingway somewhere write of post-coital depression? Sharon seemed afflicted with it too.

“You all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Aren’t you?”

And she hugged him, as if to reassure both of them.

* * *

Another night, in a bar, Sharon started talking to some junior executive type on the stool next to her. As they warmed to each other, he placed a hand on her thigh. She left it there, became more animated.

Tom had the urge to step off his stool and pull the guy off his. Instead he said, “Let’s go, Share. I’m tired all of a sudden.”

She turned to him and grinned. “I’m not tired at all.”

“I can see that. You having fun?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m perfectly sober.”

She turned and smiled at the guy, who made a point of smiling at Tom.

“C’mon, Sharon. Let’s just go.”

“I’m staying. See you later.”

She gave him a look that said *whatta you gonna do about it?* Nothing, he decided.

“You sure?”

“As sure as I can be of anything,” she said, and the smile on the guy’s face broadened.

“Go to hell then,” he told her, and turned his back on her—on *them*—and stalked out.

The bar where this situation had started, which he’d just left, was on North Wells Street, a fair distance from Old Town, but he walked it. He reached her place after an hour of trudging the many ill-lighted blocks, half-expecting, half-hoping to be mugged (*See what you made happen?*), and fell into her Murphy bed in the empty apartment, feeling its emptiness, her absence, and lay awake—until finally he heard a car pull up outside, then footsteps (hers? Theirs?) on the outside stairway, then the key being inserted into the lock and the door open. Had the car driven away? What if it hadn’t?

He heard her heavy breathing. She was drunk all right. She stood still for a moment, he guessed, probably trying to determine whether he was there or not. Then he heard her move to the bathroom. The light in there went on and she turned on the tap. He heard her gag, then throw up. She’d stuck her finger down her throat; it was what she did when she felt she was going to be sick: *Might as well get it over with!* Now she was brushing her teeth. Then the bathroom light went out, he heard her undress, the bed covers lifted and her cool body slid in beside him.

“You get what you wanted?”

“Nothing happened. Let’s go to sleep.”

“*Something* happened. What were you—”

“Please. I just want to sleep.”

He rolled away from her, but she cuddled up to him, fitted her body to his and breathed into his ear, “You’re jealous! I like that.”

He was choking on his hurt and anger, but then the warmth of her body, the comfortable, familiar feel of it, eventually lulled him to sleep.

The next morning she was grinning and playful and they made lovely love with the sun spilling into the room. It was Saturday; they could sleep in. They finally rose about one and together made a breakfast of scrambled eggs, croissants and marmalade, and café au lait. Then they showered and dressed and went out. It was fall now, with a briskness in the air that made them want to run.

They ran, a good part of the way, to Lincoln Park and sat by the lake.

The brisk wind was off the water and the lake heaving against the shore. Leaves were falling from the trees. “Isn’t this marvelous?” she said, hugging him.

“Yes.”

“Hooray!” she called into the wind. “We’re two against the world. Let the world blow!”

Later they had a long lunch in the classy joint with the sawdust floor in Old Town, then went out on the street again. The day was closing down. There was a definite chill in the air now, a reminder that winter was coming, and they both felt like running again, they felt like flying.

“Let’s head down to the Loop,” he said.

“Let’s!”

“We’ll walk down State Street . . . that *great street!*” Tom sang the phrase, echoing Frank Sinatra’s version of *Chicago*. “We’ll eat at Berghoff’s.”

“Yes!”

But on the El she was quiet as the train headed south, lurching and screeching above the streets. She gripped his hand, and as the El plunged underground to become a subway, she shouted above the train’s screeching, “Let’s get off on Division!”

They got off in the Near North, climbed the stairway to Division Street, and joined the merry crowd of mostly young men and women like themselves. Looking up he saw the evening sun against some high, pink clouds. There was no evidence of the urban haze he knew must be there.

“Where should we go?” he asked.

“Let’s just go,” she said.

They walked up Division and down State; then up Elm. They came to a place they’d been to before.

Inside they sat at a table and ordered steins of the beer on tap. He smiled at her, but she looked past him.

Their beer arrived in chilled mugs. She took a sip of hers.

“I don’t like this,” she said.

“What, the beer? We’ll try something else.”

“No, it’s not the beer, it’s . . . it’s *here*. It’s . . . *us*.”

She stared past him, then took a big gulp of her beer. She smiled at him then. It was like a grimace.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said. “About you and me and whether there’s any point in carrying on with what we’re doing.”

“What’re we doing? You mean our living together? You on that kick again? I told you: we can get married.”

“And I told you it isn’t that. It’s . . . it’s *us*. It’s you. You’re not what I want, after all. You’re not what I *need*. I’m sorry,” she said.

Tom took a breath. “I knew this was coming,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for it.”

“Don’t be angry. I probably love you,” she said. “But it’s not enough.”

“I’m not angry.”

“You’re hurt then.”

“I’m not hurt!”

“Oh *please*. Don’t be angry. Don’t be hurt. I’m not worth it.”

Tom took another breath. “You’re worth it,” he said. “*We’re* worth it. Christ, Sharon, do you even *know* what you’re looking for?”

“No.”

She looked away. He hated her now, hated her stubborn self-absorption, her complete self-centeredness. Whatever the fuck she was looking for, he hoped to hell she’d find it someday. He hoped she’d finally *know* what the fuck it was. *Whatever* it was, she hadn’t found it with him.

“You’re not what I want either, finally.”

“Then it’s good that we’re splitting up.”

“You’ve taught me honesty, Share, I’ll say that for you. Be honest. Be cruel.”

“You *are* hurt,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry. And you know what? You’re like those lights out there, the lights of the city, so soft and glowing and alluring, and guys like me, we’re . . . we’re the goddamn moths, smashing ourselves against them,” he said, suddenly pleased with his nice metaphor.

“You’ll be better off without me. Believe me.”

Her eyes were soft, then hard. He loved her, though he shouldn’t anymore, now more than ever. He loved her hard, honest, unyielding eyes.

I could be recalled. That thought struck him now; it would be grimly satisfying. There’d be no nuclear missiles fired from Cuba, thanks to Khrushchev and President Kennedy communicating with each other; no nuclear World War Three—though nobody, other than the heads of state in Washington and Moscow, knew then how extremely close it had come. But he still had a year to go before his eight-year military obligation was over, and lately there’d been talk around the paper about the war going on in what used to be French Indo-China—now Vietnam—and the open secret of America’s growing involvement over there in the name of fighting communism. Sounded like another Korea. He’d missed that war, but he might get in this possible one, though he’d served his time, his four long years in the navy.

We shouldn’t have moved in together, he thought. They should have kept it loose, kept their separate places, not committed to actually living together.

“I’ll call in sick tomorrow,” he told Sharon. “I’ll move out while you’re at work. I’ll leave my key.”

“Where will you stay tonight?”

“Hyde Park, with my old roommate. I told him this might happen.”

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She moved to touch him.

“No,” he said. “Don’t bother.”

And he stood up and walked stiffly out of the bar and onto the brightly lit street still crowded with young people just like him—just like *her*—people of their anxious, neurotic generation, all stupidly drawn to the misleading lights of this city. Maybe he would quit the paper now. Maybe he would move to another city.

First published in *The New Orphic Review*, MEG FOX's "Piano Boy" was selected for the 2014 *Journey Prize Anthology*. Her poetry has appeared in *Grey Skies Review*, *The Trinity Review* and others. Her Play, *I Wish I Had a River*, was featured in the 2012 Breathing Fire Reading Series. Her novels include *The Bone of Time*, a portrait of a Hemingwayesque young writer in twenties Paris, and she is now working on a dystopian revolutionary trilogy, *Band of Comrades*. She holds a doctorate in English from the University of Toronto, and is founder of The Dragon Academy.

Marked on the Body

M.A. Fox

HE WAS WAITING on platform 11 for the westbound train. Behind his dark glasses, his eyes were half closed, and he moved his head and shoulders to the music in his ears, just a little, a kind of contained swaying. He didn't want to look like the idiots in the ads, bouncing and jumping and strutting their stuff to music no one else could hear. She was standing a few feet from him. He noticed her because of her hair, rich purpled red. She was reading a hardcover book and sipping from a big iced coffee. It was surely her, but he had trouble being sure. He'd been looking for her without looking, for a dozen years, his eyes drawn to every woman whose hair was that colour. Henna, he knew that now, from art school girlfriends, but then he'd thought it was natural, a rare gift of the genes. He'd said that to her once, shy, awkward, "Your hair is beautiful, the colour in the sunlight. It's like flames." She had smiled at him, said thank you. Her tone was light and teasing, moving things away from sincerity, flattery, longing. Her voice, which he'd found so sexy then, low-pitched, husky, a smoker's voice he knew now, but not then, contained a rich amusement at the things of the world. The tone did what it was meant to do, put his adolescent passion back in its box, restored the proper distance between them.

She glanced up from her book, looked along the track for the train. Her eyes rested on him for a minute, she was looking at him, taking him in, but without recognition. He'd changed a lot since he was fourteen and she came into his grade nine English class, the substitute for Mrs. Kempton, who'd had both her legs broken when a car collided with her bicycle. He was a good foot taller, lean and wiry, his hair had grown darker, he cultivated his facial hair so that it was always in just the right state between stubble and beard. In grade nine, the only kid in the class who was shorter was Dolores, whose parents were Pilipino, and who had to wear high-heeled boots to inch over five feet. He was pudgy then,

baby-faced, nothing to shave, maybe half a dozen stray hairs on his chest. He did just enough work to hover at the bottom of the class, which wasn't much work at all. He trailed, unwelcome, after the cool kids, hoping some of their glamour would wear off on him. Puppy-eager, he'd bought some tolerance by acting as a cash machine, pinching liquor from his parents. He slavishly copied their outfits, their postures, learned from them to skip most of the dreary class-time by asking to be excused ten minutes or so in, sailing past the washrooms and out into the parking lot, returning just in time to copy a few notes from the board and get the homework. He felt clever because the teachers never seemed to catch on, but more likely they just didn't care.

Miss Constance Fairchild was something else. He'd come to class early her first day, largely out of curiosity. Not much happened in high school. But she was young, just out of teacher's college he supposed, hip. She wore short skirts and had good legs, sported an armload of bangles that clattered when she wrote on the board. She had extra piercings in her ears, wore an assortment of unmatched long dangling earrings. She was excitable, argued with them, quoted from memory, paced back and forth in front of the class, perched on the edge of her desk. The boys paid attention. They were all hoping to get a glimpse up her skirt. She didn't seem overly impressed by the good students, the ones who waved their hands frantically so she'd call on them. She was ironic in response to the smug textbook answer. She knew about things the other teachers didn't, bands, slang. At Homecoming, one of the chaperones, it turned out she could dance, and would. When she looked at him, when she said his name, it felt like she reached out and pulled his heart from his chest, held it in her hand.

Hopeless of course. He got close to her the only way he could. He wrote her poems and songs, never shared. He drew her, endlessly, in the margins of his notebooks. One delirious field trip, he sat jammed up against her on the bus, feeling her thigh along the length of his, dizzy with the smell of her perfume, her hair, his eyes drawn to the opening of her blouse, the pendant that touched where her breasts began, the way when she stretched out her arms, gesturing, talking, he caught now and then a glimpse of lace. Red lace. He filed that away in his stock of dream images, the secret knowledge that ordinary white underwear was not for her. And for the first time in his life, instead of just skimming the Spark notes, he read every text she assigned, and searched out the others, the poems and novels and critics she loved. Focused only on her, he forgot about the cool kids when he was in her class. He didn't start waving his hand in the air, but when she called on him, he answered intelligently, fully, desperate for her to understand that these words were deeply meaningful to him too, that he was a kindred spirit. He made notes of the music she mentioned, downloaded it onto his playlist, replacing Green Day with

Ravel. He made notes of the words she used, and put them in his poems, nacreous, evanescent, uxorious, perspicuous. He sweated blood on his essays, cut out her comments and pasted them into the journal he had begun to keep because she said she kept one. On the last day of class, she organized a picnic, led them out into the cemetery behind the school grounds, where they sat among the headstones, everyone reading a favourite poem or the lyrics of a song. She read Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West."

The summer dragged endlessly. He sat on his apartment balcony for hours, practicing guitar, composing songs for her. But in the fall she was not there. Mrs. Kempton came back, though he had Mr. Sandell for English. The classes sank down into unutterable boredom, but he had acquired the habit of doing well, and it extended to his other subjects. He went on skipping, and hanging out on the back lot with the smokers. But he did his homework, it wasn't very hard, and he kept on reading, looking for the books she'd praised, memorizing poems, hearing her voice in his head.

The train came into the station. He edged over, followed close behind her as she mounted the steps, sat where he could stare at her the whole trip, masked by his shades. She hardly glanced up, reading intently, sometimes copying out of the book on a piece of folded paper, holding the coffee cup between her knees to free her hands. They got out at the same stop, but she walked fast, and he lost her in the crowd coming down onto the street. He wondered why she was taking the train to Mississauga in the evening rush hour. She must be living there, unimaginable as it was, working in the city and then a long trek home to some suburban bungalow. He was going out to the studio, cutting their first album with his band. He still depended on his day job, pulling over-priced specialty coffees for Bay Street business types. A tall skinny no foam extra shot latte to get you through the morning. The band was doing all right though. They had regular gigs at decent bars, a distributor lined up for the CD. He wrote the songs, he and B.P. on keyboard. They were really onto something, developing a bit of a following, playing their own stuff, not just covers.

After that, he looked for her every time he stepped onto platform 11, and more often than not he saw her too. He'd weave through the crowd to stand right near her, sit where he could see her, or tease himself with sitting on the seat behind her, putting his arm across it, feeling the back of her neck, the brush of her hair when the train rocked. She always had a book. If she looked at him, it was impersonal, appraising, like a barman, a bouncer. Each time, as she walked away from him, he said to himself next time he would go right up to her, remind her that she knew him.

The voice that crackled through the loudspeaker over his head sounded bored and insincere. There had been a delay, westbound. Emergency crews

were on the scene, and regular service would be restored in approximately twenty-five minutes. She said, "I might as well have bought myself a fucking coffee." She was not talking to him, but he answered. "There's a Second Cup, near the ticket booth."

She looked at him then. "This place is such a labyrinth. I'll probably miss the train trying to find it."

"I was going to get a coffee myself," he said, which was not true. "Come on, I'll show you."

She closed her book, tucked it into her knapsack. It was bright green, embroidered with characters from Babar. She caught him staring at it, shrugged. "It amuses me," she said.

"I remember that about you."

She narrowed her eyes, looked at him more closely. He pushed his shades up on his forehead. She had to tilt her head back, now, to look up at him. She shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm terrible with names, but usually I recognize faces."

A man with a gigantic suitcase was pushing ahead of them onto the escalator. He put his hand lightly on the small of her back, steered her aside so she wouldn't have her toes crushed. They got onto the escalator, side by side, blocking the woman behind them, who pushed her almost into his arms getting by. "You must have hundreds of former pupils," he said.

"Thousands, more like. Give me some help."

"Grade nine English, Northview Heights Secondary," he said.

She searched his face, missing the end of the escalator, stumbling. He caught her elbow. "Kind of a long time ago," she said, "and I daresay you've changed a bit."

"Matt Stesco," he said.

She laughed then. "I would never have guessed. Not in a million years."

"You remember me then?" that tone in his voice, wheedling, pathetically hopeful.

"You bet," she said. "It was my first year of teaching, god I was nervous as a cat, and that was a tough class. And coming in like that, part-way through the term, the substitute. You were a godsend. I used to think about you, planning the lessons, I used to console myself that at least if you were interested, I might have some hope of reaching the others."

They stood in line at the coffee bar. "I wasn't much of a student," he said.

"Not true. You actually wanted to learn something, to understand. The others were doing it for the grades, or to impress their classmates, or completely detached and free-floating."

He didn't know what to do with this information. "What do you want?" she was unzipping her knapsack, "No, come on, let me buy this round."

"An enormous iced latte," she said. "No sugar. And thanks."

He placed the orders, a long double espresso for himself.

"I can't drink it neat," she said. "It makes me too jittery. You'd have to scrape me off the ceiling."

"There's not so much available caffeine as you'd think," he said, "the dark roast cooks it off. If you really want a buzz, you need a drip cup, from a pot that's been sitting on the warmer for a while."

She made a face. "Doesn't that sound inviting?"

They exchanged catch-up information. He told her about his band, the CD. She told him she was teaching an evening course, out at the Erindale campus, though she still taught high school English, full time. "I've gone over to the dark side," she said. "I'm at Bishop Strachan now."

"Trying to bring a little light to the entitled?"

"Oh the kids are all right, they're just kids under it all; it's the mothers who are really frightening, with their facelifts and breast enhancements and their designer clothes. Stepford wives."

They sat together on the train. He told her he'd seen her before, but hadn't found a way to start a conversation. "I noticed you too," she said, "not that I had any idea that it was you. But the body art is rather arresting."

His left arm was covered with a full sleeve tattoo. You could see a lot of it, it was summer, and he usually wore just a T-shirt. He had a big tattoo on his back, that you couldn't see, a woman extending her wings across his shoulder blades, his idea of the one who sang beyond the genius of the sea. "My own design," he told her. He did not add that it all came from her, the characters of the books she'd read with them twining together, Gatsby's Daisy and the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleberg, a bull and a bullfighter with a swirling red cape, for *The Sun Also Rises*, a mounted knight who was Gawain, carrying the green head of the giant, an albatross for The Ancient Mariner, a silver trout and golden apples for the Yeats poem, the dragon and the tree for the Garden of the Hesperides in *Possession*, Odysseus' sirens, perched on a blue rock, holding their lyres. She put out a finger, cold from her iced coffee, and traced the line of the dragon on his forearm. It was like being touched by a live wire.

