

the 15 year anniversary issue

the UN-elgout,
NON-amily-oriented
theory & art mag

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children
churches
& daddies

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anniversary)



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5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 22 (the White House). Cover art of burnt wood, remnants from a Katrina home, photographed 12/31/06.

Every Little Death

Tanya Rucosky Noakes

They were both lying to begin with, neither of them meant the word, "Love," fucking like cats in the gray dawn light, tearing passionlessly at each other they way they both climaxed alone, and dressed quickly and silently. Afterward, the room was still cold.

Fearing the Candidacy Reaper

I have been watching the just-about weekly caucuses and primaries for this election, and I have seen the Democrats battling it out like you wouldn't believe. In the beginning, Hillary Clinton was the shoe-in for becoming the Democrat candidate for the 2008 Presidential election (not because she's a woman, of course, but because she's attached to Bill Clinton and the Clinton political machine). But this gleaming prospective nominee came into the spotlight, and Barrack Obama gave generic speeches of "hope" (something you resort to when nothing else works) and "change" (something most every Democrat wants, after dealing with 8 years of the President Bush kakistocracy), wooing everyone over to his side.

I have been asked who I would vote for, and I said I wouldn't vote for either one of them. So I was then asked if I had a choice of the two, who would I pick... Now, I haven't scrutinized the platforms of each candidate *that* much, but when I heard Sen. Clinton talk about pushing universal healthcare through onto the American people, I immediately recoiled. I mean, in lofty vogue terms it seems like a good idea, but in practice it fails miserably, where insanely long waiting lists have to be made for necessary operations, and sub-standard care is all that is available (because there is not enough money for the health system we currently have to offer those services to every person in the country, even after the inevitable massive hike in takes to pay for this).

Oh, I'm sorry, I'm going on without backing this up. Check out future editorials "U.S. Healthcare & Canadian Healthcare" (<http://www.janetkuypers.com/kuypers/prose/2007/u-s-healthcare-and-canadian-healthcare.htm>) or <http://www.janetkuypers.com/kuypers/prose/2008/free-healthcare-and-the-poor.htm> with the editorial "Free Healthcare and the Poor" that shows how Canadians do pay an additional amount so they might be able to see doctors and in Europe they don't have the money to take care of people with more chronic illnesses... I don't want to make the same arguments again, so please check them out to know why the idea of universal healthcare is not a good idea.

But making this decision alone was enough to make me say that I wouldn't want to vote for Sen. Clinton.

But then I think of the fact that there is a decent chance that the

Democrat candidate (Clinton or Obama) will beat McCain and become the next President, so a part of me feels like I should be pleased that a talented woman could actually become President. The side of me that cares about women being treated equally should really be pleased that Clinton could pull this off. Some would say that that alone might be reason enough to sway me to vote for a viable woman for President.

But the thing is, that same emotional side of me should also think then that I should be voting for Obama, since he is representing Illinois (I'm the Chicago girl, I have to have some loyalty somewhere, don't I?).

But I have heard people talk about his speeches and what a great orator he is, and I'm sorry, but every time I hear him speak (oftentimes even when he is reciting a practiced, overly-prepared speech) he pauses too much. And I seriously think that I could make a drinking game out of doing a shot every time he says "uh" in the middle of his sentences, and I would be hammered within 15 minutes.

Obama's speeches and speaking abilities have greatly improved since the beginning of these debates (good thing they're taking so long, he's got time to clean up the way he speaks with all of the speeches he has been having to make), and I can tell (even from early speeches) that he's saying things stylistically to make you think of Rev. Martin Luther King (which everyone is wooed by, even me). He's saying those generic vague lines very well, and it's pulling at a lot of people's heart strings.

And in light of all of these debates, I really *don't* know what his positions are on a lot of things, because he usually just talks about vague ideas and nothing concrete. The only thing I *have* heard is that according to voting records, people have said Obama is more liberal than Clinton.

And Sen. Clinton wants universal healthcare (that's so liberal it's socialist). And Obama is even *more* liberal than her?

Okay, I really don't need to be thinking about who I'd vote for; I've just been watching the 24-hour drive-by media so much that I really feel like I'm embroiled in this long-running debate. But I just watched the West Virginia Primaries this week, and Sen. Clinton won them over big time. And a lot of people have been telling her to get out of the race, that it's clearly Obama that should be running (it's funny, I just keep thinking that like how the white men gave blacks *then* women the right to vote, I think people are more comfortable with the idea of Barack Obama being a black man as President than Hillary Clinton being a white *woman* as President...). But when I listen to her speeches, she does make a point: she wins the big states, which will *need* to be won by a Democrat in order to become President. She was

able to pull off Ohio, and is begging to have them include Florida. Clinton has won over most of the northeast states, California and Mexico border states... It seems to be in the more rural areas is where Obama is able to get people's attention. She even noted that every Democrat that was President of this country since like 1903 won West Virginia (which she did).

And maybe the West Virginia argument really isn't a valid one, but she does have a point with the big states. When you're battling McCain for the Presidency, you have to be able to pull these large victories to beat your opponent. People keep talking about the fact that Obama has won more states, but they have been smaller states, where he is able to make more of a grass-root appeal to people to win their vote.

So when Clinton is saying that Obama cannot get votes from a wider racial and financial groups in the country, Obama seems to be trying to appeal to lower economic levels (you know, to hopefully make him look less stuffy, since that's the wrap he's been getting). John Edwards just endorsed Obama, which may pull a different group of supporters to Obama's side. Now, I am writing this in the middle of May, and this issue will be released just at the climax of the Clinton and Obama debates, so it will be fascinating to see how the final minutes of this insanely long nomination process will unfold.

News sources have been saying that Obama would be a stronger candidate against McCain than Clinton would, but comparing head to head polls (<http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/national.html>) currently Senators Clinton and Obama have the *same* advantage percentage-wise over McCain.

What is sad is that after all of this debating between Clinton and Obama (along with the media and both Clinton and Obama even saying that they are very politically similar), is that there are Democrats that have said that if the person they're supporting doesn't claim the candidacy for the Democrats, they would either not vote or vote for McCain instead of vote for the other Democrat Candidate for President. And it's funny, I listen to scraps of Rush Limbaugh every once in a while in the car (it's odd, Chicago is more Democrat than Republican, but it's next to impossible to find a non-Republican radio show on the dial...), and he calls his efforts "Operation Chaos," to have his Republican lackeys vote for Clinton in the primaries, just to make the whole Democrat nomination process that much more difficult to understand. And i'm sure Rush probably takes credit for the length of this Democrat nomination, but we'd guess that his pleading with people probably accounts for only a few

thousand votes going toward Clinton.

I can't even explain why people are flocking to Obama's side instead of Clinton's for support in this nomination when all Obama seems to give are generalities to appease and soothe the restless masses down. But my husband made a good point (not a politically correct point, but possibly a valid one). A lot of people seem to be supporting Obama for the Democrat nominee, a part of them might make the decision to support him because on some level it might make them feel *good* to support an African American. He seems like a good candidate, and supporting him in this process makes them look like they are not bigoted or racist.

But with all of this in the mix, you really have no idea how every-

thing is actually honestly turning out in the first place. But when we are so close to the final decision being made for the Democrat nomination, it will be fascinating to see how everything actually ends up falling into place.



Janet Kuypers
Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief



Southbound, painting by Aaron Wilder

I Don't Know What I Was Betting On

I've never been one to gamble. I've never liked the idea of giving away money on chance, when the house always wins (if they didn't, Vegas wouldn't survive, not Atlantic City, or Biloxi, or all of those damn riverboats where people can gamble ... or even the lottery in every state of the country). When I was 18, my parents took me and my sister with them to Las Vegas, and they even handed me a token and sat me down at a slot machine and told me to play. Before I could do anything with the coin, someone came up and asked to see my I.D., so I said we left it in the hotel room and we walked away.

Good thing they stopped me. I didn't want to gamble anyway.

In fact, since I couldn't gamble (my sister was old enough, but someone had to be around me while mom and dad gambled) mom and dad decided to go to Circus Circus to gamble, and dad gave my sister and I \$20.00 to "go off and enjoy ourselves." So when we left them to go toward the carnival-like section of the casino, I even offered to my sister that we could just split the twenty bucks and be in the lead, but she insisted that we do spend the money somehow at all the carnival-like activities. I even remember spending time at one booth where the back wall was filled with balloons (literally filled), and you got three darts to try to throw them at the wall and break any of the balloons. When you broke a balloon, you won a little prize (a really small stuffed animal, like I wanted that). And so my sister gave me some darts, and I'd throw one, and I'd break a balloon. Then I'd throw another dart, and I'd break another balloon, and I'd win little stuffed animal toys. And then my sister would take three darts, and I'd watch her throw one, and it was like she was throwing it in a light arc, and I'd watch the dart arch up into the air, and as it came back down toward the wall, we'd watch the dart bounce right off one of the balloons and before it bounced to the floor.

This happened to her more than once, so I gave her the toys I won.

But since then I've been to Las Vegas twice, and I had no desire to gamble either time. Once we even stopped to watch Michael Jordan and the Bulls playing basketball at a betting room because it was on the monitors, and we got free beer while we watched a little of the game. I even was laid over in Las Vegas recently (I took a flight from Seattle to Chicago with a layover in Denver, and the flight from Seattle to Denver was cancelled, so hours after our flight was cancelled we got a flight to Las Vegas, where we waited for hours for a flight back to Denver, before we got home, 21 hours after we started our trip), and when I saw slot machines in the airport, I was almost tempted to drop something in to say I've played something in Las Vegas once.





Because if I have ever been involved with games of pure chance (like playing slots, to buying lottery cards), I have always failed. So I don't buy them; it's a waste of money. Once recently I was even at a church dinner, and the entire night they were selling card tickets so people could win money (because they have to get their money from more than the weekly collection plate, I suppose). My brother-in-law was buying these little cards like mad at \$1 each, he'd give \$5, pick 5 from the end of the grid, and losing with all of his tickets, then paying for more the next time someone came around selling more

"chances" to win big. Finally he asked me to pick one that he paid for, so I looked at the choices and picked one from another row, not at the end but in the middle somewhere, and when he opened it, he won \$5.

