

children churches & daddies



the **UN**religious, **NON**family-oriented
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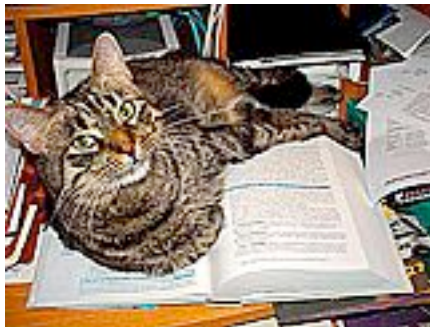
On All Fours

Janet Kuypers

you sit and you work at your desk
when you're home
it's like you're not here when you're here
when you're lost in your work
but i've noticed one thing
whenever the cat comes near your desk
struts around your leg, maybe meows
you stop what you're doing
to give him some attention

sometimes the cat'll even
jump on your desk
put his paw on the book you're reading
to see if you'll scratch him behind his ears

so i wonder if this is what i have to do
i'll crawl over to your desk on all fours
rub my head against your leg
to see if you'll stop your work
and notice me



photography by J. Yotko

the boss lady's editorial

U.S. Healthcare & Canadian Healthcare

That's the beauty of Capitalism:
You pay for what you get
(and that's how it should be)

I have been listening to the new resounding battle cry of every democratic candidate for President of the United States over the past year, and every Democrat out there wants universal healthcare in the United States.

To give you some background of where I'm coming from, allow me to explain... I voted for Bill Clinton when he ran twice in the '90s. My voting choice may have been because I didn't want Bush #1 in office for more than one term, and my voting choice may have been because I wanted to attribute President Bill Clinton with the tremendous economy we had throughout the '90s. But now I can tell you (now that I've thought about it more) that even though I'm in a Democrat state (thanks to Chicago), I wouldn't call myself a Democrat (and no, I definitely don't call myself a Republican).

I tell you that to let you know my leanings aren't screamingly Democrat, but I wouldn't necessarily call them Republican either.

I have to say that when it comes to healthcare, my decisions are based on my own personal experience (duh, how could you base anything on anything other than what you know). I have never been poor enough to worry about whether or not I could afford any medical treatments. If I had to go to the doctor, I went. I might not have liked the cost, but I was willing to pay it, because in this country, it costs money to be able to afford the best healthcare (because no, unlike what Democrats tell you, healthcare is *not* a right). When I had healthcare through my most recent career job, I had no healthcare coverage for medications (so when I took anything, I paid full price for it). When I had healthcare at my most recent career job, there was no dental coverage (which means that because I am cheap, I didn't go to the dentist for years, good ting I didn't have cavities). In fact, I wasn't even going to pay for healthcare when I quit my job and traveled around the country, because I never even used the healthcare coverage I paid for in my job. Thank goodness my roommate convinced me to get coverage anyway, because someone almost killed me in a car

accident 8 months after I left that job, and if I didn't pay for healthcare coverage I would still be paying off the astronomical medical bills from 1998.

So maybe my personal experience tells me that it is crucial to pay for healthcare coverage, because it can really save you in the end. That for day-to-day medical problems it may not be perfect, but it is better than nothing. I know some people say they can't afford it, and. . . Well, this sucks of me to say, but I can only speak from what I know (and I have always been able to afford *something* for healthcare).

If someone says they can't afford healthcare, does that mean I should help them pay for it? My answer is a flat-out no, and I want you to understand why. When I see a bum on the streets in Chicago (I'm sorry, a homeless man) with his hand outstretched looking for change, I never give them anything. I do my best to ignore them, anything, because when I am walking to and from my work, I feel they aren't earning their way to anything in life. I don't feel like contributing to their Pursuit of Happiness if they aren't willing to do something to earn their rewards (because asking for money isn't considered a legal job, and I don't care to hear about how some homeless people can pull in good money without paying taxes by just asking for money from people who hold jobs).

