



THREE NAKED LADIES PLAYING CELLOS

*The Repertoire of Modern Cello Pieces*

COMPILED AND EDITED BY

DAVID A. WOODBURY

# THREE NAKED LADIES PLAYING CELLOS

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# ***Three Naked Ladies Playing Cellos***

*an arpeggio of 16 unique pieces*

*compiled and edited by  
David A. Woodbury*

*published by*

**DamnYankee  
.com**



*Millinocket, Maine USA*

Three Naked Ladies Playing Cellos  
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## *Three Naked Ladies Playing Cellos*

*Three nymphs perched unashamedly  
on a precipice by the sea.*

*God's design in flesh and song,  
beauties they stood all three.*

*Golden locks of angel silk they wore  
as their only dress,  
While strumming the music in my soul  
with a fingertip caress.*

*Three naked ladies played cellos  
on a precipice by the sea  
And in my earthly self-centeredness,  
I thought they played for me.*

*M.B.*

*for, um, uh... well, for crying out loud*

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## *Introduction*

It is late 1999. Within a generation the population of those – whether worldwide-web-connected or not – who assume the Internet always existed, like motorcars and refrigeration, will exceed the remnant of us for whom it is a miracle.

Electronic publishing may already top the list of unique industries spawned by the Internet. The electronic book is now defined as either of two things: 1) the text of a book-length work stored and distributed as a computer file and used in that form on computers of various description, or 2) a device taking the place of a paper-and-ink book, designed to display the contents of an ebook file.

In the words of pundit Tom Brosnahan, “the ebook is the revolutionary technology which, after three thousand years of written communication, finally and forever disempowers... all of the obstacles and bottlenecks between writer and reader.”

DamnYankee.com has been on the lookout for the work of accomplished writers interested in seizing this opportunity. As the authors represented in this volume began to come forward from all across the USA and Canada, the idea took form that their diverse work might lend itself to a compendium of modern stories.

DamnYankee.com proposed the project to these several writers of our acquaintance, and, one by one, they came aboard. The result, the whimsically-titled *Three Naked Ladies Playing Cellos*, is the original idea made flesh, so to speak.

The idea took on another dimension when the publisher decided to produce the title both as an ebook file in popular formats and as a conventional paper-and-ink volume at the same time, the first collection of contemporary authors published in both forms simultaneously. Naturally, it’s the ebook that need never go out of print.

DamnYankee.com is a pioneer in the dissemination of ideas by means of the Internet. Often now, the word ‘book’ may be preceded by an ‘e.’ What a writer and a reader do remains the same.

It is this editor’s idiosyncrasy to defer to Strunk & White on questions of style. Many editors today ignore that tidy little volume but seem at a loss to explain why. In the present case, an author sometimes took exception to this deference to S&W, and, in the end, the author prevailed. That’s our excuse.

Several kind souls supported the vision that gave rise to this project and then helped keep it alive. Working with 16 authors is not nearly as tidy as working with one. Clearly, those who deserve to be acknowledged include the authors, for contributing the fruits of their efforts and cooperating thereafter. Author Michelle Buckman penned the verse that inspired the cover illustration – or was it the other way around? Or did the title come first and inspire the rest? Another of the authors, Mary Sullivan Esseff, stood out as “first among equals” and took it upon herself to keep me focused.

For her steadfast help and encouragement, Mary gets to tell her story first, followed by the remaining works of fiction. The non-fiction brings it all to a close. Other than those deliberate positions, the stories are arranged in no particular order.

*Humbled and privileged to serve as compiler and editor,*

David A. Woodbury

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## *Love Made Visible*

*Mary Sullivan Esseff*

I passed into adulthood on New Year's Eve when I was only nine. The process of passage began December 27, 1944.

+ + + +

'Where are we going, Pop?' I asked as we walked down the hill away from our house at the top of Prospect Street.

Pop didn't answer. I could barely hear my own voice above the howling wind that blew my skinny body into the street.

Though the freezing snow swirled around us, I could see the distant horizon. It glowed now, as it had for years, from the ever-present culm dumps of sulfur burning blue against the coal-black sky. The miles-long slag heap loomed like an eerie ghost spewing stinking fumes into the otherwise still dark night. I thought of the story in yesterday's *Wilkes-Barre Gazette*. A tramp, one like so many others left homeless in this 1944 war-time economy, who had sought out the warmth of the hills, was found dead, asphyxiated by the treacherous gases.

+ + + +

The new snowfall had started earlier as we sat down to our supper at six. By the time Mom was washing the dishes, new flakes had coated the ice-sheathed streets. After supper, I sat before the coal-burning stove reading a year-old Batman comic book. I was engrossed in the cover action of Batman and Robin watching Hitler get blown up by a Fourth of July firecracker when I heard the phone ring.

Mom called me. 'Khalil, get coat. Go helb Pop. He too old be out alone this bad night. Can't take Billy in this weather,' she said.

Just before supper, I had helped Pop bed down Billy, our draft horse, in his stall. I knew Mom was right. If Billy slipped on the ice, it would

have been the end of Pop's livelihood. No junkman could peddle his wares without a sturdy horse and wagon. Everyone else drove trucks now, but Pop was of the old school, too old to learn to drive, too ingrained in his method of doing business to want to change. There was no need to take Billy out on a night like this anyway. Why even Pop and I were being dragged out at this late hour, past my usual bedtime, mystified me.

I carefully wrapped newspaper around my feet and pulled two wax-lined paper sacks over my shoes to keep my feet warm and protect my only pair of shoes from the snow. Now worn and ill fitting, the shoes had once belonged to my nephew. I tied string around the bags to hold them tightly to my ankles.

I bundled into my huge, black coat, a hand-me-down from my nephew. That's what happens when you're the last, and late born at that, in a family of thirteen. Two of my siblings, both more than thirty years older than me, were married and had nine children between them before I was even conceived. Mom, at forty-eight, had no clue she was carrying a child. Barely five feet tall and nearly as wide, Mom was surprised when I arrived nine years ago, a change of life baby – or more exactly, a life-changing baby, for the household was never the same after I made my unexpected entrance. Pop, now sixty-eight, was older than my friends' grandfathers. Nevertheless, he was proud to have a third son.

So, this bulky coat was one of the many curses of all Lebanese families: never waste a morsel of food or throw out a coat with a shred of wool still clinging to it. This coat had been lying in mothballs for eight years waiting for me to grow into it. It could have stayed in the black trunk another ten and it still wouldn't have fit. It hung loosely on my narrow frame and reached almost to my toes. Even when rolled back, the sleeves covered my fingertips and drooped five inches from my wrist allowing the frigid air to rush clear up to my shoulder blades.

Mom pulled my wool cap, a Christmas gift from my sisters, over my curly blond hair. It was the only new possession I owned. I treasured it as if it were spun from gold. She kissed me on the cheek as we stepped into the swirling snow.

'Watch he not fall,' Mom whispered in my ear.

A fresh crust frosted the four-inch underlayer of ice. Icy daggers pierced my cheeks and eyes. The snow illuminated the otherwise pitch-black night. I followed in Pop's footsteps as he broke a path through the crusty snow.

'Where we going, Pop?' I asked louder.

'We go church.'

'Why, Pop? Why so late?'

'*Abouna* Jabir need me.'

I heard a distant church bell chime ten times. 'What does Father Jabir want at this late hour?'

'It no matter what he want. I take care church. I take care *Abouna*. He need me. I go.' His hand was in his right pocket. I knew he was saying his prayers, quickly slipping his black rosary beads through his fingers.

We started down the ice-covered stone steps leading to Dana Street below. The wind had forced my eyes to slits and was trying to freeze them shut. I hunched over, driving my wool cap instead of my face into the wind. I could see nothing except my feet pushing one step at a time through the crust. I prayed the paper bags would not rip apart. There was no rail to hold. I hung onto Pop's sleeve. We descended one step at a time. Pop clung to the jagged stone wall that rose ten feet to the street level above us.

I reached for the next step. My foot slid on a patch of ice. I grabbed for Pop's hand, but missed. I tumbled down several steps and dropped in a dazed heap on the frozen street.

'Khalil,' Pop cried. 'Khalil, dun move. I come helb you.'

I took a deep breath. Nothing hurt. Within seconds, the snow spread a frosty layer over me. I pushed the wetness from my face in time to see Pop scrambling down the steps.

'Careful, Pop,' I yelled above the wind. The responsibility on my shoulders weighed even more than my coat. What would Mom do if I let something happened to Pop? Why wasn't Zachary – or his goody-two-shoes sons – bearing this obligation. 'I'm okay. Just slid on my *theszu*.' I struggled to my feet. I shook off the whiteness that clung to my enormous coat as I tried to shake off the resentment building up inside me.

‘*Ya, Allah dakhleek.* Thanks be to God, you okay. Thanks be to God you wear thick coat. It break you Mom heart if any thing happen you.’ Pop raised his black beads to the heavens. ‘*Ya, Allah dakhleek.* Come, we go church and pray. *Ya, Allah dakhleek.*’

We continued our trek through the blizzard. Begrudgingly, I too thanked God for this ridiculous black coat.

Pop clutched my arm tightly. We moved more cautiously now. His rickety old legs took forever to cover the remaining three blocks on the ice-encrusted sidewalk down Dana Street to St. Anthony’s Church. What usually took ten minutes to walk took almost an hour. What dreadful emergency could have brought us out on such a cruel night?

We entered St. Anthony’s through the side door leading to the sacristy. I followed Pop to the front of the altar and knelt next to him on the top step. Even at his age, he knelt tall and straight. He stood so tall that friends and strangers alike thought of his height as over six feet, not his actual five feet eight inches including shoes. No slouching ever, certainly not in the presence of the Divine. Though not even ten, I had had years of practice molding myself into Pop’s image. I loved the beauty of the Maronite liturgy as much as Pop did. Being in the presence of the Holy Eucharist, especially being able to raise my voice in song to glorify and honor God, sent me into rapture. I knelt upright beside him trying to extend my chin to the greatest height my slight body could reach. He was a saint, and I wanted to be like him.

Dozens of tiny red votive candles lit beneath the pedestal of the Virgin Mary cast eerie flickering shadows around me as Pop chanted in his baritone voice, not diminished but enriched by age: ‘*Ya, Allah dakhleek.*’ Though exhausted from the long, freezing walk, I summoned forth my pure soprano voice to mingle in harmony with his. Singing with him was one of the few joys in my life. I even forgot to beg God to let me get back to my warm house, to sleep in my warm bed. I allowed my voice to mingle with Pop’s and sent the hymn of praise to Mary into the heavens above riding on the smoke rising from the flaming candles:

*Assalam AAlayki ya Maryam,  
ya mum ta li’aat niihat ,*

*Arrabu maaki*  
*Mubarakaton anti finnisaa'*  
*wa Mubarakaton thamaratu batniki sayyidna*  
*YASUU ALMASIHH.*

Hail Mary  
Full of grace  
God is with you  
Blessed are thou among women  
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, our Lord,  
Jesus Christ.

*Ya kiddissa Maryam,*  
*ya walidat Allah*  
*salli li ajlina nahnu alkha ta' aa al*  
*Aan wa fi saaat mawtina*  
*Amin.*

Holy Mary,  
Mother of God,  
Pray for us sinners now  
and at the hour of our death  
Amen.

As the lingering notes wrapped around the rafters above, Pop blessed himself. 'Come, *Abouna Jabir* need us.'

I followed him to the large rectory next to the church. A solitary street lamp broke the darkness. The snow still fell, thick and wet, but the wind had abated. The rectory steps were covered with a half-foot of snow. Pop pushed the snow aside with his foot.

I made him stop. This was my job. I scraped the thick, moist snow from the steps with my hands. I made a small path up the three steps, across the porch, to the front door. By the time I'd finished, my hands stung as if inflicted with prickly cactus needles.

Pop rapped quietly on the door. He didn't want to wake the sleeping pastor. Housekeeper Maroon had called. Pop expected her to answer the door and give the reason for their cold night venture.

The porch light snapped on. *Abouna* Jabir, himself, opened the door. Barely an inch taller than me, but two hundred pounds heavier, he was bundled in a massive red velvet robe and wore a red velvet stocking cap on his fat, balding head. At first glance, he resembled the Santa Claus at Boston's department store on the square in downtown Wilkes-Barre, except for his hooked nose and cold, unsmiling eyes.

'What take you so long, Jhidius?' *Abouna* Jabir rasped in his unjolly voice. 'I wait hour for you come.'

Pop bowed humbly before the priest, 'Blease, forgive, *Abouna*. I no escuz. We come helb. What you need?'

'Is freezing in house. I need wood for fire. Maroon say too cold for her go out. She call you. Went to bed. Too cold for me sleep. Need wood on fire. You bring,' the priest ordered.

Pop bowed. I bit my tongue holding back the anger I felt as I watched this fat cleric humiliate my Pop. Why couldn't he be like the priest at St. Mary's – always laughing and joking with the school children, congratulating me on my fine grades at school, handing out candy canes when school recessed for the Christmas holidays. Fr. Hughie was what a priest should be – someone who passed on the true Christ spirit to all around him.

We went outside. Out into the frigid air. Into the blizzard. I staggered through the blinding snow, following closely in Pop's footprints – actually, deep leg prints that were too far apart for me to hold my balance. Several times, I miscalculated and the dizzying snow swallowed me as we trudged to the rear of the house. It took forever to clear the snow from the stack of wood piled against the Rectory's back wall. Pop put several huge logs in a tin box and together we dragged the container up the back steps, through the rear door, into the kitchen.

Pop carried log after log to the fireplace in *Abouna* Jabir's bedroom while I returned to the wood pile and filled the box again. I dragged it to the back door. Too heavy to lift, I carried two logs at a time up the steps and into the kitchen until I stacked a large pile neatly beside the stove.

We were finished. The fire in *Abouna* Jabir's bedroom would blaze for hours. Pop had also started a second fire in the living room. The house was toasty warm. Exhausted, I was ready to go home. *Ya, Allah dakhleek.*

*Abouna* Jabir lumbered out from his bedroom in his scarlet outfit. To thank us? To offer us a warm drink?

'Jhidius, clean snow from porch and steps. Make path to church. I say Mass at six o'clock. Must be ready. I no want fall.'

'Pop,' I whispered. 'It's still snowing. If we clean it now, it'll be covered by morn.'

Pop bowed before *Abouna* Jabir. 'I do now and come back early. Clear more.'

*Abouna* Jabir grunted. 'Make sure you get back in time.' He slammed shut the door.

Pop handed me a shovel. My teeth chattered as we cleared the porch and steps, then made a wide path to the church. Soon, I was drenched beneath my huge black coat.

Finally, we finished. The clock had struck twelve as we laid down our shovels and began to plod, in silence, up the hill toward home, more tired than I'd ever been in my life. The only noise was the near-silent clicking of the rosary beads as they passed through Pop's nimble fingers.

'Pop, why do you do this? How can you let him push you around like that? Not even a word of thanks. Don't you have any pride?'

'*Abouna* Jabir is briest of God,' Pop said. 'Many long years ago, before even you sister, Miriam, God rest her soul, and Zachary were born, old *Abouna* Butrus bless our church with his presence. He great man. Give to poor. Love God, love beople. He teach me, still a young man, many thing. I love him like my own Pop. He die, 1907. We have no briest care for our souls. No briest sing our Maronite Mass. No briest hear confessions in our language. My heart broken. All beople in barish want new *Abouna* from old country.'

'I send letter Mom's sister, Zarifa. Still live in our village, Hardine. She beg Batriarch send new briest. *Abouna* Jabir just ordain. Patriarch send him. *Abouna* Jabir not happy. Think he smart enough to be

Patriarch someday, Zarifa say. But he say he stay for year, be in Batriarch good grace.

‘After year, *Abouna* homesick, want go home Lebanon. He not briest like *Abouna* Butrus, but he say Maronite Mass, what our people need. I beg him stay. I bledge I care for him and church as long I live. I beg God keeb briest here. *Abouna* stay. God answer brayer. I do what *Abouna* ask. I do because I love God – have no bride when I serve God. Bride cause devil fall. Good lesson you learn. If bride fill heart, no room for love. All these year, I carry out my duty for love of God. Ask God, you love Him. You be habby. That only thing imbortant – love God. When you love God, easy carry out duty. Love God, Khalil. Love God. My good friend, the man I name you for, Khalil Gibran, write: *Work is love made visible*. That what I do when I serve God. I show God I love Him, no matter what the work.’

I asked no more questions. DUTY: another curse of Lebanese families! It was the men’s duty to provide for the family, carry out the various vendettas mandated from generations past, make sure there was always a spiritual leader in the tight-knit community, and above all, sacrifice everything for God, family, and heritage.

Lebanese women’s duties were simple: cook, clean, bear children, and please their husbands. It wasn’t until years later that the men who believed this realized how foolish they had been. In actuality, the women ran the house and were behind the scenes in all business transactions. They raised their daughters to be independent, feisty, free thinkers. They raised their sons to be merchants and to believe that women did what they were told to do. Only after they married did they learn the truth. Because of all the women in our household, I learned at an early age that Mom held the purse strings in our house and that she and my seven older sisters wrapped Pop (as well as their own husbands) around their little fingers.

This Duty was a miserable curse to have done what it did to Pop, to keep him pressed under this priest’s thumb for almost half a century. Could God really expect that extreme commitment from His children on earth? Could God expect Pop to carry out a promise that caused him to be constantly humiliated and subjugated by an arrogant, loveless minister of God? This was truly beyond my grasp.

Silently, I followed in Pop's footsteps as we crunched home through the blinding blizzard. As soon as we were home, I crawled into the bed I shared with him. I pulled the warm covers over my head. I planned to sleep till noon.

I had barely closed my eyes when I heard Pop stirring. I didn't want to open my eyes, but peeked from beneath the covers. I heard a clock chime the half-hour note. Half past what? The room was black. My eyes finally adjusted. I saw Pop sitting on the edge of the bed pulling on his tattered boots.

Silently, I rose, put on my shoes, covered them with brown paper sacks, pulled on my huge black coat and tightened my hand-knit hat over my ears. It was my Duty to help Pop... and God.

The blizzard was over. Two feet of snow blanketed the ground.

Together, Pop and I hiked back to St. Anthony's through the silent night to clear the walkways. As every other morning, we stayed to assist *Abouna* Jabir at the six o'clock daily Mass which was packed with parishioners. Not this icy day, nor even the plague, would keep these devoted souls from giving homage to God.

As I knelt beside Pop at the altar of God, a deep resentment choked the words of praise that rose from my throat as we intoned, in Aramaic, the mystical body of Christ. How could *Abouna* Jabir misuse – abuse – the authority entrusted to him? How could he mistreat Pop because of the vow Pop had pledged? How could he, our pastor, who had taken a vow of poverty, live in a palatial rectory, drive the best car, and always have plenty of food on his plate? Worst of all, how could I respect Pop for taking this abuse?

We had nothing. Mom stretched her meager budget to ensure we always had enough to eat. Yet, Pop thanked God every moment. *If we have God's love we have everything anyone could need.* Each Tuesday – devoted to St. Anthony – Pop gave his entire day's earnings to those in need. Everyone said Pop was a saint. No one ever said that about *Abouna* Jabir.

After Mass, Pop invited *Abouna* Jabir to our house for dinner Sunday afternoon. I was mortified. What could we possibly offer this priest who had everything and we had nothing?

+ + + +

Saturday afternoon. Our entire Maronite community trooped into St. Anthony's to confess their sins. I hated this humiliating rite, but since my classmates and I received First Communion, the Mercy nuns (or merciless, as we called them) at St. Mary's School drummed it into our heads it was our duty to confess and repent every single week. If we didn't go to confession, we were called into the principal's office and severely reprimanded. How she ever knew whether we went or not, I'll never know – nor did I want to find out.

This week was especially hard for me. I had committed a mortal sin for which I needed to beg God's forgiveness. I had questioned the authority of the priest, but greater still, I had been embarrassed by my Pop, ashamed of him – the greatest of all sins in a Lebanese family.

I was so ashamed of myself that I felt others could clearly see my treacherous sin. All eyes were upon me as I squirmed in the line that moved like molasses in January. Sweat beaded on my face and made my palms stick together. I left the line and hid in the shadows and watched and waited while the queue of pious parishioners snaked endlessly around both sides of the church, ultimately reaching the confessional at the back of the church. Finally, the last in line left the confessional and I slipped behind the ruby velvet curtain. I held my hot face between my folded hands and prayed to God I would have the courage to speak this terrible truth. How could I even say these words out loud? I squirmed and grew hotter waiting for the grate to creak open.

I jumped when the grate slid open and I could see Father Jabir's fat face through the wooden slats. I must not let this priest know who I was. I breathed deeply and lowered my voice as I began: 'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned...' My voice acquired a Lebanese accent as the words spilled out, a torrent of unleashed water rushing through a collapsed dam. Only when finished, did I notice the reeking smell of whiskey on the other side. Could he possibly have brought his silver flask into the confessional? I froze awaiting the words that would condemn me to Hell for all eternity.

'You sorry you sin?' Father Jabir asked.

‘Yes, Father,’ I said, lowering my voice another octave.

‘Good. You remember commandment: Honor thy Father and Mother. For penance, say three Hail Mary, three Our Father. Now, say act of contrition.’

I breathed deeply and forced my voice into the most low-pitched I could muster as I recited the *pro forma* words. The grate snapped shut. Ending with a huge sigh, I rejoiced in making it through without revealing my identity.

I rose to leave. I was halfway through the heavy ruby tapestry when Father Jabir again slid open the grate and boomed: ‘Khalil, I finish. Tell you Pop I want see him right away.’

I felt ridiculous as I scurried to the sacristy where Pop was arranging the white linens for Sunday Mass and pointed to the confessional. I was acting just like Pop. Bowing and running to do this priest’s every bid. I cringed when Father Jabir thundered: ‘Jhidius, I no like...’ It didn’t matter to me what he didn’t like. It was just one more way to exercise his power over Pop. Of all the heads bent in repentance, none raised to look at Pop. The scene had been repeated too many times to cause a stir.

I knelt and prayed for God’s forgiveness. Most of all, I prayed I wouldn’t turn out like Pop, a submissive pawn of the parish priest.

+ + + +

Saturday night, Mom took out our best dishes and linens, all items from her Hope Chest, her legacy from Lebanon. She used these precious possessions only on the rarest occasions. Like tomorrow, when, as Mom said, *Abouna* Jabir would ‘honor’ us with his presence. Mom polished the handcrafted copper coffee pot that her oldest sister, *Tante* Zarifa, had sent her from Lebanon when she married Pop thirty-seven years before. Used for making Arabic coffee, it had been handed down through the family for four generations. She brought out the fragile, hand-painted demitasse cups, also from Lebanon, that Aunt Catherine, her second sister, had given her as a wedding gift.

Sunday, I awoke to the smell of fresh pita bread baking. And spices – cumin, allspice, cinnamon, mint – mixed to create *kibbe*, *kousa*, and

stuffed grape leaves. The pungent smell of garlic and lemon, used for *tabouli*, *hummus*, and *baba ganoose*, filled the house.

Mom, helped by my oldest sisters, Miriam, 31, and Esther, 29, both spinsters fifteen years past their prime, had been preparing food since before dawn. Even before I rose, I knew the three tables, placed end to end to accommodate the forty family members invited for this auspicious occasion, had already been set. It was always so.

Tonight was New Year's Eve. A night when the family gathered to thank God they were in America, free from the Turks who had driven them from their centuries old village high in the mountains in Lebanon. Their village, Hardine, was one of the first in Lebanon to follow the teachings of Christ. It was still disputed whether Jesus had actually spent time in Hardine just before surrendering Himself for His crucifixion and death. Family tradition held that it was a young lad from Hardine who offered the loaves and fishes to Jesus to feed the multitudes after the Sermon on the Mount. Their village had been blessed from that time on with an abundance of fine priests and saintly people, many in our direct lineage. Our family name, Khoury, meant 'priest.' Pop's grandfather, his father, and his grandfather's father were all married priests as were several great uncles on Mom's side of the family. A blessing on our family. Why God had allowed the Turks to force half the villagers to desert their homeland was a mystery to me. Pop said it was God's will: *Entshullah*. How God's will ordained these things had always been a puzzle to me. But I seemed to be the only one who felt that way. The rest of the family, much older and thus wiser than me, threw up their hands when I asked 'Why?' and said '*Entshullah*.'

As usual, Pop and I walked to St. Anthony's to arrive early enough to set up the altar and light the candles. Zachary picked up Mom, Miriam, and Esther in his '38 Plymouth and dropped them off in plenty of time to light a candle or two before kneeling in the first pew in front of the Blessed Virgin's altar.

As usual, Pop sang the Maronite liturgy, half in Arabic, half in Aramaic. I served on the altar, a place where I could easily watch the oft-amusing quirks of our varied parishioners, many recent arrivals from the 'old country.' Others, like Mom and Pop had been in Wilkes-

Barre for over forty years. In this tight-knit community, it didn't matter how long they had been in America. They still spoke their original language, prepared their food the same way, never married or even socialized outside of their community. Even business was mostly transacted within the community, though their wares – produce, jams, baked goods – were sold to wholesalers as far away as Hazleton and Scranton. Of course, this was the same of all ethnic groups in Wilkes-Barre: a German section, Polish, Lithuanian, Irish, Italian – each with its own culture, language, and church. The only thing our 'Arab Hill' section didn't provide was a Catholic school. Then, it was okay for my nieces, nephews and me to go to St. Mary's School – a melting pot of mostly Irish – in the center of Wilkes-Barre run by the Mercy nuns.

And so it was, that at church, families socialized and gained their spiritual renewal for the coming week. From my place on the altar as bell-ringer, a duty which I did not mind taking on because it brought me even closer to the Blessed Eucharist, I liked to guess what kind of news families wanted to share with their neighbors by watching their movements before and during Mass. Zachary was busy spreading the news of the six-year old 'near-perfect' truck – an International – he picked up for a song. Sixteen-year old Terese Mir blushed intently every time she felt Ziad Roman's eyes burn into her lovely neck. Old Tante Helene nodded furiously as she passed some gossip to the 'Black Widows,' – as my friends and I referred to the old biddies who wore black to mourn the dead, theirs or anyone else's, – encircling her like a band of Indians in the back of the church. All this murmuring stopped immediately when I rang the bells announcing that Mass was beginning. Father Jabir, resplendent in his gold brocade white vestments, marched onto the altar still decorated with the Christmas crèche and a profusion of poinsettia. Besides me, the bell ringer, he was attended by my nephews, Anthony, the seminarian, and his brother, Jude, the college student.

The Mass began as usual with Father Jabir mumbling the Maronite liturgy, Pop chanting the responses in his ethereal voice, and me nodding on my knees to the left of the altar. How was I to know that the Pastor would offer anything but the routine Sunday morning Mass?

It began to unfold just after the Gospel. Father Jabir began his sermon: 'I want to thank all for generous donation to Christmas collection. We raise seven hundred dollar. Some, we use for church roof. Some, for flowers...'

I was quick to spot some rustling and muttering among the Black Widows. Like dominos, their words spread in each direction, finally coming to rest in Zachary's ear. Even I, a naïve lad of nine, knew church, especially in the middle of Mass, was not a forum for a debate. But that didn't stop Zachary from exploding from his seat, his face redder than rhubarb pie, to redress *Abouna* Jabir.

'How much went to the church?' Zachary demanded. 'Where did the rest go?'

All eyes were riveted on the *Abouna*. They knew, thanks to Tante Helene and her Black Widows, what the charge was. They just wanted to hear it from his own thick lips. I looked to the statue of the Blessed Virgin. Her eyes, too, seemed set on the enraged priest.

'I tell you. I you bastor and I do what imbortant for church. I know some beoble not happy I have new car. But I you bastor and I need car for visit my beoble in barish.' His fat cheeks grew redder as he offered excuses to justify his dishonorable action.

Every time he said 'bastor' I scanned the crowd to see if they thought it was as funny as I did. Only the younger ones of us who didn't speak English with a heavy Arabic accent were enjoying his unmindful phrase. Everyone knew his 'old' car was only two years old and was rarely driven to visit parishioners. Everyone knew he loved to drive into New York City during the week and sit in on various pinochle games where he frittered away his salary and the numerous 'gifts' his parishioners paid him for the many services he provided: baptisms, weddings, funerals. Now, everyone also knew he had done the unthinkable: used parish funds to buy a top of the line Buick Roadmaster, a car most in the parish could only drool over from the outside of the showroom window.

The parishioners, with the exception of a few wealthy families, were extremely poor. It was wartime. Many sons who had been breadwinners were now overseas. Daughters worked in factories in Rochester or for the government in Washington replacing the men who

had been sent to the Pacific or European fronts. My own brother, James, had been plucked up and sent to London as an Army cook. For anyone to buy a new car in these trying times was sacrilegious. Every extra penny was set aside for those in need. Zachary's 'new' truck was vital to his produce distribution business. His old truck had died just before Christmas on the hills near Hazleton. No amount of spare parts was able to get it running again. Fortunately, he had been able to buy a truck from an Italian family whose son, God rest his soul, had been killed in the war. They were desperate for the money and were willing to take small payments over a couple of years with the promise of fresh fruits and vegetables thrown in from time to time.

I had never witnessed such a hullabaloo. From the second pew, Zachary let fly a barrage of Arabic phrases the likes of which I had heard frequently from him, but never, I swear, on my blessed sister's grave, would I expect to hear them in church. My mouth dropped open. My eyes shut in prayerful disbelief as I prayed for the salvation of his soul. Zachary was going to Hell, no doubt about it. No matter what the priest did, this was wrong. Even I knew that.

From the pulpit, *Abouna* Jabir was turning purple. He could no longer spit out anything but 'I am you Bastor' again and again.

'Quiet.' A hush fell over the congregation. A thin, wiry man appearing much taller than his five-foot-eight stature had risen from the chair behind the pulpit and raised his hand to silence the bleating flock. 'Zachary, I ashame you. Sit now. *Abouna*, forgive my son. Blease, finish Mass.'

Without another word, Zachary sat, *Abouna* returned to the altar, and Pop began to chant softly in Syriac:

*Chubho lhaw qolo*  
*dahwo guchmo*  
*Walme lat romo*  
*dahwo fagro*

*Chma'oy of edneh*  
*hzayoy 'ayneh*  
*Mochoy of ideh*

*wakhleh fumo.*

Glory to the Word  
Our God made man.  
God's most wondrous  
work has been achieved.

Him our eyes have seen  
Our ears have heard  
Him our hands have touched'  
And mouths received.

With both mind and heart  
Praise Christ our Lord  
To redeem mankind  
Our savior came.

The Mass proceeded as if nothing had happened. Those gathered to celebrate the Holy Mass joined the chant as Pop's voice reverberated through the church. My glorious soprano voice joined harmoniously with his. I could even hear Zachary beating out the rhythm with his deep bass.

*Abouna*, still shaking, raised the host above his head for all to worship the Body of Christ. I jangled the bells until he arose from his deep genuflection. I rang the bells again as he raised the chalice containing the Blood of Christ.

At communion, as I let Father Jabir place the wafer on my tongue, I prayed that God would clear the confusion from my mind. I knew Zachary was improper for attacking *Abouna* in church, but I knew how wrong the priest was to misuse church funds that were so desperately needed within the parish. How could a man chosen to do God's work do such a despicable thing? God did not answer me. Nor did Pop when I asked him the same question as we blew out the candles and put away the altar linens and ornate vestments.

I was bewildered when I saw Mom hobble up to Father Jabir as he greeted parishioners after Mass. 'Don't forget,' Mom reminded

*Abouna* Jabir in Arabic, ‘Come today. Four o’clock. We prepare nice meal for you.’

I was even further amazed when Zachary paused to shake *Abouna*’s hand. ‘Those Black Widows always get me upset. Enjoy your car,’ he said gruffly.

*Abouna* Jabir nodded and passed on to the next parishioner, a wealthy merchant, Monsieur Mir, who had recently returned from Beirut. The French title *Monsieur* was a remnant, I learned, of the French occupation in the Middle East, a title used to show respect to those Lebanese who were especially wealthy and cultured.

Were these people crazy, or what? I shook my head and walked home silently beside Pop.

+ + + +

At three o’clock, the family gathered awaiting the arrival of *Abouna* Jabir. I dressed in one of my nephew Anthony’s old suits. To make it fit, Mom had turned under the cuffs and sleeves four inches. It still hung off my shoulders.

I was starving. When I tried to snatch a piece of bread from the table, Zachary slapped my hand. ‘Wait for our guest like everyone else.’ Like all his other outbursts, Zachary had forgotten his brutal assault as soon as he sat down in church. This trait always amazed me about my brother. He could carry a grudge forever against a declared enemy, yet, in a moment, he could dismiss his unruly outburst as if it had never occurred. Since I was a frequent recipient of his verbal attacks, I tried to stay out of his way as much as possible. This was not easy, for Pop had relegated his parental authority to my brother. Zachary had so harshly punished me over the years that if he told me not to touch the bread, I’d starve to death before taking even a morsel.

Four-o’clock. Pop placed bottles of whiskey and *arak* on each of the tables. Everything awaited *Abouna* Jabir. No one would be allowed to touch a morsel until *Abouna* Jabir blessed it. The tables, laden with every possible Lebanese dish, remained untouched as we awaited *Abouna* Jabir’s coming.

Five o’clock. We all grew restless. The women buzzed around the kitchen polishing silver, wiping the already spotless surfaces, checking

the icebox to make sure nothing had been forgotten. Aunt Catherine called me in to help her carry a heavy dish, or so she said for Zachary's benefit. Instead, she placed before me a plate filled with a delicious assortment of the *mezza* to be set on the main table as soon as *Abouna* arrived. I loved Aunt Catherine. She always knew what a boy's heart – and stomach – was yearning for.

The men took out their tambourines and *derbakkes*, hollow drums covered with smooth lamb skin. To tighten the drums, they held them up to the heat of the electric bulbs hanging bare from the ceiling. Discretely, they pulled flasks of *arak* from their hip pockets and raised them to their lips. The liquor loosened their tongues and they laughed and joked with one another. Pairing into teams, they faced each other and began to sing in Arabic. Spontaneously, one team after another composed *Athebas* (pronounced *A-teh-beh*) – poems set to music. Zachary, leader of the first team, started by creating a verse that poked fun at Uncle Tunoose's gambling escapades. Zachary's team took up the witty verse and produced a repetitive rhythm that mingled laughter with harmonies and puns. Without hesitation, Uncle Tunoose fired back a verse that, through double entendres and innuendoes, disparaged Zachary's driving skills. Tunoose's team picked up his quick comeback and drummed out the humorous ditties to the delight of all. The *arak* now flowed freely. Not even Pop prevented his guests from enjoying a bit of the grape while spinning increasingly raunchy rhymes while waiting for the priest to arrive. Though my Arabic was limited, I too composed an *Atheba*, about Jabir's rear. But mine could not be sung out loud. Nevertheless, I laughed to myself as I created verse after verse of pun – ishing lyrics casting the priest in the least favorable light I could imagine.

Seven o'clock. *Abouna* Jabir arrived. He offered no apology for coming late. Mom acted as if he had arrived exactly on time, humbly bowing before him as he entered our modest house. Everyone, from oldest to youngest, gathered in a line in our living room to kiss his hand, welcoming him into our home. I, the youngest, would be last to greet him.

We had waited all day for this man – priest – to share our food, a meal fit for a king. A meal rarely seen in our house. A feast for this

priest – man – who over the years had so mistreated Pop. This man, who even today had insulted Mom’s gracious hospitality, had not had the decency to appear at the designated time, had denied a houseful of guests from eating the banquet prepared in his honor.

‘*Pthu-a-shitohn* – Devil, I spit on you!’ A phrase Pop cried out whenever evil permeated any situation. A cry I wanted to shout now as I tried to hide, to crush my slight frame between the corner wall and the breakfront.

How can I kiss this man’s hand? How can I pretend to honor this person who purported to be Christ Himself in our midst, this man I despised for all the contemptuous things he had done to Pop, to the parishioners, and now to Mom?

My brother spied me.

‘Khalil,’ Zachary said in a tone that conveyed both authority and threat of serious reprisal if I disobeyed, ‘Go honor *Abouna* Jabir for blessing our house with his presence.’

I backed further into the corner, wishing to melt through the wall, but Zachary took me by my collar and dragged me to the end of the line just as Zachary’s oldest son – my nephew – Anthony, now a first-year seminarian, kissed *Abouna* Jabir’s hand. I cringed as I was forced to kneel before this fraud of a priest. I glanced up momentarily and saw his smiling face, but his eyes were unloving, unkind.

‘Khalil,’ my brother hissed.

I forced my lips to dart at *Abouna* Jabir’s opulent ring. Dizzy with shame and bitterness, I fled into the kitchen, out the back door. I hated *Abouna* Jabir. I hated Zachary for making me buckle under and kiss *Abouna* Jabir’s obese hand. Most of all, I hated myself for not standing up for my beliefs. I threw up in the immaculate snow. I felt as corrupt as the now-defiled snow. *Aiyah! Aiyah!*

I was freezing, but couldn’t go back inside. Who was there who cared about me? Mom slaved to please Zachary. Pop deferred to both Zachary and *Abouna* Jabir. I was a lost child, a child born too late, born into a world of adults whose lives had been lived before mine had begun. Still a child, I was uncle to a generation of young adults. Not a worthwhile role to play in life.

As I sat freezing on the back porch, I heard *Abouna* Jabir laughing his cruel laugh, saying good-bye. 'I must eat with Monsieur Mir,' *Abouna* Jabir said leaving the house. 'He insists. What can I do?' He left without partaking of the food Mom had prepared. Without offering a toast to my family. Without blessing the house. I heard his new Roadster crunch through the snow on Prospect street and head toward the Commons, the wealthy estate section along the Susquehanna River, in reality, only a few miles away, but in essence, a million miles from our poverty-stricken Arab Hill section in the Heights.

I thanked God he had not blessed our house. *Pthu-a-shitohn*.

I heard the door creak open behind me. I knew it would be Zachary ready to berate me for offending the priest. Since he'd made his peace with *Abouna*, it was time to chastise me. I wanted to run, to break through the crusted snow and leap over the back fence to escape the inevitable humiliation and sting of his course hand smacked across my face. The heaviness in my heart prevented me from moving. I didn't care. He could hit me as hard as he wanted. It would toughen me up for his next assault.

A bony hand touched my shoulder. I turned to see Pop. He was surrounded by the shimmering glow of the porch lamp. He looked like an angel. He sat beside me on the cold stone step.

'Khalil. You freeze out here. Come. Eat.'

'I can't Pop. I can't face Zachary. I was proud of him when he stood up to Father Jabir. But when he apologized and kissed his hand, I felt he was such a hypocrite. Then, he forced me to bow down too. How can anyone respect a priest who steals from the church and abuses you and Mom and everyone around him. Is that what it means to be a priest?'

'No one ask *Abouna* where he get car. He not steal from Christmas collection. *Monsieur* Mir give him as gift for helbing his brother come this country. *Abouna* not tell beoble because *Monsieur* Mir embarrassed to have money during war when others need so much. Zachary listen to gossib from Black Widows. They spread false rumor. Zachary not think ask if it true. He explode first. Ask later. You brother think anger, force, is way to solve problems. Is wrong. He never learn to find God inside himself. You must learn to look for truth

below surface. Not easy to always know what is truth, what is lie. Search for truth. Ask God to help. You find it then.'

Khalil sat silent as he let these words sink in. He was confused, befuddled. First a priest who dishonored God by his opulent life style being defended by his Pop. Then, a brother who seemed to attend church faithfully, but broke most every Commandment outside of church, was being criticized by his Pop – very unusual in any Lebanese family.

'I don't understand, Pop. Zachary always goes to Mass. He knows the Commandments. Why does he act the way he does?'

'He go church. He receive host. But he not allow God to come inside him, to touch his heart. You are young. Easy to hold God in heart when young. When older, not so easy. *Abouna* know that. He answer God's call many years ago. He try be good priest. Responsible for many souls. Hard job. Not easy to hold such big responsibility. He do his duty best he can. He human, just like you. Just like me. I do what I can to help him. Is not my place to judge Zachary or *Abouna*. Is my duty to love and serve God, and love God in them – in everyone – no matter what they do.'

'You take care of people better than he does. You should have been a priest, Pop.'