But I know better; I know that these tickets are placed on there with no chance to see the numbers inside, so my picking that card was purely chance.

And the chances of pulling a slot machine and winning are even slimmer than picking a card from a stack on a sheet for someone working with the church.

So I don't pay to play games of chance.

But I thought that since I was in Las Vegas (for the first time at the airport, actually), I'd pay money for one pull of a slot machine, knowing I wouldn't win, but just so I could say I played a slot machine in Las Vegas (even if it was only the airport). But I didn't have any coins small enough to play just once, so I let it slide.

I didn't "let it ride," which is a game you can bet on when you gamble, if you like to play poker (which has become the gambling rave now, ever since they decided to actually show people playing on cable, like watching people with sunglasses on indoors try to bluff their opponents). And right now I'm visiting my father, because he wanted someone to go with him to Tunica for a tourist travel weekend to gamble. You see, usually my big brother usually goes with dad (they both like to gamble), but he couldn't make it for this trip, so I offered to go with my dad (because he really wanted to go, and he didn't want to go alone). So here I am, thinking about helping my dad around while he gambles for a few days, while I watch. I think he said he'd get a "card" for me so I could play.



Lucky me. I get to gamble in Tunica. And it's not even betting on anything in Vegas, like a small part of me wanted to do so I could have said I gambled there (even if it was just a slot machine once at the

Las Vegas airport).

Actually, I just asked my dad what a day was normally like for him there, and he said that he had breakfast, then gambled, then sometimes skipped lunch while gambling all day.

Wow. So this means I'll get to sit and watch him all day gamble. I didn't realize exactly what I was in for when I offered to join him on this trip.

Dad told me that it is always really air-conditioned in the casinos; he told me to bring a jacket or a sweater along, and I have two pairs of pants and the zipper jacket to always have with me when I'm in the casino. Dad said he wore shorts, but he brought a jacket along because it was always so cold. Then he said that it was probably so that people wouldn't get warm in the casino and want to leave. And speaking of using methods to make people want to gamble in a casino, I've even heard that the creators of these slot machines have even made sure that the sounds they generate (when they're spinning, and when a turn wins or loses) makes sounds in certain pitches that are more harmonious, and don't upset people who happen to listen to them (in other words, they even make sure the sounds their machines generate make people feel happier about losing, and more inclined to gamble more). So, maybe going to Tunica will at least be a good experiment for me to watch people in this environment.

So we leave tomorrow morning to take an airplane flight, before we take a long bus ride to the casino for this tourist weekend where I watch my father gamble morning, noon and night.

Okay, it's been one day here, and it has been strange. We took a flight, and there was a \$1 prize drawing (you won a golf baseball cap, which neither of us wanted) and a \$5 drawing (for the remaining cash). He gave money for both of us, and neither of us won.

Should have been a sign.

But anyway, we were flying to Tunica, and I couldn't help but notice the clouds in the sky we flew over. Unlike that I'm used to seeing when I fly out of Chicago (when there are clouds, the sky is covered with them, and it becomes a thick blanket entirely separating you from the ground), the clouds looks like little puff balls scattered almost into neat little rows below us. It was actually quite pretty.

It might have something to do with our elevation on our flight, because I don't know how big this plane was, but I remember the captain saying over the speakers to the flight crew, that they were passing the 10,000 mark. I'm used to larger flights that usually hover over 30,000 feet, and this flight (which was half to two thirds the difference to Chicago from southwest Florida, which is normally a 2 hour 20 minute flight) was over 2 hours long (actually, more like 2 hours, 10 minutes). But I had to check into this: it was a 737, and the pilot even said they range between 30,000 and 35,000 feet, but it was a SkyKing airplane, and



part of the reason these flights take so long is because they are a smaller plane from a small airline company. As they fly they usually get directions to either (A) slow down to accommodate a larger, well-known filled airline, or (B) take a course that is out of the way because other airlines are using a similar route.

After flying directly to Tunica, I found out that there was a chance that

we might not be able to land the plane there ... not only was the runway really short (for this airport is small and probably only a year or two old), but also because the runways collect heat from the sun during the day because of what they were made of, and the heat from the ground might actually help to force the airplane off the ground for such a short runway. But we flew into the airport in the morning, so there was no problem. We were driving to the casino hotel after the flight landed, and we were offered a limo instead of a bus. Dad said he couldn't sit in a limo (physically unable to do so), so, lucky us, we took a bus instead. So on the bus ride I saw cotton fields (they looked really kind of cool, with little tufts of cotton like little cotton balls, at the end of a branched off of rows of tiny trees.

Then again, we also passed the Tunica Museum. I leaned over to dad and asked quietly, "what exactly is in the Tunica Museum?"

So once we were in the casino, dad went to play PaiGow Poker, then a little blackjack, then 3 Card Poker (I know nothing at all about poker, so this was a learning experience, watching him play different variations of a 5 card concept of poker, trust me). He hot me a card and put \$20 on it, then showed me how to play the slot machines, spending a little under \$3 of the \$20 he put on the card. So I went to a slot machine (although they all have different facades, they all pretty much sounds the same and do the same thing, just give you an option of how much money you want to lose at every slot machine pull, which is really only pressing on a button on the slot machine console). I lost about a dollar, then quite and went to find dad and watch him play again. I walked with him to the doorway of the men's room, and decided to play a slot machine nearby, and when I placed my card in which said I have over \$16.00, it immediately printed another card (without letting me do anything), saying I had 15 cents left on the card.

I didn't spend that money, it just disappeared, and there was nothing I could do about it.

When I told dad, he checked the machine, and then put another \$20 on my card, and he played a nearby slot machine with me as I dwindled the total back down to 15 cents.

I really don't get why people play slot machines. They are a ton of machines that make the same key sounds, and the casino sounds like a toy store on acid or something, with the way the place sounds.

But anyway, I then walked toward the “Wheel of Torture” ... I mean, Wheel of Fortune ... slot machines, which were only 15 each a pull, So then Dad gave me another \$10, and I blew all of that money.

Wise investment.

How can people actually think this is fun?

Well anyway, after that I watched dad play video poker. He did that a few times during the day, and back in Chicago when I see these video poker sets there's usually one at the end of the bar and it makes absolutely no sense that they are in a bar and I can't imagine anyone ever playing one in a bar when you usually go to a bar to hang out and talk with people, not play video poker). But dad was playing, and we were giving tips for the free drinks we were getting, and I have to say I was actually having fun. I don't know, maybe it was because I was somehow involved with something that dad did (even though I wasn't gambling, and it was nice to do, even for only on time in our lives.

After we had a comped dinner (which was quite nice, we had a nice Reisling wine and the eggplant parmesan was good and they played big band music the whole time), dad went back to the casino, and left his motorized wheelchair thing in the hall do he could get to a seat. I tried to physically lift to move this thing out of the hall because dad just left it there, and I lifted the seat out of the motorized unit. Obviously, dad was pissed (that's what he gets for leaving his shit out for others to clean up for him), so I called to have someone come fix it. Because dad gets to anxious, I lifted the chair seat and put it back into position, so all seemed fine and he left without having anyone look at his chair.

Granted, he said after that the chair part of the motorized wheelchair thing now rotated, which it never did before, and apparently that was bad, but he didn't want anyone to look at the chair. Of course not.

Personally, I thought having the chair be rotatable was kind of nice, but dad likes to complain.

Then he went to the craps table, and he lost a lot of money really fast (versus losing some, then winning some back at the blackjack table), so he decided to call it a night and I got to bring him back to the hotel room.

Good thing I told him there was a season premier of CSI in Last Vegas on that night I really wanted to watch.

On the second day I was here, a woman behind the bar at the casino told me (after I explained to her what happened in the season premiere episode of CSI) that I looked like Sara Sidle. The character Sara Sidle is tall (probably five feet ten inches), has brown hair about my length, and it is usually straight (like how I straighten my hair now), though it is sometimes curly (like mine). So I thought, great, I look like her, but she is thinner.

Oh well, it's better than people telling me I looks like Molly Shannon from Saturday Night Live ... I might have a personality like her, but I am *definitely* not as heavy as her. I'm sure of it.

On some levels, it is novel to hear her for my father, and on some levels it is novel to hear the odd synchronization of the hundreds of the separate slot machines randomly making noise all at once in a large hall (you would think that hundreds of machines making different noises at different times would be jarring, but they all make noises in the same key and it almost becomes like one large orchestra tuning up, and it doesn't bother you to hear it when you walk through the casino), but I don't gamble.

Couple that with the fact that there are no windows in any of the casinos, that no one has a clue to the time ... no one feels the need to even eat a meal. So with the lighting always the same and the air condition always blasted, you never have a concept of the time of day.

So on later trips through the casinos, dad would take me with \$20 each to 25 cent slot machines. And you know you can win, but you win enough to come out ahead (trust me), so apparently my dad's idea of having fun is sitting here and playing slots until you're out of money. What's the point? Is spending money by pressing buttons over and over again (to imply pulling on a slot machine repeatedly instead of actually moving your arm) supposed to be fun?

I just got back from this trip, and I still don't know what to make of it. I gambled with slot machines, but I gambled with my father's money (hardly like actually gambling on my own, on what I wanted to do). Dad had better luck at "Black Jack Plus Three" (which meant that you could possibly use one of the dealer's cards to make a poker-like hand; if you could do that you'd make much more money than you would at winning a hand of Black Jack) than he did a "Let It Ride" (I still couldn't tell you how to play that version of poker, but he lost something in 99% of his hands, it was awful). He had luck by finding a good craps shooter at a craps table (made a few hundred bucks there), but with losses at other places, you seldom end up ahead of the game at a casino.

A few dealers would ask me (since I was standing behind my father betting at a table) if I was playing, and I would say no, that I don't gamble. And a few of them even said to me good, that was a smart decision.

Because it's as I've always said, the house always wins. If it didn't, the casinos couldn't stay in business...