When they got off the train, she said it was nice running into him, she always wondered how her old pupils were doing. "We don't have to leave it to chance," he said, astonished by his own daring, "I could give you my number. You could come by the studio sometime, after your classes. It's not far from the campus."

"I would actually love that. I've never been in a recording studio. And I'd like to know what kind of music you're writing." She took out her cellphone, punched his number into her contact list. He took out his phone too, trying to look casual. She gave him her number without blinking.

She didn't call him, of course. He figured he'd run into her on the train, fix a date, but she seemed to have disappeared. He waited a week, and then he called her during a break in the session, fortified by a gulp

from B.P.'s flask. He went straight to voice mail, left her careful instructions for getting to the studio, said why not come Thursday night? After he pressed "end" he kissed the phone.

They were on a break, gathered in the sound booth, sharing a joint. There was static from the intercom and the security guard saying, "There's a lady here, for Matt."

"Ooh, a lady," B.P. said. "Does she have a name?" then "hey, cut it out," to Matt, who punched him in the arm.

"Fairchild," the guard said.

"Well, why don't you send the lady right up?" B. P. said, ducking another punch.

"She's probably looking for me, really. Just afraid to say so. The drummer's the cool one," this was Chuck, kind of a pretentious idiot, not as good as he thought, but good all the same.

"You got your own old lady, Upchuck," Matt said.

"That joke is so old," Chuck said, "you should give it a decent burial."

"It's still got some life in it," Matt told him, "gets you every time."

She stood at the doorway, in her grown-up clothes, holding her Babar knapsack in front of her. They made a place for her in the sound booth, next to the other girlfriends and hangers on. The soundman gave her the executive treatment, a chair, a set of headphones. She accepted a toke, which surprised Matt. "Alright!" Chuck said.

They went back into the studio, picked up their instruments, got lost in the music. He looked over at her, from time to time, sitting there in the booth, listening. She'd put her hair up in some kind of a clip, it was shining in the light over her head. There were strands that had worked loose, trailing across her cheek. She looked happy, absorbed. She was talking with the soundman, he could tell, nodding her head, sometimes pointing to the panel.

It was near midnight, when they wrapped up. She came with them to the bar. She ordered a bloody Caesar, apologized for not liking beer. "They have wine by the glass," Chuck told her, but she made a face. "I'm a terrible snob," she said. She was quiet, nursing her drink. The others were rowdy, high on the beer and the joint they'd smoked on the way over, and on the way things had gone at the studio. "We really nailed that sucker," Chuck said. "Matt was on fire."

"Showing off for his fair child," B.P. said.

Matt looked at her, worried, but she smiled serenely. "You were pretty impressive," she said. "You have to invite me to the album launch."

After last call, they divided up, the ones who could get home by taxi, the ones who needed a ride downtown. Matt usually rode with B.P., who lived near him, and drove a vintage Beetle, which he somehow kept going. It was painted with faded flowers and tigers and ankhs, a real sixties' relic. She stood on the sidewalk, hesitating, looking into the crowded

car, then turning to Chuck and his girlfriend. "We're in High Park," Chuck told her. "Does that help?"

"If you just get me to a subway stop, that would be fine."

"The subway's going to be closed by the time we get in," Matt told her. "You should take my seat."

"Then how will you get home?"

"I'll crash at Chuck's, if he promises to keep his dog from molesting me."

"Don't be a wanker," B.P. said. "She can sit on your lap, she's short. Come on, Sarah's going to ream me out if I wake her up again."

They rode into the city with the radio blaring, singing along, she sang too. She sat on his right knee, her legs between his, his arms around her. "You must be crushed," she said to him when B.P. slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting some lunatic who decided it was a great idea to turn left across two lanes. "That's not the word I would choose," he said.

B.P. stopped at the corner of Dalton and Bloor. She got out first. Matt was trying to come up with something to say, wondering if he should shake her hand or give her a hug or just leave it. B.P. leaned across the empty seat. "You getting back in or what?" he said.

"Oh I can walk from here," she said. "I just live on Howland."

"Shut the door then. Nice meeting you and all that." She shut the door, and he took off, leaving them standing there, awkwardly.

"Look, I'd better walk you home," Matt said. "It's kind of late."

She didn't refuse. They walked companionably a couple of blocks back the way they'd come, turned up the street, quietly in step. "Look," she said, pointing, her bracelets clashing, "a full moon."

It sailed above the dark shapes of the old trees, round as a gold coin. "It's okay," he said, "you don't have to worry. I take drugs for it."

She looked up at him, puzzled for a second, then laughed. "The werewolf thing, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"This is me," she said. He followed her up the path, onto the porch, waited as she fished out the keys, trying to work up the courage to say, offhand, cool, that he'd like to see her again, not just hope to run into her on platform 11, when she looked over her shoulder, opening the door. "Would you like to come in? I could make you an espresso, or we could have a glass of wine."

He followed her in, sat on the edge of the living room couch. It was open to the kitchen, he could see her looking in the fridge. "I've got some white," she said, "I just opened it last night. It's Sancerre."

"Hemingway's favourite," he said, remembering. He looked around the living room. The couch, coffee tables and armchair, grown-up furniture—they were in good shape, they went together—were crowded by a grand piano and the bookshelves that ran from floor to ceiling. "This

is a nice house,” he said.

“I share it with my brother and his family. We bought it together, years ago. Mom and Dad gave us the down payment, when we were students. I think they were a little nervous about us, in the big city. They grew up in Huntsville, where they still live. In those days, we had a house group, while we were undergrads, and David, my brother, was doing his master’s. By the end, people had drifted away, we didn’t feel like starting over again, looking for roommates. He and Pam were engaged, I was working. At Northview,” she said, turning her head to smile at him. “So we increased the mortgage, turned it into two flats. They have the top two floors, three bedrooms, space for the kids, I took the ground floor. I get the garden.” She came into the living room, holding two glasses of white wine. “We could go out and sit there, if you like.”

“Sure.” He followed her through the dining room. “That’s a big table.”

“Dinner parties,” she said. “Also it’s my study. Sorry, you have to walk through the bedroom to get out the back, don’t look, it’s kind of a mess.”

He looked around anyway. It wasn’t really a mess, just some clothes on an armchair, a big bed, low to the floor, more bookshelves, books piled everywhere, on the bedside table, on the floor. She handed him her glass of wine, wrestled with the lock. They walked out onto a wide deck, down a couple of steps. He noticed she had taken off her shoes. She noticed him looking at her feet. “I like the way the grass feels,” she said, taking her wine glass from him. “I should, I have to mow it enough.” She raised her glass, touched it against his. “To the band. To success.” She sat down on the grass. A bit unsteadily, he sat down next to her. “We could bring a couple of chairs from the deck.”

“No, I like the way the grass feels,” he said.

They took a couple of sips. “This feels a little strange,” she said. “Transgressive.”

“I’m over eighteen,” he said.

“I know. But the last time we met, you were my student.”

“That was a long time ago, and besides, it was in another country.” The wine was cool, really delicious, full of subtle flavours and scents. He sniffed at it. “I’m glad you’re a wine snob.”

“I ardently believe I can tell the difference. But it puts some people off.”

“Not me. I’d like to learn about it.”

“You just have to drink a lot, keep tasting. Experience.”

There was a long pause in the conversation. They looked up at the moon. She lit a cigarette. He took one of hers. “Are you, then,” he said.

“Am I what?”

“Married?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge,” she said. “Are you?”

“Not even close.” He looked around the garden, the beds of day lilies and roses, the big old tree. “I always used to wonder about your life, outside of school. Where you went, how you lived, what it was like, your private life. Do teachers think about that, like that, about their students?”

“Not so much,” she said. “Professional boundaries, maybe. I don’t know why not, really. Is it the way you imagined?”

“I knew there’d be lots of books.”

“I can’t help it, they follow me home.”

He lay back on the grass, then turned sideways, so he could look at her, leaning on his elbow.

“What about the tattoos?” she said, reaching out to touch his arm again, lightly, just for a second.

“They have to do with books, too,” he said. He began to explain the design. You could see them clearly, in the moonlight, though the colours were leached out, washed blue. She leaned closer. He sat up, took off his shirt so she could see the figures of the bull and the bullfighter on his upper arm. He turned his back, so she could see the woman there. He recited the poem. He felt her fingers on his back, tracing the figure. Then her whole hand, feeling the muscles of his back with her palm. “Put your arms around me,” he said.

She moved so she could put her legs around him too, pulled him back against her with both arms locked across his chest. He leaned his head against her shoulder, he tipped it back, reaching up with his right arm to draw her face down to his. He kissed her, very softly, on the mouth, kissed her lingeringly.

It was she who broke it off. “I’m going to get a godawful crick in the neck, in this position,” she said. “Romantic as it is.” She unwrapped her legs from him, she leaned her hands on his shoulders a little, and stood up, reaching down to retrieve the wine glasses. He was baffled, hurt, uncertain. He just sat there, not knowing what to say or do. “It’s all right,” she said. “I’m over eighteen, you know.” Then, when he did nothing, “My room may be messy, but the sheets are clean.” She stood over him, smiling down at him. He couldn’t move. She looked confused, shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just thought... Look, it’s really late, I’ve had a bit too much...” She turned, started up the steps towards the house.

He jumped up then, caught up with her, took her arm to keep her from marching straight on into the kitchen, turned her to face him. “No,” he said, “wait. I just can’t believe it, is all. You must get it, do you see, it’s a sacred dream,” did he really say that? “Please. I want to, I’ve been wanting to. Please,” he almost called her Miss Fairchild, realized he’d been avoiding saying her name all night. “Please, Constance.” He took the wine glasses from her, set them down on the floor. “If you’ll let me. If you want to.”

She put up her hand, took the clip from her hair. He kissed her again,

in earnest, he put his hands in her hair, it was as soft as he had imagined, smooth as silk, as water. She put her hands to her shirt, began to undo the buttons. “No,” he said. “Let me.” She put her hands at his waist then. Slowly, one at a time, he undid the buttons, the way he’d imagined so many nights, alone in his narrow bed, opened her blouse, pushed it down her shoulders. He kissed her in all the places he’d dreamed of kissing, her neck, her shoulders, the base of her throat. The bra she wore was turquoise. He traced its edges with his fingers, with his lips. He undid the button on her trousers, eased down the zipper. He kissed her belly, he knelt before her. They were men’s trousers, heavy linen, the smallest tug sent them cascading to her ankles. She stepped out of them. He kissed her knees, her thighs. He stood up, holding her close while he rid himself of his jeans. He slid his hand in under the waistband of the turquoise underpants, covered all of her, fur and slippery cleft. He was not a virgin, he knew what he was doing, but it was an act of worship. With my body I thee worship, he thought. He laid her back on the bed as on an altar. In his one-handed dreams he had never been able to conjure up her response, her body, yes, her skin, but she had remained stubbornly passive in his virginal imaginings. Now she was real, she moved and turned and sighed and groaned, she said his name, she gripped his hair, his back, she wrapped her legs around him, she arched over him, touched by the moonlight that came through the window.

Sunlight was coming into the room by the time they were drifting off to sleep, her head on his chest. He was stroking her hair, she was stroking his tattooed arm. “I understand the images,” she said, “how you chose them, but why did you do it?”

He could have said, for the look, that it was tribal, it marked him out as a clan member, a certain kind of art student, musician. A conforming non-conformist. He could have said he didn’t want some tattoo out of a book, but every one who submitted to the needle liked to think he was some kind of original, a daring outsider. Instead he told her the truth. “I wanted you marked on my body,” he said. “I felt naked without you. I wanted to wear you on my skin.”

NANCY BRANCH's short fiction has been published in *The Mitre*, *Found Press Quarterly* and *Taproot*. One of her creative nonfiction pieces was chosen as a finalist in Malahat Review's 2014 Open Season Awards. "Alfie" is drawn from a collection-in-progress entitled *Journey Home*, inspired by her early years growing up in Chaleur Bay's rural surrounds. She and her husband live in The Eastern Townships in Quebec.

Alfie

Nancy Branch

ALFIE CARSON was a big man, solid like a butcher block. He lived with his mother in a house where I rented a room. Alfie worked at Medjuck's Furniture Store and spent his days lifting crates and delivering heavy furniture to customers who probably never gave him a second glance.

Today, as he did each day when he got off work at four-thirty, he came whistling down the sidewalk, clomped through the long veranda, and entered the house with a resounding bang of the front door. He always shut the door this way, with a force so great it sent shock waves through the house and a rush of startled air fleeing down the hallway.

"Meoow," he cried from the bottom of the hallway stairs, like some fencepost tomcat yowling for a mate.

"Uh-ooh," I said, game for the afternoon ritual that always unfolded in the same way. "Somebody let the neighbour's cat in again?"

Wheezy giggle.

"S'at you, Alfie?"

I knew full well it was; I knew, too, that he was simply waiting for permission to come up into my room.

"Ya-up," he bellowed, and began his heavy-footed ascent up the groaning staircase, his breath coming in loud gasps, his head bent to the task like some great ox straining at the plow. Shirt tail untucked and suspenders stretched to snapping over his muscled chest, he hovered for a moment outside by the doorway.

"Lo, small fry."

"Lo, Alfie."

The greeting was his cue to enter, which he did, lumbering into my room, filling up the small quarters. As always, his pockets were bulging with candy, and his hands hidden behind his back.

"Which hand d'ya want, Jeannie?"

It didn't matter which hand I chose because I got both of them anyway: one holding an Oh Henry, the other a bottle of Coke. I ate the first half of the chocolate bar with an elaborate display of enjoyment as Alfie looked on, smiling broadly, and listing like some disabled sea vessel. Later, in secret, I flushed the remainder down the toilet along with the soft drink.

* * *

The Carsons had a small boarders' dining room that branched off the front hallway, but no one used it anymore. Since I was the only boarder at this time, I joined the family for meals in the kitchen. On this particular Friday evening, carny music from the King Reid Show blared from the exhibition grounds across the street. Alfie, his sister Bertha, and I waited around the arborite table for supper. Lolling on the floor at our feet was Lady, a rotund, white Samoyed that prodded my knees with her snout until I finally shoved her away. The dog switched her attentions to Alfie—more consistent with his dole-outs than I was—and sniffed at his hand like a rooting truffle hog.

As usual, Mrs. Carson trundled back and forth between the woodstove and the table with her pots of mashed potatoes and sugared turnips. She was a heavy, ample-busted woman who suffered from painful varicose veins, for which she wore thick elastic stockings. She had trouble rising from a bed or a chair, but once she got moving, she carried her flat-footed girth about without too much trouble.

"Ya ain't goin'," blurted Mrs. Carson, referring I supposed to an argument that had started sometime earlier in the day. As if to reinforce her point, she thwacked a slice of fried bologna onto Bertha's plate. "Circus ain't no place fer a young girl, 'specially that time 'a night."

Bertha forked potatoes into her mouth, followed by a large chunk of bologna. "I'll be with Mary," she said, not bothering to swallow. She packed in more food and her cheeks pouched out like a scavenging hamster.

Mrs. Carson snorted. "That Mary ain't no reassurance. 'Sides, I know what yer up to. I seen ya pressin' up against *him* in the veranda when ya thought I was asleep."

Bertha's round face mottled, and she threw Mrs. Carson a mean-dog look. "I'm old enough ta do what I goddamn want!"

"Old enough ta wag yer ass in the boys' faces, sure enough. But don't come cryin' ta me when ya wind up in trouble again."

Colour bloomed darker on Bertha's face. She shot up from the table and, for a moment, she and Mrs. Carson squared off in silence. Bertha was a big girl, a good head taller than her mother, and she carried some weight in the hip. I knew she was younger than Alfie—seventeen, eighteen maybe—but she looked older, street-coarse, like the punks I sometimes saw hanging in the alleys outside The Cosmo on Friday nights.

Bertha inched her face closer to her mother's. "An' who's gonna stop

me?”

“Me and Alfie,” said Mrs. Carson. But she dropped her eyes and took a tiny step backwards.

Bertha hitched her chin and blew air through her lips. “Yeah, you and whose army?”

With that, she turned on her heel and strode into the hallway. We listened as the front door slammed behind her and the ensuing reverberation shook the house. All of us remained quiet for a time, and then Mrs. Carson turned to Alfie.

“Do somethin’, Alfie.”

He placed a slice of bologna onto some bread, folded the whole thing over, and took an enormous bite. Then he handed a piece to Lady under the table.

Mrs. Carson’s voice rose to a high-pitched entreaty. “Go after her, Alfie. Go after yer sister.” When he didn’t answer, she yanked on his shoulder. “Alfie...*Alfie!*”

He stood up then from the table, so abruptly that he knocked his chair backwards with a loud clatter. The dog gave a yelp of alarm and scabbled from the kitchen, her pendulous belly swaying only inches from the floor. Alfie’s face flushed beneath his stubble, and he made an inarticulate, sputtering sound. Leaving his supper plate unfinished, he stomped through the hallway and slammed out of the house.

Mrs. Carson and I sat at the table without speaking, except for her asking if I’d like another cup of tea or an extra slice of apple pie. I wondered what I’d gotten myself into, coming to stay here at the Carsons’. My parents had been stern but loving people who’d never fought in front of us kids. And they certainly wouldn’t have tolerated the kind of back talk Bertha had used with her mother. I had to admit, though, I was curious about what kind of trouble she’d been in. Was it drugs? An arrest? A baby? Knowing better than to ask these questions aloud, I cleared the table and helped Mrs. Carson to do up the dishes. Once the supper things were put away, I went upstairs to my room for the evening.