Pop smiled and shook his head. 'When I young, I want be priest. Then I see you Mom and she change my heart. I love God above all, but too weak not to love Mom too. God bless us with many children. God so good to me. I try be good to Him, family, all people. God so kind. Even send me beautiful son in my old age. Such a blessing. A blessing! You fine boy. Make no trouble. Study hard. Work hard. Sing like angel. I broud you my son. *Ya, Allah dakhleek.*'

Pop took my face in both his hands and kissed my forehead. 'You good son. I love you. Come. We eat. You sit next to me tonight. Take your place at table as my son.'

Brushing the mist from my eyes, I followed Pop into the kitchen. That was the longest and most intimate conversation Pop and I had ever had. Though I longed to ask him more, I basked in the warmth of those few moments. Only a few short days before, I had been ashamed of Pop because he served *Abouna* without question. Now, a lifetime later,

I was ashamed of myself. I was not worthy to sit at the same table with this holy man. I wanted to hide my unworthy face from the family and friends gathered to celebrate the New Year. But Pop put his arm around me and led me to the place of honor next to him at the head of the table.

Pop began the chant and everyone joined in:

*Arrubu yuhyina*  
*Arrubu yafdina*  
*Arrubu yo'tina*  
*Kulla ma nasal.*

Let us glorify Him  
With our thanks and praise  
Let us bless the Lord  
Through the eternal days.

Head bowed, I stood closer to Pop to feel the warmth of his love as he blessed our house. Blessed our feast. I wanted to be like him, a saint, a true Christ figure.

'Eat. Eat,' Pop urged his guests as the women loaded the table, first with the *mezza*, then the main courses. Arak flowed freely. Song and laughter filled the tiny house. Where all this abundance had come from, mystified me.

No longer seeing life through the eyes of a child, I raised a glass of milky Arak to toast the New Year. Imitating the rest of the men, I took a gulp. I didn't even wince as the abrasive alcohol singed my throat, accepting the burning as part of my initiation into manhood. Though still confused about Pop's duties and responsibilities to God, the Church, and *Abouna* Jabir, in particular, I was proud to sit at the right hand of my father, proud to be his son.

*Ya, Allah dakhleek.*

## *Goat Lady*

*Douglas C. Smyth*

*I've always meant to stop here, although I don't know why. I guess it's the goats, busily, greedily, cropping at the bright green grass with short pulls.*

“The goat lady?” Skip says, “She don't have no use for them softeners you sell. Don't think she got electricity, or running water. Seen her hauling water from the stream runs by the road.”

So, it's a waste of my time, but there's something about this place. The fences look like they've been mended over and over again, patches of baling wire, twine, chicken wire, patches on patches, dirty webs of rusting wire between leaning posts and well chewed trees. A single line of barbed wire loops crazily through the uneven tangle. These fences remind me of my father, forever cursing his goats because they always got out.

The creek, where the old woman supposedly gets water for her goats, curves below a yellowing farmhouse, that wide curve giving the place a peaceful feel, as if the land embraces the house. Shutters hang by single rusted hooks, and a piece of browned tape flaps uselessly from a window it is supposed to patch. The roof looks sound enough, though, straight and true.

A brown and white goat, clean and bright, chews at a long stalk of timothy as she stands on the collapsing porch. Her grin is mischievous.

“Hello?” I feel a little ridiculous calling out like this, since it looks like only the goat can hear me. “Anybody home?”

Before I've finished saying the word 'home,' an old woman, bent, gap-toothed and smiling appears beside the goat. She reaches out one brown clawed hand to the goat's back. She uses it to steady herself.

“Hello,” I say again, feeling even more ridiculous. Skip was right. No point even mentioning my water softeners to this old lady, so I’m at a loss for words. Imagine a traveling salesman at a loss for words. “Uh, I saw the goats,” I begin, “reminded me of my Dad. He kept goats. For awhile.”

The old lady grins easily, as if I’ve mentioned the one thing that’s important to her. “Beautiful, ain’t they.”

It’s not a question, and looking at the goat standing next to her, still grinning as it chews another stalk of grass, I have to agree with her. Goats like this one have beautiful faces with big yellow eyes that smile and mouths that look as if the world’s a joke. “Sure are. My Dad always had trouble keeping them in their pasture, though.”

“Oh, yeah. Smartest critters around, ain’t you Darlene? This one’s Darlene,” she adds unnecessarily, “and ain’t no point in trying to keep her in. Find her way outta anything, and then the dumb billies’ll follow.”

I laugh. It’s the kind of thing Edna, my wife would say to her friends, only about me, and then they’d all commiserate about the big, dumb men in their lives. The only thing I can think of to say, though, is: “Well, stopped to see the goats, but I sell water softeners. Can make your water as soft as silk, so soft it’s smooth on your skin, so soft it won’t leave any soap scum on your tub,” not that she looks like someone who languishes in the bath. “And it protects your water tanks, and your pipes...”

The old lady’s face takes on the expression of a stubborn child. “Don’t got no pipes, except up to the pump.” She gestures towards a rusty hand pump at the side of the house. It’s the kind of pump – minus the rust – that you see painted red or black atop a fake well. People around here have them for lawn displays. But this one sits on a rotting wooden cover. Obviously there’s a dug well underneath it. “Don’t want no electricity in my water, and I don’t like it running through metal pipes, neither. Get my water from the crick – ‘cept in winter. Soft as a breeze.” The closed face warms to a grin.

Again I’m struck speechless. No one drinks water from the streams and creeks around here! Animals, maybe, but not people. Even a generation ago people worried about septic tank run-off, and barnyard

manure affecting the water supply. And now we have toxins, PCBs, and who knows what else.

“You, uh, you don’t have an electric pump?” I don’t ask this because I don’t know the answer. I just haven’t absorbed yet that she probably has no electricity. I glance skyward for the ubiquitous power line coming in from the road. There is none.

She grins, in control now, “Ain’t got no call for electricity, an’ don’t want no wires, all that radiation in the house. It’ll kill ya, Clem used-ta say.”

“Clem?”

“Husband.”

In all the times I’ve passed, I’ve never seen an old man here. I’ve seen her, though, sitting with her goats on the porch, or leaning over the fence talking to passersby.

She must have sensed my confusion, because she adds, “Passed away maybe twenty year ago. Want to see some of my milkers?”

Mamilkers.

She points across the road to the large barn. It hasn’t seen paint for even longer than the house, and odd pieces of board or shingle are nailed up at crazy angles to cover holes or rotten patches.

I nod, and the old woman carefully descends from the porch, keeping one hand on her goat, holding onto it as if it were a banister.

I feel as if I should be helping her, she moves so slowly and feebly, but I get a strong sense that she’d be highly insulted if I tried.

The barn is a dusky cavern, the wood dusty and dark, with wooden stalls well chewed. Quite a contrast to the airy, lighted barns of the fancy horse farms I know around here.

Her milkers come when she calls. At least six of them. Goats surround us. Some reach up, even climb up on the old woman, putting their front legs over her shoulders, nuzzling her face. She hugs them, her face alight.

The place stinks of goat and goat manure. Doesn’t look like she ever mucks out stalls. I’m startled as I look down at my shoes. I’ve got to keep them shiny and clean to make my rounds, and here I am standing on what must be a foot of compacted goat manure.

Six milkers. When I was a kid we had only two goats, but we were overflowing with milk. I remember my mother gamely making cheese and butter to use it all. “Do you sell the milk?”

“Oh, yeah, some of it, anyways. And cheese. Got some good cheese setting up down in the cellar.” She points a black nailed claw back towards the house. “Sell kids, too, mostly round Easter.”

I wonder how she sells the milk with hands as dirty as hers.

Back out at my car, she says, “Come by any time. I ain’t going nowhere.” She grins at her joke, a sly grin that stays with me as I drive away, wondering how in the world she survives there.

The next time I see Skip, our local font of all local lore, I stop him on the road. That’s how he talks to people around here. He’s usually the one who waves me down, from whatever hundred-dollar junker he happens to be driving that month. He wears a beret, god knows why, but he affects the local accent, likes to flag me down with, “Did you hear the one about...”

When I ask him what he knows about the goat lady, he scratches his head and grins. “Ain’t the kind that’d hire me, now, is she?” He’s part-time caretaker for weekenders all over the town. “Let’s see. Her and her husband been here maybe forty years, no, probably fifty. Strang’s the name. Husband died maybe twenty years ago. Think they came from Brooklyn, but a long time ago.” He shook his head. “Goats. Did you hear the one about the goat and the sheep?”

I drive by the goat lady’s place nearly every day, going from one sales presentation to another. Occasionally, I see a car or pickup pulled up by her house, see her deep in conversation with someone over her fence, and once I saw a man sliding a box of what could have been cheeses into the back of his truck.

With the change of weather, I see the goats less and the old lady not at all. I don’t see any smoke from the chimney, either, and I wonder does she have any heat? I certainly can’t see her splitting wood. She must be in her 70’s or 80’s.

One blowy, snowy winter day when the snow is sifting across the road like fine white dust, I decide to stop as I pass the goat lady’s, see how she’s managing.

As soon as I switch off the engine I'm struck by the moan of the wind, the absence of any sign of life from house to barn: no smoke in the chimney, no footprints in the snow. I shiver in the wind as I get out of the car. How does she keep warm?

I'm on the barn side of the road, so I think of going there first. Barns are usually warm from the animals, and maybe from the manure. As I look down at the snow I see one set of footprints partially obscured by the blowing snow. They are going towards the barn and below the wind I hear some goats bleating softly.

When I push through the sagging little door, the contrast is sudden, from sharp, fresh blasts of wind to the soft, heavy ammoniac air of goat and urine. The air feels liquid compared to the blowing sand outside. It is so dark I cannot see for several moments. As my eyes become accustomed to the gloom, several goats approach me and nuzzle at my pockets. Their great yellow eyes are luminescent.

Down the way, further along in the gloom, sits the goat lady, looking at me, her legs out in front of her. Goats surround her, but she's looking at me. "Young fella, you come at a good time. Fell back there, 'bout where you're standing. Could use some help – to get up, anyways. Lucky these goats pretty much take care of themselves – except for the milking."

Jesus, what a mess! What if she's broken a leg, or something?

I help her up. She can't weigh more than fifty or sixty pounds.

Once on her feet, she seems to manage all right, although she does hobble a bit, but maybe she always did.

She looks up at me, eyes hooded, wary, then thanks me. I can tell that she wishes she hadn't asked for help.

But she needed it.

"Mrs. Strang? Is that your name?"

She chuckles. "Ain't nobody called me that in a long time, but I guess."

"Do you have any relatives? Children, somebody who might –"

"Now look here young fella!" Her eyes are narrowed, her face is hard. "Just cause you helped me up..." she looks down at a goat nibbling her sweater cuff. She is wearing at least four sweaters, one on top of the other, all with holes. She glances back at me. Her face has

softened. “Got a niece, down in Peekskill, least I think she’s still there. Ain’t seen her in maybe four, five years. Name’s Strang, too, unless she done gone and changed it. Alice Strang.” Her face turns dark at the name, and her voice turns strident. “She don’t like goats.”

She looks up at me and then down at the goat nibbling her sweater. “Can’t see how. Ain’t she beautiful?” Her question is plaintive.

I try to grin back at her, to agree, but my mind is already chewing over what I have to do. I’m even driving down towards Peekskill the next day, so I’ll look in the local phone book down there.

An A. Strang is listed in the Peekskill directory. Of course I get her answering machine, not a real person. I leave a message, trying not to say too much, uncertain whether I’m doing the right thing.

That evening the phone rings. A breathy, young woman’s voice asks, “Is this Mr. Seymour?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Alice Strang. You called about my aunt, up in Four Corners? Is she all right?”

The anxiety in her tone almost crackles over the phone line, and I wonder whether I should try to downplay what I saw, protect the old lady from this young woman. I’m already sorry that I’ve alerted her.

“Guess I better come up, soon as I can,” she mumbles, when I tell her how I found her aunt. “Could you...I know it’s a lot to ask of a total stranger, but...sort of keep track of her until I can get up there this weekend?”

“I can stop by,” I reassure her.

I don’t tell the old woman about her niece when I do see her in the barn the next day. She now seems perfectly capable of taking care of herself, and I worry that I made a mistake in calling her niece.

My worries are only intensified when I mention ‘the goat lady’ to Bill Cooke, a developer friend.

“Love to get my hands on that place,” Bill remarks. “Ever see the inside of the house? All hand-carved woodwork. The mantel’s fantastic. It’d take a lot of work, but you could get a fortune for it restored.”

The niece could make a bundle from it.

That weekend, driving by fairly early, I see a spotless red Hyundai pulled up along the road by the goat lady's house. When I stop, a youngish woman comes out of the house all muffled up in a goose down coat. She's wearing a red dress underneath and high heeled boots, not exactly the outfit to go clambering around a farm in the wintertime.

"You Mr. Seymour?"

When I nod, and shake her proffered hand, she looks doleful. "Auntie doesn't listen to reason, but I've got to get her out of there. Did you know she's got goats in the house? And no heat?"

"I'm not surprised. The barn's probably warmer – from the goats, and hay and, uh..." I don't think I should mention manure to this pretty creature. Then I realize what she just said. Get her out of there. What would that old lady be without her goats?

At Alice Strang's request, I keep on stopping by to check up on the old lady. Every time I see her, the old woman greets me at the door, or in the barn, with a sly friendliness. She seems to be fully recovered from her fall, but I worry about what I've set in motion by contacting her niece.

One day there is an ambulance pulled off the road, and the red Hyundai is parked next to it. As I get out of my car, my worst fears are realized. I hear the old woman yelling. Those are angry screams, not screams of pain. Before I've made three steps towards the house, two men emerge. They are carrying a stretcher. The old woman is strapped onto it.

She is still yelling. "Where're you taking me? Lemme down! I can walk, dammit! What's gonna happen to the goats? What's she gonna do with my goats?"

I step forward, before I know what I'm doing, saying, "I'll take care of them for you." Now why'd I say that?

She stops yelling for an instant. Solemnly, she nods in my direction, and then takes up where she left off. "Lemme down! I can walk..."

Her niece comes over to me. Her face is tearstained. "I wish Auntie could see: I'm trying to do the best for her." She looks up into my face and tries to smile. "Thanks for offering to help with the goats." Her face composes itself, and her voice sounds dry and business-like as she

continues, “Actually, I’ve contacted a goat farm up in Chatham. They’ll be coming by for the goats this afternoon.”

“Oh, good,” I say automatically.

It isn’t until the ambulance and the Hyundai drive off that I realize the implications of the niece’s last statement. She had planned to have the old lady carted off. There are no plans for her to be coming back.

About a month later, Skip waves me down on a back road. “You asked me ‘bout the goat lady, right? Well, you hear she – well, really her niece, I reckon – sold the old place?”

I shook my head.

“For a hundred thou. Needed it for the nursing home they say. Sold it to Bill Cooke. He’s gonna restore it...”

I didn’t want to hear any more.

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## *Invisibility*

*Gabriel Stevens*

I've got this invention. I call it the cloak of invisibility. If you put it on, no one sees you anymore – except for cops, kids, and other vagrants like yourself. My cloak of invisibility; it's an actual thing. It *was* a tweed smoking jacket when my wife and I picked it out on my forty-fifth birthday. Now, six years later, it's dirty, threadbare, and has one pocket ripped off completely. Still, it works perfectly; I'm invisible. Bradley, Joe the Bender, Circus Jimmy, and the rest of my current associates, they can see me, but street people don't count.

“So, she says I'm a blight on the upward reach in the heart of humanity and walks out – just like that, Professor. Takes her doll collection – gone!” Bradley said as we trudged up 23rd Street. He pushed his left hand out like a boat hydroplaning away. “Worthless bitch, best day of my life when she left, now that I think about it.” As soon as he got done waving his hand around, he balled it up and blew warm breath into it.

I was about to make sympathetic sounds, but just then he rotated the left sleeve on his coat until he found a satisfactory spot and slithered his nose on it. When you think about it, who is so brain-wasted that he can't snatch a couple paper-towels somewhere to carry with him? Sometimes when I'm just living I wake up and look around wondering where I am.

Now *there's* an invention: a soft towel that sticks to your coat sleeve. Let's say a towel that sticks to the sticky strip which is already on your jacket. ...Wait a minute; the coat would pick up everything. You might reach into your bag and walk around the rest of the day with jockey shorts hanging from your elbow. Wool jackets, sticky stuff on the towel, that's the way it should be.

“I’m no blight on nobody’s upward reach the way I see it,” Bradley went on. “At least not anymore. I’m out here, baby: far away from anybody’s upward friggin’ reach.” For the next few steps he waved his hands and formed words with his mouth but no sound came out. Then, as if moving your lips but not speaking saved up volume, he burst forth again. “Too bad I’m not a doll. *Then* she would be happy. Crazy bitch loves dolls. God, I got lucky that day. – Now lookit him.”

I had been thinking of getting through another day without booze, and it took me a second to realize the conversation had made a left turn and now required my participation. I hate when people do that. Talk should go on without any abrupt breaks unless the break is pre-signaled. It should behoove the speaker to warn everybody – wave a hand, stamp a foot – before the subject changes: body language grammar. I wish I had a notebook for some of this stuff.

“Where? Who?” I replied just managing to look up in time to see a stooped figure waddle into the subway.

“Him, the one dragging the trash bag down the steps.” Bradley waggled a dirty index finger in the direction of the disappearing figure. “It’ll be wore through in a day. What a dill!”

“That’s no him. That’s Nickel Nora,” I said.

Bradley was nonplused or is it plused? – When are you plused?

“You can’t tell. Who could tell?” he moaned. This apparently injured his sensibilities. “She’s wearing work boots. Now, why is she wearing men’s boots?” His nose bunched and his lips curled in moral outrage.

Bradley always talked too much. Sometimes I avoid him, today I didn’t. I was beginning to regret it, but I get tired of being alone.

We try to catch the goobers’ eyes, especially if they look like they might have a spare buck or even a quarter. But most of the time it’s like walking down a long hallway with the sound turned off, drifting in a dream, walking and walking through the gray statues.

That’s a whole other thing. You can’t stop anywhere for too long, because the cops hassle you. Hassling is important to their sense of well being. The Bataan Death March, day after day. My feet feel like tortured stumps by afternoon. Roller skates for the homeless, a license

to stop walking for two full hours a day – signed by the police chief, I say. It ought to be a basic inalienable right.

“She was first in line at the Salvation Army on Wednesday. Slept in a doorway all night,” I told Bradley.

“Crap,” he said. “My feet are killing me. I got blisters on my calluses. You ought’a see when I take my shoes off. They don’t even look like feet any more. They look like boiled lobsters.”

“You have to wash your socks every day, Bradley, every day. You have an extra pair?”

He looked at me suspiciously: kind of drew back, so he could focus on my face. He probably thought I was about to rob him.

“So you can wear a pair and be drying another pair,” I explained. His shoulders relaxed.

“I ain’t washed nothing lately. I wear ‘em down and grab another pair at the shelter.”

By “grab,” Bradley meant to steal them from someone weaker. Bradley was a jackroller, a streamlined jackroller, but he seemed to like me for some reason. Probably because I don’t smoke, and there wasn’t anything to “grab,” and maybe because he imagined that I’d off his ass while he slept if he did. I might now. I’m not who I used to be. The streets have made me different. I’m not even sure I can be like I was again. Probably not – not completely.

“I’m going to take her friggin’ shoes, Professor. She shouldn’t be wearing no man’s shoes anyway. That ain’t right,” he said, as he turned around and headed for the subway opening.

Bradley has a deeper understanding of right and wrong than most of us.

I kept walking. For one thing, Nickel Nora was on her own. On the streets we’re all on our own, but also, I knew where she was going: to the subway ladies’ room. She would be safe there. The guard at 23rd Street lets the women use the lavatories at certain times to wash things and get warm. The women knew when it was okay. Some would try to stay, sitting up all night on the toilets, but the guard would come through periodically and throw them out. On the street, women have to sleep sitting up. Lying down makes trouble. They get big cankers on their lower legs. Never lying down is bad for circulation someone said.

I hardly remember how it was... before... anymore. I'll see her Thursday, at lunchtime. She always goes out for lunch on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She'll recognize me this time. I'll tell her it's been 54 days since I last drank, and she'll say that's good, Howie. Let's go home.

I ought to keep a journal like writers do, write down my philosophical observations, stuff like that. ...Only trouble is that's something else to keep track of and protect from the Bradleys.

Thursday morning: I took a shower at the Men's Club – Men's Club, makes you laugh. Put my "valuables" into a baggie and held the baggie in my teeth the whole time. Later, when I came out, my sneakers were gone. That was serious. You can die from lack of sneakers.

"Hey, Jimmy, where the hell have my sneakers walked off to?" I said, trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

Fat Jimmy's a trustee. The worthless dog turd is supposed to watch your clothes. He doesn't give a shit, just leans against the wall and chews on a toothpick. That is, when he isn't walking out of the room and gossiping with the cage man.

"What sneakers. I didn't see no sneakers," he says, the toothpick doesn't even wiggle faster.

"I didn't come in here barefoot, did I?" I couldn't hold them back; the words popped out.

He came away from the wall, his shoulders hunched up under his ears. You could tell he was in attack mode; he had spit out the toothpick. "Look, Professor, get your shit together and get out of here *now...*" – he emphasized the required direction with a thumb – "...and don't come back. You're through here, bum."

I didn't say another word... left... curled my feet on the cold floor. What now, walk barefoot to the Salvation Army – seven blocks? The concrete was icy. Someone said it was snowing. Losing my temper – bad – maybe cost me a valuable resource, the shower room.

They ought to make leather elbow patches for jackets that turn into serviceable slippers when you strip them off – emergency shoes. Shoes are life.

I found my shoes in the trashcan by the cage. Who would want sneakers with holes? Fat Jimmy had to see who threw them here. When I turned, he was grinning and chewing.

I smiled as if we shared a big joke together – trying to get back in his good graces. God, why don't I just die and get it over with? I disgust even me. She has to recognize me today or that's it. I put my sneakers on – no socks – and went outside to walk until lunchtime. We're not allowed to stay inside during the day.

+ + + +

“Hey, Professor!”

I didn't turn; just kept slogging, heading for 33rd Street. She works there, and it was almost lunchtime. This was it. Somebody tugged on my arm. It was Circus Jimmy.

“Where you going, Pro? How about we go to the library?” he said.

I looked at him, his bloodshot eyes. He had about a five-day growth on his face. His stocking cap trailed from a pocket, and, like a tar brush, his clumped hair stuck out in all directions.

“You'll only get us thrown out, and then they'll be watching *me* when I come in.” If you cleaned up and didn't stink, you could get an hour or so in the library, use of the bathroom and everything.

“No I won't, honest, Professor. They won't even know I'm there.”

It was almost lunchtime. “You go if you want, Circus.” We stepped into the street. The flow of shopping goobers filled the sidewalk completely to pass around an open manhole. They smiled at each other benignly. We're all in this thing together they seemed to say. Isn't that nice? Everything was so friendly-like. That is, until they saw Circus and me, then their faces went blank, distant. It became impossible to catch an eye. You need a one-on-one situation where they can't pretend you're talking to someone else or you'll never get a nickel.

I saw a bottle in a paper bag and walked right by it, and there could have been some left too. Damn! I'm getting good.

There were some benches made out of concrete with wooden boards to sit on. We had finally arrived at the Glenwood Plaza: a pebble-dimpled concrete semi-circle complete with trees planted in concrete pots and wire trash baskets. The designers had lined the edge of the

semi-circle away from the street with upscale shop-fronts at ground level and high-rise professional offices above.

“I’m going to sit here a while, Circus.” I indicated a concrete bench.

“What? Here! It’s freezing, man! We could be in a nice warm library. You’re nuts!”

“My feet are killing me,” I said as I sat down. “You go on. I’ll catch up later.”

He walked a few paces and then turned around. “You want to lean on me, Professor?”

“No. I’m okay.”

He came back and sat down beside me. He actually looked a little worried. I noticed that when he coughed, little puffs of white vapor filled the air around his lips.

“Why don’t you go on, Circus? I’m fine,” I said. I knew I didn’t have ten minutes before the next cop would come along, and it was lunchtime already.

“I got a secret hide, Professor.”

“Yeah? Good. Where?” Circus, hardly more than a boy, still dreamed.

“I can’t say. I have to keep it secret. If it ever got out it would be spoiled in nothing flat. It’s high up, high above the city. Nobody to bother me, safe and warm.”

Where the hell was she? “I think I know where you mean, Circus, under the Intergate Bridge in the ironwork.”

“Nope,” he said. “This is a warm place. It’s warm all the time.”

Finally... Finally, she came out of the Glenwood Building, walking right toward us. She wore a gray suit and a brown wool coat with a fur-lined collar. I managed to see the suit and the rose silk scarf as she pulled the coat closed around her neck. She always liked that scarf. That was one thing I did right. I wondered if I smelled bad.

“Where, inside a building somewhere?” I asked, but I had other things on my mind.

The bottom of her coat flared right at the knees, showing off the longest, most beautiful calves in the world. I could hear her high heels clicking.

Circus said, “No. Well, yeah. The only reason I said no was because it’s a roof house, if you know what I mean. I have it really fixed up nice. Nobody ever goes in there. The stack goes right through it.”

She swept past. She didn’t look; nobody does, why should she? I’m invisible. Her perfume took me by the senses. It was her favorite. I never could get the name right.

“Which building?”

I saw her stop. Now, with consternation on her face, she turned back. Her lips pursed. When her lips did that, she was piqued. Even now I wanted to jump up and fix whatever was wrong. Then she turned directly toward me and flashed that smile. When she smiled, she smiled with everything, even her nose. At last she saw me! The smile was for me! I almost stood up. Thank God, I didn’t. A long black car pulled past behind our bench and then to the curb. In a swirl of clothing and golden legs she got in. Her lips, happy lips now, spoke to someone else as she pulled the door closed.

“Do you think I’m gonna tell you?” he said.

“I suppose not,” I said. “You want to go to the library?”

“Not if it’s going to mess up your library privileges, Pro.”

“Who cares.”

We passed the Town Hall. The homeless tent-city still had a few tents left in it.

## Options

*Terry Burns*

The gun was on the table, its flat black surface malevolent in the twilight darkness. We had been staring at each other for hours, it with its one black eye of death.

I hadn't come to this cheap motel room with a sense of purpose, more out of a lack of direction. I hadn't knowingly brought my little black friend. It was more like he had come of his own volition. I don't know how to explain that.

Clinical depression... real... physical... the term used to describe my condition doesn't do the job. No one could remotely explain what happened in the pit of your stomach, the tightness in your chest, the lump in your throat that wouldn't go away.

The head was the worst. Not pain... more like... I don't know... fuzzy... disoriented. My friend took advantage of my helplessness.

How do I make you understand? Why would I try? I don't need your approval.

The breaks – that's what they called it – bad breaks. Losing my job, the divorce, my kids siding with her. The old cliché *when it rains it pours*, trite, but that's how a saying becomes a cliché. They're true.

More. My father and brother died within months. Car trouble. Hail as big as baseballs. More? Does it matter? No, it doesn't. Nothing mattered, that was the problem.

I couldn't make anybody else feel this. There weren't any words. It was a club and you were either in or out. You don't want to be in.

How did you reach the point of deciding life wasn't worth living? You didn't. It didn't work that way. There was no decision. You just quit. Life puts you on your knees and you give up.

Nobody understood, nobody but my little friend. He understood, and he could wait. Infinite patience.

Wait for what? You didn't think about such things. Couldn't verbalize your thoughts because it was crazy. Nuts. You thought about not thinking. Relief from the demons. No time like the present.

I picked up my friend. Cool to the touch, almost cold. Yes, that's him, cold and detached. Professional. Knew his business. Like an ice cube pressed to my temple. Eyes closed, a light scent of oil told me he was still there. Like I said, patient.

Minutes dragged by. Now what? Why was this hard? It wasn't hard. A gentle pressure on the trigger...

A knock. Are you kidding me? Now? My friend went back to the table, hid under a towel. So patient.

"Jim?"

Recognition seeped through my brain. The swirling fog in my mind obscured it, but begrudgingly allowed it through. "Janice?"

Automatic systems kicked in, years of practice observing the amenities. "Come in, what are you doing here?"

"I heard you were in town. I'm sorry about your brother."

Sorry. Yes, well-meaning people lined up to express sorrow, over and over and over. Daddy's funeral drained me. I can't do it again.

Back on automatic. "Thanks. It was somewhat unexpected. Have a seat. Can I offer you some coffee?"

"I'd like that."

Muscles remembered what to do, coffee poured, walking, handing the cup; no problem, automatic. Does she know I'm not here? Can't she see I'm already gone? Rummaged through the filing cabinet of my memory for a correct response. What was I expected to say? "It's been a long time"?

Not much of a line, but true. We went together in high school. We were so close. What happened? College happened. I added, "You haven't changed a bit." Another lame one.

She laughed and tossed her long brown hair. It was a ray of sunlight, cutting through the fog. "After thirty years? Not true, of course, but nice of you to say."

Truth pushed the fog to the side. I blinked as it surged to the front of my brain. "Actually it was true. I'd have known you anywhere. How do you do it?"

“Just one day at a time. How are you holding up?”

Tendrils of fog start to creep back in... alert... alert! Automatic systems re-activated. “I’m fine.” The oldest line of them all.

“Everybody says that. How are you really? We always could tell each other everything. Somehow I don’t think that’s changed.”

I looked at her. Was that true? Could we still talk like that? The need to talk was overpowering, thoughts swirling out of the fog, pressing at the floodgates of internal control. Control was essential, maintain at all costs!

She cheated. She reached and took my hand, looked into my eyes. “You do need to talk, I can sense it.”

“Yes.” The word was out past the floodgates before I could help myself. Automatic systems were failing. I was in trouble, losing internal control.

She smiled. “But I know you. It’s hard, isn’t it? Hard to say what you feel?”

“That’s my daddy coming out in me. He couldn’t express his emotions, not out loud.”

“But you knew how he felt, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “Yes, I don’t know how, but we always knew.”

She touched my arm. “You have that in you too. I know you’re hurting, still I know you’re holding it back. I feel it.”

I expelled a long breath of air and broke eye contact. “I don’t like to burden other people with my problems.”

“It’s not a burden. Problems and pain are meant to be shared. The more we share our heartaches, the smaller a piece we have left to bear. If enough people share, it almost disappears.”

Was that how it worked? All these people saying their meaningless words, were they just trying to take a little piece of my pain on themselves? That’s amazing! Still, all I could force through my lips was, “It’s hard.”

“I know. Oh, how I know. When I lost Momma nobody would talk about it. Everybody said to put it behind me, not to dwell on it.” The smile disappeared. She folded her hands in her lap and looked at them as if she weren’t sure why they were there. “Then I lost a child on top

of that and my anguish doubled. They said I had to move on. I still haven't moved on and it's been years. There's no closure."

She looked up and found my eyes. "I still have a need to talk about it. And you need to talk. We can't go on keeping these things inside of us." She brushed at the corner of her eyes.

"I'm sorry about your mother. I liked her a lot. I didn't know about the child."

"See what I mean? You just took a little piece of my pain yourself and I immediately feel better knowing you care."

I did care. I cared down in that dead spot in my chest where my heart used to be. Isn't that remarkable? I had given up on my own pain, but couldn't stand for her to hurt, even after all these years. Astonishing.

I said it aloud. She smiled. "I knew we could still talk."

"How did you get through all that? It was an awful lot to bear."

"Not well at first. I'd take the kids to a babysitter and run around the house screaming at the top of my lungs, banging on the walls. After those sessions I went to doing it one day at a time."

"Lucky you didn't go crazy."

"I thought I had. Maybe I did. I wish I'd had you to talk to then."

"You should have called. I would have come."

"I know."

"But now, when the situation is reversed, when it's me hurting, you come running."

Her smile was faint. "I had to."

"Didn't you get some help from your church? I'd think this would be right down their alley."

"To be honest, my pastor was as bad as all the rest. He kept saying not to dwell on it, to move on. He quoted lots of scripture, and said a lot of comforting things, but like the rest, he didn't listen. I needed someone to hear me."

"That's a shame. They should have been more supportive."

"But he helped anyway. One of the scriptures he read promised that God wouldn't give us more than we could bear, and always gave us a way out."

A way out! Yes, my little friend under the towel. I looked across the table. Janice was beautiful, breathtaking, and she was caring. Maybe there was another way out. I like this way better. I said, “You believe that?”

“Oh, yes, I really do.”

“But you still need to talk?”

“You’ll never know how much.” Her eyes squinted slightly. “Maybe you do know. But just the little amount we have talked has already helped me.”

“It’s helped me too.” Strangely, that was true. The fuzziness was gone. I was still pretty down, but I could tell the difference.

“It’s nearly time for the funeral.”

“Yes, I’m ready.” I was surprised to find I *was* ready. Not for the service, I’d never minded saying goodbye. I had already gotten that done. It was the people, the well-meaning people I had dreaded. But now I knew. I was going to give each of them a little package of my pain. Hand them out like Halloween candy. Not too much, it wasn’t their burden to carry, after all. Not too little or I’d cheat them out of giving the help they had come to offer. Just enough, and if I was very lucky I’d give most of it away and have little to carry back with me.

“How about riding with me?” she asked, rising.

“I’d like that if I can make a little stop on the way.” I picked up the towel wrapped bundle from the table. “I need to drop a package off at the pawn shop.”

“Now?”

“It’s important.” My little friend was entirely *too* patient. It was time he waited somewhere else. There were other options to explore. More attractive options.

## *Warriors*

*Michael Ostlund*

The President of the United States of America awarded United States Army Major Mike O'Malley the Congressional Medal of Honor this afternoon. The private award ceremony took place on the White House lawn. The First Lady was in attendance...

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This was Major Mike O'Malley's third tour of duty in South Viet Nam; the third, as well, to include an extension. He would have gladly volunteered to stay in-country until the conflict was over if they had let him. O'Malley had been in-country for nearly sixteen months this time. The normal twelve-month tour of duty wasn't long enough to suit him. He'd eagerly requested and received a six-month extension whenever the time was nearing for him to rotate back to the States. He still had two more months left on this extension. He intended to enjoy every moment of it.

Major O'Malley patiently served the Army's minimum requirement of ninety days of stateside duty after each of these three combat tours. After his first eighteen-month tour of duty he'd been assigned briefly to a stateside supply and transportation outfit. He flew daily missions there as a courier between two military installations. He was still a Captain then. After his second eighteen-month tour he did a short stint as a flight instructor in Alabama where he had been promoted to Major. When this current tour of duty was over he expected he would again be given another temporary assignment until he would be eligible to come back again for a fourth tour.

O'Malley was doing what he loved to do and was now two-thirds of the way through his third tour of combat flight duty in South Viet Nam.

O'Malley had spent fifty-two months of the last five years flying helicopters in a combat zone.

During the first nine months of his first tour of duty in South Viet Nam O'Malley spent much of his time flying six man teams of Special Forces deep inside the small neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia. He regularly flew these missions into North Viet Nam too. He often spent his nights flying a mere fifty feet above the ground alone in an unarmed helicopter with only a compass and the moonlight to guide him. After these Special Forces teams finished with their top-secret missions O'Malley went back again to pick them up. On several occasions they returned with wounded or members missing. The enemy was often hot on their tails during these extraction missions. O'Malley had been hit in the calf of his left leg while lifting off with the last two surviving members of a six-man team an hour before the sun rose on the morning of his last mission. He managed the pain well and remained alert in spite of the loss of blood. He flew the damaged helicopter back to safety, the two survivors completed their mission, and he was awarded the Army's second highest medal, the Silver Star. He spent two weeks in the hospital and another six on desk duty.

During the last seven months of O'Malley's first tour of duty he had been given the honor and privilege of flying the division's Commanding General's helicopter. This assignment had been presented to him by his company commander as some sort of reward for all those dangerous missions he had volunteered to fly during the first half of his tour.

For O'Malley this new assignment felt more like punishment. He had gladly volunteered for those dangerous top-secret assignments during the first nine months of that tour; he had to be given an order to do the chauffeur assignment for the last seven. As far as he was concerned he had been reduced from being a proud warrior to being a glorified taxi driver. He suspected the real reason for his transfer was because someone suspected he was learning too much about the division's top-secret intelligence operations. Pilots rarely held top-secret clearances and O'Malley was no exception. On his first tour of duty, in addition to the Silver Star, O'Malley was awarded a Combat

Infantryman's Badge, a Distinguished Service Medal, a Purple Heart, and fourteen Air Medals for valor.

During his second eighteen month tour of duty O'Malley flew the Huey helicopter's Bravo model again. It was the Army's main workhorse for troop and supply transport. It was also used for Medivac missions. On that second eighteen-month tour of duty O'Malley spent part of nearly every day over the jungle hovering a Medivac helicopter at treetop level. His assignment had been to evacuate the casualties from some of the most fiercely fought battles in the North Central Highlands. O'Malley loved flying these dust-off missions. He became addicted to their raw intensity. He grew to depend on the daily rushes of adrenaline much as the drug addict becomes dependent on his poison, one death-defying rush at a time. Many times his crew was busy hauling the wounded up from the jungle floor while the bright Red Cross painted against of the white background on the side of his helicopter's door was being used for target practice by a lone "Charlie" sniper. On other occasions it seemed like every Viet Cong and NVA regular in the country wanted to see him dead. He never flinched when the enemy's bullets punctured the thin doors and slammed into his bulletproof pilot's seat. O'Malley was one of those few pilots capable of keeping a helicopter hovering steadily while coming under fire; he demonstrated this numerous times on that tour as his crew methodically hauled up the wounded, the dying, and the dead. On every dust-off mission O'Malley carried the burden with him of knowing he was not allowed to fail. If he were not up to the challenge, if he panicked or lost his nerve, the wounded men he had been sent to rescue would surely die. These brave men depended on him. He was their second chance.

On his second tour of duty O'Malley received thirty-two air medals for valor, three Bronze Stars, and two more Purple Hearts. The Purple Hearts were for minor flesh wounds he suffered after bullets had penetrated the helicopter's door and had sent sheet metal fragments flying to those few spots on his anatomy that were not protected by armor.

Between his second and third tour Captain O'Malley had been promoted to the rank of Major. When he returned to South Viet Nam for his third tour of duty he was assigned the coveted position of

commander for the Fourth Infantry Division's helicopter gunship platoon. The Fourth Infantry Division was now stationed at the Dragon Mountain Base Camp located eighteen kilometers from Plaiku in the north central highlands. O'Malley was back in-country again where he knew he belonged, doing what he was best at, only this time he wasn't a defenseless dust-off pilot waiting in a state of controlled terror to be shot down. This time he was the commander of eight lethal gunships.

Major O'Malley wanted only the best in his crew on this tour. He was all through training the scared or overeager newcomers. He was forty-one years old. He knew his days as a hotshot gunship pilot were numbered, if only by his age and the rules. He was certain this would be his last tour of duty in-country as a combatant. The younger ones with better eyes and quicker reflexes would be taking over soon. He hated growing old. He feared being put out to pasture a lot more than he feared dying. For him growing old was a fate worse than death. He understood he would eventually have to accept a promotion to lieutenant colonel or be forced to retire.

He also knew that if he accepted his next promotion it meant he would find himself stuck behind some desk in a command slot. O'Malley hated the idea of being chained to a desk. He often vowed he would retire first. He always swore he'd never allow himself to become one of those over the hill warriors, one of those pencil pushing administrative types of warriors he had always found so useless. He'd been dueling with their kind for the last twenty years. He just wasn't ready to be the eye in the sky reporting traffic conditions over the freeways yet. O'Malley had put in his twenty years of active duty service. He could have retired two weeks before he began this last tour of duty but he couldn't think of anything else that he'd rather do. He was sure nothing could provide him with the adrenaline rush that flying a combat helicopter gunship over the North Central Highlands of South Viet Nam could. Years ago, somewhere over the Korean peninsula, O'Malley had become an adrenaline junkie.

O'Malley had been in the Army all of his adult life. He knew nothing else. He'd flown some of the first helicopters used in the Korean conflict. The first time he had climbed into the cockpit of a helicopter he was hooked. He immediately decided his future was in

Army Aviation. Now that he was at the end of his flying years, at least in the military, he wanted to go out with a bang. He needed to surround himself with only the best this time if he was to go out with the kind of bang that would forever make him a legend in the annals of Army Aviation. Like most warriors, O'Malley had a huge ego.

O'Malley had always led by example. Whenever possible he had been the first one into the breach. He'd survived being shot down five times so far, twice in Korea and once on each of his tours in South Viet Nam. He was the Army's most decorated helicopter pilot. But this was not enough for O'Malley. They were going to put him out to pasture after this tour of duty was over. He needed to show his men that he still had what it takes. But most of all he felt he needed to set an example for his son, David. It was important to O'Malley that his son was proud of his heritage. He was the son of a warrior.