Janet Kuypers®
Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief

I'm a Riverboat Boy: Poem on Halsted Street

Michael Lee Johnson

As sure as church bells
Sunday morning, ringing
on Halsted and State Street,
Chicago,
these memories will
be soon forgotten.
I stumble in my life with these words
like broken sentences.
I hear and denounce myself in the distance,
mumbling chatter off my lips.
Fragments and chips.
Swearing at the parts of me I can't see;
walking away rapidly from the spiritual thoughts of you.
I am disjointed, separated from my Christian belief.
I feel like I'm at the bottom of sinner's hill
playing with my fiddle, flat fisted and busted.
So you sing in the gospel choir; sang in Holland,
sang in Belgium, from top to bottom,
the maps, continents, atlas are all yours.
I detach myself from these love affairs
drive straight, swiftly,
to Hollywood Casino Aurora.
Fragments and chips.
I guess we gamble in different casinos,
in different corners of God's world,
you with church bingo; and I'm a riverboat boy.
No matter how spiritual I'm once a week,
I can't take you where my poems don't follow me.
Church poems don't cry.

Downfall

Kenneth DiMaggio

The future can only be written
in the prose scavenged
from junk mail fliers

Instead of going up
crimes are now going
two for a dollar

What happened
to my neighbors

they never leave
their expensive homes

they dissolve like old laboratory
specimens in sealed jars
of formaldehyde

Maybe if you cut out
a piece of the cosmos
and put it in a poem

you can use it
like an anesthesia
and not feel the pain
of being alone

Is that what my other neighbor did
when he cut out his painkiller
from the flesh of a human

Do you take sugar
or cocaine in your fast food American
Dream or do you just
take it black like the evil
kidnapping the innocence
from its crib

Call out call out
both the Evangelist
and the aircraft carrier

the highway is quickly disappearing
behind the stolen car
driven by the fleeing
but unknown killer

who had no intention
of murder this morning
when he looked at his world
through the eyes of rebellion

he just did not know that
what begins in the heart

soon coagulates

into a moral abyss



image forwarded
from C Ra McGuirt

Agnosticism and Masturbation

David Lawrence

As awful as a thumb is an inspiring tack.
I am struck by the interference of religion at the corner
Of the gang fight.
I break a bottle on my head
So that I can't tell the difference between my blood
And Pepsi.
I don't know if there's a God.
If I did,
There would be one because he would have told me so.

I don't see evidence of that.
I read the Bible because I like to jerk off to the pictures.
No. That was National Geographic
When I was young.
I step into the confusion like a swamp and wonder
Why the quick sand is rising above me
As I sink
Into wet mounds of introspection about variances.

meat locker lessons

Adam Joseph Ortiz

I think everybody should
be forced to spend a single
night, alone, shivering inside
the icy blackness of a
walk-in freezer, so we could
each experience the bitterness
of death.

doing so would no doubt
help us all be cognizant
of life – of the light
and warmth of morning yawns –
we take for granted on a
daily basis. yes, it sounds
cheesy, but I do believe
that doing so would make
the small things microscopic,
and the big things monumental.

A Strange Autumnal Poem (american nightmare)

Joseph D. Reich

today i took me and my wife
and kid to the apple orchards
to do what most american families
like to do in apple orchards and looked at
what i believed to be these really rare and pretty
white girls then suddenly they started dancing
like they were black these white girls from the
suburbs who had no idea what it is to be black
or to struggle or be down and out or to be
from the ghetto and they were trying to look
all seductive and provocative yet they were
doing the exact same moves with the exact
same body language and the exact same
expressions dancing like this under an apple
tree like some awful horrible parable of adam
and eve superficial and sleazy and all these
families were with their digital cameras and
their delays and it felt like some sort of crazed
cliche like some walt disney version of invasion
of the body snatchers doing the exact same
poses under the exact same apple trees
and if you knocked them out it wouldn't really
matter anyway cause they were the exact
same people engaged in the exact same
role-plays with the exact same desires
the exact same delusions exact same
personalities exact same dreams
(all i could start thinking is when
i die i beg you please just dump
me off right by the haunted hayride
no pie-in-the-sky lines no sighs no
crying just drop my bones off right
below the cardboard signs the ghosts

and goblins and when the rickety-rackety
tractor funeral ride is over feel free to
pick out your own pumpkin in some
dim sun dreary dusk of october)
upon returning home we drove
through a strip mall where
there was this old man
with a knee brace on
watering his perfectly
sculpted twirly-whirly
manicured shrub with
a radiotower poking
up over his rooftop
and he lived across
from a used-car lot
from alcoholic firemen
and blushing tomboy
at the gas station
then got followed
all the way home
by some from very
hostile (o no!) white
kids from the suburbs
cranking their rap
from the ghetto
and i thought
wow things
have really
changed
not for
the better
in this god-
awful flag-
waving country
they like to
refer to as
america
as com-
pared
to days



Welcome to Chicago, image by
Joel McGregor

of alice's
restaurant
audrey hepburn
albert finney
jim brown
joe namath
castro and kennedy—
“earn your criminal
justice degree in just...”
my wife folding me up
and conveniently sliding
me right beneath the bed.

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

Belling the Cat

Pat Dixon

5

"So what the hell can we do?!" whined Kevin O'Reilly impotently.

"Nothin'. Absolutely nothin'," sighed Sean Duff. "Nobody's ever gotten any-bleepin'-where complaining...not to his department head...or the dean...or the supe...or their congressman. Not anyone! I've seen the file that students have kept on that prick, an' it goes back nearly fifteen years! Students 've sent written protests about his favoritism towards some of the girls...scuse me, Jonesie...the women in nearly every class, an' about his temper tantrums...an' his tangents in his classes about his personal life, his deprived childhood, an' his glorious rah-rah-rah military career!"

He paused and glanced at his two roommates, who stared back and said nothing.

"Some even provided audio tapes," he continued. "They've signed petitions about his racist jokes...and 've documented how his syllabus an' his exams don't jibe with each other...an' how he never covered even half of the material he tests us on."

"Repeatedly he's been given the lowest possible student evaluations...all with no effect," chimed in Kevin. "And dozens of the...of...the women have sworn out complaints about how he has stroked their hair or groped their shoulders, patted their asses or brushed his arm against their...their chests. Nobody's ever gotten anywhere! A total whitewash...by a solid Puzzle Palace front."

"All dismissed officially...as sour grapes...by a few rotten apples. Ha!" added Sean.

"And there's megatons of evidence that students who bitched about him paid for it later in other classes and even in the...the cruddy job assignments they got long after graduation...if they ever managed to graduate!"

B. T. Jones lay quietly on her bunk, only half listening to her roommates repeat what she and every other student had known since the second week of Plebe Indoc about Capt. Thomas Catalano, Ph.D., professor of navigation in the Department of Astrological Science. She stared unblinkingly at a steel thumb tack near the upper left corner of her bulletin board. She slowly, gently gnawed on the inside of her lower lip.

She shivered convulsively for a second as she recalled how Creepy Catalano had repeatedly brushed against her breasts and buttocks while she was working out a 3D "fix" or plotting a position during an Astro Nav Lab. With a totally physical memory she relived how she had run to the gym to shower whenever he had

touched her hair or hand or neck. None of this had she shared with Sean or Kevin. The gray-haired Student Counselor whom she had confided in had expressed sympathy but had only been able to wring her hands and advise her to “hang tough...it won’t last forever, and you need to protect your grade, even your whole career.”

Belle Todd Jones suddenly realized that her roommates were both staring at her.

“So?” she asked. “What can I do for you?”

“Are you feelin’ all right, Jonesie?” asked Sean.

“Yeah, of course. I was just...I was just recalling the ol’ Serenity Prayer. I don’t believe in wasting my time with stuff I can’t change. Besides, I’m doing fine in Astro Nav. Got a solid B plus on my mid-term!”

She sat up and took a textbook from the shelf beside her bunk. Sean and Kevin exchanged glances but said nothing aloud. Kevin mouthed the words B plus, and Sean wrinkled his nose and shrugged. B. T. opened her physics book to the middle and stared fixedly at a white spot between two equations. Sean glanced at her unmoving eyes and, after a minute, pointed toward her with his thumb. Kevin nodded, and the two of them picked up some notebooks and texts and tactfully left the room.

4

When Kevin and Sean returned three hours later, they found B. T. asleep with the large textbook resting lightly on her stomach.

“Jonesie,” said Kevin, gently shaking her wrist. “Wake up, babes. Time for dinner, and it’s real turkey tonight. With yams. Rise and shine.”

B. T. opened her eyes slowly and let the book drop lightly to the deck. She smiled up at Kevin and Sean.

“Turkey? And yams? Thanks, guy, for not letting me miss ’em. Next to real swordfish or lobster or sole, that’s my favorite chow.”

She sat up slowly and reached for her shoes. Her roommates waited patiently as she tucked in her khaki blouse and ran a brush through her short blonde hair.

As Sean opened the door to their room, she smiled at him and then at Kevin.

“After desert, guys, I’ll tell you how to take care of that little problem you were trying to solve earlier,” she archly.

“Physics?” asked Sean.

She laughed aloud.

“That’s negative, Mister! No. I mean how to Catapult that Catastrophic Cat-man out of his Catbird Seat. Surely you remember whimpering about him earlier today? Clearly, it’s time ‘to boldly go where no man has gone before.’”

Kevin and Sean glanced at each other and raised their eyebrows in mock astonishment. Then they followed B. T. as she skipped lightly toward the Academy’s dining hall.

3

Capt. Thomas Catalano glared at the Academy’s superintendent, Vice Admiral Louis Q. Scott. Twice he had tried to interrupt, and twice he had been told to keep his mouth shut.

“You heap of turds!” roared the admiral. “You’ve finally gone over the hori-

zon! All these years we've covered for your stupid tom-cat, bigoted, warped pink little ass, but this tears it! No...just shut up! You'll get a hearing, all right...if you want one...but back down on Earth. Go pack your gear and be ready for the next shuttle at oh-seven-thirty. Anything you can't carry with you will be shipped down by the following shuttle on Thursday. Move!"

"It's all lies!" screamed Capt. Catalano, his wiry little frame trembling and his balding head jerking back and forth. "Lies! Lies! Lies!"

"Security! Get this thing out of here," said the admiral in a cold voice.

As two uniformed guards lifted Capt. Catalano from the deck by his elbows and carried him from the superintendent's office, the dean and Catalano's department head exchanged glances.

"Long overdue," muttered the department head approvingly.