So I might sound like a stodgy money-grubbing old man when I talk like that, but if people don't work for money, they don't deserve it. It's that simple. If you tie that concept together with healthcare, I believe it is fair to say that if a person can't afford healthcare, than it shouldn't be freely handed over to them. I mean, in the United States we don't guarantee a television in every home, but people who are poor enough to live on welfare have television sets. In fact, people on welfare receive checks and food stamps, but they aren't told how to spend their money, so they can make whatever smart (or bad) choices they want with their money. Every individual can make their own choices on how to spend what money they have.

Wow, I probably *still* sound like a real stooge after trying to explain myself. But I'm sticking with my "American way" argument

All of this leaves me thinking about listening to every Democrat during this year-and-a-half long Presidential debate. Everyone during this election talks about how universal healthcare is affordable, and how every person should have the rights for cradle to grave healthcare. This is where my blood starts to boil. It makes me angry, but because I don't believe everyone deserves the opportunity for healthcare (because in the United States you have the best chance of getting good healthcare, versus in any other country). It makes me angry because when you change the way healthcare is in this country (making it less Capitalistic and less American to allow it for everyone), you will reduce the chances of good healthcare to everyone.

Think I'm lying with my theses here? Consider the amount of money they currently goes into the healthcare system, then take that same amount of money and spread it evenly so that everyone can have. That will force healthcare to be increased for some, but reduced for others.

People in the U.S. want to order prescription medication through Canada, because it's cheaper than what they get the same drugs for here in the United States. But there are reasons the drugs cost so much more here, and it's not sheer profit (although in some respects the drug creators deserve it, because they create drugs that help us live, and they should be properly compensated for their work):

One reason is the R&D required to make the drug is actually incredibly time-consuming and expensive (trust me on this one; I'm married to someone who has worked in the industry for years and years, so I know). It can take upwards of a decade of research with a specific set of available chemical compounds and elements to come up with a working drug idea. And that idea may be rejected because of the potential drug's lack of feasibility or need. With the amount of time it takes to create a compound usable for anything, probably only one out of every 10,000 drugs created can be used and released for sale.

Now, that's a Hell of a lot of time, and a Hell of a lot of money, to be able to come up with just one medication.

Reason number two is the philanthropic reason from our drug companies. These companies create drugs, say, to help fight AIDS, or help with other basic illnesses. There are people in many third-world countries who are suffering and cannot afford any medication at all, so U.S. drug companies gives their live-saving drugs to many people or sell them to third world countries at highly discounted prices to help save lives, because they feel it's the right thing to do. Many companies, for example, give money to charities; this is a way large drug companies and their major shareholders can be charitable. Also, some countries (like France) have a fixed price they will pay for any drug (or you can sell drug A in our country if you sell B at a fixed price, there are pages of details from some countries around the world on how drugs can be sold in other countries). These two factors drive the price down in other parts of the world for a drug that companies have invested a lot of time and research into creating. Because of this, drug prices have to remain at a premium in the United States to help compensate for other markets where the drug after release actually loses money for their creators.

I totally understand that, but I still would rather pay less for my prescriptions (sorry, that is the cheap side of this Capitalist, but I think everyone wants to pay less for drugs). So you pay for any healthcare coverage that will give you a discount on medications you may need. However, to ask your government to take care of that aspect of your lives is asking too much of your government. If

the government takes control of your healthcare system for you, should the government also monitor what foods you're allowed to eat? Because that has an effect on your health, as does smoking, and not exercising enough (I'm sitting here typing at a computer all day instead of hunting for foraging for my daily food, and being active enough to remain healthy).

And the thing that's really funny about this is that prices for anything healthcare related only started rising a lot in the 1970s. You'd think that may be because of the increase in medical lawsuits (well, that would have been my first guess), but I heard that the initial rise in prices was more in line with the government's intervention in healthcare, by starting Medicaid and Medicare. Most people don't think Medicaid or Medicare is enough, and with all of the advances companies in the United States have been able to come up with to help us prolong our lives, prices *do* go up (probably a lot more than what Medicaid and Medicare was originally designed to help with).