David was his only son. A woman he never married birthed him; she wouldn't have a warrior for a husband. David was a freshman at the University of Minnesota that year. He had enrolled in the R.O.T.C. program there and had taken considerable heat for it from some of his friends. David wanted to be closer to his almost always-absent father. He thought this was the way he could accomplish that. David was following in his father's footsteps.

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In January of 1968, the U.S. Army was still using beefed up Huey Charlie models for their helicopter gunships. They had been modified with more powerful engines for higher performance than the Bravo model. They also had slightly less cargo space than the Bravo model. The biggest visible difference on the gunship version of the Charlie model was that it had rocket pods and machine-guns mounted on each side. The pods carried seven rockets each and were controlled by the command pilot sitting in the right seat. When the shit hit the fan the command pilot had to be the one doing the flying because there was a fixed sight mounted in front of him; he had to point the helicopter to aim the rockets. The twin mounted seven-point-six-two-caliber machine-guns mounted on each side were aimed and controlled by the co-pilot in the left seat using a pistol grip device with sights that hung

down from the ceiling in front of him. Wherever he pointed the sights the four machine-guns electronically followed. When he pulled the trigger on the pistol grip all four machine-guns fired.

In addition to the two pilots, two more enlisted specialists rode in the back of the Charlie model gunship and served as door gunners once the helicopter was airborne. On O'Malley's personal crew one of the gunners was left handed; they were mirror images in their open doors. They each manned a modified M-60 machine gun that hung from the top of the open side doors by bungee cords. Each had a wooden ammo box between his feet containing a continuous seven hundred round belt of seven-point-six-two-caliber red tracer rounds that fed into his machine-gun. Each door gunner wore a twenty-five pound armor plate over his chest and sat on another one.

The weapons armorer on O'Malley's helicopter gunship was Specialist Fourth Class Paul Rutherford. He was nineteen years old and from rural Ohio. He enlisted in the Army two weeks after he had graduated from high school. He could field strip an M-60 machine-gun blindfolded in less than ten seconds and put it back together again in twelve seconds more. He was the best shot in the gunship platoon.

The crew chief's name was Specialist Fifth Class Rick Thompson. He was twenty-two years old and was from San Diego, California. He had been drafted. He had been forced to drop out of college after the money ran out. He turned out to be a whiz at aircraft mechanics. He was considered by his peers to be the best crew chief in the gunship platoon. He was also the gunship platoon's second best shot.

Both of the enlisted men were on their first tour. They had been in-country three months and five respectively.

Timothy McGee was a thirty-one year old R.O.T.C. Officer from Southern California. He was currently on his second twelve-month tour of duty. He spent two months of his first tour flying supply choppers down in the Delta until he had been shot down. He fractured both legs on the landing. After leaving the field hospital he asked for and received a transfer to a gunship platoon. He spent two more months as a flight operation's officer before he was fit to fly again.

"Next time 'Charlie' shoots at me I want to be able to shoot back," reasoned Lt. McGee.

He soon became deadly proficient at operating the electronically controlled machine-guns from the co-pilot's seat of the Charlie model gunships. He earned a well-deserved reputation for being cool under fire. Lt. McGee's was awarded a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star, and seventeen Air Medals for Valor on that tour of duty.

Timothy McGee was stationed in Alabama for two years after his first tour of duty in-country. He trained pilots in the art of flying helicopter gunships while he was there. He received his captain's bars at the beginning of his second year on this assignment. A month after that he submitted his fourth request for a transfer. A month later he finally received his orders for a second tour.

Captain McGee had been in-country for two months on this tour of duty.

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At the sixteen-month point in O'Malley's third tour of duty, four gunships had been assigned to provide air cover for a troop movement to a landing zone on top of a small mountain. An infantry brigade was being dropped in for the clearing and establishing of a forward artillery base there. The landing zone was barely large enough for three transport helicopters flying in formation to hover in. Over and over in teams of three they came, dropped off their infantry soldiers, and left. Two gunships flew in oval patterns on either side of the landing zone escorting them in and out. If the troop transporting helicopters took fire, the gunships were almost always in a position to instantly return that fire. Major Mike O'Malley, who as flight leader was designated with the call sign of Gambler One, was leading the four Gambler gunships accompanying the first three transport helicopters in. If all went well these first three would leave and return to the base camp for more soldiers. They would repeat this several times while the gunships remained on the scene flying their tight oval formations over the landing zone.

"Gamblers, this is Gambler One. Check in," ordered Major O'Malley over the radio.

"Gambler One, this is Gambler Four."

"Gambler One, this is Gambler Eleven."

“Gambler One, this is Gambler Seven.”

“Roger Gamblers, we are coming up on the LZ. Our ETA should be in two more minutes. Gamblers Four and Seven take the east side and set your pattern, Gambler Eleven follow my lead and set up on me, copy?”

One by one the other three command gunship pilots keyed their mikes and responded by simply saying, “Roger.”

They broke off into two groups of two and set up their combat formations to provide cover for the first three helicopters getting ready to land. A four-man Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol had been on the top of this small mountain three days ago. They had reported no contact with the enemy at that time.

The transport helicopters were using the “Blackjack” handle as their call sign. A calm serious voice came over the radio.

“This is Blackjack leader to the fleet. Blackjack Sixteen, Twenty-one, and I are proceeding to descend to the LZ now. Stand by,” advised the captain in charge over the radio.

This was their moment of truth. Most of the transport helicopters were flown by young warrant officers fresh out of flight school and on their first tour of duty. They flew in tight formations. The young pilots felt the tension thickening in the air as they flew toward the landing zone. This was when the transport helicopters were the most exposed. Once in the zone they hovered three or four feet off the ground while the infantry troops jumped out the open doors. They were easy targets for an enemy lying in wait. The enemy would never have a better opportunity to catch the infantry soldiers in a more vulnerable position than when they were coming out of the open doors of the helicopters. The only deterrent against striking were those vengeful gunships circling above the treetops on both sides of the landing zone. Sometimes the gunships were not enough.

“This is Blackjack leader, the first team is down. We’re coming out now, team two stand by. The LZ is cold. Repeat, the LZ is cold.”

You could almost hear the collective sigh of relief in the fleet as those reassuring words came over the radio. Except for O’Malley. He was still tense, very tense. He wasn’t sure why he was so tense but he

learned long ago to trust his instincts. His instincts were telling him that it wasn't time to relax. Not yet.

The lead helicopter in the second formation of three announced to the fleet, "This is Blackjack Four; team two is approaching now. The LZ is still cold."

A second lieutenant was on the ground with twenty men. They were from the first three helicopters. The young lieutenant was trying to set up security for the LZ's perimeter when he and his men came under heavy fire. Sixty camouflaged NVA regulars who had been patiently lying in wait ambushed them. The NVA had set up their ambush three days earlier when the lone helicopter picked up and left with the LRRPs. At the same moment this ambush began a second set of three helicopters began hovering four feet off the ground in the middle of the LZ while off-loading their infantry soldiers.

The first of a wave of twenty mortars began to explode in and around the LZ. Mortars were being fired simultaneously from four launchers. The occupants of the three helicopters in the LZ never knew what hit them. The explosions from the first four mortars fired destroyed the three helicopters. The first round landed directly in the middle of the rotor blades of the lead helicopter. It was instantly transformed into a huge ball of floating flame.

The command pilot of the second helicopter felt the concussion from the first explosion a mere half-second before the next explosion disabled his helicopter. It blew his tail rotor off. He survived the crash along with the co-pilot. Most of the infantry troops aboard were either injured from the mortar explosion or in the crash.

The third helicopter's co-pilot was now screaming into his radio's microphone, "The LZ is now hot! I repeat, the LZ is now hot!"

The third helicopter's command pilot was frantically attempting to keep his damaged bird flying and heading away from the action.

Those first twenty infantrymen on the ground were dying quickly. The color of their blood stood in contrast with the thick jungle growth surrounding the LZ. The ten soldiers who were still alive in the middle of the LZ hesitated in joining their comrades engaged with the enemy in the tree lines. They were on their own now and they knew it. They hid instead. Each man frantically dug himself a hiding place among the

bodies of the dead or beneath the wreckage of the destroyed helicopters. Those still alive on the ground were barely able to breathe. The explosions from the mortars coupled with the secondary explosions from the destroyed helicopter's fuel tanks sucked the oxygen from the surrounding air. Two of the infantry soldiers had broken their legs in the crash. They were in too much pain to hide.

The two pilots huddled together in the wreckage looking hopelessly at one another. They pulled their six-shot thirty-eight caliber revolvers from their shoulder holsters and held them in their shaking hands.

Every soldier there who had access to a radio used it at the same time. It was impossible to make out half of what they were urgently screaming into their microphones. It wasn't necessary because everyone already knew what they wanted. They wanted air support and reinforcements. They wanted a miracle. They wanted to go home.

The colonel in charge of the mission declined their desperate pleas to send in reinforcements. He decided the gunships would have to do this job. He believed it was much too dangerous to send in more ground troops until artillery had a chance to hammer the area around the LZ for a few more hours. It was going to be up to the gunships now if any of these men on the ground were to have any chance at survival. They had ten minutes to rescue and pull them out. After that the first of hundreds of artillery shells would be on their way.

Three of the other transport helicopters dropped off their troops in an open field ten miles from the LZ and returned to circle in the area of the LZ. They waited for orders to pick up any survivors if the opportunity presented itself.

The Gambler gunships monitored the frequency used by the Blackjack fleet but they communicated among themselves on a different frequency.

"Gamblers Eleven and I will engage the enemy in the tree lines. Gamblers Seven and Four stay with the downed troops in the LZ," ordered Major O'Malley over the radio.

"Roger that," replied Gambler Seven.

Major O'Malley's gunship broke off first and quickly gained some altitude. He spotted the smoke from the hand grenades and small weapons fire drifting above the treetops. One of the few survivors in

the jungle heard the gunships coming. He threw two red smoke grenades in front of his position. They had nowhere to retreat. Their choices were deeper into the jungle or going back into the open LZ.

Over the radio came their desperate plea, "We're on the east side of the smoke, they're only twenty feet on the west side of it, over!"

"Gambler One copy, keep your heads down," responded O'Malley.

He sharply banked his gunship and came around for a gun run. As he brought the nose around he put it down on the target of enemy soldiers twenty feet west of the red smoke grenade. As he dove he fired off three rapid bursts of two rockets. Captain McGee simultaneously laid down a hail of lead on the fleeing enemy soldiers with the four machine-guns under his control. The door-gunners leaned out their respective doors and walked the solid red tracers from their machine-guns from one enemy soldier to another.

O'Malley heard the colonel order artillery over his radio and felt the pressure of the time constraints. The clock was running out for those below. As O'Malley was pulling up and banking to come around for another run Gambler Eleven was commencing his first dive on the enemy target. By the time Gambler Eleven completed his run O'Malley would be banking again to begin his second run. The surviving ground troops were in full retreat to the LZ. They joined the others waiting there for a miracle. All prayed to be rescued.

The enemy soldiers were in full retreat now too. They ran deeper into the jungle to the sanctuary of their tunnels.

O'Malley and McGee continued to engage enemy soldiers on the run until they lost sight of them in the thick jungle. After their last gun run O'Malley informed the colonel circling safely above the clouds that he thought now would be as good a time as any to send in the rescue choppers.

Gambler's Four and Seven had kept the enemy from entering the LZ while O'Malley and Gambler Eleven went to the aide of the infantry soldiers. They now joined together again to circle the LZ and protect their wounded comrades who were exposed under the bright afternoon sun.

Major O'Malley had two rockets left and enough ammo for perhaps one more run. Gambler Eleven carried the same. Gamblers Four and Seven still had half their payloads left.

Around and around the LZ in tight banking circles went the four gunships, all eight eyeballs in each chopper eyeing the tree lines with the human intensity that can only be found in combat situations. Someone else surely had to die before this awful day would be over.

The enemy's mortars began falling in and around the LZ again. The three rescue helicopters approaching to pick up the survivors immediately turned away. Streams of green tracers from the enemy's AK-47 assault rifles began coming up from the tree lines and from further back in the jungle. All the gunships now had several green streams of tracers attempting to find them. Everyone in the air and on the ground felt the repeated concussions coming from the dreaded mortars exploding all throughout the LZ.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

The enemy's bullets ripped through the bottom of Major O'Malley's beloved helicopter gunship. Each of the three other gunships had received enemy fire too. Gambler Seven was forced to abort and return to the base camp; the hydraulic fluid in his control system was all gone now, and it took the strength of both pilots to fly the crippled bird. Gambler Seven limped back to the base camp with two "B" model helicopters following in case he didn't make it.

The crews held their breaths as they pulled maximum G's banking in the tightest turns possible to turn their guns on the offending targets below. They knew the general area the tracers had come from. They returned a blanket of exploding rockets and seven-point-six-two-caliber rounds sufficient to assure second thoughts before the enemy would fire at them again.

Gamblers One and Eleven had finally run out of rockets and ammunition.

"Gambler Eleven, return to base," ordered O'Malley "Gambler Four, I don't suppose you'd care to volunteer to hang around while I pick up some of the wounded would you?"

"It would be my pleasure sir."

O'Malley's helicopter was much lighter with all the ammo gone. He could now transport as many as eight wounded soldiers to safety. He felt he had to give it a try. The rescue helicopters wouldn't be returning as long as the shooting was going on and those on the ground were running out of time. There wouldn't be any help coming from anywhere else now. He was their only hope.

"Gambler Four, this is Gamble One. Okay, I'm setting down in the LZ then to see if I can evacuate some of the wounded before we leave. Cover me," radioed O'Malley to the last remaining gunship with any firepower left.

O'Malley's helicopter was on the ground and his crew was busy dragging and carrying the wounded to it when the mortars began to fall again. One landed three feet from Major Mike O'Malley. He was carrying a young private over his shoulder at the time.

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David O'Malley was only eighteen years old when the President of the United States of America handed him his father's Medal of Honor. He was proud of his father that day. He looked up to the heavens and vowed to make his father proud of him as well.

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The President of the United States of America awarded U.S. Air Force Major David O'Malley the Congressional Medal of Honor this afternoon. The private ceremony took place on the White House lawn. The First Lady was in attendance...

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Major David O'Malley had been in-country almost two months now...

## *The Pendant*

*Michelle Buckman*

The pendant, an unremarkable little heart, hung on a thin chain around her neck. It was smaller than a locket and certainly not solid gold, but smooth and rounded, with a tiny cubic zircon set in the center that sometimes caught the sun and cast odd circles of light onto the wall. Chris had presented the necklace to Allysia on their second date, Valentine's Day, seven years and two months earlier. She had never taken it off. Over the years, the pendant had become a symbol of their union, more so even than her wedding band, which was given because the ceremony demanded it, not from those first sparks of romantic desire to win her love. Her fingers searched for the little heart and fiddled with it of their own accord whenever her mind worried over something. Like now. Riding in the car, fixated on finances, despite her efforts to think about their pleasant day spent on the lake.

Next to her, Chris drove with both hands clasped white-knuckled around the steering wheel. She loved his hands, pale smooth palms and big bony fingers with carefully trimmed nails. His eyes were narrowed at the traffic and his mouth hung in a tight frown. He worried about so many things. And he hadn't any idea how desperate their money situation had become.

She glanced over her shoulder at their kids slumped sideways in car seats. Ellie had drool running down her chin. Peter was sleep-sucking his pacifier with great gulping noises.

Before them, eight lanes of white concrete highway glistened in the late afternoon sun. Tree-tall brick fences blocked the roaring din and fume-laden exhaust from the more subdued hullabaloo of the city suburbs.

A triangular divide stretched on forever.

Allysia closed her eyes and pictured herself back on the lake with water sparkling around the boat and tried not to think of real things. Not the unpaid bills and especially not her secret. She hadn't decided how to tell him yet. They were almost home, not enough time left to get into a decent conversation.

If only his promotion would come through, their problems would be solved.

At the start of their marriage five years earlier, they would have delved into each other's day. Now they spoke in fragments tossed out with the hope that some thread of conversation may grow from it, but most of the time the words withered in the air. They talked on separate frequencies. Like last week.

"Guess what Ellie did today?" she had asked. "She spelled her name."

"Really?" he replied. "Well, Steve got called into the Big Man's office this afternoon."

"Peter's fever is higher... Did you stop at the drug store for me?"

"Yes, it's on the counter. Do I have time to mow the lawn before supper?"

When they did try to talk, the kids were always between them, doing things – spilling milk, needing clothes changed, crying for something, fussing over a toy.

Christ steered the car down their exit, gunning it at the bottom to make it through the light. As the light turned yellow, she made a cross on the windshield to protect them all from ill fate. Chris said nothing, but shook his head. Her superstitions drove him crazy.

"It doesn't hurt, you know," she said.

He frowned deeper without even looking at her.

As they came to a stop at the next light, Peter and Ellie stirred. The least break in momentum always seemed to jar them like an alarm clock.

"We home yet?" asked Ellie.

"Does it look like we're home?" said Chris.

Peter began to whimper. "Out, out."

Allysia said, "Not yet, Pumpkin Eater. We're almost there. Just another couple of minutes."

Chris pulled away from the light, passed a blue Buick similar to theirs but without a dent in the trunk, then turned abruptly in to Food King and parked.

“Give me the checkbook.”

Allysia hugged her pocketbook. “What for?”

“Beer.”

“You just had beer at the lake.”

He rolled his eyes at her. “So?”

“So, anyway, it’s at home. I didn’t bring it.”

He cursed as he pulled back into the traffic.

Their yard basked in the late afternoon sun, but the back windows of their house never caught the fading daylight, clouding the family room and kitchen with evening shadows hours long before the outside world. Allysia turned on the shell-filled table lamp, a treasured find from a beach flea market. She nestled Peter into his playpen among his favorite toys: a squeaky carrot, cups, a red truck and a teddy bear. She tousled his blond head, then led Ellie to the bathroom.

“Let’s go potty.”

“I don’t haf” to.”

“I know, but let’s try anyway and then I’ll give you an M&M reward, okay?”

Chris was shuffling through the junk basket on the counter. “Where is it?”

“Where’s what?” Her heart pounded. She knew what he meant.

“The checkbook.”

“I thought we decided you weren’t getting beer.”

“No, we decided the checkbook wasn’t in the car.”

She grimaced. Here goes the argument again. Why don’t we ever have any money? Why don’t we put the kids in daycare so you can get a job? We can’t live like this anymore, never having anything, never doing anything with our lives...

Her gut retched. She wouldn’t put the kids in daycare. Not so he could buy beer, or a new car, or take some useless trip to some place they didn’t need to see. Being with her babies, raising them, that was the important thing in life. And they had each other. And health. And happiness. But he never saw it that way. No matter what hurdle they

overcame, or new gadget they managed to buy, it was never quite as much as he expected.

She fingered the little heart. “There isn’t any money left.”

She could have predicted his look in her sleep. His square jaw clenched. The cleft in his chin became more prominent. His nostrils flared making his Roman nose dominate his long face. With a sweep of his hand through his sandy, wavy hair, he strode down the hall to the bedroom. She knew without following him that he would stretch out on the bed and stare at the ceiling until he got his emotions under control.

He wasn’t a vocal person. He never said *I love you* or *You look beautiful*. He only discussed his worries. The kids might be too small or too big for their ages. The knocking noise in the car might mean trouble. The heater might not make it through the winter. Time was always against him, in his mind. Life would run out before he’d had enough of it. Which was why she was worried that he thought their love had run out, lost its glitter, wasn’t worth the effort anymore.

Thirty minutes later, with the children eating fish sticks and green beans, she ventured back to their bedroom. The lights were still off. Chris was just a dark shape on top of the navy bedspread.

“You hungry?”

He ignored the question. She knew that to him no time had passed since their kitchen dialogue. “What happened to the last of the money?”

She didn’t want to answer. Not right now. Not like this, in this mood. She tried to avoid it without really lying. “Doctor bill.”

He lay quiet a moment with his eyes open and studied the ceiling fan as if he were redesigning it. “They haven’t been to the doctor since Christmas. You still owe from then?”

“No.” She didn’t offer any explanation. “Come on, let’s eat. It’s getting cold.”

He sat up and looked at her, then stood up. She knew a doctor’s bill was a legitimate expense. He couldn’t fault her for spending the money as if she had bought flowers or a present for her mom or ordered something off the television.

She could feel his eyes on her as he followed her down the hall. Finally, his hands fell on her shoulders, stopping her, turning her around to face him. “The doctor was for you?”

She sighed. “Yes.” She looked at her green socks blending into the green carpet.

She felt his eyes examining her more closely. With Ellie and Peter, he had known even before the little stick turned blue with evidence. She had been surprised he hadn’t known this time, but she hadn’t lost that soft, fleshy look after Peter. And this time, they hadn’t been trying.

“Are you...?”

“Yes. Due in November. The tenth.”

She could see in his jaw how he tried to be mad, but light came into his eyes and his mouth curled up a bit. “Really? Another one. Well, damn. Just what we need, huh?”

He wasn’t really happy, she knew, but his male ego seemed to puff up with the pride of creating life again. She buried her face in his chest and wrapped her arms around him, feeling his ribs press against her and the boniness of his spine beneath her fingers through the cotton of his shirt.

He sat at the table shuffling through the mail as she served his supper. “What’d you call a 900 number for? Fifteen dollars!”

Peter threw a green bean off his high chair and watched with interest as it landed on the floor with a splat, then threw three more.

Allysia walked over, pulled a napkin from the table and cleaned up the mess, giving her answer to the floor. “I called Madame Zym, a psychic. I wanted to find out if you were going to get the promotion.”

Peter threw more beans. She didn’t scold him. The mess kept her from having to look Chris in the eye.

“Right, like some lady on the phone knows what’s happening in my office?”

“Well, maybe. She said there were going to be major changes in our life by the end of the year. Of course, that could be from the baby. But it might mean the promotion.”

Chris’s anger flared. “Stop it, Peter. Eat your dinner.”

“It’s all right. He’s thrown them all now.”

“Humph.” He looked again at the bill. “You better not call again. What a waste of money. And you didn’t want me to buy beer!”

He set the mail aside as she handed him his plate.

She carried the handful of beans to the trash, breathing deeply, hoping her impetuous blunder would be dropped. But it wasn’t. He seemed colder the rest of the evening, going off to the bedroom to talk in hushed whispers on the phone.

He worked late the next night.

“Meetings,” he said, kissing her lightly before pulling off his clothes and flopping into bed in his underwear. He spent Wednesday evening working in the yard, ignoring her and the children, insisting he had to get the yard work done before the rain started. By Thursday she was antsy. She needed attention from him. Nausea swept through her all day, making her incredibly tired. And insecure. She wanted him to say aloud that he was happy about the baby, that he loved her, that he would never leave her. She wanted to be more important than work and promotions and money, like old times.

When the phone rang at four o’clock, it was him. “Hi, Ally. I have another meeting tonight, but not too late. I promise.”

She put the children to bed early and dressed in her red satin negligee. After she brushed her hair out with long, heavy strokes, washed her face and applied fresh make-up, she lay in bed reading, waiting for him, fighting to stay awake against the sleep-inducing draw of pregnancy.

He didn’t get home until almost midnight. She heard the door open and the deadbolt click back into place. She dropped the book to the floor, adjusted the covers and strained to hear the rustle of his footsteps in the hall. But he didn’t come.

She tiptoed past the children’s room and stood in the archway staring at him. She wanted him to turn and eye her. Five seconds, ten seconds. No notice. She glided to his chair feeling feminine and irresistible with the cool satin rippling over her skin.

“Hi,” she said.

He looked up and took in the whole of her with distant eyes. She leaned into him and he kissed her with a probing eagerness, different from his tender, wet smooches, as if someone had taught him a new

way to kiss. She pulled away breathlessly, and searched his face for this resurgence of emotion, but his face looked the same as ever, if not even more tired, worried, intense.

He sat back, dismissing her. "Go to bed, Ally. I'll be there in a bit."

On the weekend, things seemed more normal. He worked in the yard, played ball with Ellie, rented a movie for Saturday night. The late meetings, the hushed phone call, the lonely nights in bed all faded away in the routine of weekend life. Sunday night he climbed into bed, cupped her curled body into his own, and woke her with kisses.

The next morning, she stood at the washing machine checking the pockets of Chris's good beige pants for loose change when she saw it – a long red hair. She peeled it off and held it up in the air, then shook her notions away. From his pocket, she pulled out a scrap of paper with a number scrawled on it, which she stuck in her own pocket to be put away on his dresser later, then tossed the pants into the churning, soapy water.

At noon, while she was putting the laundry away with Ellie trailing behind, the phone rang.

"Mrs. Bayden, please."

"Speaking."

Ellie was pulling on her pant leg. "I want to talk, Mommy. Can I talk too? Please? Huh? Can I?"

Allysia untangled Ellie from her leg, handed her old greeting cards from the top dresser drawer to distract her, and waved her away.

"I am calling on behalf of Eastern Collection Services. We show you have an overdue balance."

Allysia searched the chain around her neck for the pendant. She couldn't find it. She put off the impersonal man on the phone by lying to him, telling him the check was in the mail, then hung up the phone and searched the entire chain. The pendant was gone.

Ellie sat cross-legged on the floor flipping through the cards, pretending to read them.

"Ellie! My pendant! Have you seen my pendant?"

"What's that?"

"The little heart that hangs on my chain. The one you always play with when I'm holding you. Do you know where it is?"

“Uh-uh.”

Allysia scrambled over the carpet, searching for a speck of gold. Her senses arched into overdrive. Her ears burned, her fingers tingled against the nylon of the shag fibers, and her nose sneezed away the dust.

“It’s got to be here.”

Then she stopped, realizing it could be anywhere in the house. When had she touched it last? Certainly it had been there this morning.

She had stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror blow-drying her hair. She had dotted on some perfume, some bath powder, all essential make up. She had touched her breasts and noticed they already seemed full of pregnancy.

Wouldn’t she have noticed the pendant missing?

Her urgency fell into despair, sure she would never find the little heart. It was an omen. She and Chris were doomed to split up. All the pressures lately had taken more tolls on their relationship than she had thought. The long silences and the late meetings flashed before her with dour meanings.

She watched Ellie sort the cards and lay them out in a row in some pretend game.

Right this minute, she imagined Chris seated in a restaurant with some woman, a grand redhead, owner of the strand of hair. He probably wasn’t at all happy about the baby. He had only smiled because he was leaving behind that much more hassle, a final tip of the scales in favor of some employed woman with career goals and traveling plans.

Everything jumbled together in her head. She tried to think of purely happy times, like their visits to the beach and their trip to the Bahamas, but if she examined the memories too closely, she could remember the disappointment. Nothing ever lived up to a person’s expectations. Hotels were never as classy as the brochures. Ocean views were always countered by the commercialism on shore. Meals served with flair would be overdone or too spicy or bland or even cold and left them feeling bloated. Even the thrill of another baby, another chance at perfection blooming under her care, had to be accompanied by this churning yuck of nausea. That’s how all of life seemed to her at

this moment. The good tangled with mistakes, shortcomings, failures, depression, resentment and anger.

The square of the windowpane bordered a glimpse of the outside world. Tree limbs whose leaves had begun to unfurl into the summer-like air yesterday looked despondent in the overcast gray today. A wren perched on a branch, fluffed up against the dampness. Rain began to fall, splattering the screen with a rush of wind. The bird flew away.

Ellie sat quietly, telling herself a story from the pictures spread before her.

Allysia pulled the card from her pocket and dialed the handwritten number.

“ATC Corporation. How May I direct your call?”

Allysia hung up, surprised it was really a business number.

But she couldn't help it. The omen hung over her. She felt certain their marriage had always been doomed to failure. Everything in life was doomed to failure. Her mother had taken off with a younger man. Her father, once a brilliant surgeon, had succumbed to alcoholism. An old beau had jilted her at the altar years before her marriage to Chris.

The notion of Chris leaving her may have been growing for years, just dormant, waiting for her to realize it. Only time and circumstance stood between now and the end of her marriage. The lost pendant proved it.

She smoothed the bedcovers, a knotted mass left from their night's passion, naked flesh against naked flesh in a contortion of positions. How could he love her that way and still hate her enough to leave her with three children?

She shook her head. Nonsense. He wouldn't leave. He couldn't leave. He would never survive on the stipend left after paying child support for three babies. And she couldn't survive without him staying, not only for the bills, but also for the emotional and physical relief. She couldn't raise a family on her own.

Ideas whisked through her mind. Maybe if they sold the Buick and found a used sports car, the red Mustang Chris kept driving past on Sixth Street, he would be happier. If he were happy, she would be happy. She was certain. If only she hadn't lost the pendant, then she would be certain.

The phone rang again. "Hello?" she said.

"Hi hon. I was thinking about you. Are you all right?"

His voice startled her. Not that he never called during the day, but she was reading new meaning into his words.

"Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"Well, you know, the baby. You seemed tired this morning."

Oh no, she thought, twisting his intent. Had she seemed unemotional in bed? Hadn't she satisfied him?

"A little tired, yes. You know, sick a bit. But I'll be okay. Ellie and I are going down to the kitchen right this minute for lunch. That will help."

She muttered a sentiment, hung up the phone and collapsed on the bed.

Ellie had progressed to doodling on the cards.

Allysia gasped. She had saved each one as a loving memento of their celebrations together. Now they were ruined. Another sign.

He had probably only called so she wouldn't call him and find him not even in the office.

As the rain became torrential, the room darkened. The walls closed in around her. She pulled herself up and wandered from room to room, tidying beds, opening blinds, trying to let the world shine into the confines of the house.

Chris was out there in the largess of the world, interacting with people, sharing intelligent conversations, sparking new ideas, while she put clothes away and changed diapers. Most days, she felt freer than Chris, visiting with friends, running errands, following her own schedule, going wherever she wanted to when she wanted to, but maybe through his eyes she seemed an ordinary unassuming housewife. Today, she felt like one.

At five o'clock, she made dinner by rote, thinking about him and replaying the weekend, every word, every motion. She couldn't recall a single moment that he had focused on her face and looked her in the eye. He had played with Peter and Ellie, carried them on his back, dumped them on the floor and tickled them, but he hadn't included her in their antics. They had both stayed busy, but not done anything together.

That night, everything had double meaning.

“Where’d you go for lunch today?” she asked.

“Belmont’s. Joan Jasper from ATC met me there. We had to go over the design schedule. Can we eat soon? I’ve got to take that chainsaw back to Harry tonight.”

Joan? She thought. The other woman? And out to Harry’s house with some excuse that it will take a while? Sure.

The week passed. She went to bed right after the kids every night. Exhausted, she claimed. She wasn’t about to let him touch her if he was seeing some other woman. He didn’t seem to mind. Work was stressing him out, he would say. He claimed he was trying hard to impress everyone on this project, to improve his chances for the promotion.

She tried to believe him, but she got to the point she didn’t want to speak to him if he got home the least bit late.

“Here’s your supper. I have a load of laundry to fold.”

“Aren’t you eating?”

“I ate with the kids, earlier.”

“Can’t you leave the laundry and sit with me?”

She pulled out a chair and sat with Peter perched on her lap, looking at Chris sullenly, waiting for him to announce his departure.

Instead, he prattled on about work, the lawn, some news on the radio. She watched his face suspiciously, biting back tears. She wanted him to admit that their marriage was over, not drag it on forever with his impersonal conversations.

By Friday, she had sunk into a murky depression. She stepped off her front porch into bright morning sunshine and pattered down the driveway barefoot, to get the newspaper. She stopped halfway to study the grass, hoping to spot a lucky four-leaf clover, something, anything, to offer some optimism.

“Ah, found one!” She squatted in the dew and plucked it, then snatched up the newspaper, skittered into the house and flipped to her horoscope.

*A stranger will enter your life. Significant changes will occur.*

Not very specific, but she could guess. Chris's mystery woman would steal him away and she would be left on her own. But the clover. Good luck. What would the good luck be?

He called at noon. "Hello Ally, it's me."

"Hi."

"Everything okay?"

She wanted to scream "NO!"

"Yes, fine. Why?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to check in. I've got something to tell you. I was going to tell you now, but I think I'll wait until tonight."

Thank heavens he wasn't going to end their marriage over the phone.

"Yes, wait until tonight," she said, "after the kids are in bed and we can talk alone."

She rushed around the rest of the day, cleaning and cooking, making their home perfect. He wouldn't be able to point around at things and fault her for being a poor wife.

By the time he arrived home, she knew she had overworked her pregnant body. She could barely move. He could tell. He took over without being asked. He served supper, then told her to rest on the couch while he put Ellie and Peter to bed. She could hear his voice down the hall, rising and falling animatedly in his storytelling rhythm, followed by the hushed words of prayers. Then he was talking to them. She could tell the difference. His voice was more even, pausing at their tinkling comments.

He's telling them first, she thought. He's telling the kids he'll be leaving soon, but he will still visit them.

Chris returned to the family room and joined her on the couch with a serene, relaxed look smoothing his normally strained face.

He's thinking of that woman, she thought.

He pulled her closer and rubbed her shoulders in soothing circular motions. She tensed against him, not wanting to enjoy his touch, but he kept on until she pulled away and stood.

"I'm going to bed."

He grabbed her arm before she could step away. "What's wrong with you?"

“As if you don’t know.”

“Know what?”

She stared at him, wanting to accuse him, but all the accusations evaporated from her mind. She fell back down beside him on the couch and dropped her face into her hands. “I’ve lost the pendant you gave me!”

“What? What pendant?”

She looked up at him, her face contorted with grief. “The heart you gave me when we were dating. You know, I’ve always worn it.”

“That’s why you’re crying? Is that why you’ve been so depressed all week? Cripes, Ally, it wasn’t expensive or anything.”

Now she looked hurt. “I know that, but I’ve always worn it. It’s a symbol of our love, our unity. But I’ve lost it.” She paused, staring at him a moment, then dropped her eyes. “And now I’ll lose you.”

He rubbed his forehead with his long-boned fingers. “Let me get this straight. I’m leaving you because you lost your heart pendant?”

She half-smiled despite herself and nodded.

He said, “Gees, you are the most superstitious nut head I’ve ever heard of.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. He stood up and pulled her into his arms.

“Fortunately, Ally, you’re married to a tolerant man who loves you anyway. How could you possibly think our marriage would end just because you lost a silly heart?”

“But you’re so unhappy. All the things you want... We’re always broke.”

“You’ve forgotten that I already have the most important things in life – you and Ellie and Peter and Elmo.” He was making fun of her, repeating her own words, but his smile said he really meant it.

“Who’s Elmo?”

He patted her belly. “This guy. When we said our God-Blesses tonight, Ellie and Peter decided his name should be Elmo.”

She wiped the tears away with her fingers. “Better than Big Bird, anyway.”

“Or Oscar the Grouch. We have enough grouchiness around here already.”

He lifted her shirt to rub the skin stretching over the soft swell of their baby and then continued up to her breasts. He peeled off her shirt and kissed her warm flesh.

The next morning, the sheets were too tangled to bother straightening. As Chris shaved, Allysia pulled off the bedspread and tugged the sheets loose from the mattress.

Chris stepped from the sink into the room, his face half lathered, razor poised in the air. “I can’t believe I never told you my news last night!”

“What?”

“I got the promotion!”

“Really?”

“Yes!” He stepped back into the bathroom, talking over the running water. “I’ll be reporting to the R&D department head, a new manager, just hired. I’ve only met with her a few times.”

“That’s great! I can’t believe it. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me last night. This is wonderful!”

She gathered the sheets towards her, keeping her attention focused on him. With a final tug, the sheets pulled free and whipped across the bed. At the head of the bed, out of her range of vision, the gold heart pendant flipped through the air and disappeared into the carpet behind the night stand.

“Meggie Rendale,” he continued, grinning into the mirror. “She’s going to be a great boss. She’s some kinda woman.”

## *Another Time, Another Place*

*James Ross Wiley*

Stephen Diehl shivered whenever he recalled how Mrs. Cotter scared him witless, terrorizing his nightmares for a month. Hiding in her shrubbery, crouched in the shadows of her drab gray house, he didn't hear her approach.

The old woman materialized from the shadows, her skeletal hand reaching for his shoulder as she croaked at him, "What are you boys doing here?"

For several agonizing milliseconds Stephen's mind and limbs refused to work in sync. Details etched themselves into his mind while he crouched, petrified. As one cadaverous hand reached for him, the other held a greasy butcher knife, the blade glistening in the dying evening light. Stephen looked up to see old Mrs. Cotter glaring at him angrily, bending to him, bringing the knife up toward him. Then he screamed and ran with all his might.

Although impressions of abject fear and paralysis remained imprinted in his memory, not all the circumstances of that early introduction were as distinct years later. His age, for example: While he couldn't remember exactly, he calculated that he was about twelve at the time. Yet even 20 years later the memory remained the most profoundly terrifying experience he could remember.

He had been playing hide-and-seek with Danny Crow who lived next door to Mrs. Cotter. Danny always was getting Stephen into trouble of one kind or another, and this was a classic example. Danny was a lonely, only child who lived a few blocks from Stephen's house as the sidewalks twisted and turned, but less than a block away via shortcuts through neighbors' back yards, over fences, and behind garages. The two boys played many summers' days into evenings together, exploring neighbors' open garages and garden sheds, battling

imaginary armies, discovering lost antiquities. Stephen was just about Danny's only friend.

That first meeting of Mrs. Cotter was a typical foray into forbidden territory. Stephen hid from Danny in the old witches' yard. The boys had always assumed that Mrs. Cotter and her sister were witches; Danny probably told Stephen so. Mrs. Cotter was bent-over creaky old, everything about her ancient and sinister to imaginative, impressionable twelve year-olds.

The old women's equally ancient house hadn't seen a new coat of paint for many years. The weather-beaten, dark gray three-story house towered over everything in the neighborhood from high on its hill. It sat far back from the street, mostly hidden by thick hedges that must have been ten feet high and four feet thick. The hedges and vines fully engulfed a rusting iron fence completely surrounding the old women's property. The only place he could see through that hedge, Stephen discovered, was near the ground. Even then he could only see in a few yards. That was far enough to occasionally glimpse a pair of old-lady cotton-stockinged feet, in sturdy old-lady black shoes, when one of the old women swept at a few stray leaves on the walkways inside the shadowy labyrinth.

Even on a sunny day the old house and its residents lived in shrouded cloying dampness. To Stephen it "felt old," and "smelled old" whenever he neared the house. Even if the boys suspected that Mrs. Cotter and her sister truly were merely poor old women, too poor to have their house repainted or have the hedges trimmed, the boys' fantastic imaginations made trespassing more exciting.

Stephen and Danny were constantly on watch to catch one of the old women snooping from behind faded lace curtains at a second floor window. But they couldn't resist the temptation to sneak around inside the old women's privet-bordered fortress. Stephen yielded to temptation that muggy June evening as he and Danny played hide-and-seek inside "The Cottery," as they called the old women's place. Bats squeaked and flitted after moths above the street lights, but none of the light from the street lamps penetrated the Mrs. Cotter's trees and bushes. Even what light shone from the moon and stars was filtered and held at bay by the thick leafy canopy.

Stephen crouched in the humid darkness at a corner of Mrs. Cotter's house, pressed close to the damp stone foundation at a shadowed doorway. As he concentrated on avoiding the mildew – and Danny – Stephen listened to his heart pounding in his ears, and he waited. And he waited.

He strained for the sound of Danny's footsteps. Despite a cool pre-storm breeze stirring overhead, sweat beaded at his forehead and trickled into his eyes. Mosquitoes whined at his ear. More breezes, stronger than, stirred the pungency of Mrs. Cotter's Sumac-weed trees. The fetid heaviness of sour dirt and rotting leaves under the hedges hung on his skin and clothes. As two minutes of hiding stretched into three, then four, Stephen wished Danny would hurry and find him, so he could get the hell out of there.

As in the calm before a storm, the breezes died abruptly, a cold clamminess surrounded Stephen, and he shivered uncontrollably. He turned his head at some stimulus that had escaped his conscious hearing or sight, and a croaking voice from out of the darkness demanded, "What are you boys doing here?"

A pale, withered hand pointed an accusing finger at him, trembling as it grew longer, coming menacingly closer, the hand opening and grasping at his shoulder, another hand wielding a long, heavy butcher knife.

Later, when he could think more rationally about the incident, Stephen suspected he'd screamed like some silly girl. He shot out of that dark corner like a runner primed in the starting blocks, scraping his left knee on the slimy foundation of the house. He ran with his feet barely touching the ground, heading for the single opening in the hedge at the street. Birds startled from their sleep in the bushes squawked and beat their wings wildly. Stephen was sure that they were the witches' gargoyles bearing down on him!