Admiral Scott's head shot up, and he glared at Capt. Marcia White. The dean looked across toward a small porthole and chuckled inwardly.

"White," said the superintendent, "you're skating toward insubordination with that thought. Unto every thing there is a season. Remember that! Nothing before this...not one single complaint or tape or observation...was over the line with this heap of dung! Not his groping and rubbing, not his so-called favoritism, not his exams or teaching or speeching or war stories or jokes...nothing! It fit in with our mission of training these young little shits to be tough...and flexible and...regimental! It was what they needed to help get them ready for the real world of interplanetary shipping!"

"Sort of like a Zen koan," interjected the dean, looking mildly at his shoes.

"Exactly, Bob!" said the admiral. "Exactly like that. Gets 'em on their toes."

Capt. White whispered, "Sorry, sir," and glanced gratefully at Capt. Robert Brookes, who had gracefully dissipated the superintendent's wrath.

"When a tool is no longer useful," added Admiral Scott, "it must be discarded. Perhaps, though, it is time to replace it with a different kind of tool, Capt. White. Perhaps we won't search for another like that Tom Cat to help us mold our students."

He paused to reflect.

"I never did like that man. But he was useful to our mission. And, of course, we could never let any students get their way against us. Ha! As I used to tell Cat himself, to get booted out of here he'd have to rape my wife in the dining hall with at least three hundred and twenty-five witnesses! No offense to you, Marcia."

"None taken, sir."

The admiral strode lightly to the porthole and gazed out.

"Marcia, maybe you could tell me what the hell those stars there are. I never was that good without a chart. An' besides this whole damned Academy keeps rotating like a sonofabitch...which confuses me all the faster. Ha! But then we do need a little gravity here, don't we? Ha!"

Capt. White crossed the admiral's office in two steps.

"Yes, sir. We surely do!"

"Just let me know where that bright sucker called Beetle Juice is from here,

if you can figure it out, will y', Marcia?" he said, giving her a gentle punch on the shoulder to let her know that no grudge was held.

"I'll see what I can do, sir," she said smiling faintly and pressing her nose against the thick plexiglass.

Behind them, Dean Brookes hummed a little tune and paged through a copy of *Asteroids*, the U.S. Merchant Space Academy's alumni magazine.

2

The next noon during mess-muster, when the regiment of midshipmen heard that Capt. Thomas Catalano had retired unexpectedly in the middle of the academic quarter, at first there was stunned silence, then an exchange of bewildered glances, and finally a sea of broad, relieved smiles. At no time were there any words of celebration. No unprofessional "Hip-hip Hooray!" was sounded by even one cadet.

Kevin O'Reilly and Sean Duff glanced at their roommate, Belle Todd Jones, with new respect. She stared calmly at a small porthole on the far wall of the assembly area. For a second, two stars appeared whose names she had no interest in knowing. She breathed slowly and permitted herself a slight smile of satisfaction.

1

After taps, with her laptop computer B. T. added a few notes of explanation to a student-network file for future reference by the cadets who would come after her:

"In the matter of Capt. Thomas (Tom Cat) Catalano, it was realized by an unidentified midshipman on 19 Feb. 2027 that cadets' complaints never get results. If we want to be heard by a person in a position of authority, we must use reverse psychology and damn the guilty with bogus praise. In this particular case, at the midshipman's instigation, three students wrote mid-quarter evaluations which commended this teacher thus:

1. I think Capt. Catalano is wonderful! Whenever my friends and I see him privately for help, he permits us to be out of uniform.

2. I never knew a teacher to be so gentle and caring as Tom Catalano...he has a special way about him that makes me feel totally at home here. He's so funny and tender with me that it's hard to remember that I'm orbiting hundreds of miles above the Earth when I'm with him.

3. I wish Tom Catalano could be put on the Board of Trustees for this Academy so that all his supercool ideas about how to run this place right could be put into action. But, unfortunately, as he has pointed out repeatedly, 'In our industry, only ass-kissing schmucks who lack ability can get any power!' I am also very grateful to Tom for telling me to relax around him and call him by his first name.

It was decided that three such comments would suffice to plant a seed. More would have been overkill and would likely have aroused justifiable suspicion. Space well!"

The Yellow Pimpernel

Pat Dixon

Glancing at his watch, the President noted ruefully that he would have to set aside his writing yet once more because of the demands of his office.

Life, he thought, gently gnawing on his lower lip, is an array of compromises and trade-offs.

His eyes glanced up at his leather-bound copy of Marcus Aurelius, and he sighed.

We share some of the same frustrations, Marcus, old boy. What would you think of my modern world, eh? Pretty horrendous...but somehow you would have found the inner strength to plug along and give your best.

He sighed and glanced at his fingers, which rested on the keyboard of his laptop.

How many languages did you master, Marcus, old boy? Two? He felt quietly proud that he had kept up his own studies of Latin during the past four decades and had taught himself modern and ancient Greek, German, Russian, French, Romanian, Italian, Arabic, Japanese, Hebrew, and, of course, Spanish. Drawing a deep breath, he put his bookmarks back into his volumes of Goethe, Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Leibnitz, Pirandello, Karl Barth, Dante, and Schweitzer and gently closed them. Glancing calmly at his open Greek Testament, he reread five more verses and then tucked the red silk ribbon flat before closing those pages, too.

"Martha, axe my wife t' step in here for a moment, will y' please?" he said into the intercom.

He began tucking his books back into the private drawer of his desk, barely hearing the reply, "Certainly, Mr. President."

As the door opened and his wife approached, he hit the "save" command on his computer and closed the document...deceptively titled "Baseball Dream Teams." Then he picked up his portable CD player and put the earphones loosely into his ears.

"How's it goin', Hon?" she asked, closing the door behind her. Her eyes showed a keen, intelligent interest and, to a lesser degree, concern for her husband.

"Three more pages done...I'm inching towards a new kind of interfaith synthesis which will bring atheists and Buddhists and...and..." (he paused to grin boyishly) "and Rastafarians together, uniting them with the mainstream monotheists and polytheists. But I'm still not sure what can be done with the Christian Scientists and the...the L. Ron Hubbardites."

"Do you have a publisher for it yet?" his wife asked.

"Yep. This essay will appear in *The Yale Theological Review*, and when I have the next two essays completed, Yale's press will bring out my next collection. They've agreed to let me do a 'Dummies' version of five of the essays for HarperCollins so the public will have a crack at my latest thoughts, too."

"That's really great! Would it be all right if I glance over what you've added?"

"Mmmm...Lady-love-lotus-blossom, I'd rather you didn't. I have to pop out of here in another minute or so to join the Prime Minister of Israel for a photo-op in the Rose Garden. I'm just 'getting in character' now with my language tracks, an' then I'll have to go. 'Ooh my little pretty one, pretty one. / When you gonna give me some time, Sharona?' I'll let you read it tonight...or better yet, I'll read it to you. I know you won't have trouble with the French, German, and Italian, but you'd need me to translate the Russian and Greek passages. Damn...I wish I knew ancient Hebrew better! 'Never gonna stop, give it up.' Ha. 'Such a dirty mind. / Always get it up for the touch / Of the younger kind. / My my my i yi woo. M-M-M-My Sharona.' Talk me down, Hon. I sure as heck can't go out there singin' this song."

"Okay. Focus, Babes. Tell me again why you sign your serious articles and books with the pseudonym S. P. Blakeney?"

"Well, when I was a kid, I saw that ol' Leslie Howard film, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, about a shrewd guy who pretended to be a goofball so's he could do a lot of good on the sly. I al'ays thought ol' Leslie an' me looked a heap alike, an' I kinda modeled m'self after him in some ways. An' I read the book a whole ton o' times, too. So's when I started writin' my highbrow stuff, I sorta hid b'hind the character's name...Sir Percy Blakeney...S. P. for short in my book."

"An' why do you have the little yellow flower on the dust jackets and embossed into the cloth of the covers? Tell me again."

"It's 'cuz I r'late to the yellor rose of Texas, but this here ain't really a rose. It's a pimpernel, a little five-petal thing-dingy that really don't come in yellor...least ways it don't yet, but some botanicalist's gonna invent one just to prove me wrong on 'at. An', o' course, yellor was the main color o' Mighty Mouse's costume, an' he was the other boyhood he-ro o' mine."

"An' plus it's a kinda 'in joke' for you an' me, who knows your secret identity. Right?"

"Course it is. Neither m' daddy nor my mom knows I kin read this kinda stuff, let 'lone write it! Wouldn't be proper...be like braggin'. 'Sides, it'd be a security breech. Couldn't trust 'em to keep the secret. 'Come a little closer huh, ah will ya huh? / Close enough to look in my eyes, Sharona. / Keeping it a mystery gets to me, / Running down the length of my thighs, Sharona.' Whoa! Don't be thinkin' them kinda words, fella! Not just now, anyways. Ha. Anyhow, I gotta go now, Hon. Wish me luck!"

"Good luck, Dubby-babe! I know you'll do just great out there."

She gave his arm a tight squeeze and his cheek a tiny kiss, and they left the Oval Office together.



The President gave her a shy little wave as he walked toward the open doorway, flanked by Secret Service agents who wore dark suits, sunglasses, and earphones in their right ears.

His wife walked toward the elevator, humming to herself.

" 'There's a yellor pimpernel in Texas, / La-la-la-laaaa dee-deeeeee,' " she sang barely audibly. The doors opened, and she stepped in, pressed a dark button, and glanced up at the indicator lights as the doors reclosed.

" 'When you gonna give it to me, give it to me? / It is just a matter of time, Sharona. / Is it just destiny, destiny? / Or is it just a game in my mind, Sharona?' "

She began to giggle to herself. *Now he's got me doin' it!* she thought.

" 'Never gonna stop, give it up. / Such a dirty mind. / Always get it up for the touch / Of the younger kind. / My my my i yi woo. M-M-M-My Sharona.' "

As the elevator doors opened, she glanced in her mirror and adjusted her facial expression to that of a Stepford Wife before she stepped out. Her secretary was peering out of a doorway forty feet away, holding the correspondence they had begun answering.