Some time past midnight, Alfie slammed back into the house, without Bertha. I heard him thump up the back stairs into the quiet of his bedroom. The quiet was short-lived for, as she had on many nights, Mrs. Carson soon cried out from her first-floor bedroom.

“*Al-fie*, dear, I need to get up. Come help me get to the bathroom. *Alfie!*”

And then that same sputtery, frustrated sound as he clumped down the back stairs. I listened to the murmur of their voices in the darkness, and the crack of the wooden bed frame as Alfie got Mrs. Carson settled back down. It was one o’clock before the house finally grew quiet again.

Late the next afternoon, Bertha came home. It wasn’t long before another fight broke out. I tried to ignore the sounds of the argument that

ended only when, just before supper, the bleat of a car horn sounded from the side yard. A few minutes later, there was a loud disturbance in the downstairs hall. From my bedroom doorway, I watched as Bertha wrestled two suitcases along the floor, her mother huffing and wheezing her way behind her up the hall. With one hand pressed to her chest, Mrs. Carson made a desperate lunge for Bertha's arm.

"Bertha. *Bertha!* Don't be stupid. He's no good fer ya." Bertha wrenched herself free and stormed out the door, Mrs. Carson yelling after her, "Don't ya dare come back here with no kid! D'ya hear me? I ain't payin' fer no other kid!"

She stood there for a time in the hallway, her arms hanging limp at her sides. The skin of her face had gone slack, making her look very old and tired. I started across the landing towards the steps, but as I looked down into her worn, lined face, something stopped me from going to her. What could I possibly say that would matter?

* * *

After Bertha left, Mrs. Carson went downhill. Her breathing got worse and, a couple of months later, she started using a nebulizer. For a while, she made feeble attempts at making suppers, but she'd burn the meat or boil the vegetables dry, and there was never any more gravy for our mashed potatoes. I came upon her in the kitchen one afternoon after class, leaning her weight against the counter edge. She looked at me with weary eyes and said, "Can ya take over, Jeannie, dear? Just fer tonight."

Before long, I was doing the cooking for all of us. I didn't mind, though. I knew how to work, having done most of it at home when my mother was busy finishing her teacher's certificate at the community college. And Alfie helped out. He did the dishes and often walked with me to Tingley's Save Easy for groceries, a couple of blocks away. At the checkout, he'd pay for the food, making a big production of withdrawing the bills from his wallet.

"Alfie, let me pay for my share," I'd say to him at these times, tugging his arm down so onlookers couldn't see the great wad of cash he always carried in his wallet.

"Nope," he'd say, beaming at me like a benevolent Santa Claus. "Yer money's no good with me, small fry. I got lots 'a money."

It was no use arguing with him. When he wasn't looking, I'd slip a twenty into his coat pocket. I didn't like giving Alfie cash, Mrs. Carson either for that matter. Not since she'd told me about Bertha.

"What's going on?" I asked her after the first time it happened. I'd just got home from campus and found her wringing her hands at the kitchen table.

"Bertha was here."

"Is she back?" I'd asked with alarm.

She shook her head. "She's still livin' on welfare with that guy over

t'other side 'a town. She come by 'cause she knew I'd be alone."

"What'd she want?"

"Money, same as always. I told her I didn't have none, but she hunted round the house till she found my purse under the bed. She took yer board."

From that moment on, I started paying for my rent in trade. I'd buy groceries, or write a check for the phone bill, or do chores around the house to help Mrs. Carson out. I still worried about Alfie, though, waving his roll of cash around for everybody to see.

* * *

Late in October of my second year at the boarding house, Mrs. Carson had another episode. Over the wind tearing at the upstairs windows, I heard her cry out in the night for Alfie. The calling wasn't unusual, but this time her voice sounded different—stricken and frightened. When I got downstairs, I saw Alfie in the narrow light of her open door. He was just standing there, one big, agitated hand rasping across his stubbly chin. In the bed, Mrs. Carson was barely conscious. Her eyes were sunken marbles in their blue-rimmed sockets. I got the nebulizer mask on her and, since I didn't trust Alfie with the medicine cup, spat directions at him over my shoulder.

"Call 9-1-1, Alfie. And go outside to wait for the ambulance."

By the time the ambulance attendants got there, Mrs. Carson was in a bad way. The transport gurney wouldn't fit through the narrow bedroom doorway, so they had to lug her by hand into the hallway. Her body jackknifed heavily in the middle, and the flowered nightdress she wore rucked up indiscreetly above her thighs. Alfie and I called a cab to take us to the hospital, but by the time we arrived, Mrs. Carson was already gone. Later, back at the house, we sat in the kitchen with cups of tea, too stunned to say anything much at all.

The following afternoon, I called Alfie's older brother, Larry, in Toronto. I'd never talked to him before, and I could hardly believe it when he said he wasn't coming to the funeral. He made sure to tell me, though, that he'd be inheriting the house and, in the future, would I please forward my rent checks to him. I found Bertha's number scribbled inside the front cover of the phone book. I didn't want to talk to her, but when I finally called, some gravelly-voiced guy answered the phone. I waited a long time before Bertha picked up the receiver.

"I'm very sorry," I said in as calm a voice as I could manage. "Your mother passed away last night."

She let out a wail like an air-raid siren.

"Stop play-acting, Bertha!" I snapped. She immediately went silent, and remained that way as I gave her the details of the funeral arrangements.

At the memorial service in the Salvation Army Church, I sat in a pew with Alfie. Bertha showed up late, in ratty jeans and a powder-blue ski

jacket that reeked of cigarettes. A burly, forty-something man with close-fitting eyelids flopped down in the pew beside her. He wore sweats and a red baseball cap with *World's Greatest Stud* written across the front. During the service, I was careful not to make eye contact with them, but afterwards, when it was over, I nodded to Bertha out of politeness. She ignored me, but inclined her head at Alfie.

"Was that Bertha's new boyfriend?" I asked Alfie once we'd got outside in the church parking lot.

"Ya-up," he said, "Georgie."

"How d'ya know him?"

He hesitated. "I run into him and Bertha last week at McDonald's."

Then Alfie's eyes shifted away and he grew quiet. I gave him a careful look, but decided not to press it. To cheer him up, I suggested we stop at Tim Horton's on the way home.

"Ya-up, OK," he said, his smile returning. "Couple Boston Creams would sure hit the spot."

* * *

In the days following the funeral, I watched Alfie closely for signs of grief or a meltdown, but it didn't happen. He left for work, he came home, he went bowling or took in a movie on Saturday nights, same as always. As for me, I felt a little strange. The house seemed empty without Mrs. Carson in it, kind of echoey and cold.

"I'm thinking of moving, Alfie," I told him one evening when he returned home from work. "To get a place of my own. Something smaller maybe, a little closer to campus."

But he just stood there, lopsided in the kitchen doorway, his coat smelling of snow and November chill. "I brung ya somethin'," he said in his happy voice, as if he hadn't heard me. "Which hand d'ya want?"

And I looked up into his wide-open, smiling face, whipped raw by the winter wind, and knew that I couldn't leave him.

Time passed and we made small changes to the household. Nothing major, though, nothing that would shake up our comfortable domestic routine. One of our little changes was Friday night pizza. Weekdays, I'd ask Alfie, "What d'you want for supper?" and between the two of us, we'd figure out something to eat. But when Fridays came and I asked this question, we'd look at each other and whoop, "Pizza!"

A Friday evening late in November, Alfie decided he wanted Greco's instead of Luna's. I said sure and handed over my half of the money for the pizza. He'd just returned with an extra-large, double cheese and pepperoni when we heard a sudden commotion in the veranda. A few seconds later, Bertha and Georgie burst into the house.

"Just in time fer supper!" she crowed, eyeing the open pizza box on the table. I felt my chest tighten with anger, but held my tongue for Alfie's sake.

“Ain’t enough fer everybody,” said Alfie. He’d risen from the table and was clutching a large bottle of Coca Cola to his chest.

“Awww, come on now,” piped Georgie. “Me an Bertha, we don’t eat much.” He sniggered and pushed back a long skein of hair that had worked itself loose from his slicked down comb-over. Without waiting for invitation, he plunked down onto a chair beside me. Bertha helped herself to some milk from the fridge, and then maneuvered her butt between the stove and the table edge. She’d put on a good bit of weight around the middle, so she had some difficulty getting seated.

When the meal was over, Bertha called Alfie into the front hallway. I started in on the dishes while Georgie struck a stove match to his zipper and lit a cigarette. For several moments, everything seemed fine, but soon I heard the rising pitch of Bertha’s voice.

“Ya do, too.”

“No, I ain’t.”

“Ya always carry a bunch ’a cash in yer wallet.”

“I give ya eighty last week at McDonald’s. It’s my money.”

“Shit, Alfie, yer livin’ here rent-free in Larry’s house. Ya kin afford it.”

I stepped into the front hallway, trembling with indignation on Alfie’s behalf. Georgie followed so closely he trod on my heel.

“You don’t have to do that if you don’t want to, Alfie.” I shot Bertha a hard look.

“It’s none a yer business,” she spat, and then to Alfie, “Ya gonna give me the money or not?” Her sharp voice vexed my ear like nails on a blackboard.

I’d never seen Alfie dither over anything. Every movement he made was always precise and super-energized. But he swayed now on his feet, and drove his hand across the bristly cut of his hair. After a long minute, he reached into his back pocket for his wallet and withdrew several twenty-dollar bills.

“That ain’t enough,” said Bertha, snatching the money from his hand. “I know ya got lots more in there.” She moved into his body space and narrowed her eyes.

“It’s all I got,” he whined as he handed over his remaining money.

“Let’s go, Georgie.” Bertha spun towards the door. Georgie knocked past me and scuttled after her into the darkness. After they’d gone, Alfie stood in the quiet hallway. He looked for a long time into his wallet, as if his willful staring might somehow bring back the vanished cash.

* * *

The Carsons’ side yard was hardly ever used. No boarder had parked there in almost two years, and since Mrs. Carson’s death, visitors rarely dropped by. So I was quite surprised when, returning from classes that last January afternoon, I spotted an apple-red Chevy Nova pulled up close

to the chain-link fence. Curious, I headed for the family wing at the back of the house.

I found a man sitting alone at the kitchen table. He was big like Alfie, but slack-muscled in an unexercised kind of way. The facial resemblance to Bertha was striking: the same pasty complexion and roundness along the jawline, the same deep-set, brown eyes. Except that, unlike Bertha's, his eyes were pricked with intelligence.

I advanced and extended my hand. "You must be Alfie's brother. I'm Jeannie. We spoke on the phone when your mother died."

He gave me an appraising look.

"Yeah, I'm Lawrence. Good to meet you." He leaned forward in his chair to shake my hand.

Uncomfortable with being the only one standing, I took a seat opposite him at the table.

"You're here for a visit?"

"Yeah. For a week or two. I'm between books—I'm a writer—so I thought I'd drive down to see Alfie while things were slow." He paused, his small eyes sharpening as they swept my face. "Mum told me a while back you were doing a Master's in education. Teaching's a pretty safe career choice, don't you think?"

I bristled and decided right then I didn't like him.

"Maybe, but it's what I've always wanted to do."

I stood and poured some water into the kettle. When it whistled, I made some tea. I was just setting out the milk when Alfie banged into the house. He drew up short when he spotted his brother, and hung there, yawning in the doorway. He took a few steps forward, his face twisted into a crooked grin.

"Hiya, Larry."

Again Larry didn't rise for the greeting. He lifted a hand from the wrist and waggled his fingers. I'd had enough. When Alfie flumped down on a chair, I excused myself from the table.

"Nice to finally meet you, Larry," I said.

"It's Lawrence," he corrected.

Without comment, I headed up to my room.

* * *

Two days into Larry's visit, there was a phone call. I scrambled towards the staircase to answer it, but Larry beat me to it. I returned to my room and settled back down to finish an essay on the effects of direct instruction on second-language learners. The writing had been going well, that is, until Larry's voice wormed into my concentration.

"Who told you I was home?"

Long pause.

"No, that's not a good idea."

Longer pause.

“Stop it, Bertha. Why d’ya always have to be like that?”

His voice took on a plaintive, fretful tone.

“Oh, for Crissake, your boyfriend can shovel you out. Alfie’ll be dead tired when he gets home from work.”

Pause again.

“Why can’t you just leave us alone? Uhh-uhh. No goddamn way. Well, you’ll be wasting your time, ’cause I won’t be here!”

With that, he slammed down the receiver, causing the telephone to jangle a tinny protest.

By this time, I’d stepped onto the staircase landing, Larry was breathing hard through his mouth and pacing the carpet in the boarders’ living room below me.

“Everything all right, Lawrence?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure. Just freaking wonderful.”

I came down the stairs and sat on the flowered couch, watching him knot his hands together.

“Maybe it’s none of my business,” I began.

Larry sank into an armchair and drove a hand through his thin, lank hair.

“Bertha’ll keep at him and at him, picking away until he does whatever she wants. “

I knew he meant Alfie.

“He’s like some big goddamn draft horse. He’ll work and work until he drops.”

Larry rose suddenly and headed for the stairs. “Take care of him, Jeannie.”

I said sure—a reflex at first—but then I bridled. Why was it *my* responsibility to take care of *his* brother? I mean, I loved Alfie and everything, but I couldn’t stay in this house forever. I’d already told Larry I’d be graduating in the spring so, if anything, he should have been making plans to pick up the slack.

Within ten minutes, Larry had his bags packed. He whipped past me and, as I watched through the living room window, he peeled out of the side yard in a cloud of spun-up snow and exhaust.

* * *

The last two months I lived at the Carsons’ were conflicted. Graduation wasn’t far off and I knew I was going to have to figure out what to do about Alfie. I’d left numerous messages for Larry in Toronto, but he wasn’t returning my calls. I lay in bed nights, my stomach roiling, my mind going round and round like a dog on a chain, hanging myself up on the same thoughts. I couldn’t understand how Larry could have just walked out on Alfie, leaving so many things up in the air. You’d think he’d at least want to sell the house for the money. But I supposed then he’d have to deal with Bertha’s grasping, and help Alfie move his stuff into a new

place. In the end, I gave up leaving messages.

A couple of weeks after Larry left, I had the idea to call the Salvation Army captain, who'd been a good friend to Mrs. Carson over the years. When I explained the situation to Mr. Tidd, he said, "No problem, Jeannie. I'll watch out for Alfie."

He gave me the name of a good cleaning lady who could come in once a week for cheap, and I knew Mrs. Carson had years ago arranged for the church accountant to manage Alfie's finances. So technically, things were more or less settled.

Still, I didn't feel right leaving Alfie alone in this great big house. I was especially worried that Bertha might move in with her mooching boyfriend and the new baby I'd recently heard about. Yet, I was anxious to get on with my own life. I'd gotten a job teaching English in Rivière-du-Loup and, although the job wasn't due to start till the end of August, I needed some time to find an apartment, get to know the place before classes started up in the fall.

A few weeks earlier, when I'd brought up the subject of my leaving, Alfie had responded with what seemed like indifference. His reaction had surprised me. The only explanation I could come up with was that he didn't believe me. I'd told him once before that I was leaving, but I'd stuck around, so I guessed he figured I'd change my mind again.

The funny part was, I was actually considering staying to take care of him. And the thought crossed my mind once more as I lugged the vacuum cleaner up the back stairs to tackle Alfie's room. I'd never ventured into the intimacy of his bedroom, and I did so now only because I felt the house needed a thorough cleaning before I left. The truth of the matter was, I was stalling, for I hadn't yet decided *what* I'd do.

Alfie's was a loft room with a double window. The inside window was open, its wooden sash and casing broken. Every window in the Carson house had been painted shut, so I knew what force he must have exerted to splinter the casing. Next to the window was a low dresser crammed into the three-foot space where the wall met the pitch of the roof. Its drawers were ajar and overflowing with protruding shirtsleeves, pant legs and work socks, riddled with holes and stiff with perspiration. Dusty bowling trophies crowded an ancient bookcase that sagged away from the taller end of an adjacent wall.

In the center of the room sat Alfie's bed. The blankets were peeled back and the sheets twisted into a fitful tangle. A Hustler magazine lay open, face-down on a scrunched up pillow, and the top sheet bore several stains whose origin I didn't dare think about. Above the pillow, wedged into the headboard of the bed, was a blurry snapshot of Alfie and me, taken outside the veranda by Mrs. Carson a couple of weeks after I'd arrived at the boarding house. Its edges were buckled and smudged with darkened fingerprints.

In that uncomfortable moment, I became aware of a sudden closeness in the room and the heavy muskiness that hung on the air. I felt ashamed that I'd trespassed into Alfie's privacy. But something else, too. For the first time since I'd come to stay at the Carsons', I felt afraid. I'd always thought of Alfie as a sort of brother, a benign and smiling child. But this was definitely not the room of a child and, given the grease-smudged picture stuck in the headboard, I began to question whether Alfie's thoughts about me were brotherly. Hastening down the staircase, I made for my bedroom and snapped the door lock behind me.

* * *

On our last night together, Alfie and I sat around the kitchen table for supper. Quite old now and partly deaf, the Carson's dog lay in a lump at our feet. The dull whistle of the kettle sounded from the back of the woodstove and, on the yellowed wall, the Kit-Cat clock ticked off the quiet minutes of the evening. Since this was a special evening, I'd put out Mrs. Carson's good ironstone dishes and some printed napkins I'd picked up at Tingley's on my way home. And because they were Alfie's favourites, I'd made meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and Boston cream pie for dessert.