Spying the opening in the bushes, his only chance for escape, Stephen lunged for security of the real world, flying for the sanctuary of that opening. The bushes at one side of the opening took an additional toll on his scraped and bleeding knee, and his tumble on the concrete sidewalk added a bruise. Stephen didn't notice any of this until much

later, when his breathing finally returned to normal, when his pounding heart no longer threatened to burst through his ribs.

Tumbling, rolling, still half running and half crawling, Stephen headed for Danny's back porch. There Stephen found Danny crouched behind the porch railing, watching Stephen's approach, his eyes wide with terror.

"Oh, Jeez, man! I nearly got kilt!" Stephen whispered at Danny.

If Danny had even grinned at that moment Stephen would have strangled him. But when he looked up at Danny from the porch floor where he lay gasping for breath, Danny stared back at him, his hands clamped over his mouth.

"Didju see that? Ol' Lady Cotter almost had me! I ain't NEVER goin' NEAR there again! Where the hell were YOU?"

"I... I... I saw you, an' then I saw her!" Danny tried explaining. "She was comin' up behind you, and there wasn't nuthin' I could do, man! She's like a friggin' ghost 'r something'! She dint walk 'r nuthin'! She jus' started floatin' up behind you, and, and BAM! There she was, an' there wasn't nuthin' I could do! Shit, I ran like hell too!"

"Thanks a whole helluva lot, man! Now she's knows it's me, and one of these days she's gonna find me, an'... DAMN!"

They avoided Mrs. Cotter's yard for a week or two, and no slimy, warty creatures from Hell crawled from crevices in the ground to swallow them, no gaunt buzzards swooped down from inside The Cottery to pick and tear at their flesh. But nearly true to his promise, Stephen didn't go back in there at night; he wasn't that stupid. It could have been worse, Stephen admitted: he didn't have to live next door to that.

A few years later, his vivid imagination tempered, Stephen made another visit to Mrs. Cotter and her sister. Several inches of snow had fallen overnight, perfect for canvassing the neighborhood with a snow shovel to earn Christmas shopping money. It occurred to Stephen that Mrs. Cotter's sidewalk was never cleared of snow, but she might spring for fifty cents, maybe even a buck to get her walk shoveled.

Even in the winter the old house was hidden behind its dense hedges. Barren tree branches gnarled overhead like ink sketches of despair in a winter wasteland. Weathered, age-splitting porch floor

boards creaked under his weight as Stephen approached the front door, wary even at his advanced age of fifteen. Pulling at his gloves, drawing them tighter against his wrists, Stephen hunkered into his coat and shivered uncontrollably, recalling how he'd done so that summer evening years ago. He tried to laugh, to convince himself he wasn't still just a little bit intimidated by the old women.

He knocked with his gloved knuckles on her door, wondering if Mrs. Cotter also would remember their first meeting. Age-crackled paint of some indeterminate dark hue rimmed the edges of a beveled oval window, behind which, from behind yellowed lace curtains, Mrs. Cotter's wrinkled face peered at him before she inched open her door.

"Yes?" Just the one word, her voice rustling with papery thinness in the cold winter air. She held the door with one bony hand, and clutched a shawl around her shoulders with her other frail hand. Musty warm air swirled out from the house and around Stephen as Mrs. Cotter stared.

"I , uh, was wondering if I could shovel your sidewalk." Straightening his back, standing taller as if before a demanding teacher, he was sure she was going to say "no." There was a moment's hesitation as Mrs. Cotter stared. Not at him exactly, not even through him, but somehow, rather, "into" him. Here it comes, he thought, "No thank you, young man."

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked softly, her voice barely more than a dry whisper.

"Well, I mean, you know, because it's covered with snow, and, someone could fall and get hurt, and then you'd be libel." His reasoning, he figured, was legally sound and convincing. He'd grasped the concepts, if not the exact terminology. After all, He'd practiced and perfected it on his previous dozen or so customers, and it worked for them. It annoyed and embarrassed him that he hadn't made sufficiently clear his pitch should more strongly imply payment for his services.

"Very well, but only the city sidewalk. There is hardly enough snow on the interior walkways to warrant any attention to them." As if she were granting him permission to clear her walks of snow, a dispensation of grace, she nodded imperiously toward the sidewalk, then firmly closed her door without waiting for his reply.

“But we haven’t settled on a price yet!” he thought. “Oh hell, it’ll only take five minutes and my feet’re freezing. Just this last one, then I’m going home to thaw out!”

In little more than five minutes the walk was cleared. Stephen wasn’t surprised to look up at one point to catch a pale face peering from behind a second floor window curtain. There was no hint of embarrassment on his inspector’s part as their eyes met. Quite the opposite, he felt guilty for spotting Mrs. Cotter watching him. Shoveling his way up her walk within the hedge, he added his finishing touches to his previous sales pitch, mindful of the homeowner’s liability for injuries to postmen and delivery men – if she ever got any mail or packages.

Before he’d even removed his gloves to knock at her door again, Mrs. Cotter opened the door at his approach. “You’re quite finished then?” It was a challenging statement rather than a question, not requiring a response. Mrs. Cotter instructed him to come inside.

This was only the second occasion Stephen had ever spoken to the old woman, if howling in retreat a few years earlier counted. Now, despite strong misgivings, he was entering her house. An aroma of “age” eddied around him as he stepped past her into her foyer. An unthought, unconsidered but perceived impression of “forever” enveloped him, so many mingled and fused aromas, indistinct scents tugging at distant memories and faint images. He wasn’t even sure they were his memories, just something, somewhere, on the periphery of understanding.

Within the house’s musty atmosphere of antiquity there was the smell of kerosene, reminding him of his great-aunt’s farm house, of her kerosene lamps, frying eggs and toasting bread at breakfast, linoleum floors freshly scrubbed with Murphy’s Oil Soap, and so many rushing, flooding impressions at once. Herbs’ and spices’ fragrances that once delighted him in the farmers’ market here clung to his hair and clothing, invading his senses completely. Ambiguous blends of dill and garlic lost their pungency, suffocating in the cloying heat and humidity of the close quarters. After the crisp cold winter air, the house’s oppressive heat and clammy confinement were overpowering. Stephen’s knees wobbled slightly, and an uncertain queasiness stirred in his gut.

“Please put your overshoes on those papers,” Mrs. Cotter instructed him, pointing to a neat layer of faded newspapers carefully laid on the floor behind the door. Stephen had been standing, awestruck, filling his eyes with strange “new” sights and impressions. While they were new to him, everything in the marble-floored foyer looked as if it could have been borrowed from a museum, caught here and stuck in time. Either that, or, again that queasiness washed over him, it was time that was stuck here. Stephen glanced briefly through the door’s oval window at the car parked at the curb across the street, just to be sure it was still there, and was still a car, not a horse and wagon.

As he removed his boots Stephen watched his reflection in an age-blurred mirror, tracing with his eyes its ornately carved, deeply oiled cherry frame. Below the mirror a narrow table of similar dark wood held an overflowing fern planter, deep green and lush, flourishing in the heat and humidity. Opposite the newspapers, near a coat closet door with a full-length mirror, stood a deep china vase, its glaze cracked like a million spiders’ webs, containing two canes and a simple black umbrella. A tall grandfather clock stood in a corner, its pendulum slowly swaying, back and forth, gears and cogs patiently marking off its own sense of time, “Tock, tock, tock...” As he mechanically unfastened the buckles of his boots, while his mind protested her invitation to come inside, Stephen tried to catch the exact moment the old clock’s pendulum stopped its upward swing and began down again.

“I, uh, I can’t stay. I gotta get home an’...”

“Nonsense. Your feet are nearly frozen. And you are obviously quite fatigued from a hard day’s work. You will come in and warm yourself before we send you on your way. A man must not work for wages alone. We will share your satisfaction of a job done well.”

“Aha! She DOES understand. I DO get paid!” he thought. “Yes ma’am. Thank you, ma’am.” He continued unbuckling his oversized galoshes, cracking ice balls from the buckles as he went, creating small dirty puddles on the worn gray marble floor.

“Bring your coat in here,” she pointed through the dark oak-lined archway to a sitting room, “and we’ll dry it by the fire while we talk.”

Wondering what he’d got himself into, he followed the old woman, surveying the room as they entered, taking in more wonders of the

museum-era home. Two tall windows, nearly floor to ceiling, were draped with lace curtains, probably once white but now aged yellow, each window with a small table in front of it. One table held a plant in an algae-tinged terra cotta pot sitting on a cracked white dinner plate. He thought the plant was what his mother called “*aspidistra*.” The other low oval table accommodated a dozen or so small photographs in ornate pewter frames. More photographs hung on the walls, and another dozen or more lined the mantle above the fireplace.

At first he thought the atmosphere of antiquity was merely the effect of the lighting, fading daylight weakly seeping through the faded curtains. Gradually his eyes adjusted to the dim light. Striped wallpaper, he could see, once red and green stripes, now was tinted tones of gray. Despite the darkness and faded colors, everything seemed clean and polished, but ancient.

A gas fire glowed yellow-orange and hissed softly in a fireplace, a small, shallow affair set in the corner of the sitting room. Black iron scroll work enclosing the fireplace abutted muted metal-green tiles set into a gray marble hearth. Mrs. Cotter pulled a straight-backed chair from another corner of the room to place backward near the fireplace, and draped Stephen’s smelly wet wool coat over it.

“Grace, would you like to make us all a toddy?” Turning in the direction of her question, Stephen saw Mrs. Cotter’s sister standing in an arched doorway to the dining room. “Stephen, this is my sister, Miss Lawson.”

“Now wait a minute!” he thought. “How’n the hell does she know my name? I never told her!”

“Pardon me, Stephen, perhaps you prefer to be called ‘Steve’ at your age, but I customarily avoid nicknames and diminutives. ‘Stephen’ suits you better, in any case.”

“Yeah, OK. I mean, yes ma’am. I don’t care, I mean that’s fine with me, but...”

“Please, pull that chair closer to the fire and sit with me. We’re not totally isolated here, you know. I do know a few things that go on about us in this world. You are ‘Stephen’ and your friend next door is ‘Danny.’ Am I not correct?” Again, a question requiring no response. “First, let us attend to the matter of your compensation.”

“Huh? I mean, pardon?”

“What is your customary fee for clearing a small walk like that?” she asked, tilting her head toward her front walk, but her eyes never leaving Stephen’s.

“Uh, usually fifty cents.” He thought about telling her “a dollar,” but felt a compulsion to honesty, what he’d mentally calculated to charge her earlier.

“Yet you also gratuitously cleared the remaining walkways and the front steps. I think a dollar would be fair, don’t you?”

Catching the general drift of what she meant, he simply nodded his head and accepted the wrinkled dollar bill she held out to him. “Thank you,” he mumbled, stuffing the money into his jeans pocket.

“You are quite correct regarding my liability,” Mrs. Cotter now spoke more cordially, softer. “Who told you about that?”

“Uh... I don’t remember. I guess I just knew it, you know?” His “brilliant” sales pitch before her compliment embarrassed him. His cheeks reddened. “Sometimes you pick up that kinda shi... uh, stuff just hanging around.”

“Stephen, you are a pleasant young man, with a great deal of potential and promise. Can’t we speak frankly and dispense with false humility? I sense that you read a great deal, don’t you?” Another of her statement-questions. “Why, then, do you not use the vocabulary to which you are exposed? Your lapses into gutter trash don’t become you.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. It slips out sometimes, you know? I mean, sometimes it’s just easier, I guess. No offense, but you sound like my Grandma when you call it ‘gutter trash.’ Except she calls it ‘cursing’ when my dad does it.”

“No, I am not offended. I suspect that I am several years older than your grandmother, so I could accept the comparison as a compliment. But your grandmother is incorrect: it is not ‘cursing.’ It’s simply low language, ‘scatology’ most often. I venture to guess that neither your grandmother nor your father know much about genuine cursing.”

Stephen wasn’t sure if his Grandma had just been insulted or not, but he didn’t think so. It didn’t seem like Mrs. Cotter to insult anyone. The

house and the quiet fireplace were warming him, and he was warming to the old woman, but the mention of “curses” made him uneasy.

“Yes ma’am. I mean, no ma’am, I think. What’s ‘scatology’?” he asked, surprising himself at his own boldness.

“In your case, and that of most of your friends, let us call it ‘gutter trash.’ I think you already perceive my meaning from the context, but your interest is piqued. I suggest that you look it up in a dictionary later. It’s spelled just as it sounds. ‘S-C-A-T-O-L-O-G-Y.’”

“Marie! What ARE you talking about?” scolded the other old woman, Grace, from the dining room archway, her hands laden with a tray of drinks and crackers and cheese.

“We’ve been discussing linguistics and propriety. Stephen is admitting that he is sometimes slothful in his speech and manners, and he is about to begin to learn to grow. Isn’t that ostensibly true, Stephen?”

“In a way, yes. But you know, I can talk with you one way, but not with my friends the same way, you know? I mean, if I talked to them the same way as you, they’d think I was nuts, or BS-ing them. It ain’t the same.” He accepted from Grace a tall glass of some thick, warm liquid, sniffing it discreetly as he pretended to take a first sip. There were aromas of spices he knew from his great-aunt’s kitchen and garden, some anise he thought, some lemon, or something like it, aromas of dill and parsley, a distant scent he might have recognized as basil, and the biting pungency of alcohol. He didn’t actually know or recognize all those herbs and individual aromas as much as he sensed the concoction of many aromas and flavors that he remembered from sometime, somewhere.

“I grant that we speak differently as situations require of us, yet we must aspire to that propriety which we know to be consistently correct, if you’ll pardon the redundancy. Now I beg your pardon, I am speaking over your head. Not to impress you, to inspire you. One does not learn to swim by watching the river flow past, and one does not develop a vocabulary by saying ‘ain’t.’ And don’t tell me ‘ain’t’ is in the dictionary; I already know it is, yet that does not make it acceptable in every form of address or convention. Do you understand?”

“Yeah... yes... I mean I know what you mean, I think. But it’s not too dam... very likely that I’d be discussin’ ‘scatology’ with somebody like Danny. Not in this lifetime!”

“Exactly my point. Well taken, and well said. You understand precisely what I implied regarding ‘propriety’ of words and actions with respect to changing situations. You acknowledge a universally appropriate correctness of behavior for yourself, which is modified slightly when conditions warrant, yet what I am trying to lead you to less directly is that you can adapt to situations without compromising your standards. Do you agree?” Mrs. Cotter’s questions were becoming more question-questions now, less rhetorical. Stephen felt less lectured, more included.

“I think so. It’s like, ‘keep what you know to yourself if you don’t wanna tick your friends off,’ right?” He took another less tentative sip of Grace’s toddy. And another one. There was some kind of sweetener there too, probably honey, something smelling like honeysuckle, he thought.

“That is close enough for now. In time you will change even that opinion, but you are a very adept student.” She seemed pleased, though whether with him or with herself he wasn’t sure.

“Grace, I think you were a bit generous with the brandy, weren’t you? I doubt that Stephen drinks liquor at home, do you?” From her quiet corner of the room and conversation Grace smiled coyly at Stephen.

“No, ma’am, except on Christmas, and New Year’s when my dad puts a little whiskey in a glass of ginger ale, or gives me some ‘Morgan David.’ And when I got a cold, and then he makes up something like this, only his don’t... doesn’t taste as... uh... I’m sorry, the only word I can think of is ‘musty’ but I know that isn’t exactly it.” He was no longer surprised at his boldness with the old women, but he was surprised at how easily the words came, rolling on and on, coming from somewhere near the back of his skull as his head began to buzz. It was different than the “buzz” he got from a few beers with his buddies.

“No, I think you are more correct than you know. ‘Musty’ is quite good, in fact,” Mrs. Cotter’s words were louder, but less distinct, echoing in his head. Her person became separate from her voice as

Stephen watched her, listening to the sound of her voice as much as trying to keep up with what she was saying. “Still, I think perhaps you should drink your toddy more slowly, until the warming of the outside of your body can catch up with the warming of your insides.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s real good though. I didn’t mean I don’t like it. Thanks a lot, Grace, I mean, Miss Lawson.” He thought he remembered thinking: I must be getting drunk!

“Not at all. ‘Grace’ will be just fine,” the previously silent sister spoke up. “All that separates us is a few years’ age, and I know you mean no disrespect. Perhaps we shall become closer friends if we dispense with that formality, too. And I think my sister will agree ‘Marie’ will be equally satisfactory with her.”

Amazingly, but he don’t know why he should have thought so, Grace sounded just like her sister, and she could actually speak. She’d been very quiet, just listening, watching, and nodding. “She can talk!” the ridiculous thought amused him, and he laughed, inwardly, he hoped.

“Under the circumstances, and not to make a pun,” Marie smiled a genuinely warm smile, “it is very pleasant to hear my given name from someone other than my lifetime companion and sister. Please, Stephen, do call me ‘Marie.’”

“Yes, ma’am, but if you don’t mind my saying so, it doesn’t come easy. I’m not used to calling, uh, older wom... uh, ladies by their first names. But I like that, too. I’d never get away with it at home, though. I take back what I said about you and my Gran’ma. You’re not alike at all. Oh, that’s a compliment, too. How’s come you’re being so nice to me? Sorry, I just thought how that sounded, and I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just, you know, I never thought you liked kids an’ all, and now I don’t know. I just never thought of you and Miss Law.. uh, Grace, as nice, I mean ‘fun’ people before. This is all kinda new to me, like I’m in a whole ‘nother world ‘r something.”

He could feel his words slurring embarrassingly together, as he rambled out of control, the gas log flames dancing rhythmically in the fireplace as he heard himself chatter aimlessly.

“You are our guest, and as you must have surmised, we don’t entertain that many. As I said, you are a young man of potential and as such we’d be less than gracious not to treat you on a mutually respectful

basis,” Marie smiled, both at him, and in turn, at Grace. “Before we met, you assumed certain things about us. I have always known that you are intelligent. You have grown much since our first meeting. I doubt you’ve forgotten that either, have you?”

“No, ma’am.” Now he could really feel the blush rising in his face, and it wasn’t due to the heat of the fireplace.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. However, to illustrate my point, why did you believe that we are witches?” she asked, her smile warm and forgiving and mischievous at the same time. “Do you still believe that?”

“How did you know... I mean why do you think...” His face must have been redder than the ceramic logs in the fireplace.

“Oh come now. Remember, we’re not totally isolated, you know. I am not offended. I understand that you might have believed that; but still I’m curious why you believed that. You were only, what, twelve or so then?”

“Yeah, but I mean I never said anything to you like that. Did Danny? Did he say something like that? I don’t believe he’d say that, not to you. I don’t think he’d even talk to you. Or understand you. You speak differently. Not just bigger words, you know, but you talk about different things.”

Did he mean that she was sounding as if she were talking to him from the end of a long, cavernous tunnel now, or was it some other intangible character of her words? He wasn’t even certain where his words or thoughts were coming from.

“Again, your inquisitiveness. You see, you are learning. Let us just say for now, we know. There are many ways to know. There is much to learn, many ways to learn, much knowledge yet for you to acquire. One of my advanced years has much to pass on before I leave this world. For example: Tu es un jeune fou et sans sagesse tu deviendras un vieux fou.”

“That’s French, right?” Stephen thought he recognized the language, but he had no idea what she’d said. “I didn’t mean an accent or anything like that. I meant... I don’t know... everything. What you say, the way you say it.”

“Yes, I understand that too. Though you have some difficulty in expressing it adequately, I do know what you mean. When you know what I mean, you will understand too.” Marie sat her toddy aside, having barely touched it but for a small sip or two.

Marie continued speaking to him, as if through a haze; he could see her unclearly. She spoke in a voice old and dusty, like the walls of the old house itself talking to him, stringing together strange combinations of clicking consonants and blending vowels, speaking in yet another foreign tongue, one he could not place at all.

“You lost me there. Is that a language, or are you making it up?” he asked brazenly.

“It’s an ancient language that I doubt you ever would have heard, or that few others would recognize except for the Irish, and very few of them would understand it. It’s a form of Celtic, an ancestor of Irish, even of Gaelic. It’s the language of my ancestors, and yours too.”

“I’ve heard of Gaelic and Celtic. I bet you’d be surprised that I know about Druids, and bards and vates, too,” he offered, although he was in way over his head. That was about the extent of his knowledge, that the languages and people had existed in some ancient time and place.

“Yes, the revelation impresses me, but does not surprise me. Perhaps you’d care for a glass of water now? Grace?” Marie floated toward Stephen’s chair to take his empty glass, to give it to Grace, who wordlessly took the tray of glasses and crackers and cheese, and floated away through the dining room archway.

Marie, for all her years, seemed to move with effortless ease across the room to turn a large key protruding from the fireplace wall tiles. The flames flickered slightly higher, more blue, less orange. “Perhaps you have questions about things like Druids, and questions about other things too.”

Sure, Stephen thought, he had lots of questions but he hardly knew where to start, and something about time nagged at the back of his mind, at the boundaries of sentience, which seemed to be slipping away minute by minute. How long had he been sitting there? Should he be going home? Or was it some other question about time? Something about the room, the house, perhaps? There seemed to be something he

should ask about peculiarities and paradoxes, yet he couldn't think what it was he should ask.

"Are you Gaelic?" he asked. "I mean are you Irish? You don't sound Irish. You don't have any kind of accent, really. Were you born here or somewhere else?"

"In time, in time. Those are all fair questions, and deserve answers. I will tell you, and show you. You will begin to know." Marie sat back into her chair and looked into the fire as she spoke.

No longer compelled to return her gaze, Stephen closed his eyes momentarily to stop the room from wavering.

"It is rather like a story in some respects, so let me begin with '...once upon a time...' The fire's not too warm is it? I rather enjoy watching the flames flicker and dance, don't you? It warms and it entertains..." Her voice softened, sounded younger, and his vision was drawn involuntarily to the flames. "All the mysteries of the world seem to exist in the flames, don't they? One wonders how many answers are there, too. No sooner do you see a flame than it is gone, replaced by another, a newer version of itself. The past and the present are one in those flames. There is no past, only a flowing 'now,' and that passes so quickly, yet remains, timeless, it seems. Relax and enjoy the warmth while I answer what you ask."

The fluid colorful flames held his gaze as her words filled his head, becoming sound images, floating impressions and feelings.

"Isn't it perfectly relaxing, soothing, to feel warm inside, comfortable and secure before a glowing fire, watching flames rising to join others, disappearing as new fire glows from below, becoming pictures, blending into other images, all becoming a larger image within your mind?"

Her voice flowed like warm poetry as the cadence of her voice matched the flames' waving, deep beds of orange and blue seaweed in a shadowy lagoon, voice and flames, images and impressions...

"See in your mind an old city ... many years ago ... long before automobiles and electric lights ... cobblestone paving hard and gray... Horses pull carriages and draft wagons laden with goods of all sorts, the air alive with the smell of fish and fresh vegetables and herbs from vendors' stalls along the street. Damp cold seeps into your feet from

the street as it's nearly winter, and evening approaches. People are anxious to go home. Horses stamp impatiently, steam rising from their backs as snow begins to fall. Wet and soggy, thicker now, larger flakes of white, falling thick, soft... Across the way, a lamp lighter approaches with his lamp and wick.

"It is 1846, December, and you see Boston, where I was born. Our home is close to the harbor. One of the earliest memories I recall is the smell of the sea when the wind shifted, before a storm. That December I was christened Marie Angeline Lawson. I was named for my maternal grandmother and my mother, an ironic combination of initials which made a mockery of my names."

Marie's story flowed for what felt like hours, and Stephen saw places she described, places so alive that he reached out and touched them, feeling the rank dampness in his nose, heard the gulls from the harbor flying overhead. Her words surrounded him as she guided him through a flowing journey. His feet stumbled over slippery cobblestones, and the smell of horses and manure and cold, wet streets tinged his nostrils in the misty damp air.

His mind made the mental connection that Marie was even older than he thought, more than a century old, if that were possible. Yet, there was no rebellion of disbelief within him as Stephen absorbed the knowledge. It had to be true, and was, because he was there, witnessing it all, living it with her.

Mrs. Cotter's narrative continued, her voice lost in vivid details pictured in Stephen's mind as she related the younger Marie's story. As a young girl Marie was often alone in the world, save for her baby sister, Grace. Their mother had died shortly after Grace was born, and their father was often away from home on business, sailing the world on great steamships. A governess and housekeeper, Mrs. Cavanaugh kept house for Mr. Lawson, and she oversaw the raising and education of his two little girls.

Mr. Lawson insisted that his daughters be kept from the roughness and filth of the harbor area. Consequently, except for weekly visits to church, the young girls had little contact with their immediate world.

Mrs. Cavanaugh, a large, red-faced woman of a quietly purposeful temperament, felt that formal schooling was a waste of time for the

young girls. She became their tutor. She taught them to read, first by teaching them to make stitchery samplers, pictures of faded flowers surrounded by borders of alphabets and numbers. Somewhere in her background Mrs. Cavanaugh had become an educated woman of strangely unique wisdom.

When Marie was less than six years old she began receiving lessons in French from Mrs. Cavanaugh. Baby Grace was only an infant at that time, and later, when Grace began to learn French, Marie was learning a more ancient language, one Mrs. Cavanaugh had learned at her mother's knee, who had learned it the same way.

Explaining to the young girls that learning a trade was a corruption for young ladies of Marie's and Grace's stations, Mrs. Cavanaugh insisted they instead learn languages and philosophies, histories and ancient wisdoms. She taught the young girls to cook as well as to sew, her breadth of knowledge which she lavished on the girls extending far beyond spices and herbs to flavor and garnish dinner.

"Lost knowledge," Mrs. Cavanaugh termed her instruction in herbs and philosophies. "Fools have existed much longer than wisdom, and the final battle of those forces yet remains to be fought," she'd counseled her young charges. "Long before churchid idiots tried to catalog the forces of nature according to their narrow-minded parochialism, Nature knows what She's about, and She's not about to disclose her secrets to any one whose mind is closed!"

So Mrs. Cavanaugh instructed the sisters in the names, history, and applications of herbs and plants in life. Forgotten names for spices and herbs rolled off her Gaelic tongue sounding like the plants smelled, tasted, or looked. "...á buidheag cambhil for female pains, á bhile-bhuidheag with tea, an' fionnas-garaidh, cuach-haidruig, an' lus-na-Fraing with other remedies. An' from the ancient lusragans, a bit o' luibh mionnt to gi' ye a fine lodach ainm luibhean..." she'd talk on as she worked and instructed the young girls.

Adding Latin and common English names for most of the plants, Mrs. Cavanaugh scoffed at folklore remedy applications for plants. "If it looked like a lung, the idiots assumed it healed the lungs, and that was that. Fools!" The girls became more dissociated from their own world

as Mrs. Cavanaugh ceased taking them to mass, and began having them accompany her to her own temple and priest.

The sisters became much closer than sisters. They began to think alike, even to know the other's thoughts, a talent which Mrs. Cavanaugh encouraged and tested. They shared a single bedroom, sleeping in a single bed, pillows stuffed with hops when they caught colds, windows wreathed with bouquets of garlic and dill.

“My Mister Cotter was our priest and guide, but at that time his name wasn't ‘Cotter’ but ‘Cothromach,’ an older Gaelic form,” Stephen heard Marie intone – Marie's words, but a much younger woman's voice. “He was an older man, very much older than I was, and he told me that I would be ‘reborn’ into adulthood. I was a very pretty young woman then, nearly your own age now...” Her voice faded into the image of a Marie of over a century ago in the cloudy haze of Stephen's mind.

Mrs. Cavanaugh took the young Marie to her priest's home alone, without Grace. The two adults, Mrs. Cavanaugh and Mr. Cotter, began a somber discussion of honor, obligation and tradition, some of it in another language yet, one young Marie hadn't fully learned.

Some hours later, after a passing around of a decanter tasting of old wine, honey and dill, of old visions and ancient memories, Mrs. Cavanaugh spoke to Marie alone by the fireplace, instructing her to remain with Mr. Cotter that night, to listen to him and learn from him. She dressed Marie in a simple white gown, one she'd brought with her that evening, secured at the young girl's waist with a sash of the same material. The old governess then kissed the girl's forehead as she said “Good night,” tears forming at the corners of her eyes, and left Marie seated by the fire.

Her head swirling from the heat of the fireplace and the drinks, Marie felt oddly warm and nervously excited as she sat before the fire, as Mr. Cotter paced the room and finally stood behind her chair talking to her of new knowledge that would change her forever, take her into a new world she'd never known. Something strangely exciting pulsed through Marie as she became more attuned to Mr. Cotter's presence, to his scent of muskiness and tobacco, to the sensation of being alone with him as he spoke quietly with her.

His hands softly stroked the young woman's neck as the room floated around her. Marie was fairly burning inside when the older man's hands softened and became powerfully gentle as they caressed her neck, her shoulders, then slid slowly beneath the fabric of her gown. She felt herself growing warmer, aroused, as his hands surrounded her and cradled her in gentle embrace. Aroused, confused, excited-wanting, trusting and wanting to know more, to go farther and higher, Marie felt herself more than yielding to the older man's strength and gentleness, willing him with her thoughts not to stop, to take her beyond anything she had ever felt.

Sounds she did not recognize as hers came from deep within her as she felt the heat spreading inside her, her own hands now tugging at the fabric of her gown, covering his hands with her own. A old man who became a much younger man yet somehow the same man, came from behind her chair to raise Marie by her hands, to bid her stand before him, before the fire. No words were spoken, thoughts transcending the space between them as Marie instinctively untied the sash at her waist, letting her gown open and slide soundlessly over her shoulders. Her long auburn hair fell around her shoulders, framing her face, the face this man before her now took in his hands, and held to his lips.

No longer merely hearing Marie's words, Stephen existed in that time and place of over a century past, apart from the two lovers, as if he were only a shadow cast by the glowing fire. The youthful and beautiful Marie stood shyly before him by the fire, her soft, pale skin glowing by the light of the oil lamps and fireplace. It was Marie, yet how could it be, so young and lovely? Was he there, in Boston over a century ago, or was he sitting in a chair in some ancient woman's living room? His mind battled between rationality and dream; he felt himself asking himself questions, and felt another entity which was him knowing that this was neither dream nor present reality, not there or then, but only now.

His mind reeled at what his closed eyes could not have seen. Memories which were not his flooded his brain, and feelings that should not have been his boiled inside him. The wood fire crackled behind the exquisite beautiful fantasy standing before him. A Marie of fifteen years old. Small bare feet and ankles motionless on the rug before the

hearth. His mind's eye marveled at the smooth sheen of her skin, the soft angularity of her hips, the curves of her breasts.

As Stephen's disembodied self stood before this apparition of beauty and desire, he was – he became – Mr. Cotter; for the old man was no longer there, but he, Stephen, was alone with Marie, wondering in wild excitement at the exquisite beauty of her nakedness. She stepped the few paces toward him and reached out to him. As he stepped toward her outstretched arms the vision faded.

Stephen felt strangely compelled, under some spell with no volition of his own to resist or do anything but the will of this soft, sweetly smelling memory of a girl. Then she was gone.

“My Mister Cotter seduced me that night, yet he did not abandon me,” Stephen heard an older, ancient Marie speaking. “We were married a month later, and Grace came to live with us. Shortly after we were married Mister Cotter left for the War in the South. I never saw him again, but read in a letter from his captain that he'd been killed in his sleep, by a stray bullet that flew through his tent. Mrs. Cavanaugh died that same year, too, leaving little Grace and me alone. Yet we were sufficient to survive for many years, obviously.”

His eyes strained to refocus on the fireplace, Stephen felt as if he had only closed them for a few moments. Where was the young Marie? He struggled again, against waking and reality, wanting desperately to find Marie, to recover that memory, or dream, or whatever it was. As though she had no idea what he'd experienced, Mrs. Cotter spoke to him from her chair beside the fireplace while Grace sat passively watching him from across the room. She stared intently at him and watched him with a curious look bordering almost on fear, it seemed.

“But look at the time!” Marie, once again an old woman, adjusted the big key at the side of the fireplace. She nodded at the old clock in the foyer, “You must get home for dinner, I expect, but we shall resume our talks, yes? There is much more to discuss, so much more. It will snow again soon and we shall continue our talks then.”

“But Marie, the young girl... What happened to...? I need to know what happened. How did you...?”

Stephen shook his head, still foggy from the daydream – or was it merely a dream? So real it seemed. He tried to absorb what Marie was

saying. She wanted him to return the next time it snowed, to shovel her walk and to continue their conversations. Light-headed but refreshed from his nap by the fire, Stephen looked around himself, confused, looking for the lovely young Marie. She seemed so real just moments ago. He hoped it would snow again soon, very soon.

“You slept, and you dreamed, but it’s not enough. I understand. In time, all in good time,” Marie told him. “Patience, Stephen. You are so young, and you want to travel so fast. It will be a long winter, with many snowy walks to clear, and we’ll talk some more.”

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## *The Third Virgin*

*Lee Smith*

Hanoi, the city of tombstones. That's what the shells of downtown structures looked like as we passed over it on our way to an airfield near Hoa Binh. Atomic bombs don't leave much. The pilot took the plane down to 5000 feet so that we all could see.

There wasn't much left of anything anywhere... except God. God was making a big comeback. Churches gathered their widely scattered flocks about them and began to provide some sense of community. Suitcase bombs had blown Caesar all to hell, and the churches were stepping in until Caesar had a chance to be reborn so that once again we could render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. Hail Caesar.

"Well, we're going in without benefit of instructions, folks," the pilot said over the intercom. He sounded a little too relaxed. "That's okay though, because there are no other airplanes in the air and the visibility is limitless. Of course I'll be a little worried if there's a chuck hole in the runway... Let's see. We, meaning the crew and this aircraft, will be sitting here until Monday. Then, if we can rustle up some jet fuel, or even kerosene, we ain't choosy, we'll try to make our way back to Frankfurt. Otherwise, with the fuel we have, I guess we'll be rowing back from maybe Manila. So if you want a ride, and we have the room, bring your own food and stop on back." Then he laughed.

It wasn't a soft laugh like you would make in a restaurant; it was a loud brash barroom laugh. I thought that he might be drinking up there in the cockpit, and keeping it all for himself. "Hey, don't take any chances out there," he continued. "From what we heard on the radio, there's only local law, some good, some nonexistent. They beat up Hoa Binh almost as bad as Hanoi... Me, I'm doing my visiting within running distance of this airplane."

Tom reached over and took his wife's hand, and she responded by taking his in both of hers. Tom was a career overseas correspondent. I knew what they were thinking, because the same thoughts bothered me. Once we put foot on that runway, security would vanish. Except for starting campfires, U.S. money may be useless. I sat next to Tom Dalton and his wife Burmah. I liked him, and I found myself coveting his wife. It wasn't my fault; she was a fox.

The plane, an old DC10 had definitely seen better days. Who knew when her last safety inspection took place. Someone had removed most of the seats, probably to make room for cargo, and the passengers on this trip found themselves randomly scattered throughout what used to be tourist class. Tom and Burmah and I had one lone triple seat all to ourselves, even had some wooden flare boxes to rest our heels on.

I entertained myself by watching a continuous black trickle of what looked like a vital fluid making its way across the wing from the root of the turbine and then frittering off into space at the trailing edge. Fuel, I told myself. Not life terminating hydraulic fluid, just fuel.

I was a little surprised to meet another correspondent on this trip, because no one was financing world news anymore... except for this Sardine Stone thing. And that was only because the Sardine Stone meant the end of the world, or the true beginning depending on your religious affiliation. So it was a God thing.

His wife came along because she didn't want them to be separated. Tom was 55 and his wife 48. If they were still alive, their two children lived on the West Coast. Life had become iffy, because, on average, three suitcase atom bombs exploded in U.S. cities every week. It started long ago with one bomb in Hong Kong. Then things went crazy with blind and confused retaliation coming from all directions and all parties. But that's water under the dam, as my dear old daddy used to say. The Saganites had it all wrong about nuclear winter and eternal radiation. That was the good part.

Tom had white hair, low, just above his ears, but the top was entirely hairless. As a matter of fact, the bare skin shined like he waxed it regular. His wife, while in her maturity, was still a vivacious brunette, with a figure and skin that could bring women 15 years younger to tears. As I said, I coveted the hell out of her; kept sneaking peeks at her

thighs. I imagined... never mind. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. That means you're not allowed to even imagine or wish. Some rules are hard.

She constantly leaped up to get him cups of water, she rubbed his neck, smoothed his hair.

Crushed together as we were, I couldn't help listening to their conversation. "I'm not afraid, Tom," she said one time. "If this is it; if this is the end of our time together, then let it be together and not with you somewhere far away."

Tom was a little embarrassed. I could see that. Women will embarrass the hell out of you. He cleared his throat. "It'll be all right, honey." He looked over at me. "It's no different from the way war correspondents had it in 1917. We got too used to satellite uplinks, palm-sized computers, and instant communications anyway. This will be real news reporting again." He spoke the words confidently as he tucked in his paisley shirt. In five minutes she'd be making him pull it out. "Even now," he added, "somewhere, someone is trying to put the satellites back online and when that happens we'll have reliable worldwide communication again."

He told me privately that she cried about the way things had become. I responded with something like, "at least we're all in it together," and then agonized over the bland stupidity of that statement for at least half-an-hour.

It's not that there was a shortage of airplanes; the shortage was of fuel. And it's not that there was a shortage of fuel; it's that there was a shortage of the means to refine and ship it. And there would be a means to refine and ship it, if there were a way to pay. Paper money had lost its virtue. It was as if everyone in the world had awakened one morning to look at the slips of paper in their wallets and they had all exclaimed in unison, "Why this is nothing but a small rectangle of paper!" It isn't always the direct damage from a catastrophe that does us in; sometimes it's the collateral damage to the public's confidence.

The wheels hit the runway so hard the impact made my ears ring, and the pilot compounded the discomfort by immediately slamming the reverse thrusters full on. Already spreading patches of green grass laid claim to most of the parking area. The plane waggled around and

through the taller clumps until we stopped what looked like a quarter mile from the cement block terminal building.

“Good luck, folks,” the pilot’s voice said. “This is as close as I care to get.”

We had to carry our own bags of course. The heat from the cracked concrete worked its way through the soles of my boots. I probably looked as bewildered as everyone else. Tom’s wife carried his one small under-seat bag, while he lugged two enormous valises.

People stood within the open hanger maws staring out at us, their faces lighter splotches in a long band of colorful clothing. Smoke from inside cooking fires rolled under the edge of the door and then billowed upward. In unison we all turned toward a small cluster of people in dissimilar uniforms patiently waiting. I just knew they were going to ask us for our papers like it really mattered.

“I’m going to get us first in line. I’ve got jewelry. What do you have?” Tom asked.

“Me too, wedding rings by the dozen,” I replied, handing him a key ring full. I had some U.S. currency also. The rumor was that it was still being accepted here and there.

“Let me do the talking,” Tom said.

“Okay by me.” I only knew a few phrases of Vietnamese.

Three of the five men smiled at us, but they all wore guns. People with guns when I don’t have any always clear my sinuses. Our latest intelligence on Indo China flatly stated that you can get murdered over here for pocket change. It went on to name names, a lot of them.

Burmah and I watched the negotiations. Papers and leaves blew around our feet. Tom was calm, smiling, while the officials, if that’s what they really were, waved and pointed a lot. The other folks from the plane piled up in a bunch behind Tom. Burmah smiled at me nervously, and I tried to look confident.

“This your first trip to Indo China?” she asked.

“Yeah, you?”

“No. We were here twenty years ago, but it wasn’t like this.” She scanned the devastation beyond the airfield. The city that could be seen had been leveled. Only stumps of concrete and steel remained. Even after five years, rubble still choked some streets. Fewer people required

less; they just cleared what they needed, I suppose. She wore spike high heels. Great legs. I needed to start thinking about something else. –Really.

Burmah broke the silence. “Could I read your background information on the Sardine Stone sometime?” She had a way of looking at you from the side of her eyes, and then she would lower those long lashes.

That jolted me. If I gave it to her, I figured she would just deliver it to Tom like a cup of coffee or a glass of water. “Ah, sure. But, they’re packed pretty deep in my backpack. At the very bottom, come to think of it.” It was a lie, but simply giving away my research with nothing in return didn’t make much sense.

She sorted through her purse. “I’m sure I packed his eye drops. He’s going to need it with all this smoke in the air.” She looked up, wrinkled her nose, and then back down into her handbag. “...Oh, here they are.”