She found that it was difficult to walk to the rhythms of either "My Sharona" or *There's a yellor pimpernel in Texas*, so, with a bland, stoner smile on her mouth, she shifted to the more martial song that her husband sang some nights while wearing his yellow flannel pajamas and the set of vintage Mouseketeer ears they had found fifteen years ago at a Dallas flea market. It seemed appropriate to sing it aloud.

"*Here I am to save the day!* Yup. *Here I am*, Traci, dear...all ready to get back to work."

"Ready when you are, Mrs. Bouche. You sure are the perky one today. Wish I knew the secret of...of...of...of all your energy!"



Red Lined Steps,
art by Cheryl
Townsend

Peace Land Murders

Marc Tamargo

As Madeline strode purposely down the streets of Maltrice, she made a point to walk with pride, to outwardly show that she was not ashamed of herself, even though all of the onlookers who stopped whatever they were doing to stare with disdain at the malcontent outcast, the one who had the audacity to defy the order of their perfect society, thought she should be. She made a point to drink in all of her surroundings, to remember the faces of all of those who hated and feared her, for it would keep her mind occupied on the long days of solitude that was her life.

She was allowed three short visits to a city per a year for supplies, usually she just stopped by whatever city was closest, but this time she was specifically contacted by someone associated with Premier Joxston, the leader of the entire world of Europa, and requested to go to Maltrice, the capitol city. The message had surprised her to say the least, even though upon her expulsion from society she was given a communications device, she had never been contacted in her thirteen years of exile.

Her short supply visits were always the same, docking at a harbor and not being allowed to leave her boat while supplies were loaded on, and of course, there was always someone there trying to convince her to return to society. "All you have to do is take the pills," someone would say. *The pills*, everyone on Europa had a variety of pills to take every day, which were different for each individual. Some enhanced vision, some raised intelligence, and others increased physical strength, there was a cure for everything. No one suffered in this perfect society, except for Madeline, because she refused to take the medication. Mainly for one pill in particular, a pill intended to correct a "disease", but Madeline didn't consider it a disease.

Years ago humans identified the DNA that caused homosexuality, those DNA were found within Madeline. The pills would suppress this and cause her to become heterosexual, or how the people of Europa called it: normal. Because she refused to become normal she was exiled; forced to wander the vast oceans of Europa alone on her sail boat. The irony wasn't lost on her that she had chosen to be the only homosexual on the entire world, making a life of loneliness a certainty regardless of her exile. At first her hope was that others would follow her lead and celebrate their uniqueness, but no, everybody wanted to be normal, and why not? Europaeon society was perfect, no one was ever hostile to one another, and there were never any disputes, let alone crimes. Europa was well known as the 'perfect society of peace'.

The Europaeons were incapable of causing Madeline physical harm or incarcerating her, but they couldn't comprehend why she would defy the ways of their society. She was exiled, not as a form of punishment, but so that she wouldn't tar-

nish their perfect world with her presence. They could always force the medication on her, but that wouldn't be very peaceful.

Madeline had moments of weakness when she thought about giving in, about taking the pills, after all what good was being a lesbian doing her when she had no one to share it with, but those moments always passed. Her determination was the main thing that kept her going through all the hopeless and lonely nights.

Europa was a moon of Jupiter's that had been terraformed several centuries ago to have an atmosphere and biosphere capable of sustaining human life. The massive water ice that had once covered the moon had been melted to create one vast ocean that was now littered with large artificial man made monstrosities of cities. Madeline was out of her element on these large metallic metropolises, it didn't sway beneath her feet as she was accustomed to; it was just mind numbingly stationary.

Madeline was being escorted through the city by a man who had been radiating his contempt for her the whole time. Although contempt was a trait found in few Europaeons, they were usually the type of people sent to deal with Madeline; hence she was accustomed to such behavior, even though most people were not. She was sure that their objective was to intimidate her, but they didn't seem to notice or care that Madeline was incapable of being intimidated. She couldn't care less what their reaction was to her and she certainly didn't fear them, there was very little if anything at all that Madeline feared, including death, for at least it would be a sweet release from her permanent state of exile.

She followed the burly escort into a large overly decorated room, there they sat and waited. The woman behind the desk blathered something about Joxston being with them in a minute, but Madeline knew it would actually be much longer. She knew how people like Joxston functioned. They liked to stroke their ego as much as possible and making people wait a long time for them was just one of the many ways they made themselves feel more important than they really were.

While they were waiting Madeline could sense the escort's disdainful gaze drift her way and she became more agitated by the way this minion thought he could contain or control her. She met his gaze with a hard cold glare, gathering up all the hatred she had accumulated for everyone on this misguided and naïve world and directed it all at this stuck up simpleton. Only after a few seconds under the heat of her glare did he shiver up and turn away in fear like the coward she knew he really was. She allowed herself a small smile of triumph, it was just more proof to her that she was right and everyone else in the world was wrong.

Her inner musings were interrupted by the woman behind the desk who intrusively announced, "Mr. Joxston will see you now." Madeline's first reaction was to sarcastically reply 'oh what an honor', but she decided to hold her tongue, instead she followed the burly simpleton through a pair of elegant doors into an large room where a smug, ugly, and pathetic man who couldn't have been anyone other than Premier Joxston sat behind an oversized desk.

And of course, as Madeline could have predicted, he didn't look up from

what he was reading as he began to talk. After giving some sort of insincere greetings he talked about how pleased he was that Madeline took the time out to meet with him, as if she had anything better to do. When he finally decided to look up at them, his gaze fell upon her escort. "Robert, would you mind leaving us alone for a couple of minutes?" The man stood still, not wanting to move, he shot Joxston a look that said 'are you sure you want me to leave you alone with her?' Madeline almost laughed out loud at the fear these people felt for her, she had never done anything to indicate she would cause harm to anyone, yet everyone feared her none the less.

Joxston signaled Robert to leave and said, "Its okay Robert, we'll be quite alright." He nodded before reluctantly leaving. Again, Madeline had to suppress the urge to laugh, thinking that Joxston's little display was meant to impress her, that he showed no fear. He then proceeded to stand directly in front of her and blather on endlessly about the affairs and interests of the people of Europa, in other words things Madeline couldn't care less about. He spoke in such a casual and friendly manner that an outside observer who didn't know any better might think that the two of them were old friends, but then again Madeline's stone cold composure, her dead silence and icy stare of hatred was a dead giveaway that they were not. Madeline's adversarial position didn't deter Joxston in the least. Indeed he seemed to take no notice of it as he continued speaking to Madeline.

"—and I'm sure you must be wondering why I asked you here." Joxston was saying, and then finally he was silent. It took Madeline a few moments to realize that Joxston was waiting for her to respond. He just stood there patiently, showing no sign of irritation. At last, Madeline lifted her eyes to stare directly at him in the same manner she had to the burly escort but he did not back down, he stared directly back at her, though there was no hate in his eyes. One might think that look he was giving was one of kindness and friendship, but Madeline knew better, it was a smug look of superiority. He had the power and he knew it. She couldn't help it, she turned away, and she felt a little ashamed and defeated, so she didn't respond to him.

"A couple of days ago our worldwide sensor grid detected a small space ship entering the atmosphere and descending towards the surface." He paused to let the weight of his words sink in. Madeline couldn't help but let a look of shock slip past her mask. What he was saying couldn't be possible. Europa was an isolationist world completely separated and cut off from the rest of humanity. To further that goal there was an impenetrable energy barrier that completely surrounded Europa which matter could not pass through. It has been said that no other world would use such a barrier for they would be trapped within, however since Europa contained the perfect society no one would ever want to leave. The barrier had been erect for over a century in which time no one had ever left or entered Europa. It was common belief amongst the people of Europa that the rest of the solar system was violent and chaotic and if Europa had any contact with the outside world it would ruin their perfect society, so a statement that offworlders were going to set

foot on Europa was a surprise indeed.

After the brief shock wore off her first thought was that he must be lying, her second thought she voiced, "Why tell me?"

"Because these off world visitors are not invited—" Madeline inwardly sighed at that statement, of course they weren't invited given Europa's fear of outsiders, "and because we need your help to deal with them."

That statement was even more shocking than the first; in fact it was the last thing she expected anyone, especially the leader of the world, to say to her. Her disdainful surprise broke through her icy exterior as she blurted out, "You want me to help you?!" The whole idea of it had to be the most ludicrous thing she ever fathomed.

Joxston's friendly façade suddenly disappeared as he finally showed anger "These people are impure, they come from worlds full of sin, lust, greed, and wraith. They are a disease that would infect our perfect society and would wipe out our civilization more effectively than any virus." Just as quickly as it faded his friendly nature returned, "We need you to take care of them for us."

Her reply was instant and vicious, "why should I help you?" She couldn't believe that he would have the audacity to ask for help after forcing a life of loneliness and misery on her.

His smile only seemed to grow, "Those outsiders are the biggest threat our world has ever faced, they pose a much greater danger than you ever could. If you help us with this problem we will welcome you back into our society; your exile will be over, we will not even ask you to take any medication. You can live wherever you wish, do whatever you wish." His tone changed to one of deep sympathy, "You don't have to be alone anymore."

Only in her wildest fantasies had she ever thought anyone would ever utter those words to her. On some of the worst nights when she would cry herself to sleep, she often thought about what life would be like if she were allowed to return, and about how she would discreetly try to change things, try to work up descent, to get people to embrace their differences, instead of being ashamed of them. But more than that, despite her icy exterior, she couldn't stand to be alone any more. It was tearing her up inside. Indeed she often wondered how much longer she would last. The nights where, in desperation she would put her self made shot gun to her head and seriously consider pulling the trigger were getting more frequent. She was sure that sooner or later she would pull the trigger. So at this point she would do just about anything short of giving in to their demands to end her life of loneliness, but she remained skeptical, "How will people tolerate having a freak and malcontent in their presence?"

"People will adjust to it. I'll speak to them personally. Once they learn of the great service you did for them they'll all be too grateful to worry about petty differences." His voice changed to become more soothing, almost enticing, "Think about it, you could do whatever you want, and be whatever you want. You could improve your talent for the arts," he gave a small laugh with a friend-

ly smile, "I'm sure people will really appreciate the beauty you can create. I know you don't want to be alone anymore. This is your chance." He glanced down at her arm. Madeline cursed herself for leaving her arm exposed. She had scars that ran the length of her left arm where she had cut herself with her knife. She should have covered them before meeting with Joxston. They openly showed how desperate and miserable she was.