"Busy day, Alfie?" I asked, hoping to dispel the weight that had settled like concrete in my gut.

"Guess so," he said.

I tried again. "Many deliveries?"

He smeared the back of his hand across his mouth. "Couple or three," he said and resumed eating.

After that, conversation grew a little stilted, even for us. Lady made a feeble prod at Alfie's hand, and each time her snout appeared from under the table, Alfie patted her head or scratched an ear, but he didn't pass along any scraps. I felt uneasy at this change in his behaviour and, although I should have known better, I blurted out, "You know I'm leaving tomorrow, right Alfie?"

He dropped his gaze, and said, "Ya-up."

To cover my discomfort, I stepped to the counter to make us a pot of tea. When I turned back to the table, I saw that he was gone. At times, Alfie could be quirky, so I was only a little concerned at first. But when he still hadn't returned after I'd finished my tea, I knew something was wrong.

A cold draught from the rear of the house drew me to the adjoining shed. I found Alfie sitting on the steps in the open doorway, slumped like an old mattress against the grey evening twilight. Behind him, the smell of dankness rose from the cellar stairwell.

"Whatcha doin', Alfie?"

He turned and fixed me with sorrowful eyes. For a moment, he did not speak. But then his mouth quivered and his voice came out, plaintive and small.

“Who’s gonna take care ’a me now?”

I felt the blood leave me then, as if my face had gone suddenly white as the shred of moon lifting from the horizon. Words formed loosely in my head, but my lips began to wobble and no sound came out. I heard the scuttle of some creature in the shadows, and the smell of dankness intensified and wrapped itself around me. Staring at Alfie, I wanted only to comfort and reassure him, but I couldn’t get past his immense size. And so I merely patted his knee.

Early the next morning as the taxi swung into the Carsons’ side yard, I called up to Alfie’s bedroom to say goodbye, but he didn’t answer. I guessed he’d already left for work. I laid a place for him at the kitchen table, ready for supper, and checked the fridge for the plate of food I’d put there the night before. On the first step of the back staircase, I set the laundry basket filled with mended socks and work shirts that I’d carefully ironed and folded.

After the cabbie had loaded my things into the car, I turned back towards the house. “Give me a minute,” I said to the driver. “There’s something I need to do.”

In the veranda, dust motes spiralled, heavy on the morning sunshine. Hardly aware of what I was doing, I turned the doorknob and stepped into the dimness of the house. The hallway shadows gave way to a blade of sunlight, but when the door closed, the quiet shadows returned. I stood there pinned by the weight of the silence, my only conscious thought of Alfie. I pictured him returning late in the afternoon in his work clothes, tired and hungry, his red face stubbled and greasy with sweat. Pictured him standing there at the end of the hallway, confused for a moment by the stillness. Listening for movement with that peculiar listing stance he always used when he was uncertain.

Outside on the street, a green sedan slowed. I spotted Bertha in the passenger seat of the car, the sunlight falling harsh on her round white face. When she turned her head to scan the front of the house, a muscle stood out taut in her neck. The sedan rolled slowly past the waiting taxi and then sped away with a roar of broken muffler.

For some minutes, I stared after the vanished car. Dropping my key into the souvenir dish on the hallway table, I reached for the doorknob. I pushed the lock and listened as the latch engaged with a soft, metallic click.

KEMPTON DEXTER performs as a singer, plays guitar and banjo, writes songs, stage plays and stories. He also draws, paints and sculpts. Dexter is a founding member of the Grunt, an artist-run gallery in Vancouver. He has had many exhibitions across Canada. Grandpa Dex has worked at a wide variety of “day jobs” in construction, food service, landscaping, boat building and toolmaking. In 2012, he self-published his first collection of short stories, *Mrs. Ceperly Garden and Other Plots*. Kempton plans to publish a book of new stories in 2015. This is one of those stories.

Horses Running on Frozen Ground

Kempton Dexter

IRA OPENED ONE eye. He had an erection. Some things never change. He rolled onto his side, hoping to fall back into that sweet sleep world. Sadly, the sound of the fridge commanded his attention. Ira opened both eyes to see the glossy beige wall just a dozen centimeters away. He rolled over on his back and looked toward the window. The lower half was covered with a dark green curtain, but the upper half revealed pale gray clouds. He tried to picture the person from his dream who said, “The mission is to get high.”

The memory of a woman, an old woman, came to him. He pictured her now against the gray sky, in tight black jeans, walking away from him. It was more of a sashay than a walk, a cultivated gait designed to make an indelible impression. He could see her turn and look at him. Her face made an equally strong impression. She was pale and gaunt beneath thin blond hair. The face reminded Ira of a Mexican death mask. The combination of desire and death was unsettling.

He sat up and looked around for his clothes lying on the floor. He put on his pants and limped down the corridor to the communal lavatory. While he urinated he saw through the window a crow with a chunk of bread hopping around on a neighbouring roof. A seagull was stocking the agile crow.

“The race is to the swift,” he chuckled.

Much relieved, Ira slid open the bathroom window and looked down at the sidewalk seating outside the ground floor cafe. It must have been around 8 AM, because Philip and Earl were in their regular spots. Ira considered going down to join the two creatures of habit. No doubt they were talking about antique cars or motorcycles, two topics that made Ira’s eyes glaze over. Another favourite was leaky roofs and congested buses. Of course, there was the tried and true latest cancer diagnosis and the obligatory mastery of medical terminology. Ira could have

acknowledged he was as guilty as the next man with that bullshit.

“Not today,” he said and plodded back to his suite. He lay on his bed in the opposite direction to how he had slept, looking back into the room. Ira reached over and pushed the curtain open allowing the light to flow in over his right shoulder. There was a small table in front of the window with a couple of books and a half cup of cold tea. He drank the tea and picked up a book titled *Betting Thoroughbreds*. He opened it at random. There was an example of a racing form dated July 29, 1974. Ira read down the list of the horses’ names. My Compliments, Our Dancing Girl, Some Swinger, Secret’s Out, Precious Elaine (formerly named Idontlikehim).

“I don’t like him, Christ.” He closed the book and pictured the horses running and could hear the sound of the announcer calling the race. He smiled, closed his eyes and slid back into a half sleep. Ten minutes later he got up. There were a couple of shirts soaking in the sink. Ira wrung them dry and hung each on a piece of twine that ran the width of the room, near the high ceiling. The building had been a rooming house for a long time. 101 years, the landlord said. Ira figured drying one’s clothes on a string over the stove had a long and venerable history. The ghosts were bound to approve. They should feel right at home.

Ira cleaned up around the kitchen counter. The clock said 8:59. The day was well under way and he felt like he had cement in his shoes. What day was it anyway, Friday or Saturday? They say that’s what happens when you work at night, you get the days mixed up.

“Friday night is date night,” he said with animated conviction to the open cupboard. He shut its door.

“Precious Elaine.”

How weird was that. He had known an Elaine. Hell, he had the tattoo. Ira put a tablet of vitamin B12 under his tongue. It had a sweet taste as it dissolved. A little bit of a woman’s love and affection was way overdue. Ira’s memory was a powerful instrument and it held sway in the present. Old flames were milling about his room, each one a class act. Someone had told him once that his greatest talent was meeting remarkable women. Ira mused it was a talent gone into hibernation. He took a half-dozen vitamin D tablets.

Water; what a good idea, Ira thought. He shook his head. It felt like a hangover. The lean man ate a ripe pear and he got ready to greet the outside world. Ira buttoned his jacket, ran a brush through his thick hair, then glanced briefly at a small round mirror above his sink. Something was very strange so Ira moved closer for a longer look. His watery blue eyes were such a dark brown they could be mistaken for black. And his sandy brown hair was even blacker in the natural gray daylight from the window. Ira’s ruddy, weathered skin appeared bronze-coloured and smooth.

Ira held the vitamin B container in his thick hand and tried to pronounce

the ingredients.

“Methylcobalamin, mannitol, cellulose, xylitol, crospovidone, diacalcium phosphate, dextrose, vegetable stearic acid, vegetable magnesium stearate, calcium carbonate, silica.”

He was only mildly unsettled that he had virtually no clue as to what had dissolved under his tongue. Better living through chemistry, he recalled. Silica, wasn't that like sand?

Ira stroked his beard as he took a second look at the mirror, but the slender hand in the mirror touched the taut skin of a graceful jawline. The eyes were deep-set and his were not. The nose was small and his was large. Ira shrugged his shoulders and turned away from the reflection, looking out the window for the birds but they were gone, and he noticed patches of ice on the flat rooftop where he thought he had seen puddles earlier.

“Hmrrph. The mission is to get high,” he said absently, and drifted into the odds associated with track conditions. Horses running on frozen ground. He could feel the hooves striking the ground in his chest. The sensation made him dizzy and he walked slowly into the studio room. He picked up the empty beer cans and put them in a plastic bag. A guitar was leaning against a wooden chair in the center of the room.

“Miss Harmony,” he said and put his favourite instrument out of harm's way. Ira drew the curtain on the studio window. From here he could see the alley and the downtown core of the city—it, a darker gray than the sky. In the alley a woman was rooting through one of the dumpsters for treasure. Some things never change. At Ira's feet sat a pair of woman's boots. He picked them up and sat in the stuffed chair in the corner, holding the surprise find in his lap. The man was at a loss to explain the presence of the soft deerskin fancy footwear. He felt a little nauseous.

The room had a large full-length mirror hanging on the wall opposite the window. From the stuffed chair he could see the reflection of the downtown skyline. The cityscape in reverse usually amused him. It was the illusion of being somewhere else. He looked at the boots, then back at the reflected city. He swallowed hard, stood, and stepped in front of the mirror.

Ira surveyed what was supposed to be his reflection. He saw a tall, young woman in an open jean jacket and a small dress with thick horizontal bands of pale purple and hot pink, cut at mid thigh. She owned the face he had seen in the mirror over the sink. He thought her long skinny legs looked a little funny. She shifted her bare foot and put her hands on her hips.

“You like what you're lookin' at?” she said.

Ira almost nodded.

“Who are you?” he said.

The young woman laughed. “You got a cigarette?”

"I don't smoke," said Ira.

"Just my luck. Got any dope?"

"I got weed."

"Anything else?"

"Anything else?"

"Coke, crystal, you know."

"Jesus." He scratched his beard and saw the reflection slide her fingers along her jawline to the cleft of her chin.

"I'll get you some money and you get me some dope," she said.

"Me?"

"The guy down the hall, Steve, he's got coke and speed and whatever."

"In number four?"

"Yes, handsome, number four. Steve."

"Why don't you go see Steve yourself."

The reflection laughed, darkly. She spoke with a old woman's voice. "Steve ain't nice to ladies, especially ladies that owe him money. You understand, don't you, Ira?"

"Sure," he said unconvincingly.

She smiled and he liked it.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Elaine, I'm Elaine."

"Hrmph, well. What day is it?"

"It's Sunday, Ira, every day is Sunday. Ok, we need some cash, honey, pronto."

Ira took the cue as an instruction and slid his bare feet into the boots. He didn't bother to look back at the mirror. He could imagine the presentation. Flat-chested and willowy desperation masked by sexy determination. The woman walked down the hall, down the stairs and at the entrance fussed a little with her hair, putting it together in a high ponytail. Elaine stepped outside and down the alley, briskly walking west the two blocks to her stroll. A car stopped.

"What'e ya do?" the guy said though the half-open window.

"Go, blow, half and half, hand act with trash talk."

"How much?"

The first three she quoted high, the fourth low. It was a tried and true business strategy. So was the performance. Fuck them with their own sex babble. She crafted it in a child-like delivery while jerking their ugly noodles for sport.

Elaine made her kitty and arrived back at the apartment building with the heebie-jeebies closing in. She had difficulty getting the key in the door.

"Come on, come on. Stupid, Christ."

Inside she sprinted up the wide, worn stairs to Ira's suite. She looked in the full-length mirror. She saw Ira.

“Money’s on the bed, I need to wash. Go see Steve.

“There’s coffee,” he said.

“Go see Steve now.”

When he came back, she was in his housecoat sitting on his bed. Ira watched Elaine get high.

“You?” she said.

“No, it’s bad for my complexion.”

She laughed. Her smile would melt butter.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she said.

“No, not really.”

“Ha, well, not really, so what’s that, she’s just in your mind. You sure like it warm in here. I may be a ghost, but I like that too. I think you need a girlfriend. Maybe I could be your girlfriend. I think you would make a swell boyfriend, Ira.”

Elaine moved as she spoke. Ira couldn’t figure out where the sound was coming from. Her feet, no, her fingers, her eyes, her shoulder, the belly, her breasts, her face, her knees, her.

“I’ve been working the streets here since 1963, Ira. God damn. How long is that? Fifty years? Golden anniversary, right?”

“Golden? I think so.”

Elaine opened up the housecoat to reveal her thin, naked body.

“You like this,” she said.

He nodded.

“No one has put his dick in there in fifty years. Fifty years of whoring and no man’s cock has found itself into my pretty little pussy. I think I’m overdue, sweetheart. I’m overdue for you.”

“You don’t exist, Elaine.”

“You need to get high. You’re all mixed up.”

Ira tuned toward the stove and the smell of the brewed coffee.

“You’re a funny bunny. Come here, Ira, come.”

He turned from the stove and took a step toward her.

“I’m real, I’m real, come here, come here.”

She held out her long thin arms.

“Come.”

He stepped closer. She undid his belt and his pants fell to the floor. He took off his shirt. She made him hard. As he mounted her, she saw the tattoo on his right bicep. It was a red heart with the name Elaine written across it. She felt horses’ hooves against frozen ground as he thrust himself into her.

The days are short in November and it was well into dark when Ira fell asleep. Elaine listened to the music of his breathing. She sat up and watched him. She was coming down, slowly for a change. It made sense. Elaine picked up Ira’s pants and put them on, then went into the studio and stood in front of the mirror. All she could see was the pants cinched

up around an invisible body.

“Didn’t work,” she whispered.

Elaine sat in the stuffed chair and looked about the quiet suite. She found Ira’s wallet in his hip pocket. It only held a ten dollar bill. She put the rest of her money in the wallet and slid it back into the pocket. Elaine had enough dope to last the night, even though she wasn’t sure that it mattered. The tall woman fell asleep for an hour or two before she awoke to the morning’s first light. Slowly she got dressed and looked around her small, precious home. It was the right time to leave. Elaine opened the window and stepped onto the sill. A seagull standing sentinel turned its head to look at her. She jumped. Up she rose just as the bird took flight.

Ira opened one eye. The morning rumble of the city spread into his awareness. The air was cool and fresh. He noticed the window was open and stretched to close it. Ira pulled the blanket around him and buried his face in the pillow. After a few seconds, he sat up.

“Elaine,” he said.

He stood and went into the studio. Ira saw his naked reflection in the mirror, he was alone. He put on his pants and went down the corridor to the bathroom. Walking back to his suite, he met the caretaker in the hallway.

“Hey Ira, Steve’s leaving,” said Carlos.

Ira looked confused.

“Steve, you know, in number four. He’s a damn dope dealer, been wanting to get rid of him for a long time. We want good guys in here—like you, brother.”

“Yeah, umm, thanks Carlos.”

Ira watched the big man descend the stairs before returning to his suite where he warmed up the cold coffee and poured it into his carrying cup. Outside Philip and Earl greeted the disheveled Ira.

“Gees, haven’t seen you in a while, my friend. Where you been?” said Earl.

“Just catching up on my beauty rest.”

“Can’t say that it’s workin’ all that good,” said Earl.

“To sleep, perchance to dream,” added Philip.

“Dream? Yeah, I guess so.” Ira sipped the too-hot coffee and continued, “So, Phil, what’s on your agenda this fine morning?”

“Oh, find a leak in my neighbour’s roof and try to fix it.”

“Lotta leaky roofs over his way,” chuckled Earl.

“She’s recently been diagnosed with cancer.”

The morning sun was clearing the building on the east side of the street and the warm light was slowly creeping down the cafe wall.

“How about you, Earl. Going for a ride?”

“Oh yeah. Take the motorbike for a spin, sure. Not many nice days like this left before the rains.” Earl gestured toward the sky.

“What day is it, anyway?” said Ira.

“Sunday, man. Sunday all day.”

“Ah, horses are running this afternoon.”

Philip’s long fingers plucked a long dark hair off Ira’s jacket.

“Ah, ha,” he said, waving the evidence over the 2x4 table.

“Say, Ira, who’s the dark-haired lady?”

Ira took the strand of hair and lay it on the chipped yellow paint of their little table. He was still and quiet. The two others waited. People came and went from the busy cafe, with muffins and coffee, sandwiches and cakes. Cars and trucks would stop, then drive off. Families with baby buggies, folks with bikes, others with dogs. All coming and going, coming and going.

BRIAN d'EON's short stories and poetry can be found in a variety of publications: *Winners' Circle* 8 & 9, *Open Window IV*, *Oral Victory*, *Horsefly* and *The Elephant Mountain Review*. He has submitted winning stories to the Okanagan short story contest and the Kootenay Literary Competition. In 1998 his radio script, *407 Arachne*, won the Mark Time award. His novella, *Eta Carinae*, is available through Amazon, Barnes & Novel, etc. To learn more, check his website: [www. briandeon.com](http://www.briandeon.com). He has previously contributed to the *NOR*.

Brave New World

Brian d'Eon

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, exile, sat silently at a dark table, by a dark wall, trying to warm himself by an unenthusiastic November fire. How in hell did he find himself stuck in Stratford-upon-Avon's Three Tunns Tavern again? Alone. In the middle of the afternoon.