Tom returned looking smug. He tossed me my rings with a wink. “Let’s go, it cost two wrist watches, but we’re in. They even have a taxi waiting for us. We go through the terminal.” He pointed at the building as if we may not have noticed it. Behind him, the “officials” had quickly processed the remaining passengers and now walked casually toward a broken gate that led past the terminal and into the street. One of them held a two-way radio to his face.

There was no taxi waiting. Nervously, we looked at each other. We depended completely upon a taxi driver’s knowledge for a place to spend the night.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what happens. What a mess,” Tom observed, sucking at his teeth. “I feel like getting back on that airplane and waiting for Monday.”

“Where do you figure the Stone is now?” I asked.

“Probably east of here, and it should pass north of us within two days and then bend northwest up the Red or Black River valleys to avoid climbing the mountains.”

Okay, it looked like we were going to share information. Good.

The Sardine Stone surfaced first on Macáu. Readers now wanted to know about its journey to Mecca, Jerusalem, and then Arkhangel’sk.

Some professed to understand why the ruby had to be walked all the way to Arkhangel'sk by a virgin. To me it didn't matter.

In the distance I could make out occasional gunfire.

Finally, after half an hour, an old beat-up blue and yellow Renault chugged up to the curb. I think the driver burned flax seed oil or something in his taxi, because it trailed thick gray smoke behind. He smoked hand-rolled cigarettes, and heavy lines creased his thin face all the way to the bone.

With Burmah's valises in it, the driver couldn't close the trunk completely so he tied it as closed as he could with baling twine. Tom and Burmah got into the back. Another shock awaited me when I tried to slip into the rider's seat. A big ugly Mac-10 machine pistol nestled in the middle of it. I paused with one leg raised while the driver got in, retrieved it, and tucked it under his seat. "Hooligans," he said with a half-smile. I used to be a cop, and my instincts were screaming that this man was too nervous by half. I figured that the "hooligans" were me, if he got a chance.

"Oh wonderful," I answered, as I settled my butt somewhere the exposed coil spring couldn't get at.

We didn't have far to go, less than two miles. The taxi stopped in front of a two-story business front on Saiens Street. The second floor windows had neat pulled-back rush curtains and a lamp set precisely in the center of each.

"Two here," the driver said holding up two fingers. "Two here." He kept smiling at me and nodding like he and I shared some kind of a secret.

"Oh, sorry, Kevin," Tom said, opening the door and getting out. "This looks kind of like it might actually have a bar where we could get a drink. Do you drink?"

"Only when my mouth is open," I answered.

"Good. Good. Things are looking up then," he said. "When he settles you in, why don't you come back and spend the evening with us?"

"You got it, Tom. I'll be right back."

His wife slipped out feet first with an apologetic look backward in my direction. "It doesn't look like it's that crowded from out here," she

said, holding her hat to keep the breeze from blowing it away. “I mean, no one is standing around. It seems practically deserted.” Her wide-brimmed, white hat wasn’t going to make it all the way through this trip.

“You get in back now,” the driver said with a black toothed smile. Behind him seemed like the best place to be so I complied.

Tom and Burmah waved as they watched me being driven off. She held her skirt down with one hand while she waved her hat with the other. Damn!

I paid close attention, but in ten minutes I knew the walk was going to be too long if I couldn’t find a way back. We were already into the surrounding countryside. I kept thinking about all the small arms fire in the town, and wondering where those bullets were ending up.

“Where we going?” I asked.

“Not far. Nice place. You like,” he said with a head-bob and a grin.

“Is that it?” I asked pointing at a large plantation house in the distance.

“Yes,” he said. But then he turned into what looked like an old gravel quarry cut into the hillside. Soon we were completely out of sight of the farmhouse and the road. There could have been a lot of reasons for turning off the main road, a short cut, perhaps a washout ahead. He reached over and rearranged the Mac-10 as he drove. If I took him now, from behind, the pistol was mine. But what had the man actually done? I could really look like a fool here. The car stopped and he turned his head halfway. By now my brain was racing. “Piss,” he said.

If he got out without picking up the gun I would just grab it. Get it in my possession. What the hell, I could apologize profusely later and give him a couple gold rings for a tip.

When he got out, he had the Mac-10, and my legs started to shiver like a man about to be executed, because that’s what I was. I used my hands to keep my knees still. Too late. Way too late.

He turned and waved it at me. “Get out of the car,” he said. He was grinning, black teeth all over the place.

“Why?”

“Search, police.”

Yeah, right.

When I got out of the car, the sky was just turning that beautiful evening turquoise blue. He motioned for me to raise my hands. A sense of calm and wonderment came over me and I thought about sunsets on the Ogeechee River. My dad and I were throwing rocks. He smiled down at me. Is this stillness what the brain does to ease the fear of dying? To the right, just off the gravel roadbed, there was some freshly dug earth. I felt no fear, no fear at all. I was floating, just waiting, and hoping I would feel nothing.

*No! Snap out of it!*

My only chance was to get him closer.

In the dusk of the trees ahead, I saw two figures. It looked like a farmer and his son. They leaned on their shovels waiting. The driver behind me said, “move!” I didn’t. Finally he said move again and that’s when I felt the gun barrel dig into my kidneys. My breath felt like stale beer in my nostrils; I doubted that my body would obey me. With a psychic ping, the spell broke, and I spun to my right carrying his weapon out of alignment with my elbow. The weapon roared a short burst into the trees before I got my right hand on it. Then I pulled him across my body and managed to fall down with him kicking and flailing under my hip. Mortal fear gives one the strength of the insane, they say. It must be true because I twisted the weapon free from his grasping fingers like he was a thumb-sucking baby and rolled away.

It had taken but a few brief seconds, but already the other two were half-way across the gravel with raised shovels. Brrrrp pop pop, went the Mac-10 in my hands and they both fell wobbling like rag dolls. No more benefits of the doubt. No more. The driver, in the meantime, scrambled on hands and knees toward his cab, and I shot him dead without the slightest consideration. His left leg kept quivering. I didn’t care. I was alive, because he was dead, and it felt good.

My whole body quaked like dry oak leaves, I felt sick, and I had to urinate so bad my stomach hurt. I kept shaking while I shoveled the dark soil into their faces. All the rumors were true; you could die for the change in your pocket. I needed a drink and a smoke, and I don’t usually smoke.

I drove the taxi a half mile or so and ran it into a short overgrown side path, just so it wouldn't be found near the bodies. After packing the weapon into my knapsack along with all the ammunition I could find under the seats, I set off on foot for that distant plantation house. I stopped to throw up once, but after that I felt fairly good. The mosquitoes, however, smelling my nervous sweat, went after me like starving piranhas.

+ + + +

I passed cornfields growing green and tall. Closer to the house, I could see that candles or lanterns lit the windows softly. Crickets and other night creatures began. It sounded like home. The house had one of those circular driveways around an old weed-choked fountain that didn't run anymore. Music hung lightly on the air. A piano and a cello played Haydn's Symphony in G Major. I knocked on the door and waited. I knocked again, and finally the door opened. The maid wore a black frock, a white apron, and head piece. She smiled and looked like Mother Civilization.

I remember thinking about the beautiful sounds, smells, and sights of earth as I smiled back at the woman, like an idiot, I suppose.

"Please come in," she said in perfect English. I numbly struggled with the reason she would know I understood English until a gruff, friendly voice said, "Welcome, Welcome, come on in. Get yourself out of the mosquitoes, lad. How in the world did you get here? Walked, I'll wager." The man was huge. A red silk scarf knotted at the throat inside of his khaki shirt and his stone white hair combed back at the side made him look like a safari guide out of Africa. He reached for my hand and nearly shook it off. "Let's get you a bath and a room. I'll bet you could use a drink. My name is Lloyd Saint-Charles, by the way." He raised his eyebrows inviting a response.

"Yes," I said. "My name is Kevin Weyland, and I'm a correspondent for Landside International and I sure could use all of those things you mentioned in any order." In the entry way, I noticed that he had a fair collection of automatic weapons on wall racks.

“Here. Here,” he said, taking me by the elbow and steering me up the broad staircase. “Dinner is being served within minutes, but we’ll save you a place and a plate. Take your time.”

“Thanks. I hear music. It sounds live. Is that true?” I asked.

“That’s coming from some interesting guests who arrived a few hours ago. I think that they must be some kind of circus performers. We’re trying to locate fuel for them.”

A half hour later, much refreshed, I descended the steps. Night painted the windows with pitch. I could hear steps on the porch and low voices talking. Mantled kerosene lamps lit the dining room. Guests sat at a long table and except for the tinkle of glass and silverware they ate silently.

“Here, my boy. Over here,” Lloyd Saint-Charles came to take me by the arm and steer me to the end seat. I think he was relieved that there finally was someone to make conversation with. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, in a manicured voice. “I would like to introduce our latest guest, if I may, Mister Kevin Weyland, a correspondent from America, I believe.”

My eyes went round the table and that’s when I realized that almost everyone was Asiatic except a charming creature in a blue evening gown seated all the way at the other end and myself. The men, all tall and athletic looking, nodded as Lloyd introduced them, I tried a half bow. The woman, introduced simply as Eva, smiled and looked boldly into my eyes. The gown had the most delicate white frill around the neckline and the sleeve openings. I smiled back at Eva, she with the high-piled blond hair and blue, almond-shaped eyes, and received a glare from her closest companion. So that was the way it was.

The establishment provided substantial but not exotic food. I remember that, in the main course, there was a stringy meat of indefinite origin, probably bullock, served in steamed grape leaves. Normally I enjoy and remember food, but my psyche had abruptly changed dimension. Now it preoccupied itself with listening for sounds and observing small nuances. I more than half expected to have the local police come storming in, taking names and asking questions. Even though my brain told me that I had done nothing wrong, my heart

felt guilty. They could have claimed complete innocence. An American court would have convicted me.

“What brings you to Vietnam, Mister Weyland?” Lloyd asked in a hearty voice. Of course he knew; he asked for the benefit of the others.

“The Sardine Stone,” I replied. Even though the rest of the others had been conversing in another language, I immediately had everyone’s attention. When I added nothing to my answer, they resumed with their dinners.

“I have friends in town, is there anyway that I could get a ride into town tomorrow?” I asked.

“Of course, I’m expecting my overseer and his son back this evening; they’re on guard duty. I’ll have him take you. It won’t be fancy, mind you – probably an oxcart. Yet that’s better than walking I would think.”

I thought about the farmer and his son I had just shot to death.

“It sure is. I’m hoping I can get some motorized transport to get up north where the east-west trail crosses.”

“That is not a likely prospect, Mister Weyland,” a soft but precise voice said. It was she, Eva. “There is little fuel to be found in this ravaged land, I’m afraid.” She had a stuffed grape leaf delicately poised for a bite. The man to her left spoke sharply.

“Perhaps I would do better to just start hiking northward,” I said.

“Perhaps,” she said to me before responding to the man in respectful but unintimidated tones.

After dinner, Lloyd and I went out onto the porch, had two of his Cuban cigars, and made enjoyable small talk. The fresh breeze must have carried the mosquitoes away. One of the things that had me wondering about this strange plantation house was the fact that there had been no mention of charges for my lodging. Everything went on as if all accounts were already settled. As we talked, a new recital began. Trying to listen to it and to follow Lloyd at the same time caused me to miss several conversational cues.

Eventually Lloyd stretched his heavy arms and yawned. “Well, it seems that my bedtime has rolled around once again, Mister Weyland. I’ll be saying my goodnights now. Don’t go walking; the guards are

nervous after dark.” He thumped me on the shoulder, smiled, and left me to the crickets.

I stood alone listening. I drew the incense of Cuban cigars deep into my nostrils, a minuscule dab of civilization in a great pastiche of turmoil. I sighed and thought of grey faces with dirt in their eyes.

Inside, the cello filled the rooms, softly, unobtrusively. Deciding to discover the identity of the musician, I followed my ears to the East wing of the ground floor. The music issued from behind double doors. Not wanting to disturb the recital, I opened one of them as quietly as possible. A low stage, large enough for perhaps a sextet, occupied the far end of the small auditorium.

My entire body turned hot and began to resonate in time with my heartbeat. I blush even now to think of what my expression must have been.

The samurai, as I had begun to call them in my own mind, sat on randomly placed chairs facing this stage, and Eva was the center of their attention. She sat on a padded white chair playing *Pathétique* on the cello. She raised her eyes slowly as the door opened. Her mouth made silent words and she caught her breath between the words, as if the task were one of carnal love rather than ancient music. And yet, perhaps it was a tiny nod, or even a fleeting focus, I knew that she had acknowledged my presence, and even bid me welcome. Her stark naked body, however, had a discomfiting effect to say the least. Peach skin, burnished maple, dark and mysterious valleys, Eva exuded an eroticism that could drive men to their knees.

Instinct made me step back. The door slammed where my face would have been. I had miscounted the number of seated men.

After examining the wooden door from a distance of six-inches for a moment, I left. Becoming disoriented, I stumbled onto the pantry. It took only two or three drinking motions on my part before the scullery maid, smiling shyly, brushed past me, and opened the pantry door. The shelves sagged with bottle after bottle of imported whiskey; the lovely spirits in perfect rows marching bravely onward. She stood watching, still smiling, as I made my selection, blew a kiss to the bottles I would have to leave, and toddled off to bed.

The sky outside my bedroom window had cleared somewhat, and a green moon plowed through ragged clouds. Using considerable mental control, and a half-pint of Gordon's, I determined to not think of anything, to put everything firmly out of mind, and have a good night's sleep.

I awoke with a start, at first thinking that morning had arrived. But the crickets, still doing whatever it is that crickets do, changed my mind. A sharp throb in my temples reminded me of the Scotch. But there was something wrong. Something had made a noise and then that something had stopped, mid-stride, awaiting my reaction. Keeping still, I reconnoitered with my eyes and ears.

"You are awake, Monsieur?" It was the soft feminine voice of Eva. She sounded every 's' and final consonant like a singer.

"Is that you, Eva?" I asked knowing that it was.

"Yes, it is I." She wore a black slip or possibly a sleeping chemise that matched the shade of the darkness.

She reached out, and her cool hand pressed against my cheek, my nose. "Does that hurt?" she asked. The darkness made her form indistinct, and she smelled of jasmine and cinnamon spice.

"No," I said. "I stepped back in time. The door missed." I sat up.

"I am glad, but I am so sorry that they did not allow you to stay and listen to my music."

"And look at *you*," I added. I remembered apple-hard breasts and lips the exact color of her nipples.

She laughed. "It is necessary. Sometimes I recite poetry and sometimes I dance."

"Do they make you do that?" I asked.

She immediately moved closer and I could see she frowned as her face passed a pale splinter of moonlight, but her lips were so small and soft. I can't help it, I liked girls even as a child. My dad used to caution me that liking girls was worse than regular bathing.

She leaned very near. Our noses nearly touched. "No, I make *them* do *that*. We, they and I, hold each other in thrall. They are my prisoners and I theirs." Her small face had become animated and fierce, but now the expression softened, and when she continued I could feel the breath of each word upon my lips. "It is written, a terrible balance

is struck.” She kissed me softly and the heat of it remained when she pulled back and stood upright at the foot of my bed. In the dark with the black negligee on, it was if her head and arms floated in mid air. “It has come to a time when they have nearly won, Monsieur. Now there comes a terrible crossroads when it is possible for them to have both Eva and the precious stone. They are excited and very dangerous. I tried; I could not circumvent this.”

“Oh, that’s bad,” I said, but I had no idea precisely what it was that was bad.

“Together we may yet save the virgin. I need you. You are brave.”

“Not that brave.”

“Brave enough to kill, Monsieur.” It was an accusation. She knew. How? Sweat started in my hairline.

The length of our silence grew.

She began again. “The virgin and her bauble must survive to accomplish the task and bring light back into the world.” Her head and arms began to dance in the air, backwards, forwards, side to side. Her feet turning and striking the floor made the only sound for a few seconds.

“You really believe that magic stuff, Eva? I’m a reporter. I deal only in fact.”

“It is not about magic, Kevin. It is about what the world believes. *That* is very important. The belief creates its own reality, you see. Belief has power.” She stopped dancing and walked close to my side again. Now, very softly, she continued, “If this expectation fails, the world will sigh and give up its soul for a thousand years more. I beg of you, Monsieur. I will make love to you if you help me.”

“Right, Eva. If I help you or if I don’t help you, I will never see you again.”

“Yes... you will. Come. I beg you, Kevin. Do you like that, when I beg?”

Begging women make me crazy with desire.

She knew that too, because she laughed wickedly, and nipped my nose with her teeth.

At that moment, I thought something really good was about to happen, but then she spoiled it.

“I may have to pass the virgin on to you.” She took my face between her hands. “Be there. I know that you will. You are brave. You must.” Her head came upright and she listened. “They come and I must go.” She rushed to the door, and turned back. “Beware, Kevin Weyland, they are not like us. Beware.” Then she was gone.

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I managed a few hours sleep before the morning’s light. Thumping on the steps awakened me, probably the maids going about their daily tasks. I had a wonderful row of breaded and fried fish on my platter and toast and coffee for breakfast. Lloyd had the maids set a table for me on the porch and he brought out a covered dish of asparagus and toast for himself.

“Everyone else is already gone, Kevin. Care for company?” he asked. This morning he had a crisp white shirt on rather than khaki. He spoke in dull, weary tones. Lloyd Saint-Charles’s mood had turned somber.

I pointed out the chair on the other side of the table. “What do I owe you for all of this, Lloyd? I only have –”

“– No charge. Really happy to have the company. We’re scraping bottom now, Kevin, somewhat of a farce here. Keeping it going for the employees mainly. I’ve been putting off the final shutdown, because everyone I know back home has died in these damned Terrorist Wars. Nothing there for me and even less here.” He heaved a gigantic sigh and studied his coffee. “However, in two weeks, I shall be returning to England. Probably by horseback and then sailing by the look of it. Someone said that Suez is only partially blocked. It’ll be a hell of a voyage.”

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I saw no one for the first three miles. The taxi was still there just out of sight of the road. Faced with a ten-mile hike I threw my duffle back into the trunk and tried the ignition. If asked, I could claim that I had just happened upon it as I walked toward Hoa Binh.

The engine cranked over until the battery began to fade, and then it started with a backfire. At first only one cylinder, but after an

agonizing length of time a second, then a third joined in, and then the gray smoke raised up in a friendly cloud obscuring the pathway behind. “Good taxi. Nice taxi,” I told it. I found that if I backed it fast enough I stayed ahead of the smoke and could see where I was going. Thankfully, no one was on the main road when I backed onto it at 20 klicks per hour.

Hoa Binh baked in the hot morning sun when the old Renault and I came over the last hill. This was Sunday. I wondered if the pilot had stayed at the airport as he promised. I more than half expected Tom and Burmah to have left. Since I hadn’t showed for that drink the night before, there was little point in them sticking around waiting.

Saiens Street was more or less as I remembered it, cleared neatly around the makeshift hotel and littered everywhere else. I parked my wonderful old Renault directly in front of the double swinging doors. One of the upstairs curtains moved. I decided to carry my backpack in with me.

Even at 10 a.m., I could hear laughing and general carrying on from the area of the bar. Being not in the least adverse to socializing, even at this hour, that’s the direction I headed. Eight patrons tossed playing cards on the bar in turn. Each play generated much whooping and back-slapping. Jewelry and cash littered their end of the bar. Having become sullen and suspicious after the previous days adventures, I went to the nearest end where I could set my pack out of anyone’s reach. As each man happened to look in my direction his expression went flat. I reached down and loosened the pack’s strings, just in case. The bar had a plentiful supply of good whiskey on the shelves, and the brands looked like the same ones Lloyd Saint-Charles carried. Curious.

“Innkeeper,” I said – I could get by in audiotape Vietnamese – “What have you got to drink?”

The bartender had no chance to answer before Burmah Dalton showed up on the run wearing that look a child gets just before breaking into tears. She nearly knocked me over. “Kevin. Kevin,” she said, clutching my arm. “Tommy is gone. I don’t know what’s become of him. He’s just gone. He has *never* done anything like this. He came down for a drink last night and never returned.” She was, by that time,

kneading my upper arm and staring into my eyes for answers I couldn't possibly have.

In a flash of insight, I realized that most of the jewelry down at the other end of the bar was wristwatches.

Pulling Burmah's hand away from my arm, I reached down, grasped my pack, and set it up on the stool. "Where is my friend, Tom Dalton?" I asked loudly. As I reached in with my hand, I kept my eyes on the revelers.

"I have not seen this Tom Dalton," the bartender said in a reasonable tone.

"He had to have. He was the bartender last night," Burmah said, her beautiful eyes switched from him to me and then back again.

The smooth grip of the pistol nestled into my palm.

"I saw Tom Dalton," one of the men said in perfect English. He had a mustache, long sideburns, an insolent manner, and was clearly the leader of the group. He took two steps toward us. He motioned toward the door to the kitchen. "He is in there. Why don't you come and see him?"

"Oh, thank God," Burmah cried, rushing past me. She didn't make it. Mustache, keeping his eyes on me, reached behind him and held up one finger. I didn't wait, not this time. I yanked the pistol. The front sight hung up in the pack's material, and it went off in a long burst. Bullets ripped the wood off the side of the bar while scrambling men dived through the back door. Burmah froze, her hands over her ears. The barroom cleared in five heartbeats. I jammed my last full clip in while sprinting past her. In the kitchen a spread-eagled carcass with pieces missing draped over the butcher block. One bloody arm curved upward in mute supplication. It used to be a large man, just like Tom Dalton, and a shirt with a paisley print was among the clothing scattered on the floor.

"Where is he?" Burma said. I couldn't catch her fast enough. She saw. The screaming started over again. The blood pounding in my temples sounded like a waterfall. I grabbed one of her flailing hands and pulled her out of the kitchen.

"We've got to get out of here before they get organized. Come on," I told her.

As I went by, I swept Tom's watches off the bar and stuffed them into my pockets. She stood there with her hands holding her face, staring hard at the floor. "Come on, Burmah." I had to drag her at first, but finally she stumbled along willingly.

"We can't leave him, Kevin," she said. "We can't."

"Yes we can. Come on! He's long past caring, and we're way outgunned. Keep moving."

I almost ground the battery down to nothing again and that bitch of a taxi wouldn't start. They had to have guns someplace close.

"START! START! START!" I shouted as the starter ground on, and finally it did.

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Like a statue, Burmah stared straight ahead. First I drove east to the airport. The plane no longer waited on the runway.

"Burmah, the plane's gone. What do you want to do?" Her lips moved but no sound came out.

"Do you have any other connections for a way home?" She sat staring. "Burmah? Burmah!"

She looked up sharply. "Take me north with you, Kevin." It was spoken quickly and clearly.

"You can't go with me. I might end up climbing mountains, swimming rivers, who knows?"

"You can't leave me here. These people will kill me just like poor Tom."

She was right. We drove north on a cart trail, first gear all the way. The rains had gashed out large pieces of the road. Time after time we encountered obstacles and barely made it through. This couldn't last. But every mile in the car meant one less we didn't have to walk. In places, water flooded in over the rubber floor mat. We passed oxcarts and people carrying their possessions on their heads. Black-eyed children peeked from blanket slings. Whole families pushed carts to make the ox's job easier. In the afternoon, the Renault stuttered and died. In total exhaustion, the fuel gauge needle leaned on the left pin, out of gas, or crop spray oil, or whatever the taxi driver used. I looked over at her. She wore comfortable clothing, a loose, long-sleeved top

and slacks. Her shoes were straw-colored espadrille that probably wouldn't last two days.

She read my thoughts. "I'll be all right," she said.

My extra tennis shoes were at least two sizes too big. Burmah didn't look like a regular exerciser.

It was too early to quit for the day. We started walking. "Let's go slow," I said. "We're not used to this."

With a firm set to her chin, she walked without complaint. I respected that. Tom was, after all, a brother correspondent, and in a rare fit of nobility, I swore a solemn oath that I would not touch my brother correspondent's wife under any circumstances. I remember feeling like King Edward I at that moment.

After a long silence, she started to take notice of her surroundings. Then some tiny Burmah-switch in her head went click. She looked up at my forehead, squinted, and said, "I think we need to find you a hat; your forehead is turning sunburned." With those words, her period of mourning ended. Shocking if you ask me. I can't get over it to this day.

She spoke easily to everyone. The few people on the trail were mainly friendly farmer types who never heard of the Sardine Stone. Before evening fell, she had a pocketful of rice, a sturdy pair of sandals for herself, and two straw farmer hats, all paid for with a bottle of aspirin she carried in her pocket. I handed over her husband's watches. Later she would get all of my jewelry too.

We slept that first night huddled together under my space blanket, on the outskirts of a camp. The trail bent sharply here as it crossed a small brook. Below us the pine needle strewn forest floor sprouted plastic shelters. A rope stretched between two trees and a piece of plastic film sufficed to protect families of any size. A damp breeze lifted the edge of our blanket occasionally, but, otherwise, the setup was reasonably comfortable. Oxcarts, buffalo, one worn out mare, campfires, smoke and people were everywhere. Children smiled shyly.

The next morning I managed to get a blazing fire of dead pine branches going. "I have a warm shirt in my pack, if you're cold," I told her.

“I *am* a little chilly,” she said. The next I knew she was squirreling through my pack like she owned it. I laughed, and her head popped up like a woodchuck’s before she went back to her inventory. Burmah Dalton was a super-scrounger and trader. She next saw to it that we became part of a family with two ox carts, six children, and an ancient crone rolled up in blankets whom I never saw awake. Burmah’s short-lived grief for Tom bothered me, but God, what a valuable traveling companion she turned out to be!

On the second night we had a wagon to sleep under. We lay on bedding straw under the space blanket and a triangular piece of plastic sheet. Rain tap-toed on the wagon boards above, and a campfire a dozen paces away lit the scene intermittently. To keep my mind off of things I watched the dark wetness spreading on the boards. It started first in the cracks, making them darker, making the boards look rounded, like human limbs. As we breathed in unison and the rain continued the splits finally became darker, secretive. The knots, some circular and others long narrow ovals, glistened wet.

“Kevin?”

“What?”

She started to speak, stopped, thought about it a little, and then said, “Tom’s gone, isn’t he?”

That jolted me out of my limb filled reverie. “Huh!” I raised up on one elbow the better to see her with.

“I said that Tom Dalton is dead and he isn’t going to come back alive, is he?”

“Yes. That’s true.”

She was silent for a long while and I settled back, but this time turned toward her.

“My husband always held me until I fell asleep. – I need to be taken care of and have someone to take care of.” There was a little catch in her voice, she pressed her lips tightly together, but she didn’t cry.

I swallowed a couple times. “Ah, I could hold you.” I was getting that warm spot, also a hard spot.

She turned her head and managed a quiver-lipped smile. “Kevin?”

“Yes.”

“Would you do me a favor.”

“Ah, sure if I can.”

“Would you do it to me real sweet and gentle, and hold me tight, and let me cry without trying to stop me?”

“Well, I suppose so.” Inside me the Fourth of July fireworks went off, and they started with Roman candles too. I had to keep my eyes down.

In the morning, I finally remembered my solemn oath. But hell, by that time, Tom was some mysterious stringy meat wrapped in Lloyd’s grape leaves. It was a dumb oath anyway.

+ + + +

It took us three days to make the east-west trade route that the virgin and her retinue were supposed to be walking. In my entire life, I had never been so well worried over and taken care of as Burmah took care of me. Suppose I fell in love with her? Not that I would.

At the northeastern end of our trail, little more than a grass choked footpath at this point, fourteen of us remained, all Sardine Stone pilgrims. They carried sacks of gifts, mostly food. Something inside made their faces glow. They went all soft: their faces, their voices, everything. Ground squirrels, struggling mountain flowers, you name it, everything received the benign and loving smile.

A small unmapped village nestled between the buttocks of the foothills below. We were at the 1600 foot level and much higher mountains awaited the Virgin. I didn’t envy her.

“I think that I’ll keep watch from up here,” I told Burmah. The others had begun working down the now steep foot path toward the east-west trade route and the village. “I can see for miles to the east and nearly a mile to the west.”

She nodded. “I’ll see if I can line up some sleeping accommodations below. I’ll be back.” Then she kissed me on the cheek and started down.

“Don’t trust everybody,” I hollered after her. She waved an arm, like don’t worry.

I watched her go and wondered what I was going to do after the next guy came along.

In the much cooler mountains, we all had taken to walking with our sleeping blankets draped over our shoulders and tied at the waist. I was beginning to like it. You didn't even need to wear anything underneath.

Sitting still beneath a larch, I watched. Occasionally, an idea came and I jotted it down and in this way the midday passed comfortably. I must have dozed off a couple times in the sun. The grass field below me buzzed and flickered with insect life and small birds. My socks were completely dry for the first time since we stepped out of the taxi and life was good. I remember that I had just given the deep valley below a careful look-see when it happened.

Something moved below and to the left. The movement was in thick shrubs. Sure, there's always movement, a leaf at a particular angle playing in the breeze, a bird lighting from twig to branch. This was of a different kind, not random, but moving in a straight line. A disturbance defined by path rather than substance. I had hunted mule deer long enough to know that something lithe and fast bounded straight up the hill, picking thicker cover, but always angling toward me. Further behind there were one or more others, but these tracked back and forth. If I'd been home in Georgia, the solution to the mystery would be an easy one: A couple of hounds were running a deer on scent. Just to be on the safe side, I slipped the pistol from my pack. Nine shiny brass rounds remained. If whatever was bounding up the hill kept to the same course, it would break into the open right in front of me.

Then she was there. My God, how she could run and leap! Her face beamed with laughter and excitement as she stopped to look from me to her back-trail. I slipped the pistol back into my pack.

"We meet again, Monsieur," she said when she came up to me. Her golden hair trickled down out of her hood on one side and an ornate dagger was stuck through a silver braided belt at her waist.

"Eva!" I said. "What brings you here? Do you know you're being hunted?"

"Yes!" Her eyes danced. "We play hide and go seek. It is an old game that gives me time to find you out of their sight."

"How did you find me way up here?" I held my arms far out from my sides.

“There is no time for that, Kevin Weyland. I must give you this and be gone. They will kill you and that would make me very sad.” She cocked her head to one side, made an exaggeratedly sad face – you know, the one with the poked out lower lip – and reached out a bloody hand.

“You’re hurt!”

“No, it is not I who is hurt. They have found and murdered the bearer of the stone, the little virgin. She lies on the trail to the west. I can not bring her to you now. Everything depends on you. Take this.”

I reached out my hand and she placed an elongated stone in it. It was as long as my little finger, smooth, and caked hard with dried blood, but I could see from its shape why they called it the sardine stone.

She looked backward. “You must give it to the next virgin, but for now swallow it, Kevin, or they shall take it from you. Quickly!”

“Swallow it?” Nothing made sense, and my stomach did a buck and a wing at the thought of swallowing that bloody object.

“Of course... that is how it is hidden. Now do it. And if you want me, Monsieur.” She smiled like the sun. “You must meet me in Grenoble next March. The skiing is wonderful. Quickly, let me see you swallow it –I must go.”

I swallowed the stone followed by a slug from my water bottle. Over her shoulder a form leaped from the woods, gathered itself, and turned toward us. In my first glimpse, crazy, I thought it was a cat, but now he stood upright and ran toward us.

“Too late, your samurai –” I managed to say, before he was across the intervening twenty yards and had me by the throat, snarling like something insane. My feet left the ground. I tried to dig at his eyes, but he shook me like a beach towel.

“Son of a–” My voice sounded like gargling and speech mixed.

“No! No! NO!” shouted Eva.

I reached far, fingers scrabbling at her waist for her dagger, as he pushed his face against mine like he was trying to make one head out of two. I felt the hilt of it being pressed into my hand, but before I could do anything, he swung me over his head and then down against a boulder like a wounded rabbit. My legs went bye-bye, numb, they

weren't there anymore, but I held onto the knife. Even though this, whatever-it-was, had me boiling mad, I could only lay on my back looking as mean as I could.

Eva leaped at him. She sounded like a cougar screaming to scare up jacks as she struggled with him. She fought with both hands and her hair flung out around her head like Joan of Arc. In a few seconds he threw her down also, only a lot more carefully. Then he pulled out his belt knife, took one stride, and casually reached down to finish me off. Too bad for him, my arms weren't paralyzed. When he pulled me up with one hand, I came up driving that dagger right to the hilt into his damned eye socket. I felt it hit the bone at the back of his skull just before I slammed into the ground again. Only this time the samurai wasn't feeling so good either.

"Oh, Kevin," she said. "You have killed his body. You have killed his body." Her eyes were big and horrified.

"Yeah, good. I hope the rest of him is dead too," I said, trying to look natural talking while lying on my back.

"I must go before the rest come, or they will find you! I will lead them a chase. I have erred greatly. Please make this right again, Kevin. Please."

I heard her calling and screeching for minutes after she left. I was asking myself how they tracked her, and how she found me, and I could only come up with animal instinct. If they could do that, it was time for me to get on out of there. Only trouble was that my legs were no good at all.

Burmah found me. She cried when she saw that I was injured; she cried like we were lovers. And I found myself thinking that I needed to get her back down, away from this place – get her away. Thoughts came to me unclear, detached, and my stomach felt hot.

She tugged me as far as she could and then took off running for help. The whole time she was gone I listened to the underbrush expecting to get swarmed under at any second. Nothing happened.

She brought some farmers back and they carried me down. By the time we reached bottom my legs started tingling.

+ + + +

I rode in a cart. Some feeling was coming back into my legs, but when I tried to stand for more than a few seconds my legs gave way without warning.

Pilgrims milled about the murder scene when we arrived. They had blackened their faces and torn their clothing. I took some pics of the bodies and felt lousy about it. There were many children. They had all been deeply lacerated. Most died from massive blood loss. Nobody but I knew who the virgin was. I knew. Only one had its body ripped up the middle. She slept softly, beautifully, in death. I cleared my throat, pressed her intestines back in and straightened her. Dried blood made ugly red swirls on clear olive skin. Burmah soaked a blanket in the stream and we washed her, then we wrapped her in it. So this was the end of the great pilgrimage, the dream: the beginning of the end, or the beginning of a new beginning, or maybe the end of the end.

In the morning I could walk crouched over in pain, but I could walk. I remembered the stone. You haven't lived until you get to stir through your leavings with a stick every morning looking for something lumpy. I washed it off in the small stream that ran alongside the trail. Then I polished it with the last dregs of Scotch while I cooled my feet in the tumbling brook. Pretty stone, it was.

About as long as my little finger, it lay there flat in my palm, like a small fish. Take one of those old Parker fountain pens, tapered on both ends, step on it – not too hard – to flatten it, and then shrink it to the length of your pinky and you had the shape. I slipped my fingers up and down its silky warm length. Yes, I had to admit that it was a comely pebble. But where did all of this fuss over it come from, the color? Dark blood red, except on the end that stuck out past my palm and let some light from the water pass through. Inside that end, I could see internal cuts, like some microscopic stonecutter had somehow managed to work from the inside. Internal facets or planes reflected light of lighter glassy shades, crimson, salmon.

“Well aren't you a pretty thing,” I said. And as I said the words it pressed harder into the palm of my hand. I swear that it did – like a response. “I'll be damned!” I said, as I took it between my thumb and forefinger and held it up to the light. At that instant, something must have scared every bird for a mile around, because wings, a million

wings fluttered and flapped, and birds of every size rose as one into the morning sky.

“What the—!” I said and I walked out of the stream and up onto the trail to see what was going on. Then I heard it – far away. There was the sound of an airplane. No, that wasn’t quite it, maybe more like a chorus holding a single chord, but it faded and the birds which had formed a funnel cloud began to settle back toward the ground.

“Crazy,” I said and swept the stone up to the sun to see what colors it had. And the bird’s wings roared like a waterfall up into the sky. The musical chord still there, it had always been, would always be, since time began, strengthened suddenly to fortissimo. The ruby emitted a hundred shades of red, yellow and even blue from deep within. I couldn’t put it down. I was still a smart-assed, know it all, correspondent that morning. But then I held that stone up to the sun. Oh Lord. When the sun burned down into it and the colors bubbled and turned within, brighter and brighter red to yellow to white, I couldn’t drop it. No way. And then when it let it all flash out like bright lightning in a midnight sky, turning the world into rotating, flashing, purples, and greens and shrieking scarlets, and all of the colors that anyone has every heard of. When it let it out, the trees whipped in a hurricane of hues and I saw chartreuse cities tumbling by and boiling oceans and volcanoes flickering like candles in a guttering wind, blinking twinkling explosions of firelight. Finally, my hand fell and everything went back to normal or nearly so. I stood numbed, different. Tasks, there were tasks to do.

Of course, Burmah was soon by my side. “What is it! What’s wrong, Kevin? Did you see that crazy storm? Kevin?” she said.

I handed her the stone. “It’s the Sardine Stone, Burm. Look at it.”

“Oh, my,” she said. “It-is-so-beautiful,” she said holding it up to the light. Just like that. Ain’t it pretty? That was it. I took it from her hand. “I guess we better not tell anyone about it. There are always the greedy, especially now-a-days.”

She nodded, looking from the stone to my face and back again. “Are you all right, Kevin?”

“Yes.” I swallowed it in front of her. There was a great warmth in my belly. Things to do, lots of things to do. I started taking the bodies

and washing them all clean in the creek, then cutting the blankets into strips and winding them a layer deep around the bodies. I did the little virgin first. People came to help me. I don't know why. I asked for shellac and brushes and they appeared. A small hut appeared, built by someone. I don't know. There were helpers – always changing. I talked some to Burmah, but that was about it. She kept asking me to leave. I told her I wasn't able to walk or stand too much jarring and that was the truth but not all of it. I remember that Lloyd Saint Charles appeared on horseback and tried to get me to leave. I wouldn't. Finally she announced that she was leaving with Lloyd. And oh, yes, she would be back for me. Right, Burmah, you feckless Jezebel. You're going to love it, Lloyd, you're going to love it. A zebra can't change its stripes. Good riddance I crooned before I slept.

Stone by stone we built the Sepulcher of the Little Virgin. We shaped them one by one and fit them paper fine. The shellacked bodies awaited. Winter came. I was alone sometimes. People tried to rob me, but there was nothing to take by then. I missed skiing in Grenoble. Some folks checked on me and brought food. Then spring again and then it was done. Carpenters put a beautiful roof over the shrine. My hair turned white. People started calling me father. I discovered kind of in retrospect that I had learned Vietnamese; I even thought in it.

I consoled myself that I knew that she would do what she did all along. Hah, I knew it. She wasn't fooling anybody.

Then finally the virgin came. Her eyes had a look to them, sweet, sure of herself. She kneeled before me and kissed my sleeve. In the background, her parents wrung their hands. She kept running away from home, they said. They were at their wits end, they said.

I looked deep. Small. Cupid's bow lips, a child's nose, she looked back up at me, unafraid, beauty beyond beauty. "Rest. Come to me at daybreak tomorrow," I told her. She nodded so solemnly as if she knew what I would say.

The word had gotten around. In the morning, a crowd gathered, maybe 50. They had traveling clothes and packs. They would all start out bravely.

The tiny family came forward, tentatively. They were devout and held prayer books clutched. They kneeled and so did I. I whispered to the little girl, "What is it you seek, little one?"

"I seek to carry the stone to Arkhangel'sk."

"You will die."

"No, I will live forever."

"Your body will die like the other two."

"My body will die joyfully."

"What will you do with the stone when I give it to you?"

"I shall eat it."

Reaching inside my sleeve I removed the stone and held it up to the sun. An "ooh" and an "ahh" went up from the watchers, but my eyes were for the child. I rolled the jewel between my fingers until brilliant stripes caressed her face. She stood erect and birds fluttered into the sky. Seeing the end and the beginning of humankind, her eyes widened and then searched. The crowd's single voice rose in pitch. Staggering from the impact, she saw wonders that no one else could see. Colors in breaking waves of every shade buffeted her and beat her back step by step. There was no doubt. My work was done.

I cupped it in my hand until she recovered. Then I handed it to her and stood up as straight as I could, facing the crowd. "This is the Third Virgin," I announced. "There is no doubt." Some nodded and began gathering their things. That child never looked back, just started walking.

And that is the end of this story.

Oh, yes, one more thing. That summer, Burmah came back for me. Came up the trail with three jeeps and a crew of roughnecks. Cried her eyes out. Kissed me all over my face.

"I love you, Burmah," I said, a little louder than I meant to. I'm not sure if any of the other men heard or not.