He knew that he had her, no posturing or insults could change that. Madeline could see it on his face. "What do you want me to do?" she said in a dead monotone voice, revealing neither the feeling of defeat nor excitement that she felt.

"You know how the people of our society are. They detest violence in any form. You however have not been part of our society for many years, and I happen to know that in your exile you crafted and created a projectile weapon." Madeline's rage surged, how could he know about the shotgun she made? As usual her outrage didn't deter Joxston at all, "One that you often use to shot down seagulls." He then shook his head and wagged his finger at her. "You may not be aware that it is the only projectile weapon in existence on Europa, and you are the only person on Europa capable of using it or any other form of violence. So you must find these vermin that invaded our world, hunt them down and eliminate them."

"Wait, you want me to kill them?" She was suddenly repulsed, "I'm no murderer." She knew that they had a low opinion of her, but that they thought of her as a murderer made her blood boil.

"You're more capable of it than anyone else." He retorted, then smiled, "Besides, it's not murder, it would be self defense. Indeed, you would be defending all of Europa."

"What makes you so sure these 'invaders' are so dangerous?"

"Because they've already landed on Europa in the city of Cosmoton." He walked behind his desk to manipulate his personnel computer while still standing. "We have pictures of what Cosmoton looks like now, would you care to see?"

Madeline cautiously approached his desk. He swiveled the computer around so she could see. What was being displayed on it was more gruesome a sight than Madeline ever expected to see; a vast array of dead bodies spread out, lying in the open streets. The bodies were mutilated; slashed in the most horrific ways. The streets were covered in large puddles of blood. Every few seconds the picture on the viewer would change to show another part of the city, but each scene was the same; mutilated bodies with blank expressions on them, sprawled throughout the streets. Finally Madeline started to feel sick. Unable to take anymore she turned away and muttered, "That's enough."

"Of course." He replied with the same egotistical grin. "Don't feel bad, you managed to stomach those images much longer than any of my associates." She noticed that he said 'my associates' which didn't necessarily include him, and something about the way he said it made her think that *he* could stomach the images, which would really set him apart from the typical Europaeon.

"In a mere five days these four outsiders have managed to kill the entire pop-

ulation of Cosmoton; over two thousand men, women, and children. So we want you to kill four people before they can kill thousands more. You were right to be upset when you assumed I thought you were a murderer, because I do know you're better than that, that despite your anger towards us that you really do care about us, and that's why we're willing to let you back into society. But first you must save us. Will you please save us?"

The manipulative prick, not only was he appealing to her sense of decency but to her ego as well. If she didn't act thousands could die, and if she did act all her hopes and dreams could finally come to pass. "Okay" was all she said.

"Good," he said while using his computer. "There are four invaders, two men and two women all around your age—" he paused to give Madeline an analyzing look, "well actually slightly younger." A holographic projection appeared in front of his computer, "These are the four invaders you have to dispose of."

"Gee, I wonder how many euphemisms you're going to use for cold blooded murder." Madeline analyzed his face for any signs that her snide comment had any impact on him but as expected he just sat there wearing the same idiotic grin.

Madeline examined the projections of the four offworlders. One thing that jumped out at her was that one of the women had some sort of art on her left shoulder that seemed to be imprinted on her skin. Madeline vaguely recalled reading about this sort of thing in one of the few books still around that described societies before Europa; she believed they were referred to as tattoos. This particular tattoo was a bright red flower with a long green stem that wrapped around the woman's arm down to her elbow. Madeline couldn't help but be struck by how beautiful it was, how serene it made her feel, but that feeling quickly passed as she recalled who these people were and what they have done and that feeling was replaced with hatred, fear, and sorrow.

"When you're ready," Joxston said, "We'll have someone escort you to Jackson's Harbor where we have a powerboat waiting for you—"

"No." Madeline interrupted curtly.

"No?" Joxston blurted in surprise, and showing a bit of anger.

Madeline smirked, certain that that was a word Joxston rarely heard. "No, I'm not using one of those technological monstrosities that destroy the harmonies of the water. I'm using my sailboat."

"My dear," Madeline's first instinct upon being called that was to slap him, but she restrained herself, "as much as I appreciate your quaint fascination with antique vehicles, a powerboat would be considerably faster and time is of the essence." For emphasis he clicked back to the pictures of Cosmoton.

Madeline ignored her gut reaction to flinch and held firm. "No. I'm using my sailboat or you can forget the whole deal." Madeline stared directly at Joxston who stared back. They each held their stern gaze for a long cold minute, neither backing down. Madeline could see that he was trying to determine if she was really willing to throw away her only chance to end her exile over a small detail, and at the same time he was trying to intimidate her. She

knew she was not going to back down on this, even if it meant that her life of loneliness and misery would continue. Some might say that she was a fool to risk so much for so little but she was sick of being told what to do and would rather die than let herself be pushed around by this spineless weasel.

"Fine." He finally said in the same flat monotone voice she had been using. "Keep your communications channel open at all times. We'll send you all the information you need to complete your task."

Madeline took that as her dismissal so she turned to leave, but stopped abruptly as a thought occurred to her. "How do I know those pictures you showed me are genuine? How do I know all those people in Cosmoton were really murdered?" Having lived the first fourteen years of her life in Europaeon society she knew that all Europaeons were incapable of dishonesty, especially to this extreme, yet she couldn't bring herself to completely trust him.

His smile seemed slightly more insidious this time, "Last report we received stated that the invaders were headed towards Balbula, Cosmoton is between here and there so why don't you stop by there and see it for yourself?"

Thump, thump, thump. Madeline felt the familiar sting as her fists impacted with the punching bag. She felt a bit more comfortable being back on her boat, headed for Balbula. She had just come from Cosmoton, *thump*. Joxston wasn't lying about it. *Thump*. The scene of all those bodies sprawled out, slashed in the most horrific ways was still fresh in her mind, *thump*, haunting her every thought, *thump*. Seeing it in person was much worse than seeing pictures of it, *thump*. The face of a little girl who couldn't have been more than eight years old popped in her mind, blood dripped down from the slash on her neck, *thump*, along with the long cuts on her arms, *thump*. A man and a woman, presumably her parents lay next to her, their throats cut as well, *thump*. She had seen hundreds more bodies mutilated just like that, *thump*. And everyone of them was dead, *thump*, murdered.

She screamed as loud as she could when she tackled the punching bag to the floor. It made a loud snapping noise as it was ripped from its hinges under her weight. She screamed as she threw the punching bag against her desk. It crashed against the surface, scattering all the items that were on it to the floor. She screamed as she picked up the table and flung it to the far wall. She screamed as she punched the wooden wall with her bare fist, over and over. With each hit her scream grew louder and her punch harder until finally her fist went through the wall. She slowly pulled her hand back, blood was splattered all over the wall and her hand throbbed with pain, but she didn't care, the pain she felt was nothing compared to the pain the victims of Cosmoton must have felt.

The abhorrence she had for Europaeons didn't matter, no one deserved to be brutally murdered like that, certainly not children. Being in Cosmoton reminded her of her childhood, how happy it was. She imagined herself being brutally murdered at that age, it just enflamed her horror and rage. She studied the faces of the murderers on the pad Joxston had given her that contained three dimensional pictures and physical descriptions of them. She was certain that when she killed them

she would not feel regret. Over the next couple of hours it took her to get to Balbula she bandaged her hand and cleaned the mess she had made. The rest of the time she spent loading and unloading her shotgun, it had a certain calming effect, and she grew satisfied in knowing what she was going to use it for.

When she arrived in Balbula she stepped off her boat expecting to see her usual greeting party of people trying to save or intimidate her, but instead she was greeted by hundreds of people crowded around her boat. When she appeared the people cheered, and called out things like “Our savior is here.” It was a very strange feeling for her, she didn’t know how to react, she never expected to be treated like some sort of hero. The crowds were clustered behind ropes that blocked off a part of the street, which created a clear path. Two people, whom she could identify as people of power approached her from the clear path, trailed by three escorts.

A woman introduced herself as Karidia Maltrim, the speaker of the people of Balbula and the man with her as Luther Lonsberg, the representative of Balbula who reported directly to Joxston. As Madeline followed them into the city she tried in vain to ignore the people that surrounded her who would call out pleas for help, or sentiments of gratitude. Maltrim didn’t seem phased by it at all as she welcomed her to the city, talking at length about Balbula. She seemed friendly and open, Madeline warmed to her a bit but said very little. But she was weary of Lonsberg who walked silently beside her, glaring at her. He had the same smug, superior way about him as Joxston, which caused her to dislike him instantly.

Maltrim stopped, and looked directly at her, “Thank you so much for coming, I can’t tell you how grateful all of Balbula is to you for coming.”

“How many?” Madeline asked simply. Upon seeing Maltrim’s puzzled expression she thought she should clarify. “How many people have been killed here?”

“Oh,” she nodded in understanding, “thankfully none yet, you arrived just in time.”

“Has anyone seen the invaders?”

Maltrim shook her head. “No, but they’re being tracked. They’re in that part of the city.” She pointed to a place that was completely empty. It felt eerie to her to see a part of a city so barren. “That part of the city has been evacuated, in fact a lot have fled Balbula all together, but those who have stayed have hope that you will save us.”

“Well, I’d better go get this done.” She untucked her shotgun from under her arm and made a show of cocking it loudly. Maltrim was shocked by this display, but Lonsberg was unphased. She double checked that she had all her gear before she headed off to hunt the invaders.

Madeline’s nerves were high as she searched the empty village for the invaders. She tried to move as stealthfully as she could, but was afraid she wasn’t doing a good enough job. She never had to do anything like this before, and couldn’t even guess at what skills the offworlders possessed. But she did know that they managed to kill thousands of people within a few days. When she was

a child she heard stories of the technological monstrosities offworlders had and the horrors they would use them for, but she never thought she would see first hand what they could do.