William had done his best: sucking in the vapours through the stem of a clay pipe, but decided very quickly that he could abide neither the smell nor taste of tobacco—the latest 'fashion' from the Americas. More and more William brooded over his condition. Zounds, he thought, he had never imagined he'd live to be so old.

Home town hero some called him. More modestly his epithet was *local boy who made good*. *Stinking rich landlord* others were apt to say—for William had his detractors as had his father before him.

"Willy Shakespeare," the children's chant went, "what does he do? Nor shears nor plants, but generally rants, and looks for occasions to sue!"

It was all true and none of it true which in large part could be said of each of the two dozen plays he had written and staged, for William Shakespeare would never be pinned down. He was everyman. He was no man. The great observer who took in everything, digested every human foible, refined it, presented it, held a mirror to the world, and smiled mysteriously while counting his coin.

The afternoon was dark and dank and outside a cold rain pounded against the grieving soil. Hunched over his ale, the misplaced playwright stared vacantly at the fire. The wood within cracked and hissed in pathetic fallacy with the bones and ligaments of his forty-six year old body. God-a-mercy, he was tired. At least here in Stratford he was safe from the plague or that was the argument at least—no one knew with certainty. Was it the scourge of God? Punishment for the wicked entertainments

penned by himself and others on London's south side? It could be, for all William knew, for he knew nothing. Common sense had long since deserted his world. For the past few months, trapped in his boyhood town, far away from his friends, his livelihood, his sense of importance, he might as well have been a wind-whipped monarch staggering across the moors. *Blow winds and crack your cheeks!* Outside the wind answered his invocation, whipping through cracks in the building and allowing candles inside to bend to his imagined cries.

"Another, Master Shakespeare?" the tavern's host asked. Far from his Edinburgh home, Angus, like himself, was a refugee.

"Aye, Angus. If you please." William put down his book. Today he had no stomach even for Ovid.

Stratford had not always been a prison. As a boy it was a world unbounded; he had romped through its forests, dunked his friends in the Avon, thrown rocks at sheep, stolen apples, played pranks on his Latin teacher, and, in a climax of boyhood zeal, in the light of a setting sun, had ravished Anne Hathaway behind a haystack.

But who had ravished whom William would ask in the months following?

Anne, dear Anne—William sighed, recalling the sound of her name: it was like a warm western breeze blowing across fields of rye. She had always been a good wife, had let him do what he must, never complained, but how quickly she had aged! Now she was fifty-four and looked it. Through town she walked with a cane, hunched over. Her face was all wrinkles and the corners of her mouth perpetually down-turned. Only at the mention of her children would a smile brighten her face. Then the creases would reverse direction, her eyelids leap open, her spine straighten and she would talk happily of Susanna and her husband John Hall, the physician. Susanna had married well and the promise of grandchildren thrilled Anne as nothing else. She had been preparing for that glorious event for years, decades—maybe from the moment the sun had set on her virginity.

John Hall was no intellectual giant, but no half-wit either, nor was he unkind. There was even talk of a liaison between Judith and a man called Thomas Quiney whom—it seemed unavoidable—William would have to meet and make conversation with and Lord knows what else—in exchange for which he might yet live to see his youngest well married also.

The same could not be said for his boy. Never Hamnet, who was now fourteen years dead, and never to know the joys of London, good ale, venison, poetry, nor the magic between a woman's thighs. Never.

Never.

John Heminges had once said to him—they were both drunk at the time—that all William's tragedies, every single one—had been a response

to the death of his son. Utter nonsense, of course, which William proved by draining his tankard in a single toss.

“Angels and ministers of grace,” William muttered to himself, shaking his head, then finishing his ale. Would he ever return to London? Would they ever re-open the theatres? Would he ever again put pen to paper? Did he even want to?

Suddenly the tavern door slammed open, and through it a storm-tossed creature emerged: half-man, half-fish, to judge by the smell. The man, if it was a man, was hairy from head to toe with no clear border between beard and the fur of his coat.

“Praise God!” the creature bellowed. He closed the door behind him and stamped his boots. A small puddle of melted snow rested by the door’s threshold.

“Good morrow, sir!” Angus called out. “Nor day for man nor beast yonder.”

The creature replied. “I am in need of dark ale! At once!”

Angus waved the stranger close, made him sit, poured his drink. “I have the very thing, sir.”

“Ah!” the stranger cried out, gulping wildly, wiping the foam from his lips and beard, “the fruits of civilization truly! I am Ulysses returned!”

An allusion to Virgil was not commonplace in the Three Tunns so William turned to examine the stranger closely. It was difficult to assess the man’s true size, buried as he was beneath multiple layers of furs: deer, fox, possibly even bear. If one were to imagine a pill bug or some other burrowing crustacean inflated to human size—this would come closest to resembling the man.

“Not from around these parts, I reckon,” Angus said, refilling the stranger’s tankard. “Where dost thou call home?”

The stranger laughed, shaking the counter. Barrels in the corner of the room trembled as he spoke. “No home for the likes of me!” The stranger pointed to the door behind him. “I carry my home upon my back.”

“Art thou a travelling player then, sir?”

Again the stranger laughed. “We are all players, are we not?”

“T” is beyond my ken, sir.” Angus nodded in the direction of William. “Yonder be the gentleman to ask.”

William jerked himself upright. He hated this kind of thing. He didn’t mind the accolades in London, but here, in this pastoral backwater, which offered little beyond quiet and anonymity, he wished, above all things, simply to be left alone.

The stranger turned slowly, a great grin upon his circular face. “How now, sweet knight!” He raised his tankard; William responded in kind.

Angus waited, seeming to expect a confirmation of old friendship. None was forthcoming. “Thou *dost* know who sits there, in faith?”

The stranger’s smile did not waver. He kept his eyes fixed upon

William. "Who in Hell's great dominion be he?"

Angus shook his head. "Yonder sits William Shakespeare." He struggled to suppress his agitation. "The *playwright*."

The stranger laughed and raised this tankard again. "Let me amend my greeting then to: Well met, Master Shakespeare... playwright and fool!"

The stranger spun back to face Angus, displaying his empty vessel. "Heaven be my witness, good host, t'was full but a short time past!" He lifted the tankard high so he could look under, as if in search of a crack. "T'is most wonderful."

From his money pouch, William grabbed a golden coin and raised it high in the air for the Angus to see. "For the good gentleman and myself."

"Thank you, Master Shakespeare!"

The stranger turned, again saluting with his tankard, "I see, kind sir, thou art a trinity of the blessed: knight, scholar and gentleman all in one!" The stranger growled as he moved his limbs, slipped off his stool and walked, sailor-like, to join William by the fire.

William rose to take the man's hand. "Thou hast me at a disadvantage, sir."

Momentarily the stranger seemed perplexed. "Oh, the custom of the land, I see..." He paused, as if translating from another language. In a moment he conjured a name. "Caleb."

William motioned to a chair opposite him. "If you please, Master Caleb."

"I am at your command, kind benefactor."

And the two men smiled and drank, and exchanged a dozen empty pleasantries till finally, removed of pelts and hat, the now glassy-eyed stranger, unabashed, began to tell his life's tale, almost all of which he professed to have passed beyond the sight of land.

"So thou hast been a mariner most of thy life?"

Caleb nodded. "Now metamorphosed into a land sailor, navigating my caravan across England's green and rolling hills."

"And thy caravan? Outside?"

"Aye. Moored to an oak tree."

William rose, reasonably steady on his feet, and walked to the door. He opened it a crack and saw that it was true. Through the sheets of rain which, like waves, battered the tavern's timbers, he saw a caravan brightly painted: red, blue and yellow. There was even a figurehead fastened to the front: a mermaid with rain dripping from her breasts. Truly it resembled a ship on wheels. It was from just such a caravan—sans mermaid—that as a boy of four, William had watched his first puppet show: marionettes, brought to life at the hands of a grey-bearded Italian, *il Grande Signor Bobolino*.

Smoke rose from the caravan's chimney. Ten feet away a melancholy horse stood tethered within an open stable.

Looking back to the table, William could see Caleb's head now resting flat against it, and feared all was lost, his gold sovereign quite pissed away.

But then, like a resurrected creature, Caleb spoke sideways, his cheek still pressed to the table and his eyes fastened shut. "Bermuda... T' was the worst by far."

William hurried back to stoke the narrative.

"How the worst, pray tell?"

"Shipwrecked." The only parts of Caleb's body that seemed conscious were his lips. "We were as a dozen vessels before us. All smashed upon the wretched reef."

"How long wast thou—?"

Two fingers rose above the plane of the table. "Two cursed years."

William shook his head.

"Two years, two months and twelve days... Would be there still if weren't for..." Caleb began to lift his head. The effort was monumental. It was like watching a ship winch a heavy cargo onto deck. Finally Caleb balanced the tremendous weight between his shoulders, supported by two fleshy counterweights spread across the table.

William urgently waved Angus over. In a moment he arrived to refresh the mariner's beverage.

Caleb didn't drink at once. His lips quivered as if in silent incantation. He stared into his ale, as if mesmerized by a roiling sea he was reluctant to disturb.

"Thou wast saying," William reminded, "that thou might'st be in Bermuda *still* an it were not for?"

Caleb lifted his gaze from the malt sea. "An it were not that the island were haunted."

"Haunted?" William echoed.

"Aye, playwright, magic everywhere. How else even to explain my survival? I should have been dead, washed up onshore, battered, bloodied, broken to pieces like the wreckage of my ship."

"Yet thou didst survive two years more."

Finally Caleb dared disturb the malted maelstrom and brought the tankard to his lips. "For six months I lived on grubs, gulls' eggs, oysters, and fish which I caught with my raw and bloody fingers. What was left of my sea-torn clothes dissolved away in the wind and rain, and I was left naked and hairy. I had nearly given up all hope when, at last, the mighty gods took pity. A second ship approached and shattered on the rocks."

William's mouth hung open as he watched the mariner's eyes dance at the recollection.

"Thou needst not look scandalized, playwright. By now the island's magic was working full bore, for nearly all *this* ship's crew—unlike mine—survived. They washed up gently on Bermuda's pink beaches as if guided

by Venus's cherubs, their only hardship being to be scattered across the island, so that, at first, each of them believed himself to be the sole survivor."

Caleb laughed, his body shaking like a sea lion. "Aye. Seems the stuff of fairy tales, I know, but tell me, playwright, who is the man who can draw with authority the line between what is real and what is not?"

Shakespeare shrugged, made no pretence to have such authority.

"So there I was, Master Shakespeare, hiding in the pine woods, laughing to myself, as one young man, tattered and soaked, paced the strand, beating his chest, crying out how all his kin were now confined to Davy Jones's locker."

"Which was not the case?"

"T" was surely not. A dozen more of his comrades, scattered across the island, lamented under the same delusion, all of them teary-eyed and penitent. The irony of it, eh, playwright?" Conspiratorially the stranger leaned in closer. "If thou wants to tell a good tale, Master Shakespeare, spice it with a good dose of irony. It cannot fail thee!"

"So there stood I, in my melancholic state, helpless as Adam. Yet I could not stop from laughing! To once again hear the sounds of human speech and realize I could understand it still, and that I might not die."

It was expected, in such exchanges, that the listener would interject from time to time. "Remarkable," William commented.

Caleb spread his large hands flat across the table, using the splayed fingers of his left to represent the island's topography. "I scrambled two bays over to greet the wine-red sea for, even from a distance, I could see that its great waves bore precious gifts: intact crates of salt beef, biscuit and—most important—kegs of fine god-given liquor."

William smiled. "Thou wast saved."

"Like a Christian!"

William could easily imagine the stranger emptying a keg in one sitting, a hairy Dionysus, dancing, singing, and lording it over his sandy domain.

Caleb continued, "Gradually I revealed myself, first clothing myself with finery washed ashore, including a pair of fine leather riding boots which, though tight, lent me the necessary air of nobility. I descended upon them like Olympian Mercury, sharing with them the secrets of the island: where the fresh water flowed, where the shallow lagoons harboured clams and fish, where caves might give them shelter and, most important, how to defend themselves against the spirits." The stranger's face darkened. Suddenly he slapped himself violently on the neck as if some winter gnat vexed him.

William feared the stranger might abort his story. "And?"

Caleb nodded glumly. "Hast thou ever been afflicted by spirits, Master Shakespeare? God-a-mercy, I pray thou hast not. What they call here plague, Master Shakespeare, 'tis nothing, I warrant you. On that wretched

island I endured a pestilence ten times more virulent..." Caleb grew demonstrative, illustrating with his great hands. "In my bones, from head to toe, from spleen to heart. I was, Master Shakespeare, no better than a walking pustule."

Not much had changed, William was thinking.

"By day they made a whistling sound. And at night the spirits spoke in tongues, as angels."

William smiled as, in his pocket, he fingered the edges of two gold coins of the same name—angels.

Again Caleb slapped himself. "But spirits might be duped!" Caleb took three great gulps from his tankard, then touched his nose knowingly. "I had my *stratagems*."

With a raised hand, William held off Angus who was approaching with a fresh tankard.

"In truth, Master Shakespeare, worse by far, was the Old Man of the Island."

"Another spirit?"

Caleb lowered his head, making a very slow and grave shaking of it. "The Old Man *commanded* the spirits, but he himself was not of their ilk." Caleb looked William squarely in the eye as if, for the first time, truly taking stock of his benefactor, and finding him wanting. "To look at him, playwright, a Christian might take him for no more than a man."

William nodded, reverently he hoped.

"Though 'twas no *ordinary* man." Caleb looked back to the tavern's entrance. "As tall as that door, he stood, though thin and tree-like with arms that nearly scraped the soil." Caleb paused long enough to finish his drink and for Angus to replace it with another. "Master Shakespeare, I've sailed the wide world, met up with the two-headed natives of Patagonia, crocodiles, pygmies, man-eating camels but never, in all my days, have I met with such a face." Caleb began to nod slowly, remembering. "His eyes like daggers, they were, ready to cleave in twain a man's sacred liver."

The tavern door opened again, but tentatively, as if to prolong indefinitely the creaking sound it made. A young man, tall, and curly-haired stood in the entrance, uncertain whether to enter fully or step again outside. He held a sopping fisherman's hat in his hands, letting it hang by his groin.

"Fergus!" the tavern's host called out, waving the young man—his nephew—over. "Close the door! Come in and warm yourself!"

Like a beetle Fergus advanced in a burst of halting steps. "Good day, Master Shakespeare!" His voice was faint, as if muffled by the thickness of Hadrian's Wall. He took two steps more and halted again. "And to ye, good sir!" Fergus bowed quickly, then made a final dash towards Angus where he began to speak in urgent whispers about topics as unfathomable,

William guessed, as Scottish cuisine.

Caleb smiled and returned his gaze to the playwright and the fire. “A light-minded lad, wouldst thou say?” Next he laughed. “Never know what the tide will wash in, dost thou?”

“He’s a good lad, if a little lost.”

“Aren’t we all!” Caleb had lost the thread of his story. “Where were we?”

“Thou stoodst before the Old Man of the Island.”

“The Old Man of the Island, aye. And what a sight he was. Eyes like daggers, *ready to cleave in twain a man’s sacred liver.*”

The two men finished the sentence in unison.

Caleb squinted. “I told thee that part?”

William smiled.

Solemnly Caleb pointed a finger at the playwright. “It bears re-telling.”

“Tell me, Caleb, how long had the Old Man been there? Had he been ship-wrecked like thee?”

“How long? God knows. For half of eternity, I shouldn’t wonder. He had a proper home, I can tell thee that—no cave such as I was left to dwell in. He was well stocked with every good thing and was friend to all the island’s dark mysteries. It was *he* who controlled the spirits, Master Shakespeare...” Caleb scrunched his nose and his eyes narrowed. “With his chest full of *books* and cryptic spells.”

Shakespeare slid his Ovid onto this lap and then into a pocket.

“T’was either him or me, was’t not?”

William squinted in confusion.

Caleb banged a meaty fist upon the table. “The island harboured only the two of us!” The stranger seemed to expect more of playwrights. “So *clearly* one would be master and *one* would be slave! For that is the way of the world, is’t not?”

Fergus turned his head at the word ‘slave’.

“And, be assured, Master Shakespeare, I had vowed long before never to be beholden to any man, much less be his slave!”

Caleb slapped his right cheek, then his left, and seemed to rise to a new level of wakefulness. He leaned closer to his benefactor. “I had a plan.” Caleb grinned. “T’was not the Old Man only who knew secrets... I befriended the newcomers. I became indispensable to them. I revealed to them my cache of sweet liquor which, for all they knew, was mine, not theirs. I recruited them into my confederacy and had high hopes that soon, with their help and gratitude, I should become King of the Island.”

Swallowing his ale too quickly, William began to cough. Caleb patted him hard on the back, nearly knocking William off of his chair.

“*King Caleb!*” the land-sailor sang, still patting his benefactor on the back. “Rolls off the lips trippingly, does it not?”

After a dozen hacks, William recovered his voice. “So... am I to

understand, I am addressing royalty and—”

“No, no, no, alas ’twas never to be, though ’t were a close thing...”

Caleb stared at the playwright and sighed. He leaned slightly closer, tilted his head, assessing. “’Sblood, an I don’t see an uncanny resemblance!”

William frowned.

“*Thou* and the Old Man...” At first only curious, Caleb’s expression now began to darken. “When thou dost grin, thou hast the same haughty and world-weary countenance...”