But when you look at things with a more historical perspective like that, isn't it funny to see how more government intervention actually makes something like healthcare worse? So is giving our government more power over our healthcare for "universal healthcare" might not be the smartest idea.

I hear all of the Democrats talk about how universal healthcare is possible for the United States, and it makes me think of a more socialistic medical system (which isn't American). I look around, and I see that leader of other countries, when they have medical problems, they come to the United States for surgeries and treatment, so I wonder if the capitalistic method, when applied to healthcare, is the best for everyone. It may mean that some people in this country will not get the best treatment, but looking at the healthcare system in the United States versus in any other country, they will probably get better treatment in the United States versus any other country in the world.

People have been complaining during this election cycle that everyone in the United States needs better access to healthcare. So the Democrat jumped on the "healthcare for everyone" bandwagon. But I fear that in making those choices we will be degrading what we can do as a country for everyone's medical needs, and making us no longer the best. People want a free slice of the healthcare pie, but people have to remember that you get what you pay for. That sound cruel and callous, but people who work throughout their lives for better food and better lifestyle regimens (in exercise activity, etc.), they get longer life. People who make poor choices (eating too much bad food, smoking too much, remaining sedentary) subconsciously make choices about their health.

Every choice every individual makes throughout their lives is a part of their healthcare regimen, financially or otherwise. Allow me to explain: my

mother had breast cancer and cervical cancer in the mid 1990s. After surgeries and procedures, she had a clean bill of health. After talking with my doctor, I learned that I should be doing annual gynecology exams and PAP smears immediately, and I should start annual mammograms 10 years earlier than most women should. Then 10 years after my mother's clean bill of cancer health, she contracted a particularly virulent strain of leukemia (if cancer can't beat her with cancer in one organ, they'll try cancer of the blood this time). Since I did everything I could with my doctor in watching for cancer, I started to look for other things that I could do as an individual. Not smoking was one (check). Eating cruciferous vegetables is another (What's that? Broccoli and cauliflower are cruciferous vegetables. Okay, add broccoli to stir-fries and on pizzas, and snack with cauliflower instead of potato chips. I can do that). Walk more (check). You see, these are things I can do keep my health in check, and can be things to help fight off cancer. For those who don't have money, well, it might cost more to eat broccoli and cauliflower versus potato chips (though I not quite sure), but it doesn't cost anything to walk more, and it saves money to stop smoking. That's what I mean when I say that every choice every individual makes throughout their lives is a part of their healthcare regimen, financially or otherwise.

But people are still trying to purchase their drugs in Canada versus in the United States, and people want a more cost-efficient healthcare system in the United States. Well, Canada has a free healthcare system, so why don't we become more like them? I wouldn't have been able to answer that question unless my husband explained to me how he was listening to Canadian talk radio while driving through northern Ohio on a sales call for work (850 AM on your radio, my husband thought it might have been called 'dial'). This radio show he listened to centered on "free" health care that the Canadian Government provides to its people.

My husband wanted to stress that free should be in quotes, because it didn't really seem free. He said that in listening to the radio talk show, even those that supported the system admitted that it had many shortcomings. One person (who even supported the system) said on the radio that he had to wait several months for gallbladder surgery, and this was after he had waited nearly three years for an accurate diagnosis. The man my husband heard on the radio admitted that his health has suffered irreparable damage because of this, but in his words, "I guess that the price you have to pay for free health care." A woman spoke of traveling over into Michigan to get reliable medical attention (Yes, a Canadian was coming to the United States for healthcare needs, not the other way around). She had ovarian cysts the size of grapefruits and was supposed to have surgery, but her anticipated wait time was eight months. My husband even heard the radio host admit to spending



thousands for personal health insurance for herself and her family. The radio show host even said that this extra money spent for better healthcare improved the level of treatment that she received, but she *still* preferred going into the United States for her treatment. Another man who called in admitted that it sounded like a good idea initially, but he didn't realize that this free health care was going to increase his taxes by over \$4,000.00

annually (which hardly seemed to make it free).