She was also curious as to why anyone would want to kill thousands. She didn't buy the propaganda that all offworlders were evil. She had learned through her own personal experiences that good and evil were manmade concepts that all depended on one's point of view. They must have had some misguided motivation for doing what they did. She was puzzled though, to what it could possibly be. She had no illusions about herself. Although she appreciated the Balbulians sentiments, she knew she was no hero. They had called upon her because they thought she was the only one in the world capable of murder so what did that say about her? She also knew that although she was doing it to save thousands, she was also personally motivated.

It was an unusual feeling of satisfaction when, after having searched for hours with no sign of the invaders she finally discovered food scraps behind a couch that had been recently moved into a corner, a sign that they may be close by. She was relieved to finally find what she was looking for. But her anxiety level increased significantly as she rounded the corner to discover an open door, an unusual sight because all the other doors she had seen had been tightly shut. Beyond the passageway were a flight of stairs leading downward. As she carefully descended she could hear voices in the distance. The steps took her to a basement, cold and dank, and as she moved forward through the long empty halls in the only direction she could go, the distant voices became more audible. They were speaking Standard but with a strange dialect and accent she had never heard.

The room was dimly lit. The only light came from an open door to a room where the voices emanated from. She could barely hear them anymore, because the sound of her heart pounding vigorously in her chest was deafening. She had to concentrate hard to silence her heavy breathing. She kept repeating one thought in her mind over and over: *be quiet or die*.

After what seemed like hours, she stood poised in front of the open door with her shotgun in her hands ready for action. She took one long encompassing deep breathe before plunging right in as fast as she could. The very instant she entered the room she recognized the four people she was sent to kill. At a mind numbingly speed she had her shotgun aimed at the closet invader and fired before they were even fully aware she had entered the room. The shot hit its target, striking one of the women in the chest; her limp body fell to the floor.

A man charged at her, his face filled with rage. Madeline managed to keep her cool, standing her ground. When he was close enough she brought the back end of her shotgun up and smashed him on the head with it as hard as she could. A loud sickening crack echoed off the steel walls as the man's body fell limp to the floor. The two remaining invaders began to run away, so Madeline aimed her shotgun at them and shouted as loud as she could, "Stop!" The two of them froze in place by the shrill blood curdling warning. She didn't know

why she had shouted a warning instead of shooting them, even at that moment her finger was poised on the trigger just waiting to finish it, but for some reason she hesitated. It was then she realized that she had a growing feeling that something was not right. At first she dismissed it as her guilt, but she came to the realization that there was a lot more to it than that.

She became more uncertain by the second. The two offworlders stood still with dread awaiting her next move, but she didn't know what to do. Her mind was overwhelmed trying to catch up with the events that had just occurred. The alarm in her mind became louder when she saw urine drip down the leg of the young man. *Young man*, that was it, he looked a lot younger and less menacing than the picture of him had and she noticed the same of the others, although they were definitely older than he was. "What are you going to do with us?" the woman spoke.

"Shut up!" She needed time to think. She had to think. What was going on? What was she doing? "Sit down!" she ordered. For a few moments they simply stood there shaking. "Do it!" she screamed, and the young man jumped in his skin at her command.

"We didn't..." The woman began to protest.

"Shut up!" Madeline moved her shotgun to aim at the woman. After a few moments they carefully sat down against the wall. They sat in kneeling positions anxiously looking up at her. Madeline moved to inspect the woman she had shot and the man she had hit.

"Are they dead?" the woman asked.

"She's dead, he's not." Madeline said while indicating the two. "He's just unconscious." She then dragged his limp body over to where the other two were while keeping her gun aimed at them.

The young man was crying uncontrollably. "What the hell kind of place is this?" he said between sobs. "Paradise? This isn't paradise. This is hell!" That was directed at the other woman; he then turned to face Madeline, "What the hell is going on here?"

As the boy continued to cry Madeline gave the woman an analyzing look. Although she looked extremely distraught, she seemed to be calmer. "Why don't you tell me?" In response the woman shot her a puzzled look. "Why don't you tell me why you would come to our world just to kill thousands of people?" She then screamed, "What kind of place do you come from?"

The young man immediately replied, "What?" but the woman seemed less puzzled.

"Is that why you're doing this, because you think we killed all those people?"

In anger Madeline pressed the barrel of her gun against the woman's cheek. "Don't tell me you didn't do it. I know that no one on this world is capable of doing that."

The young man continued to cry, but the woman stared directly at her. "Not a person, no."

Doubt and anger surged within her, "What do you mean?"

The woman shook her head, “You want to know why we came here? We came here from another world that orbits Jupiter called Ganymede where life is tough and nobody cares about anybody else, where people deceive, cheat, and murder as a way of life. We, all four of us came from troubled lives and in the few years we have been alive we had to endure more hardships than anyone should have to in an entire lifetime. We came here because we heard stories all our lives, about Europa: the forbidden world. We heard it was a paradise, a world of peace, free of trouble and worry.

But that’s not what we found. After we crash landed in that other city, people were terrified of us. We tried to reach out to them, tried to be friendly, but they ran from us. Then the machines came; three floating machines of a technology we had never seen before, shaped like a duck’s head.” Madeline wondered what a duck was. “They would flash a bright blue light at a crowd of people and— and— they would just freeze.” Her voice became high pitched riddled with anger, regret, and fear. “They would just stand there perfectly still with blank expressions on their faces, then the machines would take out some kind of knife and kill them slowly and the people, they didn’t seem to notice, they were just frozen. The machines were slow, so we tried warning the others, we screamed and shouted at them, but they wouldn’t move, they just stood still while those things killed them.

One time Dawson—” she indicated the young man next to her, “was caught in the blue flashing light, I thought it would make him freeze too, but it did nothing to him. Everyone else next to him became frozen, but he was fine, as were the rest of us when it flashed us. It tried to kill us with those knives, but they were too slow, they were easy to outrun, but the rest of the people wouldn’t run.

We tried to save them, we tried to find people who weren’t frozen, but by then there weren’t very many and the few we did find wouldn’t listen to us and eventually they became frozen as well. So we found a boat and left, we couldn’t just stand there watching people be systematically mutilated by those things. What else could we do? So we came here to hide, trying to find a space ship to take us off this insane world, but we couldn’t. We were arguing over what to do next when you came in and killed her.”

Madeline shook her head; it couldn’t be true, it just couldn’t. She wouldn’t let herself believe it. She pressed the barrel harder against the woman’s cheek. “You’re a liar!” she said through tears. “People on this world don’t lie and they don’t kill! But you’re not from this world. You’re the liar!”

The woman stared up at her, “Look at us, we have no weapons, no blood on our clothes. We’re not very strong; I mean Dawson’s only sixteen.”

The alarm in the back of her mind was screaming at her; it was true, it all added up. She looked at the woman she had killed, she had an expression of terror on her face, but all the bodies in Cosmoton had blank expressions, just like the woman said. She didn’t want it to be true because it would mean she had killed an innocent person, but she couldn’t escape the logic of it.

In denial she asked herself who would do such a thing and why? The answer

came quickly to her: Joxston, this was all his doing; he was charged with ensuring Europa remained a peaceful paradise, and he proved that he considered the offworlders the biggest threat to that peace and he would do anything to end that threat, even kill thousands of his own people. People like him don't like to do things themselves, and since no one on Europa would be capable of doing it for him he had these machines created to kill off the people of Cosmoton to make it appear the offworlders did it. This would have two desired effects, one: to make certain that everyone feared and hated them and two: to ensnarl Madeline into killing them, for the machines could not kill them, they only worked on Europaeons. She thought for a moment on why that would be, then it came to her: *The pills*. Of course, the blue light that had disabled the people of Cosmoton must have been triggering something put inside them through the medication. It all made perfect sense to her now. Joxston and his flunkies would have no experience with creating weapons, as he stated earlier she possessed the only weapon in existence on Europa so it's conceivable that the weapons they created on such short notice would be ineffective save for its dependency on the drugs, a technology the Europaeons had become very efficient at perfecting.

After the full weight of this revelation sank in, she sagged to the floor in misery. Joxston had manipulated her into killing, she thought she was smarter than him, thought she was going to use him, but she was wrong and it cost that woman her life. She crawled over to the woman's body while tasting her bitter tears. "What was her name?"

Madeline touched her shoulder, after she recognized the tattoo she had thought was so beautiful earlier. "Rose." As the woman answered Madeline remembered it was also the name of that flower.

"And what is your name?"

"Jennifer."

Madeline laughed a humorless laugh as she slowly stood up to face Jennifer. "That was the name of my first and only love." She let go of her shotgun, it made a loud sound as it dropped to the ground. She took out her knife and held it in her hand, staring at it as if it contained all the answers of the universe. "This place you come from—"

"Ganymede." Jennifer finished

"—Ganymede. Are they any homosexuals there?"

Jennifer tilted her head at the seemingly irrelevant question, "Yes."

"Are they considered normal?"

"They're in the minority, but they're considered normal, yes."

She smiled, "are any of you—?"

"No."

Madeline laughed this time out of joy she'd never thought she'd experience. "I am, the only one on this world. It's just nice to know it's considered normal somewhere." She knelt in front of Jennifer. "It's nice to have a moment of joy before I die." She then raised the hilt of her knife, offering it to Jennifer.

She just stood there staring at her in indecision. "I killed your friend," tears began relentlessly streaming down her face, "and she's beautiful." After a few moments she added, "You all are. I don't want or deserve to live after what I did." Still seeing reluctance in her eyes, she added, "Do it, please."

Jennifer gingerly took the knife. "Why were you chosen to kill us? You said no one on this world was capable of murder." She asked finally breaking the silence. When Madeline didn't reply, she barked, "Answer me."

"What are you doing?" Dawson asked nervously.

Jennifer didn't answer him; she just continued to stare at Madeline. "Because," she finally answered, "I'm beginning to suspect that the reason no one is capable of murder is an effect of meds that everyone on this world takes, everyone except me. The few leaders of this world" she thought of Joxston and Lonsberg, "are capable and willing to do anything to maintain their perfect society that they control. When their machines failed to kill you they offered me an end to my lifelong exile if I did."

"They used you." Madeline didn't like salt being rubbed in that particular wound. "You are a good person; you don't need meds to make you so." The clattering sound the knife made when it hit the floor echoed loudly through her body. "You don't deserve to die anymore than Rose did. We're new here, and I think I'd be correct in assuming there's no way off this world." Madeline nodded slowly. "We don't know this place and the leaders of it want us dead, so we're in need of help, and so are you." She offered Madeline her hand, "Let us help each other."