Again the tavern door pushed open—this time at a steady, graceful speed, as if the perpetrator embodied poise and deference in equal proportion. Strands of golden hair revealed themselves first, followed by a cream-coloured hand, still clutching the door handle, then an entire body, balancing perfectly atop two tiny, perfectly sculpted feet. The feet were covered in simple cloth shoes. Through the left, one small toe liberated itself into the air, kicking an inch skyward as the bearer inhaled. It was, William decided, as if Diana herself had descended to Earth, disguised—though in her perfection not disguised at all—as an innocent milkmaid.

“Lord Father?” the milkmaid called out.

All eyes turned. Her face was the moon, the sun and all sweet youthfulness together. Fergus stood too quickly and sent his stool crashing to the floor. He tried to catch it, failed, and made the crashing all the more spectacular.

“Miriam? ’tis not time yet, surely?”

Miriam nodded and smiled at her father. It was a smile to launch a thousand ships, to crumble empires, to make the heart of any barnacle-encrusted father obey willingly. Juliet, Portia, Rosalind, Ophelia—in none of these creations had William brought to fruition the level of innocence and beauty that now stood before him. Here, William concluded, stood untainted Eve, taking her first steps in the Garden.

“Miriam, my poppet,” her ragged father entreated, “turn the timer over and give us one hour more.”

Miriam’s smile shone undiminished. All rain and November winds were banished for miles. “As you say, Lord Father, but *then* we must leave. As you yourself have told me, Bristol lies a good ways down the road.”

Caleb nodded, accepted the rebuke easily, for from Miriam’s lips rebukes were as gentle kisses. “Aye, aye, that it is, lass. Just one hour more.”

Miriam nodded and returned her hand to the door’s handle, though first stopping to gaze upon Fergus who responded by stiffening like a soldier. This action caused his elbow to collide with a bottle resting on the counter, which in turned tumbled against another. The ensuing wave

of crashing crockery was kept at bay only by his uncle's quick and steady hands.

"Have a care, Fergus!" Angus said, banning all blame from his voice, defending family and frontier to the end.

Miriam laughed and watched as the young man's face transitioned from frown to smile and a half-dozen emotions in between. It seemed to William she gazed upon the young man's face just a moment longer than propriety should allow, glancing not only at his face, but at his arms and legs and all his generative possibilities. Miriam turned back to her father. "One hour," she said, scolding gently. Without pausing, Miriam covered her head, smiled, then noiselessly disappeared through the ancient and clunky door. Winter laughingly returned.

"That be your daughter?" Angus asked.

"Aye," Caleb replied, icily, insulted apparently that there should be the tiniest doubt in the man's voice.

Angus knew enough to inquire no further; he simply nodded and refocused his attention on his nephew. Fergus, though feigning deep interest in his uncle's conversation, at the least gust of wind or the sound of rain splattering, would turn his head to the door, hoping for Miriam's return, evidently not wishing to miss even the smallest part of her butterfly-like re-emergence.

"Bristol?" William asked.

"Aye," Caleb acknowledged. "With the traffic there, a man can make good lucre. And my marionettes are second to none. What with *my* manipulations..." Caleb held up his beefy fingers as if they were an Euclidian proof. "And Miriam's wizardry with a needle, we can present no end of epic tales: Anthony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Caesar and Brutus."

"I know these stories."

"And a hundred more. You know Aladdin? And his Tales of a Thousand Nights?"

So many stories, so little time.

"Wonderful tales! I make my marionettes fly upon a magic carpet!"

"And your daughter performs with you?"

Vigorously Caleb shook his head. Drops of rain flew off the ends of his long and matted hair. "'Swounds, no! Miriam works *behind the scenes*. My silent and unseen partner."

A gust of wind rattled the door. The tavern's candles bent away as if embarrassed. William and Fergus sighed both; it was only the wind, not Spring's second coming.

Caleb went on to reveal how puppetry was a one-man job. Done right it could be lucrative, and with Miriam's support: the cooking, the cleaning, the sewing—they might yet make a proper living of it. And now that Caleb had retired from the sea for good, now that he had retrieved his

daughter from that nunnery in Calais, it was as though he had begun his life anew. Anything was possible.

“When did your daughter first enter the nunnery?”

“From the age of six months when her mother died.”

“So long?”

“Cloistered with the good French sisters till half a year past.” Caleb paused, pulled a rag from a pocket and, goose-like, blew his nose. It took some moments for the reverberations to abate. “Reared in France she was, taught maths and languages and the wisdom of Aristotle.” Caleb raised an emphatic finger. “*And*, kept safely out of harm’s way and the sight of men’s eyes.”

“Which is how thou wouldst keep it?”

Caleb drained the last of his ale. “*Exactly* as I intend to keep it.”

William nodded respectfully and silently wished the land-sailor good fortune in a hopeless quest. The tavern door re-opened.

“Lord Father?” the goddess enquired, looking towards the fire, Shakespeare, and her salt-encrusted father. She stole a quick glance at Fergus too.

Caleb began to push his way off the chair. “Aye, aye, I know, ’tis time and the road is long.” It was an operation that took pre-planning. William rose to offer a hand. Caleb refused, concentrating instead on watching the young man and his daughter whose intense gazing threatened to part the Red Sea between them.

But what of your escape from Bermuda? And who was this Old Man precisely? These were among a dozen questions William knew would remain unanswered.

“Miriam, dearest,” Caleb called out, now standing, no longer patient. “As thou hast said, ’tis time.”

“Aye, Lord Father.” Miriam could not take her eyes off Fergus.

“The boy is nothing, Miriam. There are thousands more like him in Bristol—many better—and a thousand Bristols across the land.”

William was on his feet too, thinking never in his life had he witnessed a scene quite so elemental. Miriam gazed into the eyes of her first and one true love, the dark tavern now seeming to crackle with blue electricity. Still looking across to Fergus, her breast rising and falling like a single boat bobbing in the sea, Miriam allowed her lips to part, let the spirit of womanly desire gush forth, cross all divides and pronounce with a sweetness that made William want to sink to his knees, “Then brave new world, Father!” She could not help but laugh. “That has such creatures in it!”

ELIZABETH MEREDITH, aka Grandmother Dancing Bear, loves to share her love of words and her love of dance. This summer, 2015, she shared her following observations while solo camping on Graham Island, Haida Gwaii.

I Have Time

Elizabeth Meredith

I have time to notice
that the bee climbs completely
into the bluebell flower
and stays a long time
thereafter noticing the same
many times in passing.

I have time to notice
the beautiful puffy clouds—
Oh look there's an elephant
moving slowly across the sky
to be stopped by a large
bank of clouds forming.
I have time to notice
an hour later
that the clouds are moving
in the opposite direction.
Why is that?

Enough time to listen
to the evening bird's trill
and how every third one is different.
Time to note that the bird stops singing
at 20 to 11 at night.

Enough time to note
that it never gets completely dark
in my tent
even though it's new moon.

I have time to listen
to the swoosh of waves
to feel the breeze
caress my body.
I have time.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of the *New Orphic Review*. Her first story, "Dream Dig," was selected for inclusion in the prestigious *Journey Prize Anthology* in 2001. "Notebook One" of *Still Life with Mother* was featured in the spring 2015 issue of this journal. She came to Canada from Switzerland in 1969.

Still Life with Mother

Margrith Schraner

"An absence—as after the departure of the dead—is felt as a loss but not an abandonment. The dead are hiding elsewhere."

John Berger, *Here Is Where We Meet*

Notebook Two

September 16, 2014

The past pushes the story forward.

On the day of my mother's death, I fall asleep in Canada. A telephone warbles me awake, and sleeping still, I head down the stairs and find myself in Switzerland, where on the main floor of my mother's house, I come upon an open door. Inside the room she used to call the office, most of the furniture, I notice, has been removed.

I'm drawn to the big, open roll-top desk in the corner on my left, where all the accounting always has been done, and put my arms around the arms of an empty chair, surprised to feel an emanation that still lingers there, although my mother left that chair twelve days ago.

The past has pushed its way into the present.

On the day of my mother's death, a telephone in a dream has warbled me awake. I step outside, into a pinkish dawn. High above the branches of a walnut tree, at the back of the garden that borders the alleyway, a milky half-moon sits ludicrously tilted atop a rope of frayed white cloud. I hold my breath and snap the picture; the date encrypted digitally along the lower edge. A single moment now held fast within a frame; the moon a trapeze artist caught on candid camera, poised on a high wire stretched taut from East to West, while half a world removed, in Switzerland, my mother—unbeknownst to me and on this very day—steps out to undertake a journey of her own, poised far above some pinkish clouds, atop a wire similarly stretched, between a day that dawns and one that finds no setting sun.

September 17, 2014

I will not be there, in Switzerland, when the first light dawns, salmon-colored, over the Center for Advanced Adults. The caregiver will have been called to attend to my mother; to raise the head end of her bed. Unrelenting now, the breath that moves, staccato, in and out; my mother, sitting up in bed, the heavy curtains drawn aside, the balcony door open halfway to let in the morning air. Palpable, the robin's song floating in from the birch tree, outside; its leafy branches touch the railing of the balcony, the bird so close, she could reach out a hand if she wanted to.

The tree lights up. Pulsing sunlight streams from it, like honey, flows from it toward her. Comes to absorb, subsume her; claims her in its embrace. The branches of the tree dissolve, no longer there.

My mother's listening presence is perceived by the tree; their out-breath, shared, remains inaudible. She may have witnessed the flitting in the tree as a mystery she once had intimations about, only seconds earlier, and still, while listening, may have reached out a hand—

My mother dies then, alone and unassisted.

At the Center for Advanced Adults, the caregiver, now on her official round, enters my mother's room for the second time that morning. The balcony door seems flooded with light at the very moment when from the birch tree beyond the railing, the robin heralds its singular presence.

September 18, 2014

Always, the need to reconstruct. The attempt to separate, to isolate events in time.

My mother's death is recent. It is a cocoon spun round and round with words, until her absence begins to assume a shape; until that shape can be recognized. As if based on that shape it was possible to infer the shape of a life—my mother's, or to deduce its influence on me, her first-born daughter and the writer of such thoughts. As if the mystery of my mother's past—enshrouded in the present and embodied on the page—could provide clues for those who might come after. As if her life was to be regarded as mere artifact, its multi-faceted, layered meaning remaining hidden, albeit hidden in plain sight—

September 19, 2014

I reached her late, in August; by phone from the West Coast: Blackberry-picking season, raspberry *sorbetto*s served in sugar cones. One time, only. One last time. We spoke sparsely, her voice sounding more like a man's, octaves lower than I remembered it; mine, a quavering question mark, Shall I come—now? And her silence after that.

Her breath was taking center stage; it quelled the hollow room inside my ears. The receiver may have slipped from her hand. I heard my eldest

sister pick it up; ask whether I was still on the line, as if I might have contemplated leaving her. We stayed connected. I don't remember much. Only my mother's final, few words to me—an implied, final parting: *Thank You for Everything*.

I longed again for my mother's presence. There, above the clouds, on my way home, back to the Kootenays, I glimpsed three rainbows from the window of the small plane. In the mid-distance, the sudden blossoming of cumulus clouds; my heart open wide as the sky, I beheld in the suspended golden light, amidst other phantasmagorical cloud formations a towering Buddha, witnessed his billowing seat of lotus-and-moon disc dissolve even as I found myself looking on. And wondered then, who had been the sender of such rainbows. And what the vision was for which I had no words.

Whilst visible below, through the clouds, a patchwork of farmers' fields appeared, an unexpected replica of a quilt I had glimpsed elsewhere—spread out, below, quite similarly. I suddenly recalled the view from the window of another small plane. Four months earlier; late in spring, it would have been. We were then approaching Zürich, Switzerland. Our landing had been much anticipated. It came to signify the start, officially, of celebrating the season that marked my mother's birth. And wrapped inside it, like a gift, her just completed, ninetieth year.

September 20, 2014

Picture warm haze poured over shimmering waters. The clouds have lifted after a night of rain. Changeable April has reached its zenith; it has surrendered to the ease of May.

Reservations have been made. We have been summoned. Thirty-three members of my mother's family are gathered around her in a huddle; her tiny figure almost can't be seen. Her slight stoop over the years has become much more pronounced; more extreme. She gives off the impression of being hawk-eyed; no one will dare pull the wool over her eyes. Her sense of smell despite her advanced years is unusually sharp; she will catch the slightest whiff of dishonesty on anyone's part, to be revealed without delay.

She caught the bus early, took a train from Baden, and lastly, the *Schnellzug* from Zürich to Lucerne. She looks wide awake. She has walked rather briskly to the pier from the station—under her own steam, she'll have us believe—although she'll admit it, finally, that she had held onto the elbow of my eldest sister. The pesky swelling of her right ankle can hardly be a matter of grave concern—not right now, she insists.

This has long been her wish; her dream: A resplendent voyage, almost cinematic in scope—a leisurely cruise; five hours spent on a vintage paddlewheel steamer named *Uri*—while comfortably seated among

familiar, people she has known and loved all her life.

She wants to be first to board the vessel; she'll be crossing the gangplank unassisted, with her head held high: Full steam ahead! Then she makes a concession: She'll take Taio's elbow. He's here from Canada, her lanky great-grandson, the only one born abroad. They last met face to face when he was a toddler—he'll be sixteen, before you know it. He has traveled the distance and crossed an ocean to come this way. "We're all midgets, compared to him." My mother's laugh sounds indulgent. "Shrimp—did he correct me? Well; not quite."

At this festive moment, it's almost as if I could hear far-away strains of some music, a Strauss waltz, perhaps, being played in her honor—just for my mother—wouldn't the moment be perfect, you say? "Not the *Radetsky March*—God forbid—it's far too military," she protests, though feebly. For she's the oldest among us—granted, she's all of ninety—"not at all nineteen, anymore," she laughs—whereas her youngest relation, a little girl wheeled around in a stroller is a direct descendant of her first husband, Fridolin, although she will never, ever, mention him.

Already, we've pulled away from the shore. The far-away strains of the waltz are drowned out by a most deafening noise. We've come upon the glorious engine works that are positioned near the center of the ship. Look, how artfully exposed—the rhythmical pounding of the arms being cranked by those gleaming pistons; they're the ones driving the side paddle wheels. All that noise, the relentless clanking and banging makes you want to clap your hands against your ears.

The noise is more muted, now that the door has been closed. We have been seated at the rear of the ship, in the elegant dining salon, at five tables alongside the windows, and decked with crisp white linen, vases of baby's breath and cornflowers; silver flatware; crystal glasses for Swiss wine of choice, white or burgundy red.

On the quayside, we watch as the ancient arcades of Lucerne—the stateliest of cities, its lakeshore bordered by chestnut and plane trees—begin to recede. The landscape unfurls like a flag in the breeze. We've been placed under the meticulous care of suave waiters—a four-course meal being served discreetly—while we chat with each other. We laugh and we eat, while through the windows, picturesque villages and hilly stretches of meadow can be seen, gliding by. Already, we're starting to lose count of the many historical facts that pertain to each and every port of call. There are simply too many. We marvel at the seemingly endless succession of bays alternating with idyllic fjords. What were the names of their attendant mountains, again? Those brooding shapes you can see, being eclipsed by dramatic, near-vertical cliffs, here and there?

She has given a piece of her heart to this landscape, my mother. The *Rütti* Meadow is a declared favorite of hers. For it is here, in this place, some seven-hundred years ago, at least—let's be precise; in 1291,

historically speaking—where the Oath of Eternal Alliance was signed. She learned that at school when she was twelve—three years before World War II had started: A pact, they called it, from which the Old Swiss Confederation ensued. She tries to explain it to Taio, her jet-lagged great-grandson, who appears to be listening. As his grandmother, I've been assigned a special role. "A definitive act of heroism," I translate, doing a botched job, at best. "There were three founding cantons—that's what she's now saying," I relate. "Uri, Schwyz, and Nidwalden—you'll remember their names—those were the ones who threw off the yoke of the Habsburgs in a definitive way. You've likely heard of William Tell, the crossbow marksman—yes?" My mother searches Taio's face. "He's famous for shooting an apple placed on top of his son's head. It was this same Tell who ambushed an Austrian bailiff named Gessler. And as we well know, his aim was true: He shot the tyrant with a single arrow aimed straight at his heart, and thereby killed him dead." My jet-lagged grandson sits there blinking, across the table, in the chair facing hers. "And so," I conclude my translation with a quick non sequitur. "Swiss history at a glance is concerned with the decisive moment when *Helvetia* was born, for indeed, that is her name—you can find it engraved on every single *Rappen*, each Swiss nickel and dime." While I search through my coin purse to demonstrate, Taio nods politely. He studies the artful folding of the linen napkin to the left of his bread plate. He wants to duplicate its intricate shape, augment it with a twist of his own.

For my mother, the long hours on the ship with its many ports of call are suffused with meaning. With memory, I assume. With nostalgia, even. She has been here before, many times, in the company of her husband—the second one, that is. His name was Fritz. They were married for fifty-eight years. "Sixty would make it a diamond anniversary," I quip. She casts her gaze out the window as if intent on reeling in whatever glint she sees floating on the waves. "In the not-too-long-ago, distant past," she agrees. She juts her chin out, tries to catch Taio's eye. He returns her smile.

At the morgue, when Fritz died—the story is told, circulated and kept alive by my siblings—she would place her palms repeatedly on her husband's forehead and touch the chill on his cheeks to warm him, to return him—

"No matter, the details." My mother glances sideways at Taio. "We better not dwell on that; he'd only be bored." So recent, the events—yet, already, they have receded. They seem further away—more remote now, the details—as if they had been filed away, secreted—representing the era belonging to the vigorous, the still living; the kicking and screaming, as my mother jokingly might have said.