## *Unalone*

*Cindy Appel*

“Ship on course. Estimated time for arrival: Stardate 27.034. Main thrusters to engage in 9.25 min –”

Calinda stretched her long form lazily and flicked off the navi’puter’s speaker switch with a toe. Alone in the cramped security of her cargo hauler’s cockpit she gazed through the porthole out into space. It held the power to overwhelm her with its immensity, its vast eternal dark void, even after twelve years as a space pilot, the last two of which she had been in “voluntary isolation” as an interplanetary cargo shipper. Of course, her job had its drawbacks: long periods without a humanoid soul to talk to, irritating navi’puters and unimaginative food synthesizers. But it had its perks, too: long periods without a humanoid soul to talk to, irritating navi’puters with convenient “volume off” switches, and unimaginative food syntheses’ to keep a lone female at her ideal weight...

Not to say Calinda felt she was anti-social. Far from it. It was just that, after three serious relationships gone awry, umpteen one-night-stands, the tragic deaths of both her parents, and the recent, but not surprising, revelation of her sterility caused by prolonged exposure to the unavoidable radiations of deep space travel, Calinda just didn’t feel in the mood for the company of her own kind. The life of a cargo shipper pilot seemed idyllic after the fiasco that had been her life as a captain in the Spacefleet Merchant Corps, holiday cruise division. All those people, all those entanglements, all the loneliness in spite of it all.

The flashing light of the soundless navi’puter broke into her reverie.

“Warning, warning,” the mechanical voice implored as she switched the sound back on. “Unknown object or objects in flight path. Collision possible – defensive maneuvers warranted –”

“Damn my luck! And I thought this was going to be an uneventful trip,” Calinda muttered switching the imaging computer on. It detected nothing at close range. Boosted to its maximum distance it still detected nothing. The imaging back-ups confirmed the same.

“Why me?” she sighed. A faulty navi’puter was just what she needed. This time around she had been promised an extra bonus for the prompt delivery of her cargo of medical supplies to the outer world, Syla-5. It just didn’t make sense. Still, there was always the back-up navi’puter.

“Back-up engaging,” the mechanical voice responded to her push of a single button. There was dead silence for ten seconds.

“Warning, warning...”

“Oh, shut up, infernal machine!” Two faulty navi’puters and she would have to go back to Homeport and start all over again with two new ones – and lose the extra bonus to boot. Should she chance it?

“Explain apparent non-correlation with imagers.”

“Insufficient data. Imaging detectors possibly damaged during magnetic storm near Alta-9. Humanoid visual collaboration necessary to confirm.”

The short black hair on her neck stood on end. Something was wrong. It couldn’t be all the navi’puter’s fault. A vague remembrance of a casual conversation at Homeport sprang into consciousness:

“They say the Kaya have come up with an imager jamming device so they can’t be detected until they’re within blasting range of a ship or a planet surface.”

“How can that be?” she had asked her colleague. “And why should we worry about it? We’re merchants – not marauders like the military side of Spacefleet.”

“Don’t know how it’s done,” her colleague had drawled, “but we’d better be wary. They won’t take too kindly to our trading with the Sylans, even if it isn’t military equipment...”

That couldn’t be it, could it? She gave another quick visual scan, double checking the imagers. Nothing. But the navi’puters had detected a possible collision and they were connected directly to the imaging detectors. The Kaya could have a device that could fool the imagers into producing a blank screen, but it couldn’t fool the

navi'puters into not giving a warning about an unknown object in the ship's flight path. What now? Evasive action would put her days behind her objective – and bonus – but sudden death at the hands of some Kayan battle cruiser would eliminate that, too. And her fellow merchant pilots should be warned that the rumors could be true.

“Turn the ship around,” she ordered the computer. “Lay in a course for Homeport at maximum speed and transmit message as follows: Under possible attack by imager-shielded Kayan battle cruiser – returning to Homeport immediately. This is Calinda Tyro aboard the cargo ship, *Xanthe* –”

Then it hit – a well-aimed blast that sent the maneuvering ship spinning wildly off course. Another blast, the light speed engines were gone. The spinning craft was at the mercy of its attackers. This was not the way Calinda intended to die: alone, at the hands of an enemy who hid its face and attacked unarmed vessels.

“Navi'puter gone, imagers still functional,” she whispered solemnly as her final seconds were ticking away. The up-until-now blank screen in front of her displayed a large object ahead – an asteroid or planetoid? She didn't care. It was far better to die crashing into a natural space body than to be killed by something humanoid-made.

“Who knows?” Calinda laughed aloud in a fit of grim humor, “I may just be able to land this thing in one piece with the manuals, only to find myself on some lava-covered, volcano-erupting paradise.”

The dream wouldn't go away. Calinda kept shaking her head and rubbing her eyes, but still the vision persisted. *Oh, what the hell! If I'm dead and this is my version of the hereafter I'd better just relax and get used to it...*

Seeing her long dead mother wasn't the most upsetting thing about her hallucination. It was the fact that her mother was taking care of her, nursing her back to health in what appeared to be the remnants of her ship. Where had Mom learned to bandage and set broken limbs? Her mother had been a radio-astronomer, not a medic, and Calinda remembered her saying once how she couldn't stand the sight of blood. Maybe in the years since her death she had taken on a new career in medicine?

Calinda blinked and rubbed her eyes again. This was madness! Mom was dead, and, furthermore, if she weren't deceased, how the hell did she get onto this deserted planetoid in the middle of God-knows-where? That, and a few dozen other pressing questions, needed immediate explanation.

Awkwardly lifting herself up from the makeshift bed, she collapsed with a cry of pain, tears freely flowing down her bandaged face.

"Don't try to move, Cali," the mother-image commanded. "Your neck isn't broken but it's severely bruised and there could be some other injury to your spinal cord I haven't yet been able to determine."

"Mom...?" Calinda heard herself feebly utter, "Is it really you?"

"Of course, dear. Who else could I be?"

With that the mother-image turned back to what she had been doing, assembling a portable shelter dome and air lock. Her mother a mechanic, too? The thought was intriguing. Her father had always been more of the handy-man.

She blinked. Her eyes were playing tricks on her again. Where once stood her mother, now stood the image of her father. Turning forcefully from his assembly work, he barked in his all too familiar fashion:

"Lie down, girl! I told you there could be more extensive injuries. I have to get this dome together before I can attempt any more... any more healing."

"Father?" she desperately pleaded, "What are you doing here? You and Mom were killed in an explosion at Spacestation 12 – I had your remains cremated and scattered over Alta-9 as your will requested. I..."

"Be still! Or will I have to put you over my knee like I did when you were little?"

Calinda immediately obeyed. *This has to be my father. No one else besides me and Mom knew how he believed in that ancient method of punishment...*

Eyes closed, but acutely aware of the image's every movement, she summoned the energy and courage to speak once again.

"You still haven't answered my questions, *Father*, if I may call you that?"

“You may,” it replied without taking its attention from the task at hand. “Hmm – I’m not too certain where this little bit goes.”

So it wasn’t infallible, whatever it was. “Bring it over here. I may be able to help. I once had to use one of those things when our all-terrain transport broke down on Daros-2.”

The father-image laid aside the troublesome piece, and approached slowly. Her fear was engulfed by a luminous mist.

*I had not seen that memory before – the trip to Daros-2. I see how the parts fit together now.*

*What is happening to me? I don’t see anything but the mist, but I hear a voice speaking to me? It isn’t my father or my mother...*

*Do not worry, Calinda. I will not harm you. The voice is mine – or what your mind interprets to be a voice – since I have no vocal apparatus. I could only grasp a minute amount of knowledge for the preservation of your species on my world while you lay unconscious, but now that you are awake perhaps I will be able to discover more.*

*Who – or what – are you?*

*I am the mist, Calinda. It is beyond my current capability to explain further. Rest assured that when I have fully grasped the complexities and nuances of your communication process I will reveal all that I am to you. It would be better that you sleep now, Calinda. Your body is still healing and will be for some time.*

*How can I sleep? I’m alone on a strange planet, dying for all I know, and this strange disembodied voice is telling me to relax! I have to know more! I need more information...*

*Know this then: You are not alone. I am here. I am your friend.*

Time’s passage did not register on Calinda’s consciousness. When at last she found herself able to stay awake for a period of time and able to sit up and take in her surroundings, she discovered that it had indeed been some time since the crash. Her fine, jet black hair now tickled her broad shoulders when it had been cropped close to her head as per regulations before she left Homeport. Her fingernails, however, were neatly trimmed. Apparently she had been fed and bathed regularly during her long periods of unconsciousness. Looking around the transparent dome, she noticed odds and ends salvaged from her ship –

one of the food synthesers, her locker of personal belongings, the cockpit “black box” and signaling device... Her rescuer had a good sense of what things to save first and what things could keep, she thought. Again, as if reading her mind, the mist appeared. Swirling and sparkling, it slowly coalesced into the shape of her mother.

“I’m so happy to see you are feeling better!”

“So am I. How... how long have I been bedridden?”

The mother-image looked thoughtful. “It is hard for me to relate time in the manner of your kind, but I believe from reading your ship’s computers and calculating the length of the day on my world into your time units that it has been approximately four weeks, give or take a week or two.”

“Four weeks! That’s impossible! There is only 72 hours worth of oxygen in one of these domes – you must be mistaken.”

“No, I am not. You know I am not by the evidence of your own hands feeling the hair upon your neck.” Calinda immediately pulled her hands away. The figure smiled. “I salvaged your atmosphere recycling unit from your ship and adapted it for use with this dome. I am sorry that I was not able to repair the ship itself, but the damage to the hull was extensive.”

Relaxing, she sighed, “No need to apologize. I’m sure you did the best you could, given the circumstances. It is I who should be apologizing. I have yet to thank you for the kindness you have shown me. Thank you so much.”

“You are most welcome, Calinda.”

“I was going to say, ‘Thank you, *Mom*,’ but I know you aren’t her. What do I call you?”

“I do not have a name in any real sense of the word. I am who I am.”

“That’s going to be a bit difficult calling you, ‘who I am,’” Calinda chuckled. The alien joined in. “We could come up with something better between the two of us.”

“What do you call a being who is close to you in thought as well as in physical form, such as the persons, ‘Mother’ and ‘Father’?”

“They were my parents. Significant others – loved ones.”

“Loved One. You may call me that.”

“Loved One?” Calinda found the thought rather odd, but at the same time comforting. “All right. Loved One – how do you know what my parents look like and how do you project an image of them that is so real?”

“You’ve answered your own question – they are but projections of images I found in your mind when I was forced to scan it in order to save you from the wreckage of your ship. I have no other way of knowing what they look like. If you had given me a false image of, say, your mother, I would have not known any differently. Do I project her image accurately?”

Calinda squinted her deep brown eyes, scrutinizing the figure before her. “Yes, but I believe she was a bit more gray at the temples when I last saw her in person. You look more like her when I was a child of about ten.”

“Understandable. You remember her as a beautiful young woman, not as an aging one. And your father?” The brightness stabbed Calinda’s eyes as the spinning mist reformed into her other parent.

“Very good likeness. I always saw my father as slightly gray-headed and wrinkled even when he wasn’t. All those years of building spaceport facilities on the desert planet, Alta-9, weren’t very kind to his skin. But he always insisted he didn’t want any plastic surgery to make him look younger.”

“He believed it was what was in the heart that made a person special, not how smooth or young their skin was,” Loved One said cheerfully.

“Yes, but how did you know that? I don’t believe he ever said it in so many words.”

“But he did pass the thought or feeling onto you, and that is what is more important than the spoken word. You see, Calinda, I understand virtually nothing about your language or your culture, but we can communicate with each other.”

“Through telepathy? Reading my basic thought processes – intercepting what I am going to say even before I can say it?”

“That is a good way of putting it, but it entails much more than that.” Loved One/Father turned away from her, struggling for words, before continuing.

“When I found you dying in the aftermath of the crash, I was forced to make a decision that normally I would have wanted you to make consciously with the full knowledge of what all it involved. Calinda – I am now a part of you.”

“What?” It was having trouble using her language she concluded. “No, you’re wrong. You’re an entity that can project images out of my own mind, but we are two separate beings.”

“Yes, we are separate in the sense that you cannot breathe the atmosphere of my planet, nor exist on the same nourishment. But, you cannot cry out without me hearing it, you cannot feel pain without me experiencing it, you can not form a thought without me knowing it,” it added with a tenderness entirely lost on its humanoid companion.

“You mean you can see into my mind whether I want you to or not? You know every secret I’ve ever harbored without telling a soul?” She was shocked. The intrusion upon her mental privacy was more than she could tolerate. She wished now she had never learned her rescuer’s methods. There were just some things that could not be shared with another individual, no matter how close in body or soul – let alone with an alien...

“But you’re wrong, Calinda.” Loved One dissolved the image of her father into the all encompassing mist of brightness, gently enveloping her with its light.

*You’re wrong My Other. You have nothing to fear from me and nothing to hide. I do not fully understand your species and the way they use words and actions to hide their true feelings... their intentions. I do not wish to compete with you, nor extract payment from you in any way for some kind deed I have done for nothing but for the sake of goodness. I want only that you live your life to its fullest and to be happy and content for all of your days.*

*Happiness? She laughed aloud. It’s an illusion. The purpose of living is to get the most credits in the bank’puter before you retire, than you can afford to be happy.*

*And friends, family, lovers? Do you not realize their importance, My Other? One cannot live forever without others to share in life’s mysteries and wonders.*

*One can live without others – I am living proof!* Calinda's mind cried out, defending her sense of individuality. *I need no entanglements – they create nothing but misery and pain, and I don't need any spies who can rummage freely through my private thoughts.*

*I... I accept that you are not ready to... may not be capable of... understanding all that I can give to you.* Loved One relented, an almost audible sound of regret in its thoughts. *I will wait.*

The mist receded, briefly solidifying into the shape of Calinda herself, weeping, alone and untouched by another. Then it was gone.

The days passed slowly now that Calinda was without companionship, marooned on a hostile, alien planet. Loved One had left her alone after her confrontation except for a few occasions when it had deposited in her shelter some other item that may be of use to her. But it had done this while she slept, without the slightest disturbance. It was all for the best, she concluded as she practiced walking with a makeshift cane within the narrow confines of the dome. *You have to make it on your own. You can't always depend on others to be there to bail you out when you need it most...*

The low gravity of the planet in some ways helped Calinda's recovery and in other ways hampered it. The pain in her healing leg would have been excruciating on a planet with the level of gravity she was accustomed to, and she was unsure whether or not to continue her self-styled physical therapy. If there was a hairline fracture she unwittingly may have made it worse with all the pacing up and down the length of the dome. And the first aid reference tapes were nowhere to be found in the salvaged items from the *Xanthe*. How did Loved One know how to set and bandage her leg? And where did it get the medical supplies if not from the first aid locker? It suddenly dawned on her that she had been carrying medical supplies to service an entire planet, and her rescuer had probably used them not knowing that the ship was furnished with an ample supply of its own. No matter now – she might need a cargo hold loaded with medical supplies if she were to survive on this desolate world. But more importantly, she knew she should take a look around her demolished craft to see if it was repairable or, if not, what else could be salvaged to make her life here more bearable.

Limping across the dome without the cane, Calinda lowered herself carefully to the floor in front of the locker containing the one and only lifesuit that was aboard her ship. The idea of a trek across this God-forsaken planet with a bad leg didn't make her feel any easier, but she knew it had to be done sometime, and there was no time like the present. Her food synthesizer could synthesize enough food for five years or more if she cut down her daily rations, but how long could an alien-adapted atmosphere recycler work without breaking down irrevocably? How long would it take for someone to locate the distress beacon and pick her up? And why would they even bother? For all she knew there was an interstellar war going on up there. Who had the time or the desire to rescue a potential enemy? The thought of her comrades in the merchant lines being drafted into the military made her at once sad, then furious. Calinda was determined to survive long enough to take revenge on those who had forced her into exile here.

It was difficult, but not impossible, to put the lifesuit over her bandaged arm and side. Her limping movements didn't encumber her ability to travel too much, but what direction to take? The *Xanthe* was nowhere within sight of the dome. There was only a high ridge of hills forming a protective wall around her new home. Obviously Loved One had realized that the emergency shelter dome was a relatively fragile thing and had located it in a valley to protect it from damaging winds or high levels of radiation from prolonged exposure to the light of the planet's small, but intense, sun. The only way was up. She decided to head towards a gap in the ridge to the west, hoping to spot the ship from there.

The hiss of the air lock closing behind her reminded her to search the cargo wreckage for an atmosphere analyzer, for there was some form of thin atmosphere here. Possibly it held some oxygen content which could mean the difference between life or death if the recycler gave out. The only thing was how to extract enough oxygen to stay alive, but Calinda couldn't afford to flood her mind with too many unsolvable problems right now. She had to scale these hills. She estimated the gravity to be a third of what she considered normal. Still, the pass through the peaks was going to take some doing.

The panorama was spectacular. Calinda could see through the thin, hazy atmosphere for hundreds of kilometers. There were no signs of animal life, but there were numerous outcroppings of small, bush-like trees or shrubs and what was apparently a small river winding through a deep gorge on an otherwise level plain. Far to one side she saw the cone of a tremendous volcano rising majestically into the air, pools of lava still liquid and steaming flowing around its perimeter. To the north, an unusual grouping of large boulders reminded her of an ancient grouping of pillar-like stones she had viewed on a travel video from one of the planets she had serviced. A temple for sacrifices or simply a primitive means of establishing the seasons was what the experts had concluded. But something was different about this one. Somehow it didn't seem so ancient or abandoned. She turned her back on her curiosity and headed down the slope. The *Xanthe* lay in a twisted, broken heap a few kilometers away.

Calinda grimaced upon closer inspection of her ship, the mangled, dead body of a very dear friend. The cockpit and upper decks had separated upon impact from the lower cargo hold sections and were lying tilted, partially buried into the soil, about a half kilometer further than the rest. How in the universe did she even live through the *landing*? There must be some oxygen content in the atmosphere or else she would have asphyxiated with that gaping hole in the side. So why didn't she?

The cargo hold being directly in front of her, she decided to check its contents first. No need to open an air lock, Calinda entered through the opening in the hull walking along what would have been a wall until she reached the section containing the medical supplies. Luckily, not much damage here. The atmosphere-tight containers of medicines and equipment were scattered pell-mell through out the hold but looked relatively unscathed. The next section carried larger medical equipment for a new hospital, or so she had been told since she had not actually seen it being loaded aboard while she was in Homeport. Her suspicion should have been aroused then by the uncommon secrecy of the process, but it was not until she opened the lock and looked inside did the true implications of the action hit her.

Scattered through out the hold, broken crates of laser cannons, nerve paralyzers, and other assorted firearms spilled their deadly contents upon the floor. Gun-running! She had been smuggling a virtual army's worth of weapons in a plainly marked civilian ship. How did the Kaya know? But more importantly, why didn't she know? How long had this been going on? How long had the merchant lines of Spacefleet been used in this masquerade? It was amazing she hadn't encountered a direct attack before this...

Heartbroken, betrayed in the past by lover – and now by employer – she saw with tragic irony how much better off she would have been to have died ignorant and alone in the destruction of the *Xanthe*. *There is no one you can trust but yourself. No one.*

A crumpled piece of metal that once had called itself a ladder gave way under the stress of Calinda's weight. She plunged into the darkness of the broken ship, landing with a sickening thud against a bulkhead. She felt bruised, but nothing appeared broken except for the seal around the lifesuit's helmet. The hiss of her oxygen escaping and alien atmosphere seeping in caused her to panic momentarily, but she knew if she hurried she could make it back in time to her shelter before she lost all her air. Pulling herself up, she realized she was partially pinned under the ladder, which even in this gravity was a formidable opponent. Try as she may, the weight could not be budged from underneath.

So, she was going to get her wish after all! She was going to die in her ship alone, but not so ignorant of why she had come to this wretched fate. The thought was both so sad and ironic that she laughed as hard as she could, tears streaming down her face.

*Your life is supposed to flash in front of your eyes at this moment,* Calinda reflected. What did she see? She saw the life of a loner, never fully comfortable around other people, not even her parents. Always trying to prove herself worthy... worthy of what, though? She never knew. Worthy of admiration, worthy of pride, or just plain worthy of love?

Closing her eyes for what she believed would be the last time, Calinda sensed the warm presence of Loved One nearby.

*Calinda – wake up! I must get you back to the dome before your oxygen supply runs out.*

*Who cares? Who really cares if I live or die? Not me...*

*Stop that nonsense now! Loved One scolded her as a parent would a child. Your species is so frustrating at times to me! It is wrong to take life – even if it is your own.*

*What have I got to live for? Even if I get off this worthless rock pile of a planet I'll be drafted – and then blasted to bits – in somebody else's dirty little war. She was overflowing with self-pity.*

*You have to live for yourself, Calinda. Do you need a better reason?*

*Yes, I do.*

*All right then. Live because I love you – and I don't want to be without you. Please, don't leave me alone Calinda!*

The anguish of the plea breathed life into her dead feelings. A jumble of emotions welled up within her.

“I do want to live – help me, Loved One!”

The mist grew brighter, molding itself into a humanoid form Calinda did not recognize at first. Could it be – Jakob? He had been her first officer aboard the cruiser, *Lysandra*, a man of great strength, both physically and mentally. Loved One/Jakob proceeded to lift the ladder off her, but it would not move more than several centimeters before jamming into a new position from which it couldn't be budged. The form dissipated into mist once more as Loved One circled about her, sizing up the situation.

*I cannot move the ladder any more. Do you think you can try to squeeze yourself through the small opening I created?*

“I'll try...” She squeezed herself slowly through the gap. Her helmet would not fit.

“It's useless – I'm stuck,” she sighed. “The only way out is for me to somehow get my helmet off without losing all my oxygen in the process. Damn! I can't get to the cutoff switch in this position!”

*Do not worry. You will not need your oxygen. Take off your helmet.*

“What? I'll need all the oxygen I can get to make it back to the dome. Plus, the temperature of this vacation world is a bit on the chilly side.”

Calinda stopped herself short: It had saved her before – it must know what it was doing. From somewhere within, she felt a calming presence. She knew she could trust Loved One. She reached for the locking mechanism on her helmet, and twisted it open, wiggling the entire length of her body out from under the ladder. She expected to feel the sudden cold of the thin atmosphere sucking the wind from her lungs as her head emerged from the protection of the lifesuit, but she did not. Instead she felt the warm, caressing brilliance that was Loved One.

*There, you are almost free. I am sorry I cannot help pull you upright in this form, but as you can see I haven't any hands.*

“That’s okay,” she acknowledged, shakily regaining her footing. How was she still breathing? Why was it so warm? The temperature was well below freezing in the ship.

*I cannot keep this protective sphere around you for long. It drains my energy greatly. We must hurry back to the shelter before I grow fatigued.*

Calinda responded with a hurried pace toward the dome.

*So this is how you kept me alive while you were assembling the dome, isn't it? But how did you reach me before all my oxygen could escape, or before I died of shock after the crash?*

*I sensed your ship careening through the atmosphere, and, reaching out, I probed it with my mind. It was then I discovered you were in grave danger and would not survive the crash unless I intervened. I only wish that I could have saved your physical body from such pain, but I did manage to calm your mind before the ship collided with the surface.*

Calinda remembered her final thoughts moments before the crash. It had seemed at the time that she did feel unusually at peace with herself, something she normally did not feel – at least not before she had met Love One. The two made their way amiably back to the dome; Calinda, a small figure engulfed in an iridescent sea of mist.

As Calinda’s leg healed over the next few weeks, they made several more trips to the *Xanthe* to salvage more items for her use and comfort. Without the need of lifesuit while within Loved One’s protective cloud,

Calinda was able to explore every nook and cranny of her former home. They transferred some of its contents to her dome with the aid of a sledge crudely fashioned from torn sections of the hull. And each time they visited, the crash site yielded yet another surprise from both the cargo hold and from Loved One.

“What’s in that one?” Loved One/Jakob asked, pointing to a container that had been hidden up until now beneath several crates of weapons.

“I don’t know. Go ahead and try to open it,” Calinda smiled back at him. She found his innocence and curiosity oddly refreshing.

Loved One/Jakob picked up a twisted length of metal to pry the lid from atop the box. Earlier on in their relationship this sort of feat had unnerved her. Gradually, she had come to accept that Loved One was not a ghost. It was only a non-corporeal entity without solid mass, no matter how solid his illusions appeared.

When Calinda had first asked it how she was able to sense it as solid when it took the form of a person – how it managed to manipulate solid objects – she had been given the short answer of, “Later.” Loved One seemed reticent to tell her about all his capabilities, but she noticed that his strength was growing daily. He now could maintain both a solid form and a breathable atmosphere around her for some period of time before drifting away to refuel himself on whatever it was that he consumed for nourishment.

Calinda bent down and reached into the box and began to pull the items out one by one. “Let’s see here... a small solar power generator – very useful device – an electron microscope of some kind, some biological samples, test tubes and various other pieces of scientific equipment I can’t name offhand.”

She stood up and stretched her legs, wiping the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand. Loved One’s life-sustaining aura generated such warmth and coupled with the exertions of their latest field trip, Calinda felt like she was standing in a sauna. She dried her moist hands on her work overalls and allowed a long sigh to escape from her lips.

“Imagine that. I was hauling some legitimate supplies for a new hospital after all. Will wonders never cease.”

Loved One/Jakob reached a muscular long into the bin and removed a large rectangular object. “This object – it is called a ‘book’ is it not?”

“Yes, that’s right. A book. Hmmm, let me see...” Calinda said as she took the volume in hand, puzzling over the strange words on its cover. “It’s in Sylan and I’m far from fluent, but I believe it’s about genetics.”

“Genetics?”

“Like in cloning – making synthetic offspring... Uh, non-sexual reproduction.” She almost laughed when she saw the lost expression on Loved One’s/Jakob’s face. Jakob would have never been confused by what any of those terms meant. In fact if there had been anyone worth cloning in the whole universe, it would have been Jakob, Calinda thought, looking wistfully at the assorted articles lying in front of them. Why *had* she left the *Lysandra*?

“Do you have an offspring?” Loved One/Jakob interrupted her revelry.

“Offspring? Children? Me? Oh, no, no, I’ve been far too busy flying about the galaxy to have a child – cloned or the old-fashioned way.”

“And this makes you sad?”

“Sad?” She felt a lump forming in her throat. It was difficult to talk. Loved One immediately sensed her pain.

*It’s all right, Calinda. I understand what it means to be alone all your life.*

*But I haven’t been alone. I’ve captained many crowded space cruisers, lived on many overcrowded space stations. If anything, I have been too surrounded by people. That’s why I decided to go into cargo shipping – to get away from the masses.*

*But to have an offspring that looked like you, someone that would never leave your side, this is what you’ve long for... I see in your mind a young female with long strips of shiny cloth tied at the end of two braids of golden hair...*

“Stop it! You’re going where you aren’t wanted again!” Calinda snapped. Ashamed of her brusque behavior towards her companion she turned away from his injured look and began to gather the medical

equipment together. “This stuff may come in handy later. Let’s pile it on top of the sledge and get out of here.”

*I’ve upset you.*

The thought echoed in her mind as she lay motionless on her cot several hours later. She felt an odd, tickling sensation against her skin. At once she sat up.

“Loved One?”

In the intense darkness of the planetoid’s short night her eyes searched in vain for the mist.

*I am here. Don’t bother finding your lamp. I am close by...*

She felt a light breeze against her cheek, soft and feather-like. Soon she was engulfed in a blanket of warmth.

It relaxed the rigidity of her muscles. She lay back down, pulling her blanket up to her chin not so much for comfort as for protection from Loved One’s closeness.

*I didn’t mean to disturb your sleep, Calinda. I wanted to apologize for intruding into your private thoughts this afternoon.*

“That’s okay. I understand how that can happen. You were looking for information on what ‘genetics’ were, and you stumbled upon some half-forgotten memories of mine. It’s perfectly understandable.”

*But it’s not entirely excusable. I could have seen those memories but not verbalized my curiosity on the subject. Again, I beg for your forgiveness.*

“I forgive you,” Calinda whispered. “It’s all right. Good night now.”

She turned over on her cot and pulled the blanket tight against her frame. But Loved One was like a child who wouldn’t accept “no” for an answer. She felt his warm presence lingering in the air above her.

“Is there anything else you wanted?”

*A question...*

“Go ahead; ask it.”

*Why did your parents have an offspring?*

She didn’t expect this kind of question. Loved One must have scanned the contents of the book on genetics and found it wanting.

“Uh, I supposed it was because they loved each other,” she mumbled, shifting positions to get comfortable again.

*Love is important in cloning?*

“What? No, it’s not necessary at all when it’s done in a lab. Only for sexual reproduction.”

*And that is how most humanoid species reproduce?*

“Yes, yes it is.”

*Did you love Jakob?*

Despite the tepid temperature of the air, she felt a cold shiver through out her body. She coughed and cleared her throat, in a vain attempt to sound convincing.

“No, of course not. He was my colleague, nothing more.”

*But you thought highly of him?*

“Yes. He was a very capable officer.”

*And he was your friend?*

Calinda smiled to herself. The memories of the good times they had shared were still there. She remembered how Jakob had persuaded the crew of the *Lysandra* to organize a surprise birthday celebration – despite the fact she had strictly forbidden it and threatened a decommission for anyone who would be foolhardy enough to go along with it. How happy she had been when she discovered Jakob had had the wisdom to see past her vanity and throw her a party in her honor anyway. And he did so love telling her a good, side-splitting joke that he’d picked up on shore leave every now and then...

“Yes, I considered him a friend.”

*And you took pleasure in observing his physical form?*

“Huh? I – I guess he was a good-looking man in some ways –”

*But you didn’t love him?*

“No, I said that already –”

*What is love then, Calinda?*

It was as if all the air in her lungs had been sucked out of her. She struggled for something – anything – to say to get rid of her unwelcome night visitor.

“Love? It’s just a word. No one knows what love is. It doesn’t really exist...”

*I love you, Calinda. Are we still friends?*

“Yes, we are – but not for long if you don’t let me get some sleep. The mist receded from the cot. *Good night, My Other. Sleep well.* “Good night!”

Calinda let forth a deep sigh. Fluffing her pillow angrily and tucking her covers tightly around her once again she closed her eyes tightly. But sleep would not come. She lay awake and listened to the gentle humming of the atmosphere recycler unit. She lay awake and wondered if she really believed what she had said and whether love existed or not.

Their days now began to form a pattern. As the weak rays of sunlight filtered through the transparent dome Calinda would awaken and take a minimal amount of sustenance. Next, she and Loved One would plan their agenda for the day. It usually included a trip over to *Xanthe* or an inventory taking of the items they had dragged over the mountains to her shelter. It finally became imperative that Calinda construct an addition to her fragile home as the numerous pieces of equipment they had salvaged were threatening to crowd her out of her living quarters altogether and they began to make plans. She led an uninspired, yet satisfying enough, existence.

Her need to ever leave the small planet to be with those of her own kind was slowly diminishing as well. Sometimes late at night she found herself missing the touch of a humanoid hand, but she quickly dismissed her physical cravings as unnecessary and even primitive. Loved One was now her family and friend, her advisor and companion. She told herself she had no need for anyone else.

Calinda finally devised a way to build the annex out of scraps of the hull. She and Loved One melted and bent into shape the myriad of jagged pieces, joining them into a sturdy whole through the utilization of several of the laser cannons and their power packs – instruments of death used to sustain a life. Poetic justice, Calinda concluded.

“There, that just about does it,” she announced proudly. “All I have to do is to go inside and open the adjoining air lock to flood the new addition with air. When I get inside can you take a last look around to see if there are any holes leaking when I get it fully pressurized?”

*Certainly, My Other. Leave your tool kit here for me just in case.*

Calinda entered the air lock and sealed the outer door. Loved One dissipated, reappearing outside. Opening the inner door to her original shelter, she hurried over to open the hatch of the new room directly connected to the old by the air lock. The air flooded the compartment as she stepped up the rate of flow from the atmosphere recycler.

“Looks perfect!”

Loved One slowly flowed around the outside walls, sensing the smallest of leaks instantly.

*There's one near where you sealed the new air lock to your original. Not very big at all – I'll fix it.*

Loved One shaped himself into the image of Jakob once again, taking a laser torch in hand to stop the leak. Calinda smiled as she recognized the furrowed brow of her former compatriot who had so diligently served beside her for many years. If there was ever one humanoid being that she wouldn't mind living on a deserted planet with it was Jakob: kind, dependable, intelligent... and good-looking. At least, that was the way Loved One portrayed him. Then again, Loved One only projected the image of Jakob that she herself kept in her mind. Why did she think he was attractive now when for years she had only considered him a dutiful and obedient officer? She dismissed her daydreaming with a disgusted shrug.

Loved One finished its task and entered the dome by walking through the wall while still retaining the form of Jakob. It had done likewise dozens of times before, but today the action unnerved her for some reason. She turned away from her guest.

“Happy with your new home, My Other?”

“Yes, very much so. It's much more spacious than any other living quarters I've ever had aboard a ship or a space station,” she smiled, forcing her self to relax. “One of the many advantages of living on a natural space body as opposed to living inside a man-made one.”

“I will never understand how your kind can live inside a hollow piece of metal for days on end without going just the least bit mad,” Loved One/Jakob teased her. “You are a very adaptable species, like this Jakob was – or is.”

“Is, I hope,” she muttered, the daydreams returning. “Maybe we ought to go out and double check those seals again...”

“What ever happened to Jakob?”

She stopped cold. A lump was forming in her throat. “Uh, the last I heard of him he was still in the cruise division and on his way up, but with the potential hostilities going on up there... I guess he’s adapting to whatever the situation may be.”

Loved One/Jakob nodded the affirmative. “You had much faith in him, I know. That is why it is so sad that you two were never lovers.”

“Lovers?” Tears began to well in the corner of her eyes. She took a jagged breath and tried to sound unaffected by the intense feeling of regret growing in her heart. “How could we have been lovers when we were both officers aboard a Spacefleet starship working with each other, side by side, on a daily basis? Impossible.”

“Article 18, section 5 of the Spacefleet Code: There will be no intimate fraternization between officers in the course of commanding a starship.”

“Stop that! I remember the code well,” she barked. She took a deep breath and then another, calming herself before explaining, “The code has its uses. Where would a commander be without discipline and where would discipline be if a commander was screwing her second-in-command all the time?”

Loved One/Jakob looked hurt. “I apologize. I have intruded into your private thoughts again. I should have realized...”

Calinda felt a cad. “You don’t have to apologize. How are you to know what are private thoughts and what are public thoughts if I don’t post a sign somewhere in there?” She forced herself to laugh. Loved One/Jakob joined in, but silenced himself as he observed the downcast expression dimming her face. Calinda slumped against a tall crate that served as her wardrobe, suddenly feeling drained and exhausted with the realization of what she had been denying herself all these years.

“Are you ill, My Other?”

“I’m all right,” she whispered. “If things would have been different maybe Jakob and I would have been lovers. We had so much in common: Spacefleet, growing up on a space station... Well, we weren’t, so that’s that.”

Loved One/Jakob slowly approached her and turned her to face him. “I think he loved you, Calinda. In the memories I scanned to create his

form I sense beneath his dignified and proper exterior a man who very much wanted to show you how he really felt, but he hesitated for some reason.” Loved One/Jakob pulled her close. “He could never get past the officer to the woman underneath,” he whispered softly into her dark hair.

A tingle of nervous anticipation ran down her spine. “Probably because I wouldn’t let him. I doubt anyone I was close to ever got past the mask I wore.”

“But I who am a master of visual illusions see beyond the mask to what is real, and I like what I see, My Other.” He began to kiss her gently on her cheeks, her neck – a touch at once warm and real as human flesh, then feather-light, like static electricity. Hungry for physical contact, Calinda yielded willingly to his caresses. Then she froze, pushing Loved One/Jakob away from her.

“I... I can’t. You aren’t Jakob – you aren’t even humanoid. How can I make love to an alien?”

“But we are truly a part of each other, My Other. How can another part of yourself be alien to you?” And with that he pulled her into his arms, crushing her protests with his lips.

A year passed, and then another. Calinda’s black hair now reached the small of her back. She no longer even bothered to wear much more than a simple flowing robe, if even that, since her home was more than comfortably warm and Loved One provided all the protection she needed whenever she ventured outside. The days were filled with endless explorations of each other. When at last she repaired the faulty helmet of her lifesuit, Loved One agreed to take her on the long trip to see the pillars of stone to the north.

An overwhelming sense of awe flowed through her as she stood beside the huge obelisks of dark stone.

“And your kind really had a physical body at one time and worshipped here?” The enormity and grand scale of the circle of stones implied a civilization of some advanced technology.

“Yes, and we still worship here, or I should say I still come here to think, to contemplate. I no longer know what has become of my kind. Perhaps, they are all gone and I am alone.”

“Never alone, Loved One,” Calinda smiled. “I am here.”

“Of course, My Other.” The image of Jakob smiled back, squeezing her gloved hand. “I meant that I may well be the last of my people. When we no longer needed the physical body to contain the personality, the inner essence of uniqueness, we began to drift apart like so many clouds in the skies. We had no physical boundaries to hold us together as a community, so each of us gradually became complete unto itself.”

“Did your people have a name?”

“If we did it has been lost in time, My Other. Why, I don’t even know how old I am, or even if I had a physical body at one time. But I must have had one,” Loved One said thoughtfully, admiring the form of his own beloved.

Calinda returned the loving gaze in turn. “Why do you say that? Couldn’t you have been born in the form you are now?”

“I am not sure. But if I was born as I am now, I should be able to reproduce in this form, and I have not been able to.”

“Maybe you need a mate, a female – or male – of your own kind to do so. Are you sure there are no others like you in the universe?”

“I have reached out with my mind and felt others, like your species, but none like myself. Maybe there are others like me out there, traveling between the stars or living on other worlds, but I cannot reach them, nor will I ever be able to,” he sighed.

She was both saddened and confused. “Why not? Can’t you leave this planet and survive, Loved One?”

“Not in my present form, My Other. I draw nourishment from the electrical currents within this world’s atmosphere. I am afraid I will cease to exist if I wander too far away.”

Then it was settled. Calinda would stay here forever – or until it was impossible for her to physically exist here any longer. She was not afraid, for she knew she would die fulfilled.

The signaling device sat unregarded for years now behind an old crate in Calinda’s storage addition. Its sudden beeping awoke her from a deep sleep.

“Distress signal received,” a mechanical voice announced from the long dormant device. “This is the starship, *Hyperion*. We are in your

sector and will proceed to your location with all possible speed. If you are able to respond, please do so. Repeating, this is the starship *Hyperion*...”

Calinda was paralyzed. To see her own kind after all this time... The thought filled her with deep foreboding.

*My Other, what is wrong?* Loved One cried, its mists clothing her with a blanket of strength and security.

“I am to be rescued,” she whispered faintly.

*I am so glad. At last you will return to your own home, your own people.*

*You want me to go?* she screamed inside. Nothing else could ever hurt her worse than the thought that Loved One never truly cared, never truly loved her.

*No, My Other, I don't want you to leave me, but leave me you must.*

*Why? I have all I need here – shelter, atmosphere recycler, food synthes', you...*

*But your food synthes' are even now running low on nourishment.*

*Then I'll learn to cultivate and eat the native plants.*

*They may be poisonous to your kind. There are not many left here. My people were not good stewards of this planet when they dwelt here in corporeal form. Besides, My Other, your recycler may break down, and there are other reasons why you cannot stay here any longer than you must.*

*I can't leave you – I love you!*

*And I love you.* The tone was affectionate, but firm. *That is why I want you to go. How could I live knowing that I helped contribute to your death by keeping you here longer than a safe amount of time, only to satisfy my selfish needs for companionship?*

*But we are one – isn't that what you said? How can we ever be parted?* She wept bitter tears.

*Physically we must be. But we shall be together in spirit, My Other. The bond that links our minds may be weakened by great distance, but I shall know all is well with you.* The mist gently dried her tears. *Do not be sad. Remember all that you have done for me, all the happiness you have given me...*

*What I've done for you? Why, you've given me my life – several times over – and I don't just mean when you first rescued me.*

*You have done so much, My Other. You have given the orphan a family, the wanderer a home. I am at peace with myself now. What greater gift is there to give?*

Loved One, brilliant with emotion, curled about her in a gentle caress, shaping itself into the figure of a small golden haired child, hugging Calinda's hips. She bent to kiss and stroke the top of its soft head, pondering what form fate itself would take.

“Thirty-six hours to touchdown. Repeating, thirty-six hours...”