"What are you doing?!" Dawson protested loudly, "She killed your sister!"

"Do you think I don't know that?" Jennifer snapped back, while more tears came to her eyes, "Do you think I'm not broken up inside and buried in grief? Well, I am, but killing her isn't going to bring Rose back, it's just going to make things worse. She's not our enemy, our enemies are still out there and they won't stop until we're dead." She looked to Madeline, "Am I right?"

Madeline stared at this stranger's outstretched hand for a long time. The truth was that she wanted to die, it would be the easy way out so she wouldn't have to live with her guilt, but she owed these people after what she did, it was her responsibility to try and correct the mistake she had made. She took her offered hand and Jennifer helped pull her to her feet. They looked deeply at each other. Jennifer nodded toward the unconscious man, "Micheal was Rose's lover, so you might have to give him some time and space when he wakes up."

"If he wants to kill me, he can."

Jennifer grabbed her arm tightly, "No he can't. We need you."

Madeline smiled, after all those years of exile she finally found people who were different, like her. She had finally found people who could help her make a difference. Maybe that was one of the reason Joxston had pitted them against each other in the first place, because he feared that if they joined together they could threaten his power. "Europa is not a paradise, but together we can make it one."

The Moody Ones

Julia O'Donovan

I knew we had come to the end of the road when she stopped speaking to me. Acted like I wasn't there. That morning I asked her what her plans were. She said she was going driving, certainly not lying in the sun. I had just woken up. Not even had my morning smoke. I laid in my bed while she stuffed her jacket, maps and camera into her backpack. "What were you thinking of doing?" "Hit some shops. I don't know. What are you going to do?" I told her I might lie in the sun. She told me I would pay for it. I told her I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, I would decide after my shower. I thought I said something to imply I might like to go driving with her.

I was putting my shoes on when she left. My stomach dropped. Why was she leaving without me? I ran outside to call after her when she got to the car. "Hey, I know you" she said coming from behind me. "You look familiar." I said. The sight of my backpack and her mood changed. "I thought you were going to lie in the sun?" "I decided that wouldn't be wise with this sunburn." Her response made it clear she didn't want me going with her. She wanted to be alone. I was frozen a moment, feeling foolish. She was good at making me feel two feet tall. "Are you coming?" she asked sounding irritated. I started backing away from the car. "I don't know. I don't like the way you're acting." She shrugged and started getting in the car, reaching over to unlock the passenger door. "I won't talk," I said. "You said shops make you claustrophobic and that's what I'm going to be doing." "I'll deal with it," I said. "Do what you want" she said backing up. I wanted to tell her to just bring me back to the hotel but was too humiliated to open my mouth.

That I even agreed on this vacation amazed everyone including myself. We had gone on a weekend trip over the summer where the results were something of a fiasco. The trip had it's moments but the after effects left me miserable for nearly a month. Now here I agreed on spending eight days with her. Sleeping in the same room with her. Seeing her in her bathing suit. There would be no issue if I was not in love with her. Did she know? She did not even know I was gay. We worked at the same place and I feared telling her would result in me eventually having to resign from my job. My sexuality would be big gossip around the work place and she would be some sort of hero for being the germ that spread the news. No, that is one of the many sad things about our acquaintanceship, if I did not feel I could not trust her enough to confide in her, why did I continue to feel so strongly for

her? Go out of my way for her approval when all I seemed to get in return was rejection? Before we left, she talked a lot about picking up guys. Suntanned guys in tight bathing suits. I turned into that green-eyed monster when she talked about males. I could barely hide my jealousy when she insinuated her experience in sex, which was not much before her exaggerations. She talked big but I knew her well enough to see tight through her. I felt sorry for her, that she felt approval and acceptance was based on sexual experiences. I knew she had been with one guy her entire twenty-six years, but the way she talked covered the truth well. Also made it clear she was heterosexual. A week before we left she added some details to a male acquaintance she had the opportunity to flirt with. I heard her tell someone how she suggested he come to Florida with her since she had both tickets. "I told him he would have to explain what happened to the other ticket." She said. My face was hot. My temper was ready to blow. I spoke through clenched teeth when I suggested if he had one thousand dollars cash, he could buy my ticket. She said he had other commitments. I had so little trust in her and our friendship that I would not put it past her to ask me if I would be willing to give up my ticket. She went on to imply what fun it would be to have lots of sex on vacation. The wounded lover. People who know me say I take on that role when I feel hurt by her.

Feeling as though she would rather be with anyone else on this trip was not something I could shrug off. The next day at work the first thing I asked her was if she talked to her friend to see if he wanted my ticket. "Oh, now you don't want to go" she said. "I'm just looking out for your best interest" I told her. We did not talk to each other the rest of the day until I finally broke the silence, then we got along fine. We even had a conversation about this 'friend' of hers. She seemed to be seeing a lot of him and I asked if there was anything going on. She said he told her things could never work with them. His number one reason was because she did not go to college and their religions could not mix. My not going to college resulted in a lot of frustration with people telling me I should reconsider, how I could not go anywhere without a degree. I came to accept I would do okay. I would be all right. That this guy would not consider dating a girl who did not go to school infuriated me. I went off on one of my tirades about what an idiot this guy was with his shallow views. It angered me that she was so desperate for sex she would let someone who found her inferior to use her when he obviously had no respect for her. My voice was raised to where those in the room were taken aback by how strongly I felt about this guy's attitude. After I was through I said religion should not matter either. "If two people care enough about each other they can make it work." She reluctantly agreed with me.

All my life I felt I could never be involved with someone outside of my religious beliefs and then I met her and suddenly religion did not matter.

Our trip started out wonderful. It pleased me how easily I made her laugh and how often, just by being myself. We jokingly bickered back and forth. I kept her amused and she commented a few times how well we traveled together. This was like a dream for me, for the lady I love to enjoy my company so much.

So here we are seven days into the trip and she has stopped talking to me. I have been called moody, but I am jolly compared to her. She gets in her 'leave me alone, don't talk to me' moods a lot at work. That's different. I can avoid her or insult her and leave. Different when I am sharing a hotel room with her. She is sitting two feet away from the television switching channels. I cannot stand her silence. She is no longer switching channels, just staring at the television. A boulder could be thrown through the window and she would not notice. I want to ask her what goes through her mind when she gets this way. I know she would just shrug. I can't take it anymore, I storm out of the room and walk down to the beach. It is then I realize I am hungry and have one hour until the restaurant closes. After that it is the vending machines. I know she is not hungry but I go up to the room to ask her anyway. She does not even look at me. Just shakes her head. Why did I bother to ask? Because I love her and always go out of my way for her.

"One for dinner" I tell the hostess. This is a nice restaurant. Dim lighting. Soft music playing. Cloth napkins set in careful patterns on each plate. Candles. I have never felt awkward eating alone. Tonight I do. The waitress seems to pity me as she removes the rest of the place settings and fills my water glass. I stare at the empty chair in front of me hoping maybe she might change her mind and find me. Who was I fooling? I always fool myself when it comes to her. Always. I look around at the few people in the room. There is an old couple a few tables from me. The woman reminds me of my grandmother. The way she ate. Her stroke left one side of her mouth partially paralyzed so she ate very slow. The memories of all the times I had dinner with grandma in Florida, nice ones like these. Grandma is gone now. I really miss her.

Back in the room she is now lying on the bed watching television. I make some comment about how nice the restaurant was and my fear of being kicked out for just ordering a bowl of soup. I think she cracked a smile. I figured this was it for the night, she would soon be getting ready for bed. I take my first dose of sleeping pills. I was up to eight pills. I had no business taking the pills but I was going to be damned if I was going to lie awake all night listening to her breathing in the bed next to mine. I start reading and

feeling a little relaxed. She passes me on her way to change. She is not going to bed. She has changed into her jeans and is putting on her jacket. I'm baffled, confused. What was going on? "Where are you going?" "Out." I tried to make a joke with her but she only looked at me and said, "what's that got to do with anything?" In that tone of voice that always cuts me deep. How could I feel so much for such a cold wench? She leaves and my sleeping pills turn into caffeine pills. Hearing the car peel out of the lot, my stomach dropped. I feel hopeless. At the restaurant I had thought about a drink. I had quit drinking nearly four years earlier. My sobriety was one of my big accomplishments. At the restaurant one of those thoughts crossed my mind to give it up, throw away what I worked so hard for. Sitting in the empty hotel room the lounge seemed an idea. Yes, if I still drank I would have parked myself in the lounge until they kicked me out then stumbled back. It was rare that I felt such strong drinking urges, I just wanted the night to be over. Not have to deal with the bleeding in my heart.

The drinking urge has left by the time she returns. I wonder if I should confront her to ask what the hell is the matter with her? I know she would just shrug. Now I know what my mother goes through with me. So now we are back to her sitting silently in front of the television with her legs stretched out and her hands folded behind her head. I want so badly to say something but my mouth is frozen. The silence gets to me again and I have to leave the room. I had the door open to air out my cigarette smoke so I just stepped outside. I can see her shadow against the door. The flickering light of the channels changing. I lean against the railing staring up at the stars. I am out there about ten minutes. On my way in I say "You are very pensive tonight." "Does it bother you?" She is actually looking at me. Her voice and expression remind me of her who I love. "Yes, it bothers me. I would ask what was wrong but I know you would only say 'nothing.'" That was a great start. I might have gotten somewhere with that. Of all the things I could have said or even if I just left it at that yes, it bothered me. I might have gotten something out of her. Instead I say: "But, it's none of my business." That puts a finish to the conversation. She goes right back to staring at the television. I am so angry at myself I take more sleeping pills than I should. The dose on top of my emotions only leaves me agitated. I feel physically uncomfortable. I am awake long enough for her to fall asleep. She is a quiet sleeper. I don't even realize she is asleep until she starts mumbling something in her sleep. Of course I listen carefully to try and make out what she is saying. What she says makes little sense except for one thing that I know would amuse her. Well, maybe three days ago it would have. If I tell her tomorrow she will probably say: "So I talk in my sleep. Sue me."

the 15 year anniversary issue

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