The party appears to have gathered considerable steam. We can still be found—lingering, or loitering, whatever the preference—on the vessel

named *Uri*—still plying the waters of Lake Lucerne. Now, in the late afternoon, the lake appears limpid and the sheen on the water of a particularly bewitching green. The gathering around my mother resembles vintage footage, its myriad images splashed against a speckled screen. Bordered by uncertain white and placed near the center, there she is—my mother, she looks animated—glowing iridescently on the screen, all in silver and light.

Our party seems happily afloat. The soft whirring of the ship's engine—a muted sound, like that from a projector—has a soothing effect on the nerves, my mother remarks. I can be seen sitting next to her, at the narrow end of the table, on her left. My grandson takes up the center in her field of vision; he sits across from her, in the place of honor reserved for husbands, if hers were still willing with us.

A single walking stick can be seen by the window, leaning against the wall. Using two of them might give a false impression, that she is less than able, somehow. And besides, she'll need one hand free, to carry a small cloth bag with all the essentials—

By now, the whirring of the boat's engine resembles a purring, a basso-ostinato accompaniment to what unfolds: Poems are recited, gifts are given, hugs exchanged—in Swiss-German, first, and later in more formal *Hochdeutsch*.

The decades, it appears, have flown by us. It might be safe to say they've been given wings—the wine must have gone to our heads, we agree; we're soused—we've been lulled into thinking—

There is not enough time. We must repair to the deck at once and pose for pictures: Four generations on the lake—adrift, afloat on the boat—Noah's ark, my mother would say, though not quite—our family blended, loving arms extended to Norway, Italy and France. First the siblings; then the uncles and aunts, followed by nephews, nieces, cousins: hundreds of pictures, variations on the theme. The groupings vary—hair can often be seen, blown about by the breeze; eyes are closed in rare moments of lull, or bliss—the whole enchilada; in other words, enough electronic data to strain anyone's files. The leafy opulence of trees near Brunnen or Flüelen—an indescribable shade of pixelated green, reflected back from the water, as if from a multifaceted diamond and refracted a million times—will be on record henceforth and described as the crystalline light, the limpid presence that shone forth from the pupils of my mother's eyes.

Wine glasses are now being raised: After all, my mother is the reason we have gathered. Her brother-in-law proposes a toast to her health, her happiness and long life. *For she's a jolly good fellow*; let's drink to that. "One last round," someone shouts. "Soon, our dessert, espresso and liqueurs will come around." My mother's Coupe Romanoff, her absolute favorite, is brought in with the appropriate flair. The ship's captain stands, proud—along with the staff, grouped in a half circle—they're permitted

to shout a single word: Congratulations! She looks down, delighted, at a mouth-watering mound of whipped cream. But first, she must commend the chef for his excellent cuisine. The ship's captain winks at her—conspiratorially he whispers, if he were ninety, he'd surely be sitting down, too, right next to her. The Romanoff, topped with a sparkler, is at this very moment being lit. The strawberries look plump, much juicier than usual—'tis the season, after all; they're just so much like my mother—the captain is winking at her, again. She'll be obliged to use her spoon if she wants to tunnel down to where the ice cream is hidden—

We will not have crossed the ocean in vain. We will witness my mother blow out a single candle—for luck in the coming year. The sparkler on her coupe Denmark will spark on; the moment, extended, stretches far into the future—eternity beckons; it is the gleam in my mother's eye. She pushes back her chair; she will now make a speech, her tiny figure stretched up to its full height. She pauses. With her gleaming dessert spoon held high, she'll make a wish, her kindly eye momentarily fixed on us. Already, the glimmer of the sparkler is getting dimmer, on the verge of being snuffed out.

She wants to share a special moment. “She is telling us now how fortunate she feels.” My whispered asides are directed at Taio, who speaks Canadian English. “*Grossmami* thanks us; she is honored by our presence—”

I summarize, again and again.

“She mentions nightingales—their song, at dawn—their presence, this morning, she says, is auspicious. She considers it an omen, even. They were returning from Africa, where they had spent the winter. It makes her happy to think that they chose *her* garden to alight in, of all places. The purity of their song-lines, she says, is unequalled. The tone of their whistles and trills is unique; it is reminiscent of little bells—”

The wonder of the moment still lingers. “What are the chances of hearing such a bird?” she asks. “It's exceedingly rare. It can only happen once a year—”

“You're sure it wasn't a robin? Or maybe a thrush?” my eldest sister puts in.

“These were nightingales,” my mother insists. “I'll never forget—on this day, I was offered a gift, so rare, so precious—”

I turn to Taio, groping in vain for the words that will render the essence of what has been said. But Taio is shaking his head; he has no need of a translator, he says, having mastered the art of reading Swiss lips.

“It's the sound of the language, Granny,” he confides. “While I find it comforting, it is nevertheless much like a lullaby; it puts me straight to sleep.” His forehead rests on the table, as if trying to demonstrate. But I know he is far from being asleep. He is wide awake; his text messages cross borders at the speed of light as he partakes of the lives of his school

friends, overseas.

My mother nudges her apple juice closer to his bottle of white *Grappi*, from which he takes regular sips with a straw. “*Prost.*” She gives it an audible clink; he raises his head. For a second, he looks up at me, peeved. “They wouldn’t permit me a single taste of the wine, though I’m almost sixteen. Just imagine, Granny, not even a sip—”

We’ve been waltzed straight off the boat, it seems. It was all quite unannounced. The images from the projector may quite simply have stopped coming, or the hum of the ship’s engine may have ceased. Or else, the light may be considered less than becoming. Indeed, the light seems rather lackluster—

Abruptly, we find ourselves back on land. We must now seize the moment, for time is of the essence. In Switzerland, time tends to be short. It is vital for us to catch whatever bus, train or tram is guaranteed to carry us back to our comfortable, accustomed lives.

The moment is upon us. We have no choice; we must part. “We’ll say a hearty farewell—for we’ll be seeing each other soon, again.” Each one of us receives three pecks on the cheek from my mother: It’s a family tradition. “You may say, *Au revoir*, and *Ciao*, but please, you must never say, *Good-bye*,” my mother insists. “It’s much too abrupt, much too final. I don’t understand why that word was never banned.” She gives a shrug, followed by a laugh. “It should be forever confined to the pages of a dictionary.”

“Happy Birthday, and congratulations, Mom,” I rejoin, my turn having come to pull her close. “It can never be said quite enough—quite simply, it’s an achievement.” We’ve been blissfully afloat and gently suspended, for hours, it seems—we’ve been swept off our feet—and now, we have landed. Abruptly, it seems. “Transitions are always hard.” My mother takes a deep breath, nods her agreement. Although she is returning my cordial hug, I have the uncomfortable feeling she has taken her leave. And indeed, I see her looking away.

Across time and space, oddly enough, it is my mother’s voice that still carries. It has the power to reach me, even now—it has entered my immediate present.

“As to birthdays—” my mother pauses, casts a backward glance at the swills on the lake, at the silver surface that hides its variegated depths, “let me tell you, right now—” her voice is on the verge of trailing off, “there won’t be a ninety-first.”

“But, Mom,” I hear myself object. “The time of death is uncertain. It’s rather presumptuous—don’t you think—that you should be able to determine the length of time you’ll be spending on this earth—”

But on second thought, what she may have meant to imply was this: that the luxury of her gift to us—the extravagance of the meal we were fed on the boat while basking in her comforting presence—would hardly

bear repeating. Or rather, that we should consider it a unique occurrence, as rare as the song of the nightingale that had roused her from a dream, that morning—and further, that much like a migrant bird that sings in the night, she would only stay with us, in our garden, for an exceedingly short time. And then—

“You’ll be gone?” It’s my turn to blink, to stare.

“Just the same; you’re no different,” she admonishes me. “You look, but you don’t see; you’re just like all the rest.” She faces me. “You think I’ll live forever.”

I catch another glimpse of her; she is shaking her head—

September 21, 2014

Waving good-bye: An act of acknowledgement, a possible gesture, an intimation of the distance that is being created between mother and daughter, each time they must take their leave.

Although the jagged edges of memory are dissolving, an image persists: It is of my mother, waving to us from the lit-up window on the top floor of the cantonal hospital in Baden, Switzerland. It is night, and there is snow on the ground. My oldest sister and I have gone to see her during extended visitors’ hours, and now stand waiting at the bus loop, a stone’s throw from the hospital entrance. We look up at a single, lit-up rectangle of a window, positioned high up in the star-studded sky. I see the presence of a tiny figure. She is waving, my mother—hers is not a polite, queenly wave. Hers is a generous gesture. She is waving with both arms. From afar, her strong arm movements remind me of a powerful, mythic bird, flapping its wings prior to lift-off. A Phoenix, perhaps.

No—not a bird, I decide. She is at that moment, while standing in the bright window surrounded by dark, a human figure with wings, a guardian angel, even.

The jagged edges of memory are further dissolving: Two years before she would turn ninety, I had booked a last-minute flight to Zürich. When I arrived, one week before Christmas, sleep eluded both of us. Her situation was acute; she suffered from shortness of breath. We sat together on the living room sofa in the middle of the night, sharing a papaya. I couldn’t help noticing her swollen ankles while spooning the orange papaya flesh into my mouth.

Her small suitcase had been packed and ready for some time, in case of emergency hospital admittance, although she wasn’t quite sure she wanted to go. Half of her heart would have liked to stop beating. She had lost her husband of fifty-eight years, less than four months earlier, and would have liked to follow him. Besides, hospitals were only suitable for birth-giving; of this she was certain. She preferred to die at home.

“But dying of shortness of breath—alone?” I remember objecting.

“Why not?” She shrugged. My mother was a sensible, level-headed

person. “It wouldn’t last long.”

“Perhaps, you’d like to call Doctor Senn, and mention your symptoms to him?”

“Tomorrow, I will,” she said, carrying our emptied papaya skins back to the kitchen. “Let’s try and get some sleep.”

I decided to share, then, what little I had learned about death and dying. I imagined it would be best to die while seated, I said. The upright position was said to facilitate what in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition was referred to as the ejection of consciousness.

My Mom sat quiet and thought for a while.

“In your tradition, perhaps,” she finally said. She did not share my take on the matter. I now understand what she may have meant by her pantomime at the window. Her unequivocal gesture had been the perfect expression of how she envisioned leaving the earthly plane—by winging her way strongly upward through the night sky—up, up, and away.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. His novel, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, was a finalist for the Ryga Award for Social Awareness in Literature, 2007. The following story comes from his collection, *False Memories and Other Likely Tales*.

Remedial Reading

Ernest Hekkanen

I PERFORMED rather poorly in elementary school, owing to the fact that I had a mild case of dyslexia and spent my first ten years living the life of a bush brat. I was one of those kids who preferred running around in the woods to cracking open a book. To tell you the truth, I found it difficult to make sense of printed words. Give me a diagram, though, and I was an absolute genius. There was one particular book I checked out of the school library over and over again, and it had to do with how to construct simple radios. If not for the diagrams, I wouldn't have been able to build them. One such radio could be made out of household items: a toilet paper tube, the lead of a pencil, a razor blade, wire and earphones. I found the earphones in the garbage dump up above Perrinville. They had been dumped there along with a bunch of vacuum tubes, transformers, resistors, speakers and the like. It was a great find, one that spurred my imagination.

Back in the late 1950s, optometrists, doctors and educators were just about as poor at diagnosing learning disabilities as I was at mastering the printed word. My inability to organize letters into words, and words into sentences, was at first chalked up to poor eyesight. I was provided with spectacles. When the spectacles failed to cure my problems, I was put in remedial reading courses. I continued to read at a halting speed. I was then diagnosed with a bad case of laziness, and possible low intelligence. No one would listen to me when I told them it was hard to keep printed letters from jumping around on the page or that I had to take a running leap to cross the swirling, silvery gap in the middle of the page.

I was deemed a hopeless case.

By fifth grade, the only book I managed to read all the way through was a Little Golden Book entitled *The Sailor Dog*. It was a picture book for beginning readers, probably around two-hundred words in length. I couldn't have read it if not for the visual assists on every page. The story dealt with Scuppers, the aforementioned sailor dog, whose boat is washed

up on a beach during a storm. He constructs a shack out of driftwood and sets to work repairing his boat, which he eventually sails to a foreign land—somewhere in the Middle East, if I remember correctly. I could relate to *The Sailor Dog* because I too felt like a leaky vessel in bad need of being patched up. I kept the book tucked under the mattress of my bed, and would read it just about every night before going to sleep.

One day my big sister revealed my secret to friends. “Oh, yeah, Mike can read. Why don’t you show them your favorite book, Mike?”

“Stop it, Patty.”

She ran to my bedroom, yanked the book out of its hiding place and held it up for everyone to see. “This is it—*The Sailor Dog*. How many times have you read this book? Tell them, Mike. Speak up.”

I got up from the sofa and left the living room, in a huff.

“He reads it every night,” she yelled after me. “Every night. Isn’t that right, Mike?”

My mother refused to give up on me. During the summer months between 5th and 6th grade, she drove me to a teacher’s house on the shore of Martha Lake, to be tutored twice a week. Mr. Mulgaard got me to do things like covering one eye or the other with a patch and reading to him like that, which always gave me a headache. We did word-recognition games and flash-card exercises, all of which I was miserable at. He also got me to read aloud from a boy’s adventure novel about Buffalo Bill Cody.

“Why do you turn your head from side to side when you read?” he asked me.

“Because I need a running start to get over the gap in the middle of the page.”

“What gap? Point it out to me.”

“It’s only there when I read. I get to the middle of the page and I lose where I’m at in the sentence. I can’t tell which line I should be on, because everything dissolves into this gap. That’s why I turn my head. It helps me leap over the gap.”

Just then, his daughter came downstairs. She was nineteen years old, and a real looker. The house had a circular stairway, so I’d first glimpse her feet on the treads. It was always difficult for me not to look up from the page when I knew she was about to make an appearance. You see, on one occasion she had come down the stairs in this filmy, black nightdress that allowed me to view most of her curves. She was the reason I put up with being tutored in the first place—why I agreed to go through all the torture inherent in the exercises. She came down the stairs in the filmy nightdress only once, but it was enough to get my hopes up each and every time I heard her feet on the treads.

One day, Mr. Mulgaard asked his daughter to participate in one of the reading exercises. He got her to clasp my head in her hands to stop my

head from moving back and forth while I read from the book about Wild Bill Cody. I very nearly swooned at the touch of her hands against my temples. The candy-flavored scent she gave off didn't help any. I read more haltingly than I normally did, barely able to concentrate on the words, my eyes jerking back and forth like I'd come down with a bad case of palsy. To tell you the truth, I had no idea what I was reading. I didn't retain one bit of it, due to this quivery feeling I got down in my solar plexus. While I was reading from the book, Mr. Mulgaard closely observed the movement of my pupils.

"I think you might have a stigma," he said. "Have your glasses been corrected for anything like that?"

"I don't even know what you're talking about," I told him.

"I think one of your eyes is looking down, the other up."

"I wouldn't know," I said. "Nobody ever told me that before."

By now, his daughter had released her grasp on my head.

"My," he said, "your ears are awfully red. Are you all right, Mike?"

I wiped the corner of my mouth on the back of my hand, to keep a bead of drool from cascading down to my chin. "It was a big effort to read that way," I told him. "It felt like my head was in a vice."

He smiled. "I bet it did."

* * *

I firmly believe, even now, that the best way to get a dyslexic boy to learn how to read is by sexing up the activity. Mr. Mulgaard hadn't meant to do that when he asked his daughter to clasp my head in her hands, but that's what happened, inadvertently. At first I had resisted the idea of being tutored in reading all summer long, and now I looked forward to it—on the off-chance I'd glimpse Shelly Mulgaard's attractive figure through the filmy nightdress or have my head clasped in her hands. Without knowing it, I had confirmed the theory that irregular reward worked much better than regular reward.

I know what you're wondering: Did my reading speed pick up? Did the gap in the middle of the page lessen by even one iota? The answer to those questions comes with a story that has to do with the garbage dump.

By this time, I had purchased a bolt-action .22 rifle. It'd been real easy to get my hands on it. I had simply walked into the hardware store in Lynnwood, where you could place orders for things you wanted to buy in the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. I pointed to the picture of the .22. The cashier told me how much it would cost once the tax was figured in, and I plunked down my hard-earned cash.

"You're sure this purchase is alright with your parents?" the clerk asked me.

"Oh, sure. They've got a lot of killing they want me to do."

"What are you going to kill?"

"Rats and vultures. Things like that."

“You know better than to ever point a firearm at anybody—right?”

“Oh, yeah, I know all about that. My dad taught me the rules.”

When the call came that my order was ready for pickup, I pedaled my bicycle up to the hardware store and showed the cashier my receipt.

“I suppose you’ll want some shells with that?”

“I sure as shooting will.”

“How big of a box—fifty, one-hundred or two-hundred cartridges?”

“Might as well make it two-hundred. I’ve got a lot of shooting to do.”

Two of my pals had also bought .22s. On one occasion we were standing three abreast in the garbage dump, shooting bottles off a log. The idea was to “drop” as many bottles as possible in thirty seconds. The sound of us blasting away at the bottles must have been heard by the locals living down in Perrinville, because the next thing we knew, two police cars came zooming up behind us, beacons flashing, sirens wailing. My friend Murphy said we should run for it, but I told him to hold his ground.

“It might inspire them to shoot at us, and I bet they’re better marksmen than we are.”

Three policemen got out of the cars, not in any hurry, more like they couldn’t muster enough gumption to move. A fourth officer stood with a mike held in his hand, behind a door.