Calinda walked away from the squawking box, not really hearing what was being said, but understanding it all too well. In just a few hours she would be spirited away from the only true home – and friend – she had ever known. What memento did she have of Loved One to take with her to cherish through out the empty, meaningless years that lay ahead?

As if in answer to her question, Loved One appeared. It did not condense into a form, nor reach for her mind, but moved quickly about her, suddenly pulling away, then slowly approaching again.

“I'm going soon,” Calinda forced herself to say, exercising her little used vocal cords. She would have to get used to talking again. Her own kind did not read minds.

*I know, My Other.*

“What do I have to live for without you?”

*You have to live for yourself... and because I love you,* Loved One echoed itself.

Calinda found herself being gently guided towards her cot by her companion. She gratefully collapsed upon its surface, emotionally spent from days of crying.

*Live, My Other. Live for our child.*

“What? But Loved One you know that I can't – we can't have...”

*We can.*

She sprang up, hardly able to contain her enthusiasm. “Why didn't you tell me before it was possible?”

*I was not sure if it was. But in my selfishness I began to search out any and all possible ways that I may travel with you. There is only one way: I must die to myself and be born anew. I must become as you are.*

*“You mean a flesh and blood creature?”*

*Yes. My kind was so once. We shall be again.*

*“But how?”*

*The biological samples have the necessary DNA. I have scanned all the necessary procedures –*

*“No! You would suffer illness and death like my kind. And you would be like I am – unable to read the thoughts of your beloved? Would you really want to be mortal – trapped in this fragile shell?”*

*Yes... To truly understand what it is to be like you, My Other, it is worth giving up all this eternity I've endured alone.*

Calinda felt herself growing light-headed. She slowly lay back down upon her bed.

*First you will have to give me something of yours to make this transition possible – a cell from your body, your womb...*

The realization of what Loved One was attempting struck her with brutal force. The pain of knowing it was not possible filled her with twice as much grief as the knowledge of her departure did. Fighting off the sleepiness that was engulfing her, she cried out, “Loved One, I would gladly give you anything, but I fear I cannot. I am sterile from space radiation.”

Loved One reformed himself into the shape of Jakob. Taking a small scrapping tool in hand, he carefully scrapped a few outer skin cells from her forearm. Calinda watched with fascination as he placed the sample into a small glass dish containing a liquid that they had recovered from the genetic medical supplies. Then Loved One/Jakob dissolved into the mist and swirled itself about the container, energizing the compound inside.

*Yes, My Other, you can. You will. I will be with you... always.*

The mist blazed brighter than the star that illuminated the small world. In the wink of an eye, Loved One concentrated its life force into a thin beam of light, piercing the wall of Calinda's abdomen and spreading itself throughout her body with a surge of electricity. She knew it was done.

“Amazing how you two survived so long on that hellhole,” the starship captain amiably chattered away at Calinda. “But then again, the last few years during this damned conflict with the Kaya haven’t been heaven, either.” He reached out to touch her hand, adding, “I’m only sorry that your companion didn’t make it – to see the little one grow up, that is.”

“Don’t be, Captain,” she reassured him. “He’s happy where he is now.”

Calinda smiled and looked down at her rapidly swelling belly, stroking it tenderly. Her Loved One would always be with her – and she with Loved One.

Unafraid.

Unalone.

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## *The Big Black Shiny Cadillac*

*b.j. lawry*

She was small, gray and taut, almost disappearing into the seat covers in her gray double-knit slacks and gray blouse under her short, close-cropped gray hair. She was seated next to me in my little blue Chevy with the gray upholstery and we were heading west from Miami to Los Angeles.

I had to smile. We were certainly different. She'd told me more than once that, in my traveling togs of faded jeans, faded T-shirt and scruffy sandals – now kicked off into the back seat – that I looked like the bums who hang around for handouts.

(She'd seen them on television.)

Normally, I wouldn't be traveling with her. I'd made that vow ten years ago, soon after I'd gotten my license and she needed a ride to the supermarket. There I was, tooling along at 30 when suddenly she lunged forward, grasped the dash with one hand, my steering wheel with the other, and screamed like her hair was on fire. I tightened my grip on the wheel, stomped on the brakes and grabbed her with my right hand so she wouldn't fly through the windshield. The car landed kitty-corner across a curb, missing a large tree by only three feet.

A fallen leaf had skittered across the road. She'd thought it was an animal.

"You could have killed it, Sharlene," she said.

"You hate animals, Mama."

"That's no reason to run over them."

"It was just a leaf. Let's forget it," I said, maneuvering us back onto the road. Yes, I could have screamed. But I'd learned even by then, at 17, to keep my exasperation under wraps. It only made things worse.

I hadn't driven her anywhere since. We were together now because she anticipated my getting into trouble. And I was feeling guilty

because I'd tried to break the apron strings so many times, tried to live my life on my own so many times. But I was all she had, after all, her only child. So I reasoned that, as an adult, I could handle this trip with her.

"I've sold radio time in New York and Miami when we lived in those places, Mama," I reminded her. "I can take care of myself in L.A."

"But you've never lived away from your father and me, Sharlene. You're too trusting. Somebody has to see you settled in."

My skin prickled. She was dangerously close to saying she'd move in with me for awhile.

"You're just like your father," she said as we drove through sticky Louisiana lowlands.

"How do you mean?"

"Neither of you realize it's a dangerous world. I mean, anywhere you go there are muggings and rapes and robberies and murders. All kinds of shenanigans. And your father was going to let you go west alone!"

"Oh, my," I responded. I'd better pick up another pack of Camels at the next stop.

"I mean, Sharlene," she said in a motherly tone, "right out here on this road, how much protection do you think you have?"

"Mama, I'm not dwelling on that, thank you."

"Well, see? You're just like your father."

He had often told of trying to teach her to drive in their early years of marriage. She saw the road slope in front of her, going down an easy grade toward the river. She got scared, let go of the steering wheel, threw her hands over her eyes and began to scream. Of course, he managed to get control of the car, pulled to the side of the road and took the wheel himself, hugging her first and patting her back, telling her, "There, there, Mama, don't you worry. You'll never have to drive again." They've been married a long time. I don't know how he does it.

I took one of the few remaining cigarettes from my pack on the dash and used the car's lighter.

"You shouldn't do that, Sharlene."

“I’m trying to quit.”

“No. I mean you shouldn’t drive with only one hand or take your eyes off the road to light a cigarette.”

I counted to ten by wiggling my bare toes, one by one, against the floor mat and the gas pedal.

“You shouldn’t drive barefoot either,” she said.

“Mama, I’ve been driving for ten years. I drive as part of my job. I’ve never had a ticket. We’ve lived in New York and Miami. I have never been robbed, mugged, raped or even murdered.”

I glanced over at her. Her head was bowed under the wide-brimmed straw hat she’d bought in Panama City and her hands were clasped tightly in her lap.

Feeling even more guilty just looking at her, I said, “Let’s forget all that stuff, huh? Let’s have a nice trip. This is supposed to be a vacation for you, Mama.”

She looked at me and smiled and I could only think of a small bird, a wren, a little gray wren, wanting its supper but keeping its beak clamped tight as a mousetrap.

For the zillionth time in my life I was feeling sorry for her. And I was determined not to make it worse than she already believed it was. I wanted to offer a real vacation, so I’d changed my original plans to drive twelve-hour days. We stopped often and early. We ate at well-lit restaurants. We stayed at big, name-brand motels. And we saw whatever tourist attraction caught her eye.

She was relatively loose and happy for the next couple of days but on the third day she was all tense again. In New Mexico something seemed amiss beginning in the early hours of the morning. Her brow would not come unfurrowed.

“Sharlene, we shouldn’t travel today,” she finally said, sitting at the motel window, peeking between the thick, plastic-lined draperies into a dark parking lot. We had decided to leave earlier this morning because, to be truthful, I was going bananas with all of her “Sharlene, you shouldn’t...” stuff and I wanted to get to L.A.

I rolled over, snatching the pillow off my head. “Why not?”

“I just have the feeling something is wrong.”

“Oh, Mama...” I smothered my face in the pillow for a moment, tempted to throw it, but instead I dropped it at the foot of the bed. Sitting up straight as a two-by-four, stretching into the morning, I announced, “I’ll take a shower and get dressed. I’m sure the coffee shop is open by now.”

“Can’t we spend the day here?”

“Doing what?”

“Well, there must be something to do here.”

“On Interstate 10 in New Mexico?”

She didn’t answer and I got ready while she reluctantly began to gather her things.

As I paid the check for the rolls and coffee and again as I unlocked her car door and went around to unlock my own, she repeated, “It’s still dark, Sharlene.”

We pulled out onto the highway when the sun was making a blue silky haze on the horizon, introducing a good day. She curled in her seat with her feet under her and those wrinkled hands once again folded tightly against her lap. She had pulled on her big straw hat for protection against the coming sun.

We’d been driving ten or twelve miles when she said it again.

“Someday you’re going to get in trouble, Sharlene. I don’t know if I raised you wrong or what but good daughters listen to their mothers.”

“Mama, how am I gonna get in trouble?” I asked, my eyes on the road, fingers groping for the lighter, finally lighting up, blindly, almost singeing my nose.

“You drive off in the dark of night on an open highway where just about anything could happen.”

“Mama...” I couldn’t help smiling now. I hadn’t been this close to her for this long since I was a babe in arms. “What, really, are you afraid of?”

She looked at me with that sweet, caring glance, cocking her head, her elderly dewy eyes seeming dewier, and she said – of all the damn things – she said, “I just don’t want you to get in trouble. I love you, Sharlene.”

Oh, my. Now I just wanted to hug her. I reached over and patted her arm. She patted my hand that was patting her arm, then she pulled

her hat down over her eyes, leaned back in the seat. Her body language told me she was leaving the rest of the trip to me. Oh, if only...

She was silent until we stopped for lunch on a hot and windswept expanse of Arizona. I think she must have been trying to make amends then because she began talking about how much I would like my new job. She loved talking about my jobs. "My daughter who works at the big radio station..."

But after lunch she was quiet again, more quiet than usual. Again, she had pulled her hat down over her face and could have been sleeping for all I heard from her. Then, about an hour into our drive, she said from under her hat, "They're following us."

"Who's following us?" thinking, Oh, please, Mama.

"Those people in that big black car behind us."

I looked in the rear-view mirror. Sure enough, there was a big black car, with those windows you can't see through, about three car lengths behind us. Nothing between us and nobody else on the road.

"They're driving the same highway, Mama. They don't have any choice but to follow us unless they want to pass us."

"Well, why don't they?"

"I don't know, Mama. Maybe they feel safer with somebody in front of them."

She said nothing.

"How can you see them with that hat pulled down over your face?"

"It's not hiding my whole face," she said. "I can see with my right eye in the side mirror. I saw it on 'Murder She Wrote.'"

"Well, don't worry about them. You wouldn't even notice them if this was Miami."

"Yes," she admitted with a little curl in her voice. "And then you'd be shot without having any idea who killed you."

An hour later she said, "Slow down, Sharlene, so they can pass us."

"If they wanted to pass us, Mama, they would have. They've got a powerful car."

"I want to see if they stay behind us when you slow down."

"Mama, I just can't slow down on an interstate highway. It's dumb. And besides, they've got another whole lane over there if they want to pass."

“Please, Sharlene.” She seemed near panic. “I want to see if they’ll pass.”

I dropped from 55 down to 45. They passed us. She seemed to sigh all the breath out of herself. She immediately sat up straight in the seat and was smiling. She pushed the hat back on her head, looking almost rakish.

“See?” I said. “They’re not after us at all. Besides, what would somebody in a big Cadillac want with a little old lady and her overweight daughter in a funky old Chevy?”

“Rape,” she said.

I didn’t say a word.

A couple of hours later, after stopping for gas, I pulled out onto the road again. Shortly, almost in a whisper, she said, “Sharlene, they’re behind us again. They are following us!”

There they were, in the rear-view mirror.

“Oh, Mama, they probably stopped for gas, too.”

“I didn’t see them in the gas station.”

“Well, maybe they stopped at that convenience store nearby.”

“Sharlene, you’re going to get in trouble. You’re going to get us both in trouble. You’re too trusting.”

Counting again, I pulled off onto the roadside and let the Cadillac pass, then pulled out slowly behind it.

“Pretty soon we’ll be in L.A., Mama, and you’ll have nothing to worry about.” I crossed my fingers against the steering wheel.

“I know they’re following us,” she said.

For miles and miles of beige rock and creosote bushes and phalanxes of Joshua trees, the Cadillac stayed in front of us. It was getting to me, staring at the tail end of a big, black car, nothing to break the monotony but an occasional piggy-back semi, hot and dusty wind biting at my arm resting on the open window.

Then, somewhere amid the hills and mesas, the Cadillac disappeared.

“They’re probably behind a rock, waiting for us to get ahead of them again,” she said.

My patience was wearing thin again.

“Sharlene, I want to stop at the next town and get a motel.”

Her back was straight against the upholstery, her hands gnarled in her lap.

“Okay.” Give in.

“And I want you to call the police.”

At that I could feel my shoulders stiffen and my will power collapsing. “And what am I supposed to say to the police, Mama? That I know that car is following us because it’s been in front of us all day?”

The sun was sliding toward the horizon – a giant, red-orange ball – and I blessed Arizona and the Southwest and God, the peace of it all, there when I needed it. The pitch black and cold of a desert night would be descending soon and a large flashing motel sign was in view. The well-lighted parking lot welcomed us not only to the motel but to its attached restaurant. Good. We wouldn’t even have to go out to eat. We could call room service.

As I pulled into our designated parking slot I saw it – the big black shiny Cadillac with its ghost-like windows, parked in the same lot.

“Did you see it, Sharlene? They were lying in wait for us, I told you! And now they’ve followed us to this motel!”

I didn’t want to tell her they probably stopped to check their map, or to relieve themselves, or to take a break from the endless sight of a little blue Chevy in their rear-view mirror. And that they’d stopped here because there weren’t all that many motels to choose from on this earth-bound moon.

“Now you’ll have to call the police, Sharlene.”

In our room, she sat stiffly on the edge of the vanity bench as I stretched across one of the double beds and squeezed my hands against my eyes, feeling the pain of relaxing muscles.

“Are you going to call the police?”

I sat up, turned away from her and went into the bathroom, studying my face for wrinkles in the wall of mirror.

“Maybe they’re robbing your car right this minute!” she said across the room.

“Mama!” I shrieked, facing her again. “They’re driving a Cadillac!”

“Well, how do you think they got it?” she asked matter-of-factly.

I closed the bathroom door and leaned against the sink top but her voice was clear as rain.

“One of these days, Sharlene,” she was saying, “you’re going to get into trouble.”

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He was standing there behind the waiter when we opened the door. He waited outside as our fried chicken and enchiladas were placed on the small table by the window, and as I handed over a tip.

Then, as the waiter left backwards, nodding his thanks, he walked slowly in. His presence was bigger than mine by at least half and he was wearing a blue uniform with a badge.

“Sorry t’bother ya’, ma’am,” he began, “but are you Sharlene Fraser?”

“Yes,” I replied, thinking, Oh, my God, what has happened to Daddy?

“You drivin’ that blue Chevy out there?”

“Yes.” I could hear Mama breathing and I could imagine her knuckles white against each other as she stood away from us by the bed.

He balanced his bulk comfortably on spread muscled legs. “Now, I hate to bother ya’ about this, ma’am, but I got a complaint.”

“A complaint?”

“Couple o’ ladies travelin’ to Las Vegas. Black Cadillac. Claim you been followin’ ‘em...”

“I told you!” Mama blared from across the room. “I told you, Sharlene!”

“Quiet, Mama,” I growled as fiercely as I could with my teeth clenched together.

She didn’t catch it and she started to wail. “I told you, Sharlene! I told you you’d get in trouble someday!”

The cop looked over at her, smiling compassionately, probably thinking how pathetic it was that a sweet little bird of a lady was caught up with a criminal element like me. Then he took a pad and pen out of his pocket, his face thick and solemn, looking at me.

“Now,” he said, “s’pose ya’ tell me all about it. How are ya’ gonna get in trouble, Sharlene?”

## *Straight From The Heart*

*Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández*

Stuffed, I had eaten Christmas dinner at my parents' house and now I was pushing myself away from the table at my girlfriend's house. The moment I dreaded was coming down on me fast.

The Christmas tree blinked and glittered in a festive blend of lights. Amelia and her mother cleared the dishes. The younger brothers, Isidro and Julian, played on the floor with their new toys. Her father and I watched football in the living room.

As the announcer recapped the highlights, Amelia and her mother appeared, and I rose from my chair. When her mother sat, I announced I had to leave. Amelia followed me to the door.

When I had arrived earlier this afternoon, Amelia kissed me and gave me my Christmas present. I unwrapped the silver paper and flipped open the plastic box. A gold watch glinted at me. I stumbled over my thanks, "This is really nice."

"Something special for someone special."

I hung my head and scraped the floor with my foot. I hoped for some good words to come into my head and make it out of my mouth in the right way. Instead, I heard myself say, "I left your present at home."

Three hours later, I repeated my lie. "Tomorrow I'll bring your present when we take your brothers to the arcade." We kissed, hiding behind the front door. We were only thirteen and her parents watched me like I was the fox eyeing the chicken coop.

"Listen. It's just a little thing. Nothing like you gave me."

"It's from you, that's all that matters. I love you, Hilario."

I scraped my foot again. "Yeah, me, too."

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The next morning, with the Texas sun bright, I called my cousin. “Armando, you got to help me out.” Armando ran across the few yards between our homes and joined me on the back porch.

Before he reached the steps, I said, “Ese, I’ve got big-time trouble.”

“Whatever. We stick together.”

I shook my head. “See this?” I held up my wrist.

“Hijo. Amelia gave you that watch?”

I nodded.

“For Christmas?”

I nodded again.

“What did you give her?”

“I told her I forgot her present at home.”

“So?”

“I didn’t get her anything yet. I’m working with my uncle this weekend, and I was going to use the money to get her something then. But today we’re taking her brothers to the arcade, and she thinks I’m going to give her something.”

“Pendejo,” Armando said with a smirk on his face.

“I freaked when I saw what she gave me. I had to say something.” I searched my homeboy’s face for the answer to my love problem.

Armando, his face the dark of midnight sky, said, “You didn’t tell her about your...”

“Nah. She don’t know.”

Armando nodded.

“You got any money left, ese?”

We dug in our pockets. In my hand, we dropped change, lint and one ripped movie ticket. Armando picked out the junk, and I counted the coins.

“\$1.13.”

“Not good, primo.”

“She’s never going to forgive me.” I flopped back onto the wooden steps and leaned on my elbows. “She’s my Reina. Help me save my girl.”

We stared out into the sun-bright colors of the garden, but it did nothing to stop the worry warping my mind. Armando chewed on a toothpick.

“Hey, I got it, man.”

I glanced up.

“She’s a chavala.” He waved the toothpick in the air.

“Of course she’s a girl.” I stared at him.

“They’re all tender-hearted. Just put something together. She’ll think you’re sweet. You know how they are.”

“Put something together? Like what?”

The toothpick snapped in his hand. “I don’t know, man. Something.” He tossed the splintered toothpick over his shoulder.

I hopped up. “I know.” I checked for my mother through the screen door then crept through her garden and broke off three huge gardenias.

Armando grinned.

I strutted by him into the kitchen. I came out a few minutes later, twisting a rubber band around the stems of the three gardenias. “Que mas?” I stood on the top step.

Armando looked at me and studied the gardenias in my hand then leaped up. “I got an idea. Get a bag. Hurry up.” He dashed around the house.

I raced back into the kitchen, hid the gardenias behind the trash can, grabbed a brown paper bag and trailed after my cousin.

Armando stopped at the edge of the corner house, which was surrounded by a white picket fence. “Here.”

I saw nothing, but the cars going by, and kids playing across the street. “I’ve got no time for your jokes.”

“Man, you’re thick. Amelia should be in love with me.” Armando thumped his chest with his thumb.

“Orale, vato.”

Armando pointed. “The tree. Pick her some oranges.”

“Oranges? Are you crazy or what?”

“No, primo. She’ll think you went out of your way for her.”

“I don’t know. Sounds pretty stupid.”

“You rather show up with nothing and see her disappointment?”

I placed one foot on the picket fence, and Armando gave me a boost. I grabbed the lowest branch and swung my legs onto the tree. I picked oranges, and tossed them to Armando who caught them like baseballs

and dumped them into the bag. He stretched out his T-shirt like a basket to catch more oranges.

Then we heard barking and, from a flap in the front door, a black spot appeared. The one spot multiplied into three spots, all rushing to get at us. I released the oranges I had in my arms, and they showered over Armando.

“Hey, that hurt.” He rubbed his head.

The first Doberman reached the fence and lunged at the tree. I leaped down, almost knocking Armando over when I hit the ground. The three dogs snarled and shoved their snouts through the fence.

Armando shoved me off him, and I fell backwards, landing on my butt with an oof! I felt my backside go wet as the orange I had stuck in my back pocket turned into orange mush and the juice ran down my leg. The dogs sounded like fifty dogs rather than three hungry ones sizing us up for lunch.

“C’mon homes. Let’s get out of here.”

Armando scrambled up and pitched a couple of oranges at the dogs; the oranges splattered yellow against the white fence. I snatched up the paper bag and kept up with my cousin. The growling dogs, with their ears piercing the sky, ran along side of us on the other side of the fence.

We could still hear the dogs howling when we rounded the corner of our block.

I cleaned up, changed my clothes and sat next to Armando on the back steps. He sniffed at me.

“Okay, homes. I got the gardenias, and I got the oranges. Now what?”

“You got to write her something romantic.” Armando puckered and made kissing noises.

“Romantic. Hijo, I don’t know nothing about romantic.”

“Doesn’t matter. Write whatever. You know they get all teary-eyed over any little thing we do.” He shoved me. “Mira, just tell her the truth.”

“You’re crazy, vato.”

My mother stuck her head out from around the screen door. “Hilario, Amelia’s on the phone for you.”

I got up. Armando tripped me and laughed.

I dragged my feet across the kitchen to pick up the two-hundred-pound phone. “Hey, how it goes?”

“Hilario, when you gonna get here?”

“I told you I would be there.”

“My brothers are pestering me to go to the mall.”

“ Ah, we’re supposed to go in a couple of hours, que no?”

“Yeah, but I was hoping you would bring my present.”

“Listen, I told you. It’s hardly anything at all.”

“Doesn’t matter, chulo. If it comes from your heart, that’s all that counts.”

“Like I said, it ain’t much.

I flopped down next to Armando. “Did you tell her?”

“No. Her brothers want to go to the mall already.”

“Hijo, she’s gonna bury you alive.”

“What kind of friend are you?”

“I figured out the oranges already. I told you to write the note, man. What else you want me to do? Write the note for you?”

“Nah, I can do that.”

“Just tell her the truth. Girls dig that kind of stuff.”

“I just don’t know.”

Armando left to run an errand for his mother with a promise to come back once he was done.

+ + + +

In my bedroom, at my desk, I pulled out my notebook and tore out a clean page. I held the pen in my hand and wrote “Amelia” across the top of the sheet. Then I wrote, “I want to tell you,” and my pen ran out of ink.

I threw that pen away and found a pencil. I stared at the page, and my hand wouldn’t move. My mind was as blank as the lines on the page. I knew I’d never be able to fill the whole page with words.

I thought and thought and kept trying to write something. I erased so many times I dug a hole through the paper and had to start a new page. I couldn’t think of anything to say she would believe, so I wrote the truth.

Armando knocked on the door as he walked in. “Did you write it?”

“I did.” I licked the envelope closed.

“Let me read it.”

“You crazy? No way.” I held the envelope away from his outstretched hand.

“Why not?” He eyed me with a crooked eyebrow. “You told her the truth, que no?”

“Yeah, I told her what happened. I just know she’s gonna hate me forever.”

“No cousin, you’ll see. It’s all gonna work out.” He stood up. “Let’s go.”

“What do you mean, let’s go?” I put on my jacket. “I’m going by myself. I don’t want you messing things up.”

Armando tracked me down the hallway and out of the house. “I’m the one that came up with the plan. Anyway, you’ll need help with her brothers if you want to go kissy kiss with Amelia in the dark.”

“Get out of my face.”

He kept after me, saying, “This is how you be showing your gratitude when someone sticks by you. Even in the jaws of man-eating dogs.”

I rounded the corner of Amelia’s block. “There wouldn’t have been no man-eating dogs if you hadn’t dragged me out there.” I stopped at the sight of her house. “Armando, stay here. I got to do this alone.”

“You just don’t want anyone around when she tells you to get lost.”

My mouth fell open. “I thought you said this plan would work.”

Armando shrugged. “Who knows with chavalas.”

I turned away rather than slug him and went to the front door. Amelia pulled open the door before I knocked. Her brothers ran by us and raced to Armando and jumped on his back. They wrestled on the grass.

Her smile made my heart feel good, but sad, too, because this might be the last time she’d smile like that for me. She stepped out onto the porch and hugged me tight. “Oh, you smell good. Like oranges. Did you get a new cologne?”

I shook my head, and she waited.

“I told you I didn’t have much.” I stuck out my hands with the three drooping gardenias. She oohed and took them.

Sticking them under her nose, she said, “They’re so beautiful.”

This fed my courage a little, so I pushed the paper bag between us. “This, too.”

She peeked inside the bag. “Oranges. My favorite. Oh, Hilario, you’re so sweet.”

Before I could scare myself out of doing it, I handed her the envelope. “This is for you too. I’ll call you later, okay.” I turned to go down the front steps.

She pulled me back with a hand on my arm. “No wait. Let me read the letter first.”

I stood, staring at my Christmas sneakers while she read the letter. Armando stood behind a neighbor’s tree, holding the bratty brothers from coming over.

She stopped reading and glanced sideways at me. There were tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Amelia.”

“Hilario, you’re so, so...” She flung her arms around my neck and wet my cheeks with her tears. “Your mother told me. You gave her all your money so she could finish the dress for your little sister. You’re the most lovable guy I’ve ever known.”

I hugged her.

Armando laughed at me from behind the tree. As he stuck his thumb in the air, I knew what he was telling Amelia’s brothers: “Chavalas go for dumb stuff like the truth.”

## *Governor Edwards House Is For Sale*

*Susan Shell Winston*

### *1953: Grandpa Edwards*

Life after death is pure hell. Believe you me.

You think you got it bad? Taxes past due? Crops a failure? Shoot the damn revenuer. He ain't nothing compared to this.

Or them aches in your joints, the right toe a-freezing up each time it rains or the wind's about to change? Hell, I remember them. Or about them. Ain't got no feeling here. And you call pain sufferin'? Least ways rheumatiz gives you something to concern yourself about yourself for a change.

Got a son? I did. Do. Wife called him Sam, from the Bible. Cussedest damned mule-brained fool I ever knew. Never listened to a word I said. You think he does now? Hell! Got hisself all doozied up into those books of his, as if they could tell him a thing or two. Moved to the city, become one of them high falutin' lawyers. Might as well be a revenuer, s'all I gotta say.

He's got a wife, calls herself Sara. Pretty thing. That'll change. Like the rheumatiz. It comes in time. Just no "get yourself up," "take the garbage out," "fix the sink." Not yet. He'll see.

And the baby? Ah, there's the one. Little Julie. Cute as a bug's ear, I would've said. The face of an angel.

She don't listen to me either. Or see me. That's the worst of it.

Take yesterday. Touched the hot skillet when her mother wasn't looking. Burnt her little hand in two places. Couldn't stop her. She didn't listen to me, didn't see me. Hell, I knew about it an hour before it happened, and I couldn't stop her.

And seventeen years from now? Five months, eleven days? Little Julie's got this apartment, you see. Pretty place, going off to school, all

on her own. – It's night. Two men break in, not even wearing masks. They open drawers, they take her purse, cards, my wife's old ring. Her clothes are flung about. A lamp crashes, breaks, and she awakes. They see her, she screams, they have a knife, and they... they...

What they do to her! What they do to her.

I can't tell her. What's the use of knowing, if I can't tell her?

One calls to the other, Come on, Jesse! I hear sirens. Shots. Sure as I'm standing here, I hear shots –

Oh lordy.

I would take back the wife, the rheumatiz, taxes, hell it all, if only I could warn her. I don't know how.

### ***1969: Julie***

“Watch the birdie!” Dad said, and we laughed. Years ago when I was very, very young, I believed him. I'd stare at the lens as the shutter opened, hoping this time I'd get a peek at the bird inside. Dad promised there was one. But the shutter always closed again before I saw it and Dad would have his picture.

This time the bird would be coming out.

Robby was on the other side of the cage, Mom behind me, Dad armed with his new Leica. “Whenever you're ready, Julie,” Dad said.

I slid down the bar to the cage door, and Mom lifted the rear end of the cage slightly, coaxing the hawk out.

It stood a moment on the lawn, blinking in the sun, not knowing yet it was free. Dad had his perfect picture. Then the hawk ruffled its feathers, and shook its red tail. “Shoo!” Robby said, impatient. The hawk squawked, it lifted its wings, I held my breath, the right wing lifted from its shoulder as straight, as high as the left. Early this summer, I never thought it would fly again when I found it in the garden, under our window.

Dad came over, hugged my shoulder, as we watched the hawk pause on the lamp post across the street. “We always have to let them go, Julie,” Dad said. I shielded my eyes from the sun as the hawk rose into the clouds, and I nodded.

I was glad its wing had healed fast enough, like the zoo veterinarian said it might. I'm glad I didn't miss seeing it fly away. Next week, I'm on my way to college. I hope to be a veterinarian too, someday.

***1970: White Roses, His Mother's Farewell***

Honest to God, I never expected this. Twenty years ago, I remember it clear, the doctor, he handed him to me. "A fine, black-haired boy," he said.

Jesse'd go with me every Sunday to the Meetings, his little white jacket starched and pressed. Lord knows, I tried to raise him right. But he had his father in him. And a-sassing me always? He learned that right quick from the start. But no, I never expected it to come to this. He hit a home run when he was seven, he was so proud of that. You'd have thought the world was his that night. You should've seen his face. A smile stretching from – no, I daren't touch you. Jesse, Jesse, why'd you do it? My God, you killed a girl! A Miss Edwards, a judge's daughter. I saw her picture in the paper... I don't know how he could have done it.

He looks so peaceful now. Lying there. They fixed him up real nice.

There's flowers here on the box, Jesse. White roses. Six of them. They're not much, I know, but I wanted you to have something.

Lord knows, he never did think we had enough. "Mama," he'd say, "how can you live like this?" That was his answer to everything. "How can you live like this?" Will, that's who. That was Will taught him to say things like that. I told you so, Jesse. I told you not to get in with that Will and his gang. And Will escaped, they say. Will escaped. But I know it was him. I just know it. Will's the one did everything they say you did to that girl. Will's the one. Not you. Not my Jesse.

He made me a paper rose once. Remember that, Jesse? A white paper rose, when you were still good in school. You poured my whole bottle of cologne water on it and gave it to me for mother's day. You had that smile again, stretching right across your face. It's still there on my mirror, Jesse. I promise you. It's still there.

## *1999: Porch Swing*

The old chain creaked comfortingly. Sara Edwards closed her eyes, felt Sam beside her, his arm around her, the night of their first kiss.

The chain creaked as the swing swung forward again, and Sara heard the children laughing, shooting marbles against the wooden steps while Sam paced back and forth in front of her swing, practicing his closing arguments in those early days. Another swing, and Sara saw the lights, the reporters pressing right up the steps, the night of Sam's first election for governor. Then the day, years later, when they came back home from the capital when Sam first got sick.

Sara planted her feet firmly, pulled herself up on the heavy chain, nodded to the young family waiting. "One last time," she said.

She wandered through the house. The living room, little Robby's room, Julie's... before she moved out. Her hand clutched the door frame. What she always remembered most from those days afterwards was how the papers constantly showed the picture of that hoodlum's mother, as if it were she was the one who had suffered the most. They showed Julie's picture only twice... Sara went on. Hers and Sam's room. Empty white walls, four corners too. To go on living, he'd once consoled her, we have to leave the dead behind. Sara touched the markings on the kitchen wall, each one a promise as the children grew that, as their song said, "getting older was a happy thing to do."

She hurried back to the front door and heard the lock click one last time behind her. She handed the keys over to their new owners.

## *The Lesser Gods*

*Pat Brown*

She had been dead a long time.

A thick miasma rose from her mingling with the brine from the sea and the dry reek of decaying plants. The smell assaulted his nose and throat. Wind crawled restlessly over the dunes and stirred the shrivelled seeds in their bristling pods.

Moss had to step over a tangled pile of dangerously ripe *scatterpods*, but for once, curiosity overcame natural caution. He knelt to examine the body.

She had not been cautious, either. Her short, dark hair was a snarl of seedpods, their tiny roots burrowing into her ears and invading her vacant eye sockets. Something moved inside an eye cavity.

Grisly as the sight was, he knew from the condition of her body that the parasitic plant had not caused her death.

She was naked. Her clothes lay under her. Something about them bothered him, but he was wary of disturbing anything. It wouldn't take much to trigger one of the unbroken pods. Whoever she might have been, he did not want to join her in death.

Whoever she might have been...

He knew she was not of any local Tree Clan.

She appeared to be human, and might even have been attractive. Her breasts were the high, full ones of a young breeder. But her hair was shorn like a new-pledged hunter. And those clothes... He had never seen their like.

He itched to get his hands on the cloth, but one look at the remaining *scatterpods* made the sweat that sheathed his body turn to ice. The dusty spores from even one of them would fill his lungs with tangled death.

He had once come across a *crachina* in the final stages of infestation. It had still been alive when he found it, though its sides already bulged with the pressure of the fast growing parasitic plants. Moss had taken pity on the beast and killed it swiftly, consigning its body to cleansing flames.

It had been an expensive act of compassion. The defiled blade had joined the *crachina* in the fire and it had taken him a First-moon's span of days to find the proper metal being carried by a southern trader, and half that again to hone the hand-length of metal into a useful weapon.

He followed the story of the strange woman's passage in the torn earth, approaching the beach cautiously. He lowered his head against the feral brightness of the Sun and felt the dry, alien caress of Her heat on his bare skin.

Heat and dust and the smell of brine and rot tickled the hairs in his nose. The unfamiliar smells had his senses preternaturally alert.

Torn earth marked where she had stumbled off the beach. After that, wind and shifting sands had obliterated her trail. He was about to abandon his search when he saw the deathcups clustered beneath the fragments of tree stumps that marked some ancient forest's edge. Several of the glittering red deathcups lay crushed on the flattened ground.

He knew the answer to the riddle of the dead stranger.

She had fallen, perhaps stumbling over a tree root. And fallen into the waiting deathcups. She had been exposed to the spirit-filled fluid, which would have immediately filled her body with its evil presence, seeking her life to feed its own twisted needs, but only succeeding in killing her.

Judging from the tracks of her mad, pain-induced dance, she had died slowly. The demons within the deathcups fed on pain, and were exquisitely good at inflicting it.

Moss felt brief pity for her. A fool deserved death, but no one deserved to die in such a manner.

He eyed the brilliant, red cups with a practical eye. It was unusual to find them so far north. To encounter such wealth this close to his Tree meant the gods were very pleased with young Moss.

He collected the fluid carefully into his second, now empty water gourd, aware of what would happen if even a drop of the liquid touched his skin. He had no time for the spirit-journey it would induce. His visions, however illuminating, would not safeguard him from local predators, large or small.

He stoppered the wide mouth with a thick plug of sand-lichen and strapped it to his hip.

He gladly turned his back on the maddening drone of the sea and was about to slip back into the relative safety of the bush when he heard the sound. He froze, poised to flee as he searched out the source.

He found her lying against a shallow cut-bank. She might have been a twin to the dead woman. He knelt, his eyes skimming her face, trying to learn the extent of her injuries. He could see no blood or visible wounds on her startlingly white skin.

She shifted restlessly on the hard-packed earth. He moved nearer, his shadow falling over her.

Her eyelids fluttered open to reveal forest-green-eyes dilated in shock. She bared her teeth, but the only sound that emerged was disjointed gibberish. Disappointed, he crouched lower; brushing damp leaves from her bruised cheek. She barely moved at his touch, which made him realize she was not fully conscious. She walked in a world alone.

He hesitated, then let his hand drop to her collarbone to touch the strange cloth.

It felt oddly smooth and cool beneath his rough fingers. He could not see how it was made. If it was woven, it was of threads too fine to see. Was it pounded from a plant? A white plant?

He stared down at the unnatural whiteness of the stranger's garb. He was loath to touch the stuff a second time.

Common sense told him the woman had not come to harm wearing the material, but it still took him several moments of uncertainty before he could touch it again. He felt her heart beating strongly inside her narrow chest. Her breasts were small and soft under his palm; at his touch her nipples hardened naturally. He felt no lust for the stranger; she didn't feel human, let alone female.

He saw no sign she was being consumed by the deathcups' demons, but something about her was not right.

When she opened her eyes, he saw recognition in them, followed immediately by fear.

"I am not going to hurt you," he said quickly.

Her eyes widened. She gasped something sharp, guttural and totally incomprehensible.

His disappointment was acute. He could taste it, like meat gone bad in the heat.

She made more bewildering sounds, then frowned when it became obvious he didn't understand her.

He shook his head. "Your words are strange. I do not understand –"

He tensed when her hand touched a row of bumps and ridges looped around her waist. He thought the thing just another part of her already odd attire – it didn't look like a weapon, but he drew back anyway when her fingers brushed it.

She spoke again, softly.

And a third voice answered.

Startled, Moss leapt backward. The voice spoke again and he realized it was repeating his words, like a child learning to speak by imitating.

The voice, recognizably human, but definitely not female, spoke again.

"What do you want? Who are you?" he asked. "Where do you come from, to be in this terrible place?"

The voice repeated his words.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Are you a baby, not to speak your own words?"

He expected only more imitation, instead the woman spoke.

"This says you're speaking a variation of Portuguese... I hope so, because that's one of the languages I know... One of the old tongues. Do you understand me?"

Her speech was very odd. The words strangely pronounced, and many of them foreign sounding, like the speech of one of those terrible northern tribes who didn't even know how to make a proper Tree.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

The woman said in her strange accent, “We saw no sign of you from the *garbled nonsense* sky. Where do you come from?”

He puzzled over the numerous words that made no sense. They had not sounded like anything he recognized. “The forest is my home,” he said slowly. He glanced over his shoulder toward the distant blur of tall trees. “A hand’s hand of days away and then some. I was on a spirit quest when I found your sister-wife.”

Moss squatted lower on his haunches, peering uneasily at the blameless blue sky. What did she mean “from the sky”? Only the *crachina* and her lesser cousins named the sky home. The Gods were too jealous of that stronghold to share it.

Had he misunderstood her? “We live in the Trees. This,” he said, glancing around the almost treeless grassland she had taken shelter in, “Is not a place the Gods are pleased with. No man would try to live here.”

The ghost of a smile appeared on the female’s lips. “Not like us, you mean?”

A spasm of pain suddenly twisted her features. She clutched weakly at her abdomen, her face white as the cloth she wore. He saw her stomach move in a single convulsion.

He had thought she might be a demon, but if she was she must be an inferior one. He now knew what sickened her. And no root or bloody purge was going to fix it.

“Tell me about your sister-wife,” he said softly. “How many of the sun’s journeys since she walked out of this world?”

“Since she what? Died, is that what you mean? Do you know what happened to her – W-what’s, ohh–” She began to thrash weakly. “Why does it hurt?”

“When did you find her? Was she already dead?” He waited with growing impatience for her to reply. He didn’t want his suspicions to be confirmed, but he had to know.

“Many days,” she said softly. “We were searching for *garbled nonsense*. She left our camp. Alone. She was not supposed to... do that. When she didn’t return that night, I went after her. When I found her, she was so sick... I tried to pull her out, but those horrible plants

held her... and she was... she died right there and nothing I did could help her..." the woman began to cry.

She startled him when she struggled onto her elbows and tried to grab his arm. Her grip was weak; already her muscles succumbed to the internal poisons the parasitic plant used to stop their prey. But she held on nonetheless.

"What happened to her?" she demanded. "Tell me."

He ignored her questions. Instead, he fixed her with a steady eye and pressed his own questions. "Was she alive when you found her?" he demanded. "Did she tell you anything?"

"She was *garbled nonsense*. She died while I held her. She was all covered in this horrible dust. What were those things..."

A dry wind blew through the stiff grass. The harsh rattle of nearby *scatterpods* washed his arms in a rash of fear-bumps. This place radiated death.