The VAT (the value-added tax) is supposed to help pay for this health care, but Canadians close enough to the U.S. border come to America to buy goods to avoid the VAT, and avoid the taxes that were intended to pay for the health care that they wanted to be free in the first place.

Now, these stories were not first-hand stories told to me personally, but I trust my husband with what he heard. So to get additional perspectives on this, so I talked to Gabriella, a medical intern in New York who is from Nova Scotia. She agreed with something my husband heard mentioned on talk radio during his drive, and that was that many Canadian doctors are choosing to move to the United States to become doctors, because there is a much wider field with many more choices as a doctor. Granted, she said, there seem to be far too many specialists in medicine (I know if I ever have a problem, my family doctor seems to refer me to someone else), but there is a growing trend for Canadian doctors to move their practices to the United States. This means that there are far fewer doctors to choose from in Canada (I believe she even said something like there seemed to be only 10 choices of where to go for an additional doctor's opinion in the entire country). This all means that people in Canada have to wait an insanely long time just for a diagnosis of their condition (before waiting an additional inordinate amount of time for treatment). This also means that if some Canadians spend extra for additional doctor care (partially because of the wait with "free" healthcare in Canada), they still may not have enough options to choose from for the health care they are willing to pay for.

Keep in mind that I got this information from a Canadian woman who has been living in New York for the past four years to finish her schooling to become a doctor.

This woman even commented that she never thought the concept of "free," or "universal healthcare," would ever work in the United States. We both are not the first people to say that there are people who are willing to abuse the system via welfare, to live on next to nothing with government handouts, and abuse the free healthcare they get, and continue to stay in the system and rear

children to do the same. As a woman who sees the system on many levels personally, Gabriella said the hard part is for the people who are willing to work (and have too much pride to take welfare), but cannot earn enough money at a job to afford healthcare for their family. She sees these people first-hand, and it breaks her heart to see how these people genuinely work hard but cannot afford healthcare.



I have never been in the position where I could not afford healthcare, so I cannot guess what I would do in that position. There are Democrats out there who want to adopt a system that in essence is un-American to help people with healthcare problems. But all adopting a system like that will successfully do is lower the standard of healthcare for all people here.

I reflect on how leaders of other nations have healthcare problems and come to the United States for surgeries and healthcare. I think Mikhael Gorbachev came to the United States for medical assistance, and Fidel Castro received medical assistance from the United States (and I know there have been others, I just can't think of their names off hand). I say this to you because leaders of other countries come to the United States for healthcare . . . because we're good. Because of capitalism, and the ability to work hard and receive the benefits from helping others, we have been able to make great strides in the healthcare profession.

The thing is, if we have to give our medical answers away to everyone (that's what universal healthcare would do), we just wouldn't be able to afford it. Healthcare has gotten more and more expensive (thanks to government intervention in the first place), so more advanced methods may actually be too costly for absolutely everyone. Democrats say we could afford it, but they say that to try to be elected as your next President. If there are people who need medical healthcare coverage, there may be some sort of middle ground between the socialist ideas of Democrats in this country and the opposite end of the extreme. Government intervention is what made healthcare originally out of reach, so all I can think is that more government intervention will only make healthcare problems even worse.



Janet Kuypers®
Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief

poetry
the passionate stuff

I'm Sure We Killed It

Janet Kuypers

on the Galapagos Islands
new species of animals develop
to accommodate their immediate surroundings
and everything fits with nature

think of trees around the world:
there seems to be a tree
for the needs of every animal:
the eucalyptus and the Koala Bear,
woodpeckers to make holes in trees,
even think of the leaping and traversing of monkeys in the trees
or that even certain dead grasses are needed for locusts
animals thrive around trees producing food they can eat

in nature, every tree has its niche
and everything fills its need

unlike animals, we humans don't have a single tree:
we cut them down for building and heating our homes
we cut down rain forests to plant more orange groves
(you know, so our orange juice can taste worse, but cost less)

we cherish some for food, but destroy others:
we destroy the rain forests
which counteracts the human effect on global warming
we destroy the rain forests
that possibly possess the natural cures
for diseases that help us kill ourselves

maybe that's what we get

and maybe there once was a single tree for humans

I'm sure we killed it

guest editorial

John Yotko

Freedom Trampled by Fear (the loss of free selection of meals without fear of government repercussions)

John J. Yotko

I was listening to the radio this morning on my way to work and I heard Terry O'Brien mention that the Transportation Safety Administration wanted to start collecting information about passenger meal selection. The first thing I thought, "for what purpose do they need this information?" Then I thought, "what right have they to this information?"