“So what are you three boys up to?” asked the tallest of the policemen, pushing his cap back on his head.

“We’re shooting bottles,” I told him.

“Shooting bottles, huh?”

“Yeah, bottles.” I nodded at the unbroken bottles on the log.

“Mind if I take a look at your rifle?”

“Be my guest. I didn’t steal it, if that’s what you’re thinking. I bought it with my own money. That’s the case with Murphy here, too. And Sid.”

I held out my rifle. He cranked open the bolt and out came a spent shell. He sniffed at the chamber. Looked at all the brass casings on the ground at our feet.

“You’ve been doing a lot of shooting, this morning,” he observed.

“Morning’s a good time to be doing it.”

“You know, it’s Sunday today. Don’t any of you go to church?”

I decided to employ some humor. “Oh, yeah, we all go to church—the Church of Davy Crockett.”

He chuckled. “The Church of Davy Crockett, huh? What kind of church is that?”

“It’s for bush brats. Right now, we’re a congregation of three, but we’re hoping to increase that number. Ain’t that right, boys?”

“Sure is,” Sid said.

The policeman asked me for a bullet. I dug one out of my vest pocket and gave it to him. He cranked the bolt home, aimed at one of the bottles

and blew it away.

“Nice little rifle you have here,” he said, handing it back to me. “Be careful not to aim it at anybody.”

On our way back through the dump, we stopped to pick up some girlie magazines we’d discovered on a previous excursion. We looked at the pictures while we waited for rats to poke their heads up out of the refuse. They’d slink like shadows through the garbage, barely noticeable. We took turns dropping them dead. Sometimes the rats were so quick they’d duck out of the way of our bullets, maybe because they’d heard us taking aim.

“God, this one is sure a looker,” Murphy said, holding up the centerfold of a *Playboy*. “Look at those jugs. They’re practically the size of quart jars.”

Though we spent more time looking at the pictures than we did reading the articles, I discovered right away that I didn’t have any trouble with the silvery gap that normally appeared in the center of the page. It wasn’t because I was distracted by the pictures, either. The text in the girlie magazines was laid out in fairly narrow columns, and I didn’t need to take a running leap to get from one side of the page to the other. I noticed this almost instantly. To make sure it wasn’t due to the pictures rather than the text being laid out in columns, I tried reading the evening newspaper, only to discover it was the same with newspaper columns, as well. However, the articles in *Playboy* and the other big-boob magazines were a lot more exciting to read. They appealed to my imagination in ways that were a lot more tangible.

Soon my reading speed picked up, along with my comprehension.

* * *

I now like to say that everything I needed to know I learned in the Perrinville garbage dump. That’s a terrible exaggeration, but there’s some truth to it, too. What people choose to throw away says a lot about what they once valued, so it was a real eye-opener to go picking through the heaps of rubbish. Ever so often we’d come across old photo albums or batches of handwritten letters. Sometimes the letters were neatly tied into bundles with ribbon or string. Reading them was like snooping through other people’s dirty laundry. In this way we learned a little something about the history of the people in our neck of the woods, what I’d call the unofficial history.

“Why do people throw this sort of stuff away?” Murphy said. “I would of burned these. I mean, some of this is real personal.”

“I guess they figure a dump is a dump, and once stuff gets dumped here, no one else is going to go pawing through it ever again.”

“Listen to what it says in this letter,” Murphy said. “*I’m afraid I’m not going to be coming home the same man you knew when I was shipped out. I’m missing a few parts. But I’m alive. I guess I should be thankful*”

for that.”

“I wonder what parts he’s talking about,” Sid said, giving a laugh. “I wonder if it was his pecker or his balls.”

“Does it say anything else?” I asked Murphy.

“No, just the usual stuff. *Can’t wait to get home. I never knew war could be such hell. I’ll be so happy when I’m back by your side. I’m missing our warm dot, dot, dot.*”

“Is that what it actually says, dot, dot, dot?”

“No, there’s just a bunch of dots; that’s all.”

“Yeah, and look where all of those dot, dot, dots got him,” I remarked. “Right here in the dump.”

“Maybe he’s dead,” Sid offered. “Maybe that’s why his letters were dumped here.”

“Is there a name on any of the letters?” I asked Murphy.

“He signs himself ‘Jim’.”

“That sure tells us a heck of a lot,” Sid remarked. “Must be at least two or three million Jims in this country.”

“Wait, here’s a name on the envelope. Jim Babcock—from some town way down in Virginia.”

“I wonder what his letters are doing so far from home?”

“Maybe he moved here. Later on. After the war.”

“We should see if his name is in the telephone directory.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. Maybe we can give him back his letters. Just show up at his door, and hand them to him. I bet that would be a big surprise.”

“Yeah, let’s do it—just to see the look on his face.”

We looked in the telephone directory, but couldn’t find a Jim or James Babcock. Nor could we find Lois Mitchell, to whom the letters were addressed.

* * *

One day, in the dump, we got a surprise none of us could’ve anticipated. We were following this trail through the woods, over to the part of the dump where we normally did our target shooting. Where the trail opened into the dump, we came upon this white Chevy station wagon. It wasn’t the station wagon per se that was the big eye-opener, though. No, it was what we saw going on in the back of that station wagon. The tailgate had been let down. This guy had dropped his trousers in a bunch around his ankles and was thrusting his you-know-what into this dame who had her legs draped over his shoulders. We knew from reading the girlie magazines what was going on, but this was the first time we’d ever seen two people going at it—and with such gusto, too!

“Let’s scare the bejesus out of them,” Sid whispered.

“No, let’s not,” Murphy told him, heading back along the trail the way we had come.

Murphy's reluctance to engage in some fairly innocent mischief took us by surprise. I turned to follow him. Sid didn't. He lagged behind, long enough to fire his .22 at a 65-gallon oil drum, which amplified the sound about tenfold.

"You should've seen 'em jump," he exclaimed, after catching up to us on the trail. "I bet they'll never do that again—at least not in the dump, anyway."

All of a sudden, Murphy tried to punch Sid in the face. I responded by shoving his arm aside—just in time, too.

"Hey, what's going on here?" I said. "You two were the best of buddies just a little while ago."

Murphy's face began to crumble. He hung his head in shame.

"That was my uncle," he said. "My favorite uncle. Phil."

"That guy who had his pants down around his ankles?"

"Yeah, him."

"Well, at least he was having a good time getting his rocks off," Sid snickered.

Murphy cocked his arm again. "One more crack like that and I'm going to whale on you, Sidster. I mean it, too."

"Hey, I'm just kidding, Murph. Take it easy."

"Well, don't kid about that. Got it? And don't go spreading it all over the place. I'll hunt you down if you do."

* * *

From what Murphy told us later on, and which was easy enough to verify, too, his Uncle Phil worked as a grease mechanic in the huge triple-bay garage that sat next door to the auto-wrecking yard on Highway 99; in fact, the two of them—yard and garage—might've been conjoined; business-wise, I mean. Murphy's uncle worked in the largest of the bays, where they specialized in fixing tractor-trailer rigs. Apparently, Phil was a top-notch mechanic. That's not what got him the job at Qualified Auto and Truck Repairs, though. No, the reason he got that job had to do with the fact that he had married the owner's daughter, and had a couple of kids by her. However, the owner's daughter wasn't the woman he'd been plugging in the rear of the station wagon.

"That was somebody else," Murphy told us.

"How do you know?" Sid inquired. "You couldn't see her face. Her ass maybe, but not her face."

"I know it because my aunt wouldn't be caught dead doing something like that in a goddamn garbage dump. That's how I know."

We eventually came to learn that Murphy's uncle had done a couple tours of duty late into the Second World War. He never fired a shot, though, due to his skills as a mechanic. His job had been to fix broken-down army trucks and jeeps. When the war came to an end, he was stationed at a U.S. Army base in Germany, where he worked as a mechanic

until some time in the early 1950s. By all accounts, he had enjoyed army life, especially the carousing.

“My Uncle Phil’s really good at telling stories and, boy, has he got some doozies.”

“Tell us one.”

Murphy struck a thoughtful pose. “You know that guy, Hitler?”

“He was that Nazi leader, right?”

“Right. Anyway, on Thanksgiving, Phil told us this story about Hitler’s SS troops. Apparently, they ran a string of cathouses—from one end of Germany to the other. According to Phil, his company was the one that liberated them.”

“What do you mean, ‘liberated’ them?” I asked him.

“That’s how my Uncle Phil put it. Right away, all the other adults at the table started shushing him. He shrugged his shoulders like he was really disappointed, saying he wouldn’t go any further, owing to all the little gobblers who were still gobbling down their turkey dinners. For him, those years were the best years of his life. That’s what he told us, anyway.”

“I think your Uncle Phil’s an A-1 bullshitter,” Sid told Murphy.

Murphy cocked his arm. Sid pretended to cringe. “Take it easy, Murph. I like bullshitters. Really, I do.”

* * *

About a month later, Murphy’s Uncle Phil was found shot to death in the Triple ‘A’ Auto-Wrecking Yard, sprawled in the backseat of a 1956 Ford sedan damaged so badly it’d been declared a write-off. Lynnwood wasn’t known for having lots of violent crime, so the newspapers and the radio stations really played it up. According to *The Enterprise*, the German shepherds responsible for guarding the junkyard had been fed meatballs heavily laced with sleeping pills, or some such drug, because they were in deep snooze-mode when the staff showed up for work in the morning.

According to the article, the son of the junkyard owner made the grisly discovery. “I was tipped off by all the crows,” he was quoted as saying. “I couldn’t figure out why they were flocking over that part of the yard, so I went to take a look. That’s when I discovered the body.”

By this time, Phil had become little more than body.

“I don’t get it,” I told Sid. “Why would anybody drug the German shepherds? Why wouldn’t they just shoot them, the same way they did old Phil? And what was Phil doing there in the first place? In the middle of the night, no less?”

“Maybe he was stealing somebody’s hubcaps.”

“You think so?”

“No, you’re right,” Sid admitted. “It doesn’t make much sense.”

“I guess we’ll have to ask Murphy. After the funeral.” I ruminated for a few moments. “You don’t think Murphy would’ve shot him, do you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“It says in the newspaper that a .22 was used, and Murphy’s got a .22.”

“Phil was his favorite uncle, Mike. His favorite uncle! You don’t go around shooting your favorite uncle.”

“Maybe you would if your favorite uncle let you down in some monstrously big way.”

“No, you’re way off base about that. Way off base!”

The funeral was scheduled to take place at the Forest Lawn Cemetery, located way south on the connector between Edmonds and Northgate. Sid and I pedaled our bicycles over to the cemetery to see who would show up for the ceremony. We’d never seen Murphy dressed up in such fancy clothes ever before—an actual suit and tie, both black, with a white shirt! “Murphy’s Uncle Phil must’ve known a whole slew of people,” Sid observed. “Look at them all! There must be at least a hundred mourners here. Maybe more.”

“Many of them are Qualified Auto guys. Some look like junkyard guys, too. I wonder who the others are?”

“Friends and family would be my guess. I hear he hung out at the Echo Tavern a lot.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“That’s what my old man told my mom. He said he wouldn’t be surprised to find out that Phil was dinging some barmaid he shouldn’t’ve been dinging at the Echo Tavern.”

Murphy glanced at us up on the knoll where we were using binoculars to peruse the mourners. He didn’t look very happy to be burying his uncle, but then none of the mourners did.

“Let’s take a look at the cars parked along the road,” I told Sid. “Maybe they’ll tell us something.”

“Like what?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe the murderer hung a sign from his rear-view mirror. Something dumb like that.”

We didn’t see any signs, but we did spot the Chevy station wagon with the big tail fins. The white one. We looked in the windows and tried all the doors, which were locked.

“I wonder where this car was the night of the murder?” I said.

“What makes you wonder that?”

“I don’t know. Just wondering, is all.”

I jotted down the license plate number and stuck the piece of paper in the breast pocket of my shirt. After that, we squatted behind this tall memorial stone, dedicated to some guy who’d been a bigwig in the Masonic Lodge, and there we waited to see who would get in the Chevy station wagon. It turned out to be a man and a woman. The woman was a real looker: blond, with a shapely figure. Both were dressed in black.

“Hey, isn’t he the butcher at the Tradewell supermarket?” Sid remarked.

“I think so. Yeah. Looks like he’s having some sort of beef with his wife, too.”

* * *

Over two months went by before we saw Murphy again. In the meantime, life went on as usual. I kept attending my remedial reading classes, hoping each time that I’d catch a glimpse of Mr. Mulgaard’s daughter, Shelly. I very seldom caught a glimpse of her, unfortunately. That was kind of disappointing. However, Mr. Mulgaard did express how pleased he was with the “astounding progress” I was making on the reading front.

“You must be practicing at home?” he asked me.

“I am. As much as possible. I live a pretty hectic life, though. I can only read when it fits in with my schedule.”

“What have you been reading?”

I didn’t want to tell him I’d been reading the girlie magazines we found in the garbage dump, so I told him I’d picked up a book at the Edmonds Library.

“Which one?”

Here, I had to think really fast on my feet. “*Tom Sawyer*,” I told him. “When I get finished with it, I’m gonna try *Huck Finn*.”

At that time, in my young boyhood, I didn’t know anything about the guy who’d written those two books. All I knew was that they were connected at the hip, in some fashion or other.

“Good. If you keep this up, I don’t think you’ll have any trouble getting through 6th grade.”

“I sure hope you’re right about that. I don’t want to repeat it, that’s for damn sure.”

Mr. Mulgaard raised his right eyebrow when he heard me use the word ‘damn’.

“I mean, *darn* sure,” I corrected myself.

“Even ‘darn’ isn’t such a good word to use, not if you want to get anywhere in life. You see, people judge you by the words you use, Mike. If you want a good job later on in life, you’ll want to use better words than ‘darn’ or ‘damn’.”

“I’ll give it a try,” I said.

“Good. Give it a try.”

* * *

Back in the late 1950s, it wasn’t uncommon to see boys riding around on bicycles with .22 rifles slung across their backs or stuck in holsters attached to the frame of their bikes. Sid, Murphy and I rode around all over the place with ours, probably because it gave us a kind of status. We started saying things like “Hey, bucco” or “Hey, buccaneer” whenever we saw each other. Sid lived in the Cherry Hill Housing Park up above my parents’

wooded acreage, and Murphy lived up near the chocolate factory that once existed on Pennox Hill Road. Murphy's old man worked for Boeing—in what capacity, I don't remember. One day I called him up to find out if he wanted to play a game of sandlot baseball with the rest of us. We hadn't seen him since before his uncle's murder.

"So what were you and Sid doing, spying on everybody at the funeral?" he asked me.

"We were taking it in—from afar. That's all."

"You weren't invited, you know."

"That's why we were standing way back, Murph. We weren't invited. So do you want to play some baseball?"

"No thanks. I don't feel like it, right now."

In small towns, the rumor mill is always working. News gets passed around pretty fast, usually from one adult to another, but if you're a kid and keep your ears open, you can piece things together, kind of. Soon we discovered that Murphy's Uncle Phil had been found dead without any trousers or underpants on, and whoever had shot him had done so at close range, right through the temple.

"So how could anybody get close enough to do that?" I asked Sid. We were in the garbage dump. I had just finished taking a shot at a bottle. The white Chevy station wagon had been parked roughly where we were standing.

"Maybe he was being distracted by somebody."

"By somebody who was giving him a pecker massage," Andy snorted. Andy had recently joined our gang of gun-enthusiasts.

"So how did you find out that Phil was naked from the waist down?" I inquired.

"My Uncle Dave. I overheard him talking to my dad. Out on the patio. Over a beer."

"How did your Uncle Dave find out?"

"He used to work with Murphy's Uncle Phil. At the Quality Repair place."

"Thank goodness for all the uncles in the world," I rejoined. "They seem to have the inside track on just about everything."

One evening, Sid and I decided to conduct some surveillance at the Echo Tavern—up near 168th Street and Highway 99. Sid told his parents he was going to visit me, and I told my parents I was going to visit him. At around 10:30 that evening, we saw the white Chevy station wagon pull into the Echo Tavern's parking lot. The marquee above the tavern advertised that the Johnny Walker Blues Band was playing. Judging from the loud twanging, banging and bellowing that came from inside, the musicians were pretty juiced up—like Conway Twitty on overdrive! The guy who got out of the Chevy was the Tradewell butcher; we could tell that by his thick neck and rounded shoulders. He marched straight into

the tavern, only to come back out a couple of minutes later, dragging a woman by her upper arm.

“Hey, isn’t that the woman we saw at the funeral?” Sid asked me.

“I think so. Yeah.”

“I wonder if her boyfriend’s got a .22?”

“I’m wondering the same thing.”

The Chevy station wagon screeched out of the parking lot and tore off down Highway 99, heading south in the direction of the wrecking yard.

“I think we should tell somebody about what we saw at the garbage dump,” Sid suggested.

“I think so, too,” I followed up. “You want to do it, or should I?”

“Maybe we both should.”

The following day, Sid and I rode over to the Lynnwood police station, with our .22s holstered to the frames of our bikes. There, we told the desk sergeant about what we’d seen in the garbage dump.

The officer behind the front desk gave us a skeptical look. “So what makes you think the murderer was the guy who dragged the woman out of the tavern?”

“By reading between the lines,” I told him. “Jealous guy, honky-tonk woman, white station wagon. It all adds up. Kind of like a bad country and western song.”

He laughed. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It usually is, when you’re in the right place at the right time.”

Eventually the butcher was hauled in for questioning, and arraigned on murder charges. He was so stupid, it didn’t occur to him to throw away the .22 pistol he kept in the nightstand beside his bed.

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