"We must leave." Moss looked around uneasily. If the wind was strong enough to shatter any of the hair triggered pods, they were in trouble. He was in trouble. The spores were barely visible, and it didn't take very many to bring a lingering death...

He thought of just leaving, but... no one deserved so ignoble a death.

He considered her words, then swung around to face her. "Your camp. Where is it?"

It would be shelter, of a sort.

She nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. Yes. I can show you –"

He scooped her up, feeling immeasurable sadness at the swell of her belly pressing into his ribs. A woman should grow big with child. Not this obscene parody of birth.

"Which way?" he asked, glad she could not read the pity on his face.

She pointed down the beach.

"How long ago did you make this camp?" he asked.

"Nearly two circuits of the moon. We thought we were alone. Our *garbled nonsense* are not complete. We didn't know anyone else was here. We thought you all died a long time ago."

"Why would we not live in our forest home? It is where the Gods meant us to be," he said. "It is our home. We have lived there since the

Gods sent our spirits walking again. You must come from far away indeed if you are that ignorant.”

Moss was happy to leave the desolate site and he didn't even mind being out in the open, under the hot, white Sun. Watching his shadow walk beside him, he was all too aware of the slight figure in his arms. He would have liked to know her better. A pity that was not going to happen.

Her “camp” was not like he had expected. Now he knew she was not of his world.

Their obsession with white went beyond clothing. They had built two domes he took to be huts – on the ground of all places. Several odd, box-shaped things, and a lot of stuff he simply couldn't identify, lay about.

The woman pointed to the ground near one of the domes. A tangled frame of shiny material, covered by white fabric, crouched on the ground like some bizarre animal. He let her feet drop and watched her settle into it. Clearly a seat of some kind.

He trailed his fingers over the curve of shiny stuff. It felt cool, even with the heat of the day radiating off everything else. He looked up and met her gaze.

“The trees on your world are passing strange.”

Her smile was ghostly. He betrayed no surprise when the words she spoke went untranslated. Some things should not be spoken aloud by mere mortals. From one of the ubiquitous white boxes she pulled a flat black thing and slipped it over her chest. Moss watched in fascination as it beeped and flashed with captured sunlight.

“When my friends get back, they'll want to talk to you. You have so much to tell us, and I'm sure you have a lot of questions, too.”

“Friends?”

She closed her eyes and relaxed. “Sure. There are – were – six of us. They went up coast to look at an interesting *gibberish*. We were supposed to stay here and *gibberish* but she got tired of it. Damn, this thing doesn't seem to be working,” she said, tapping the hard shell of the black box. She shook her head weakly. “At least I got back here. Once they get me to the sky ship, I'll be okay.”

“They’ll take you... back?” His lips felt stiff and despite the heat of the unshielded camp, his body was cold.

“We have to abort our trip, of course. Too many things have gone wrong.”

Moss didn’t know where this ‘sky ship’ was but he did know what would happen if this woman took her nasty cargo there. He stared at the red light that blinked continuously on her black box and thought of what would happen, probably in less than a single day.

Once the spores reached maturity inside her, they would come out seeking new prey. All those close to her would be infected... Could he let that happen? Did he dare stop her?

Eyes half-closed; she seemed to be dozing. He stared into the unnatural blackness inside one of the white shelters and wondered how so much whiteness could block the light so well. It would be so easy to slip away. She would not notice. Her people were not his problem...

A soft, troubled moan came from the sleeping figure. Moss knew if her people had any compassion at all they would not wait to get her out of here. She would take her malignant load into their midst and the death that followed *would* be his fault.

He did not notice the sound until the woman struggled to sit up, her eyes suddenly bright. “They’re here. Oh, they’ll be so surprised to see you...”

Moss looked around, but saw nothing beyond the strangeness of the white-on-white camp. Several heartbeats passed before he could hear the low hum from the south.

The woman tried to rise. She grew alarmed at her weakness. Panic filled her expression. She began to thrash, her stomach swelled grotesquely. If those spores began leaving her body, they would enter the nearest warm-blooded body. His.

No time. His hand brushed the stoppered gourd with its precious contents. Too much produced an even nastier death than the *scatterpods*, but a single drop...

He uncapped it and, using the knife-blade, he collected a tiny amount of fluid. A glittering drop lay on the carefully honed blade.

She was not watching him. In between her spasms, her gaze was riveted on the southern exposure where a low curve of hills blocked the

nearby beach. He would have to be quick. Before she thought to notice what her visitor was up to.

“I am sorry, I wish there was another way –”

She turned quickly, but he was ready for her. Deftly he touched the knife to her parted lips. With a startled gasp she pulled back, but the deathcup liquid acted quickly. Her eyes glazed over and the look of pain faded. A trickle of viscous liquid dribbled out of her open mouth. The spores were coming out. Soon they would produce enough pressure to force their way out of every orifice in her body. He had to act fast.

The hum grew to a high whistle drowning out the roar of the nearby surf. Moss did not turn to see the source of the noise as it entered the camp.

No time to explain to them, even if they would listen.

He rose quickly and steadied the writhing, comatose woman.

He would have liked to have known her and her people. Had he met her before she exposed herself to the spores... what might they have shared?

Out of the corner of his eye something descended. Something huge and *white*, oh Gods, and it landed on wings of noise so great he wanted to fall to his knees and bury his ears between his hands. He did not turn. To turn was to forfeit.

He drew the knife up once more. The deathcup drug was strong enough to keep her feet, and her mind, in another world. She would be ready to speak her real name to her spirit-guardian and enter the domain of the dead. She might have been a fool to come to his world unprepared, but even a fool deserved a clean death to give her honor before the Gods.

It was the least he could do.

He barely heard the shouts of alarm that turned to rage as he slid the knife across her pale, too white throat. Her blood was hot and bright and washed him in guilt. She bucked once, then he felt her spirit flee the ruined body.

Instinct saved him. Dropping the defiled blade, he briefly glimpsed a startled white face as he vaulted over the dead woman.

He ignored their shouted imprecations. He also ignored the monstrous white thing that now sat on the edge of the camp. That was the source of the noise. Somehow the ones the woman had traveled with had ridden inside the belly of that thing. What kind of power did these newcomers possess?

For all their power they were slow. No wonder they died so easily. He was past the leading edge of the sharp sea-grass before the white flying beast whistled back to life.

The brush here was too thin to provide cover. He had to make it to the trees. Moss had no illusions about what would happen if they caught him. He deserved no less. He just didn't plan to make it easy for them.

They nearly got him. He was sure he felt the scalding breath of the flyer when he bolted past the first tree. Small as the tree was, it seemed to daunt the otherworldly creature enough to deflect its strike.

He didn't slow until the undergrowth became thick enough to trap tiring feet. This section of the forest was unfamiliar to him and that slowed his progress. He stopped, leaning against a winewood tree. A deep breath brought nothing but the smell of earth and damp, rotting life. His heart vibrated in the prison of his ribs, muting the normal forest clatter. But he didn't think they had followed him.

He was arrogant enough to know they would never find him in here.

He rubbed his befouled hands on the thick, spongy bark of the winewood, mottling it with the off-worlder's life's blood. A colony of *crottles* instantly swarmed over the drying blood. He braced himself against the tree, feeling the creatures swarm over his flesh, feeling the sting of tiny mandibles as they cleaned his skin. The pain was sharp. And cleansing.

Only when they were gone, back to their dark, sweet nest in the heart of the tree did he straighten and make his way back into the forest, back home.

## *That Face*

*David A. Woodbury*

*When we pedaled our bikes back toward Kenny's house, taking turns with the sloshing pot, we discovered what happens when a black, cricket-sized catfish hits blacktop that has been bubbling under the noonday sun.*

I knew that face.

She was the girl illustrated on the covers of all the sheet music from the gay 'Nineties in the pile next to my grandma's piano. Although twice my age, Candace Dennett was the first woman I ever fell in love with. At 18, she had that 'Nineties woman's oval face and tiny chin, the pursed, garnet lips, limp lids, and casually cumulous brown hair piled against gravity all about her head.

Kenny Dennett and I had become best friends that September day, my ninth birthday, when I moved to Gomer and unloaded my belongings onto the front lawn of our new house. We were moving there so both my parents could start teaching at Sugar Creek High School. Kenny straddled his flimsy, short bicycle and watched. He had never met a kid before who had a four-inch magnifying glass, a prism, a cat's leg preserved in a jar of formaldehyde, a box of quartz crystals, and a three-legged cat.

"Scientist," he had pronounced me, his first spoken word of our acquaintance. Kenny thought I was the smartest kid he'd ever seen and I thought he was the strangest. I had never before met a skinny, scabbed kid who could ride a bicycle while carrying an unbroken rotten egg in the pocket of his shorts, who whistled through his nose when he breathed, who said Heyyawannaknowwhat? before every utterance,

whether statement or question, and who smelled like he had carried a rotten egg in his shorts once before.

Kenny had turned nine earlier in the summer, establishing an unspoken seniority.

Once school started I learned that Kenny was indeed strange, a fringe member of the fourth grade, maybe even a little behind in his development. To the rest of the school he was more a mascot than a classmate, and I entered fourth grade society at the doormat level for befriending him. I chose my friends then, as now, though, for the things that mattered. Kenny was loyal, trustworthy, and fun. Without malice or guile, incapable of deceit. When I hurt myself, I could cry and Kenny would never tell. What's more, he enriched my world in ways he'd never know.

For the next eleven months I glimpsed Kenny Dennett's sister Candace almost daily when I went to his home. I was barely aware of her in all that time and hadn't noticed the resemblance, even though I had flipped through that pile of old music dozens of times out of boredom in years of monthly visits to my grandma.

The thing is, Kenny and I did stuff that kept us out of Candace's, not to mention his parents', way. Our playground started at his house and ran the length of an unlined, undulating blacktop to a creek half a mile away. It included a couple of farms that lay in that stretch, where we were free to play hide-and-seek in the corn, chase the roosters, and help hoist hay into the lofts where we could later stack bales to make forts where we played summer and winter. We could sit high on idle tractors, shoot slingshots at cans and bird nests, and, when we had exhausted our imaginations, beg milk and cookies at screen doors.

At the creek we weren't supposed to go near the water, so we played in it unsupervised. It was lined with oaks and willows and in the summer proved to be the coolest place to get out of the heat. I think it was no more by design that we went there to get out of the heat than it is a cat's conscious design always to seek the greatest comfort, even when that means climbing into the engine compartment of a car where amputating blades stand deceptively still; we just went because it suited our whim as the most interesting place to go that day.

We discovered a mess of intriguing junk under the short bridge that carried the road beyond our playground and into agricultural sameness. The junk yielded useful things like spent wooden matchsticks and a battered cooking pot. One day we discovered we could, in one pass, scoop fifteen baby catfish into that pot. When we pedaled our bikes back toward Kenny's house, taking turns with the sloshing pot, we discovered what happens when a black, cricket-sized catfish hits blacktop that has been bubbling under the noonday sun. When we arrived to face Kenny's father with our dwindling catch, we discovered that we were lacking an explanation, since boys who don't go near the water like they're told don't catch fish.

Kenny solved it in a flash. "Heyyawannaknow-what, Dad? A man gave them to us."

"And where was this man? Sitting in his car?"

"Know what? Well, he was stopped for something. Like he had the trunk open, fixing the muffler, and he said: 'You boys want to see something...'"

I bought into the lie and corrected Kenny. "No, he said: 'You boys ever see anything like this?'"

"He showed them to us," Kenny concluded, "and we said – Donnie said – 'cause Donnie isn't used to seeing fish – Donnie said: 'Are they bugs?' and the man just gave them to us."

Kenny's father evidently found our story authentic and left to go help the man with the muffler in his trunk. He never said another word to us about it.

I could brag about what we did with some of the fish. We had already spent untold hours tossing grasshoppers into the webs of giant garden spiders, those fat ones striped with yellow, black, and white that string webs capable of holding a tennis ball. We thought we'd see what a spider would do with a wriggling, bug-sized fish. (Not much, as I recall; left it hanging and returned to the center of the web.) We put some into a canning jar and tried to feed them grass. They starved before they'd eat it.

Kenny thought he'd frighten his sister so he put one in the bottom corner of her underwear drawer. A week later she still hadn't noticed it, and Kenny could hardly find the shrunken, crisp remains. I just had a

real funny feeling about Candace's underwear, so I didn't go in with him to hide it. Kenny dreamed up other notions for using fish to excite his sister, ideas that would have us first catch a shark in the creek.

I didn't share his resolve to agitate Candace Dennett. In all the time I'd been there she had never said an unkind thing to me or about me. I never heard her say anything to Kenny any worse than an observation about his odor or his filthiness, which observations I heartily endorsed even though my more abstract thoughts, such as that, rarely found voice.

Candace was not my enemy, and the more I thought of playing tricks on her the more I recoiled inside. She may have been nearly ephemeral, but her ever-cheerful, if largely unseen, presence was part of the attraction at Kenny's house. I never knew a moment of tension in that home.

What's more, as the summer crested and descended into August, I began to take notice whether Candace was home when I came over. If she wasn't, I found myself disappointed. To my relief she was usually somewhere in the house, but her activities seldom gave rise to any occasion to cross paths with two little boys.

By design I began to steer Kenny more toward indoor pursuits during the hottest part of the season, to the minor irritation of his mom. I wasn't even trying to see Candace, just to be somewhere that allowed me to keep track of her. When she did enter the same room, usually the kitchen, I was careful not to look at her but made an effort conspicuously to be occupied with whatever Kenny was willing to do there with me. Before long he began wordlessly to abandon me inside the house in order to revert, alone, to our customary organic pursuits.

The day I fell in love, Candace was everywhere at once in her family's little house, getting ready to leave for college in another month; searching, collecting, sorting, piling, humming softly, and packing. I was here and there under foot, not intending to encounter her. Abruptly, though, it happened. We came face to face in a doorway, and she paused to regard me openly. Kenny's sister, owner of actual underwear, blithe spirit of the house, grown woman, frankly held my gaze and conferred a petite smile of eternal acceptance. I remember

I stared back. We were alone. She wore denim shorts and a white tee shirt, same as me.

That was when I saw the face. There stood the girl from the monochrome sketches on the sheet music.

My grandma must have wanted to look like that. Maybe she had. Obviously the girl in all the illustrations was supposed to be the most beautiful woman of her time, some sixty years before. And if she were the epitome of beauty back then, she could be no less so now.

As I stared I noticed that Candace Dennett was not much taller than I and probably had no prospect of attaining greater height. I failed to notice much more that would later matter: her contours and the color of her eyes, her fragrance and the shape of her hands and her bare feet.

But I do remember the voice. Candace commanded my gaze with hers, stretched her lips to one side in a sort of half grin, blinked those eyes, and broke the silence with: "I love you, Donald. I just love you." A few moments later, from across the room, she interrupted my statue imitation with: "You're so good for Kenny. Which is good for me. Now go on back out and get dirty again."

Kenny never detected my miserable infatuation. I was miserable for all the right reasons but at the precise wrong decade of my life. From that day forward I couldn't leave Kenny's house to walk home without yearning to know where Candace was at that instant and what she would be doing until I returned. I sat in my own room at night and wondered what time she would be turning off her light, out on the edge of town. I ran to his house as soon as it was decent every morning for the rest of August and sometimes saw her not a minute after she woke up, when she padded to the kitchen and poured coffee. I began to study her more and more openly. These times, with her flowing hair arbitrarily arranged by her pillow, she was the woman. I knew that face.

I couldn't talk directly with Candace, but I was a real conversationalist with Missus Dennett when the three of us, (four if Kenny was up too), sat in the kitchen over breakfast.

Candace never again said that she loved me, but once meant forever to me. I didn't know a thing about love, of course, except that it was something which engulfed me like sinking in a lake, something that

filled my body and made me ache in a way that I couldn't stand and couldn't get enough of. There was no future to think about, only the moment. The most beautiful woman in the world loved almost-ten-year-old me. I was not awakening to a physical attraction either. Didn't know I was supposed to, I suppose. It was only the face.

It wasn't long before we visited my grandma again. While the rest of the household sat about in the kitchen and outside it, I sat on the living room floor, beside the piano, and sifted and re-stacked the pile of music, leaving the choicest pieces on top.

I wished I could play the piano, because I would have memorized all these songs and played them back for Candace Dennett, if her house had had a piano, which it did not. Instead, I tore the bottom quarter from one of the brittle covers and kept her folded picture in my pocket for at least a week. Then it went through the washing machine.

It was about the day after that when Kenny had an idea. "Hey, ya wanna know something?" he began slowly and portentously. (I never answered this. It wasn't intended that I do so. The information or question he had in mind always followed anyway.) "Candace has a boyfriend."

The sweaty weakness and nausea that swept over me at that tidbit, that turned the sinking-in-a-lake sensation to a sinking-in-poison feeling, I now know was shock.

Kenny went on, oblivious. "Ya wanna know something, we could play a trick on her. Not on her, on her boyfriend."

I must have acceded, or else he forged ahead anyhow. "She writes him love letters," Kenny snickered. In a sing-song he added: "She says she's gonna miss him and she wants to feel his hand in her something, her hand I guess, and he better come see her in B.G., and other stuff."

"How'd you see all this?" I finally managed.

"She writes one or two a day and I find them in her room. She hides them but I find them."

I had never seen her with a boyfriend. Never heard of one. Never guessed that she might be that kind of woman. I thought she was the girl in the illustrations: always placidly posing and waiting for nothing in particular. Gazing into my world and loving me.

"She'll be mad if she sees you," I warned.

“She’ll just yell at us and tell us to go get dirty.”

(Us!?)

“What do you mean ‘us’?” I croaked at Kenny.

“Ya wanna know what? Ya wanna do something? Let’s write her boyfriend a love letter and stick it in one of her envelopes.”

“She’ll tell your mom and then we’ll both...”

“Yeah. Well, ya wanna know something? Mom doesn’t know she has a guy. I heard her say she isn’t writing letters to any boy, even when she really is.”

“She won’t tell on us.”

“She won’t tell.”

I warmed to this sort of sabotage, although my inward image of Candace was going to tatters like the scraps that had emerged from the laundry.

By the next day Kenny had procured one of her decorated, pale pink envelopes and a sheet of her writing paper. Kenny had it all composed in his head, but insisted that I put it on paper because I could almost write like a girl. So we began, and with some unexpected help I am able to quote all of it:

*Dearee sweetiepie Paulee,*

[I knew how to spell Paul; it’s my middle name...]

*Kissy kissy lovy dovy smoochy hoochy woochy hony!! I miss you so moch all ready!! And I’m still waking around in my house with toast crums on my bathrobe and on my lips. On my lips. Get it? I want to kissy wissy you and marry you and see you in september. Or maybe never!! Just kidding.*

*With love and hugs and kisses and feely weely and be my hony,*

*Candace, you one true love*

I folded the letter into a tight little lump, the size of the one in my throat, as Kenny declared his sister always did with the notes she sent to this Paul. To our good fortune, Kenny was able to creep into her room while she was off taking a bath, and he found yet another envelope already stuffed with a note. Hers was sealed but not stamped and

needed only to be addressed. We refolded our letter to match the thickness of hers, sealed ours, and Kenny crept back in to give her a perfect substitute in one of her own fancy envelopes before she reappeared.

I don't know what Kenny did with the letter he stole. It might have made a difference then. But it may be better that we didn't know. It might have shaken my world more than the mere, crushing realization that she loved someone else. If Kenny read it, he didn't let on. I suspect that he wouldn't have made sense enough from it.

Candace went on to Bowling Green a few days later. Kenny and I entered fifth grade. Halfway through that year my parents moved us again. Not that far. Back to the next town, the one we'd left to come to Gomer. But that was the last I saw of Kenny and Candace.

Forty-one years have passed. My father died last fall. It took my siblings and mother and me all winter to sift through his clutter and boxes of effects. This *mélange* included two large grocery sacks stuffed full of letters.

"I don't know who he thought would ever read those again," Mom complained.

Pulling out handfuls and scanning the envelopes, we could guess that here were all the letters we had sent home from camp and college and the army, letters from Dad's mother, letters from old family friends. I brought the two sacks home with me and promised to make them my evenings' reading for the rest of the winter. I said I would photocopy any that would be interesting to anyone else in the family and return to my brothers and sister the letters each had sent so long ago.

Late one evening, after everyone else in the house lay asleep, I sat myself on the living room rug, dumped both bags before me, and began a reminiscence with the old letters. I had barely begun turning the envelopes right-side up when I glimpsed the corner of a decorated pink one, and that face thrust itself before my mind's eye, still trying to appear innocent and adorable. Kenny's love note, drafted in my girlish script, wasn't the first to emerge from the pile. It didn't have to be. A different one came out first. For many moments I held a lumpy envelope in my lap without opening it, letting the shock dissipate and the horror sink in.

I shouldn't have done this alone. I'm a big man now, yet this kind of thing deserves a friend's support. But whose? Who would have understood? Kenny? Who would have come and sat with me at this hour? How could I wake my wife and explain to her this betrayal I'd discovered on so many levels?

I unfolded the note in my hand, one from Candace herself to my father – to my father Paul, her Physics teacher and basketball coach. It didn't say much, but enough. Clearly she adored him. Clearly they had met for necking and petting after school. I stirred the pile and collected thirteen more of the fancy envelopes. I scanned these until I found one written from Bowling Green on the day of her arrival as a freshman. It begged him not to come see her. It called off the affair. It apologized for Kenny and Donnie's nasty trick but credited our note for helping her see her folly.

I found our note.

Elsewhere in the pile of letters, in an envelope whose bold blue invited scrutiny, I found one Dad had started for her but evidently couldn't finish. Folded with it was a brittle piece of thick paper now over a hundred years old. The note read:

*Dearest C., Even though I have had your senior picture all spring and it now sits anonymously on my bookcase at home, surrounded by your classmates', this is the image of you that I carry in my heart. I suppose you should know how I will always remember you. It's from the cover of a piece of music..."*

It was that face.

# *The Day I Should Have Died*

*Don Windle*

*Editor's note: Perhaps some true stories are better re-wrapped as fiction. Some, though, are better told as they really happened. Don Windle lives in the aftermath of this true account.*

On May 3, 1945, I should have died. The reason I didn't has remained a question in the back roads of my mind ever since. Was it luck, or fate, or something else? Even now after a half century, on a sleepless night, or musing on a summer day, my mind wanders back to World War II and my ship, the heavy destroyer minelayer *USS Aaron Ward*, as it plowed through the South China Sea 70 miles west of Okinawa. The location scrawled on the navigator's chart was "Radar Picket Station 10." The job of our mini-task force, (the *Aaron Ward*, another destroyer, the *USS Little*, and four small landing craft), was to intercept and shoot down the kamikaze swarms en route from their bases to strike our forces attacking Okinawa. That island was the last Japanese barrier to the gates of Tokyo Bay.

An hour before sunset on May 3rd, 25 kamikazes attacked our mini-task force with suicidal frenzy. During a bloody, 52-minute duel with the sons of the "Divine Wind," our ship erupted into a holocaust of flames and death. Six kamikazes, three carrying 500-pound bombs, crashed aboard our ship, spewing ammunition, gasoline and airplane parts.

During the action, 42 men were killed and 100 of the 330-man crew were critically injured. The explosions blew some of our men into the sea; others leaped over the side of the ship to escape the fire. When the *Aaron Ward*, dangerously listing with only 18 inches of freeboard between the main deck and the frothy sea, didn't sink, several sailors crawled back aboard.

Then, in total blackness because we had lost all power, the *Ward* wallowed in a kind sea until the *USS Shannon*, a sister destroyer, towed us to a safe haven. Early in the battle, Kamikazes hit the *Little* and the support craft LSM(R) 195 and sank them.

I had joined the *Aaron Ward* at its commissioning in San Pedro, California on October 28, 1944, as a seaman first class in the First Division. Even before I joined the *Aaron Ward* I had trained extensively to master the 20mm anti-aircraft gun that spewed death to anything in killing range – 2,000 yards. No one then thought Japanese pilots would fly right down the muzzles of our guns.

I was elated when our gunnery officer, Lieutenant David Rubel, handed me command of my own 20mm gun on the starboard side of the ship beneath the bridge, the nerve center of the destroyer. It was also in the shadow of Gun Mount Two, a twin 5-inch turret which used a 26-pound canister of black powder to propel a 52-pound projectile toward the enemy.

My joy at having my own gun to track and point and shoot at the enemy faded during practice on our shakedown cruise. That was the first time the twin 5-inchers trained 90 degrees to starboard and, at a point almost over our heads, fired twin salvos. For my gun crew and me, who were on an open deck, the concussion was torturous. It felt like huge hands squeezing every square inch of my body with hundreds of pounds of pressure. A tornado of smoke, powder residue, and choking heat enveloped us. We felt it would shred our skin. That it didn't was little consolation at the time.

Almost at that moment I decided I had to get away from the crushing fury of those twin 5-inchers. I knew another seaman first class in the Second Division. He, too, was gunner on a 20mm gun on the aft part of the ship – a respectable distance from any 5-inch muzzles. Furthermore, I knew that seaman wanted to be with close friends who were in my division.

So we struck a deal. We'd swap battle stations if our division officers and the gunnery officer would go for it. I didn't tell my shipmate about the big guns that I was trying to ditch.

Swapping was not a simple matter since it involved changing our work stations and living quarters as well as battle stations. Lieutenant

Rubel, the gunnery officer, had carefully picked each man for his battle station. We knew he wouldn't like his blueprint for battle altered, especially as we cruised deeper into enemy waters.

Simultaneously, we formally requested a swap. It took a month for our leading chiefs and division officers to approve. By this time we were deep in the Pacific headed rapidly into harm's way. Then it was up to Lieutenant Rubel. He said he would think about it.

Suddenly, we were in a very active war zone and were forever at our battle stations. Lieutenant Rubel was immersed in keeping his guns ready to blast the enemy from the sky. I kept asking him about the swap. He continued to procrastinate, although he agreed that since both my shipmate and I had the same qualifications we could function equally well on either 20mm. The change was an administrative task he said he would try to get to soon.

By then we were off Okinawa and the invasion of the island fortress was underway. Our ship engaged the enemy every day. Sometimes we came under attack several times during the day and night. The twin 5-inchers relentlessly hurled projectiles at the enemy and enveloped my gun mount with smoke and flames and concussion.

On May 1, during a lull in battle, my persistence paid off when I again asked Lieutenant Rubel about the swap. "Okay," he snapped. "I'll make the change next week." I felt relieved.

Two days later, May 3, at 6:22 p.m., an urgent call to general quarters scrambled all hands to their battle stations. Those of us on deck were awed by the sight of 25 kamikazes zooming in for the kill. The 5-inchers whammed as the 40mm and 20mm opened fire at the planes closing in.

Japanese planes started their suicide runs, sometimes two at a time. Planes seemed to fill the sky.

I was reminded of the time when I was a little boy and whacked a wasps' nest with a stick. But the planes had deadlier stings. Within minutes the *Little* blew up amidships and sank; LSM(R) 195, almost vaporized by a direct hit, sank; six planes crashed aboard the *Aaron Ward* and we shot down five of the other attacking kamikazes. The concussion from the 5-inchers was the least of my concerns at that time.

The plane that remains most vivid in my mind is the Japanese Val that started its steep suicide dive on the starboard side. When it got within 2,000 yards, I pulled the trigger on my 20mm. Although hit, the Val kept coming. The pilot was aiming for the bridge above me. A hit on the bridge would wipe us out, too. Because of our firing – or maybe for another reason, the Val altered course slightly and sliced between the bridge and the number one stack, clipping it with a wing before sloughing into the sea on the port side.

When the attack ended, our ship lay dead in the water, its electrical system destroyed by fire. Fires raged and live ammunition exploded all over the ship. With nothing left to shoot at, my gun crew and I scrambled down to the main deck and ran aft to fight fires and aid the injured.

I had felt the shudder as each plane and bomb hit the ship. But I wasn't prepared for the carnage we saw; the twisted metal, blown up gun tubs, parts of planes and, worst of all, the bodies of my shipmates.

We fought fires and aided the injured and dying. As we worked, a part of my mind searched for something. But what? Then it registered suddenly, powerfully, sickeningly: The 20mm gun station I had worked so desperately to get transferred to, no longer existed. Later I was told one of the planes carrying a 500-pound bomb made a direct hit on that gun station.

No one at that gun had survived. My shipmate, who had agreed to swap his gun station for mine, was never found. He was one of 20 men who had been blown overboard and never recovered.

Feelings of joy at being alive clashed with feelings of guilt. Within two days my shipmate would have been on my gun station, and I would have been on his. Why was my life spared? Was it simply because Lieutenant Rubel procrastinated? Was it sheer luck? Was it fate?

Or was there divine intervention – a hidden hand that spared my life? At the time I didn't consciously resolve those questions, but my outlook on life and its meaning changed in a way that has affected me ever since.

## *Mercedes*

*Deb Hartrum*

*Spirit song longing, screams for cure  
Moving swiftly towards home in painful joy.  
Wonderment in the obscene of diseased eyes  
Inside warm with love's wanting light*

*Arms that hold the blood, drop the bottle  
Once too often.  
Watch the river flow away from the caress  
Withering the vital fluids into sunken valleys.*

*Nights fade with dawn's rising.  
Blue is but a filmy glaze  
No more tears to soak your bed  
Mingling with ooze and sweat.*

*The ship leaves harbor.  
Wave goodbye but not forever.  
Look ahead they wave hello  
Alas a port of fears no more.*

*Oh to be in Grace belonging  
Fills her hearts with autumn s sun  
Gentle arms gather the remains  
Silent in leaves of color*

*Don t look back oh heart doubting  
Pick up the pieces and dance  
Your song is finally playing  
To the winds of eternity*

*The curtain is rising in velvet air  
Your ship comes over the horizon  
Are you ready? Do you hear it?  
The applause Mercedes is for you.*

*Her Golden hair fills the stage of angels  
Gazelle like limbs float in the breeze  
Silken skin glistens  
She smiles now.*

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## *About the Authors*

*All of the authors may be reached by contacting editor@damnyankee.com. Some may be reached as well through addresses included below.*

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**Cindy Appel** is a weekly online columnist, monthly computer humor columnist, struggling novelist, freelance article writer and confused mother, wife and woman (not necessarily in that order). You can read her award-winning column, "Every Day \*Is\* Mother's Day" at: <http://www.star-telegram.com/homes/cappel/columns/momsday.htm>. Her articles and inspirational essays have appeared in over twenty online and print publications. Her book and theatre review skills landed her an honorable mention in the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors contest for commentary/criticism. Her short fiction has appeared online and in fanzines. A woman of diverse talents, she belongs to the Missouri chapter of the Romance Writers of America and is a new member of the Sweet Adelines International.

*Cindy appreciates any advice, ideas, or agents' addresses you send her way. Apart from those items, cash is always welcome. Tens and twenties will be fine.*

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**Pat Brown**, who resides in London, Ontario, is a science fiction writer currently putting the finishing touches to the first book in a trilogy tentatively called the *Autarch Quest*. She is also the webmaster of a science fiction critiquing group, *SFNovelist*.

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**Michelle Buckman** *has been writing since early childhood, but didn't approach the art seriously until the birth of her first child in 1988, when she simultaneously landed a contract for a software manual and tackled her first novel. Her writing continues to encompass a variety of works from technical to fiction. She lives in the Charlotte area with her husband, four children, and a menagerie of pets.*

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**Terry Burns** *characterizes himself as a 5th-generation Irish storyteller who coincidentally happens to be a 4th- generation Texas teller of tall tales. "Spinning yarns is as natural to me as breathing." He pursued a 27-year career managing chambers of commerce and, meanwhile, published a substantial body of non-fiction work but pronounced it "voracious, consumed all my words." Now Terry enjoys telling his tales for fun and entertainment.*

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**Mary Sullivan Esseff** *has been writing stories since she was in high school and gives them as gifts to her children at Christmas. Further stories of Khalil can be found in her novel, The Butterfly and the Snail. She lives in the Maryland countryside with her soul mate, husband for thirty-three years, and business partner, Peter. She boasts of three beautiful adult children: Jeanne, a Creative Memories consultant, who together with her husband, Joe, has produced two of the most beautiful, delightful grandchildren in the world, Cecelia and Julianne; Sr. Rosemary, a Dominican Sister, a gifted musician and conductor; and Pete, a brilliant young man just waiting to set the world on fire. Mary is well known as an Instructional Technologist. Her non-fiction works can be found on her company's Webster, <http://www.ESF-ProTrainer.com>. She is grateful to God for the many blessings and gifts showered on her and her family. She is also grateful to the overwhelming love and support she receives from her family, friends, and writers at [darkstormy.com](http://darkstormy.com). Along with David A.*

*Woodbury, Mary coordinated the production and print publication of this volume.*

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**Deb Hartrum** *describes herself: Raised in Burbank, California, I lost myself in psychotic cinematic world of studio life. I have often thought about writing about that period of my life, but I think Harold Robbins is one up on me.*

*Most of my writing revolves around academic material. Published this year, my Family Character Values curriculum is currently under construction at <http://www.acu.org> (click on the Band-Aid).*

*My passion for religious studies and history entices me into all sorts of chat rooms where debates are hot and bothered and most of the time never resolved. These exercises in communication are often immortalized in my journal writing, waiting for the spark to ignite the right words that will develop a fiction masterpiece.*

*In the meantime, I am writing a children's series that is followed closely by my own children. I home school four boys, which is my greatest blessing.*

*Published works: Gender Difference in Communication, College of Wooster, First Year Forum Journal, 1993. The Development of Children in Amish Society, The Blackboard Bulletin, 1993. Trinidad/Tobago Americans, also Jamaica/Jamaican Americans, The Encyclopedia of Religious Studies, Byline, 1994. Family Character Values, American Christian University, 1999.*

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**Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández** *was born in Uvalde, Texas. She grew up in San Antonio and attended San Antonio Junior College, the first member of her family to ever go to college. Here she met*

*and married a military man and moved to Vermont, where Jo Ann discovered snow and more snow and raising two boys alone.*

*Jo Ann tells of her first experience with independence: “In 1980, this was the moment to experience a special kind of freedom for women. I remember the first time I pumped gas into my car, and I wanted to shout at the cars passing by to tell them that this was the first time I had ever pumped gas in my life. Look at me! I’m independent! I only spilled a little bit on my sneakers.”*

*When she was 33 a friend persuaded her to return to college. She started out taking psychology and writing. “In my second or third writing class, a student who had read the story I handed out the week before leaned over and whispered to me, ‘I didn’t know they let professional writers into this class?’ I looked all around the classroom, trying to guess who he was talking about.*

*“I became involved with No Limits for Women in the Arts in 1989 and proceeded to learn that I was a real writer. They supported me in believing that this world would appreciate what I had to say.*

*“In 1993 I ran away from home and earned a Master of Creative Writing at the University of San Francisco in 1995. A year later, White Bread Competition, a collection of short stories, was published.”*

*Jo Ann has published a number of stories in magazines, with several winning prizes. Her novel, Aftermath, won third place for best novel in the Chicano/Latino Literary Prize Competition at the University of California. The next year, White Bread Competition won second place for best collection of short stories at the same competition.*

*She created BronzeWord (<http://www.bronzeworld.com>) to assist women and writers of color to write and to promote their writing*

*in a world that makes it very difficult to become successful as a writer. “I learned the tricks, so why re-invent the wheel? I could do for others what I learned to do for myself.*

*“Currently, I am looking for a home for myself and a publisher for my three manuscripts. At the same time, I am attempting to make a go of BronzeWord to assist other writers and waiting for the call from Oprah.”*

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**b.j. lawry** *has been a writer and editor for magazines and newspapers throughout the country, covering architecture and the building trades for magazines and everything from medicine to government to crime to investigative pieces for newspapers. She has won prizes for both fiction and non-fiction and has had some fiction published in minor publications, including newspaper supplements. Retired after more than 30 years writing for pay in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Las Vegas and the New York Metropolitan Area, she now lives in a quiet Arkansas town on the banks of the White River, where she is writing fiction full-time – hopefully for more pay – and learning how to trick a trout. She also writes and edits a (volunteer) community newsletter. She is divorced, the mother of four and the grandmother of four.*

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**Michael S. Ostlund** *currently lives in Texas. He grew up in Minnesota and lived most of his adult life in Southern California. He is a Viet Nam veteran and a retired police officer. He holds degrees in Administration of Justice and Law. He logged over 23,000 miles while living aboard his 41’ sailboat for ten years along with his wife, Deanna. He writes fiction tainted from personal experience. In addition to several short stories, he has written two unpublished novels: Retired Into Darkness (see excerpt at <http://www.darkstormy.com>) and Team Eight. Both are adult action adventure novels about boats and cops.*

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**Lee Smith** was born in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania in 1935, worked in shipbuilding and building construction for 18 years, taught high school and college for 25 years, and has been the president of two teacher's unions. He has a Master's degree in education and an associate degree in Applied Science and Technology. He has authored four books for Delmar Publishers, Albany New York, and four computer programs for Ebsco Curriculum Development, Birmingham Alabama. In addition he has edited a half-dozen newsletters, written a newspaper column, and published the stories, "The Bells of Tinsley Parish" and "The Window Kisser," with Moondance magazine.

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**Douglas C. Smyth** lives and writes in New York's Hudson Valley. He has published short stories, co-written a novelization of a screen-play that was subsequently published, and has several novels with an agent (listed at <http://www.highvalley.org/dnovels.html>), the latest of which won a novel-in-progress award at *Frontiers in Writing* 1999. He also does free-lance writing for Grolier and other firms. He taught at colleges in Florida and New York for 27 years and for a college-in-prison program in upstate New York.

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**Gabriel Stevens** chooses anonymity.

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**James R. Wiley** is a writer with eclectic tastes and philosophies. Another version of this story originally appeared in serialized version as "Time Was..." in *The Cimmerian Journal* in 1995.

*Other tales of the young Stephen's ventures into other worlds – of ghosts and spirits from other times – have appeared in ELF: Eclectic Literary Forum. "Historical Narratives," speculations on ancestral origins, has appeared in a number of print and e-zine media. He writes from his home in Akron, Ohio, aided by his*

*cat, Boots, who appeared in his own story in the January/February, 1999 issue of Cats & Kittens.*

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**Don Windle** *is a retired Naval Civil Engineer Corps officer (the officer component of the Seabees), now living in the mountains east of Redding, California. Don says he can't rationalize why he decided to be a writer. "Maybe it's because I like solitude. It sure wasn't because of my background in a primary requisite for writing – grammar. I detested that stuff when I was a kid and did everything I could to antagonize every English teacher I encountered. Now, oh how I wish I had learned to diagram sentences. I stumble around correct grammar like a drunken sailor."*

*Don's first novel, Ciao, My Love, a light romance set in Sicily, was completed over twenty years ago. About ten years ago he completed a second novel, Where Bees Swarm, about the Seabees in Vietnam (where he voluntarily spent a year of his life). It isn't the typical blood-and-guts story about Vietnam, but more about the support forces, and has an uplifting romantic subplot.*

*He is now working on a novel with the working title, Implosion, set early in the next century. It deals with what could happen if our high-tech society fails, beginning with a computer virus, then fueled by man's greed. This novel is about 90% complete, but Don is struggling with the appropriate ending.*

*Don has written several essays about incidents during his Navy career and plans to write more. He also wrote a brief biography of his childhood, "The Adventurous Boy," mostly for his grandchildren and says he has "several novels in my head that need to find their way onto my hard drive. So I figure that I need to live to be at least 95 in order to get them all done." His other publications include the booklets "Why Be A Christian" as well as "The Last Puff," on quitting smoking.*

*Late in 1998 Don decided to publish his writings on the Internet. He opened the site to other writers, also. Both of his novels are parked there along with several essays. The name of the company is The Open Press.*

*Don and his wife, Bessie, travel to Texas at least twice a year; grandchildren are strong magnets.*

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**Susan Shell Winston** *writes fantasy novels in a non-fantasy state called Texas. She is a graduate of Jeanne Cavelos's Odyssey Workshop for fantasy writers and has taught courses in novel writing for high school students. She is currently one of the fiction editors at Darkstormy.com.*

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**David A. Woodbury** *grew up in Lima, Ohio, during the '50s and '60s, where the world's finest steam locomotives were crafted and whose whistles, even in those days, occasionally still accompanied the night wind when dry leaves clattered under a haloed blue moon.*

*David is the editor and publisher at DamnYankee.com and coordinated the production and publication of this volume. He lives part-time in TIR9, Maine and part-time in the next town, Millinocket.*

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