She then said that they were probably using it to study the behavior of passengers to determine if they may be terrorists. Terry noted that they have computer algorithms (her co-host suggested that she meant algorithm) that they can put this data through to profile the passengers to see if they may be a terrorist threat. They joked that the ACLU will probably get all up in arms over this one. Her own state of Illinois agrees that racial profiling is a crime. Meanwhile the TSA has taken to settling profiling cases out of court rather than facing a decision by the Supreme Court that this is unconstitutional. Immediately I was trying to dial the radio station but I couldn't get through. While I was trying to dial, she said that people do not have a right to fly, that it is a privilege. When did it become a privilege for a private individual to enter into a contract with a corporation for transportation? The day the "Patriot" Act passed, that is when. Don't worry, your rights aren't evaporating.

I thought about the references that I hear from many of the socialists, communists and liberals that I know about President George W. Bush being a Fascist. What is fascism? It is a political philosophy that glorifies the state (there is a very good description of Fascism at Public Eye). I don't believe that the President is Fascist but it appears that many of his supporters are becoming just that. If anyone questions his decisions, the Bush cultists immediately decry that person as being un-American. Since when did it become un-American to protest government action (see the two quotes from American history in this essay)? That was how this country was founded. Remember that your freedom ultimately was defined by

a group of traitors and the one we are taught was a traitor, Benedict Arnold, was the one who was loyal to his king and country.

Now Terry is an intelligent woman. She must be, because I agree with her quite often, although I don't particularly care for her delivery. I am certain she knows the meaning of the following two quotes:

Patrick Henry said, "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" Another respected individual, Benjamin Franklin, stated, "Those who would sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither liberty nor security."

The meanings of the two quotes are obvious. The first establishes that the government should be allowed only to do what the people allow it to do. In fact, that is what the Constitution states. People accepting the gradual changes taking place in our society are slowly eroding this. Franklin's quote is far more to the point. He is saying that you can't protect freedoms by taking them away. An analogy is the boiling frog. If you take a frog and drop it in a pan of boiling water, it will immediately jump out. If you place that same frog in a pan of warm water and slowly raise the temperature to a boil, you will cook it. We are the frogs and that water is our liberties. We are remaining warm and cozy as our freedoms evaporate.



poetry the passionate stuff

Dangling

Maureen
Flannery

She was a girl to die for--and he did,
just up and knotted his neck
so new breath that would have refreshed his limbs
was left swirling about the dangling participle
of his subordinate cause

and another young girl
who might have loved him someday
woke from a fretful night with a strange dream-image
of a wasp's nest
hanging from the ceiling of her room.

Repair

Candice Daquin

It wasn't anything you could give me
strangely you took more away
and though at times you hurt me
there was always enough left
to go around

Even when I said no I meant yes
intuitively our battered hearts
not fit for a respectable life
found in each other that familiar
aching

No one else could hurt me
but I wanted you to
I longed for the sharpness of your desire
your fingers around my throat

I remember kissing you as I stopped breathing
feeling you control me completely
giving you ultimate access
where only you who knew me
could ever walk

pain drove my desire
as pain ignited your own
and when you marked me
it was not the mark of cruelty
but of misunderstood love

which is why you made me swear
not to reveal what we did
to hurt and
to repair.

Cloth

I.B. Rad

Increasingly skeptics claim
our main political parties
are cut from the same cloth
with both materially
pulling wool over our eyes
through peddling yarns
spun out of whole cloth
and that,
however incumbents
 come into politics,
few retire wholly
like men (or women)
of the cloth.



Modification 1, art
by Mark Graham

Manic is the Dark Night

Michael Lee Johnson

Deep into the forest
the trees have turned
black, and the sun
has disappeared in
the distance beneath
the earth line, leaving
the sky a palette of grays
sheltering the pine trees
with pitch-tar shadows.
It is here in this black
and sky gray the mind
turns psycho

tosses norms and pathos
into a ground cellar of hell,
tosses words out through the teeth.

“Don’t smile or act funny,
try to be cute with me;
how can I help you today
out of your depression?”

I fell jubilant, I feel over the moon
with euphoric gaiety.

Damn I just feel happy!

Back into the wood of somberness
back into the twigs,
sedated the psychiatrist

scribbles, notes, nonsense on a pad of yellow paper:

“mania, oh yes, mania, I prescribe
lithium, do I need to call the police?”

No sir, back into the dark woods I go.

Controlled, to get my meds. I
twist and rearrange my smile,
crooked, to fit the immediate need.

Deep in my forest
the trees have turned black again,
to satisfy the conveyer--
the Lord of the dark wood.



image from Michael Lee Johnson

The Silence

Josh Oldham

The fog rolls in around my ankles
Obscuring my feet
Leaving me unsteady,
More so than I already am
The gentle billowing purity of the far up cloud
Lost as it comes closer to the dampened earth
Changing into gray nothingness

Slowly it swirls around
And I catch a glimpse of my feet
But never enough to help me steady myself
The swirling patterns
All too much for my contorted mind
Leaving all the thoughts jumbled
Taking away the little balance I have

Cautiously wisps of the ghostly fog
Wrap themselves around my legs
And begin to work their way upward
Dragging me down
Trying to pull me down into its entirety
Gripping my wrists
And crushing my chest
Pouring into my body
Suffocating
Consuming my cries
Before they can leave my tongue



a Timbuktu Mosque,
photographed by
Kenneth DiMaggio

Pinpoint

Eric Phetteplace

Pinpoint awakes automatic
without alarm, same hour
every day. His friends
(the knife tip, the match head,
the slight aperture of a hypodermic needle)
have tried interventions
but he has little reason
to listen to their inane babble. The wristwatch he wears
almost an anachronism now, a token
of stranger times.

Comfort Zones

Tom Vanderman

You are being watched
looked at
the object of gazes
gawked at
pointed to
probed

How does this feel to you
man?

Do you feel like the women
you open doors for
to look
at their asses
whose eyes you meet
for a cursory glance
before moving southward
pulled by the gravity
of your baseness?

Now here you are
so very far
from zones of comfort
out of range
of your home

They hold hands like you
but not like you
Steal a kiss as you may
but not as you would
Whisper "I love you" to someone
not anyone you would know
What shall we do then
with this new knowledge
this secret
space?

"As long as they just keep it
to themselves
and don't flaunt that
life style
in front of me."

Here's hoping you encounter
nothing but clever women
who make that choice
to keep it to themselves.

Shopping Cart in the Mud

Joseph Barbere

Four wheels face up
To the sky, motionless
Like the metal wire frame
That holds them up.

Looking at the cart
I can almost hear the
dim-witted laughter of
the college boy as
he crashed it into a
nearby rock and left it
to rust and cement
itself into the mud.

A brown spider
Weaves its web in
The hollow squares.
Fine lines of white
Overlap the metal bars
And form patterns
That weren't there before.

As I leave the site
Of the half buried relic,
A blade of light

Glares off the bright metal
And hits me in the eye as I pass.



He Who Holds
art by Aaron Wilder

Untitled

Toy Davis

I've embraced my damaged self
I've faced my many flaws
I've ran from most of my demons
And now I'm left with not much at all

Poem from the Spaghetti Scrapbooks (Summer)

Kenneth DiMaggio

Summer for the way
we would finally chisel
arthritic windows open
and let the neighbors
hear us yell while listening
to their similar endearments
of a family expressing its love

Summer
--backyard gardens with tomatoes
and cucumbers we were not
supposed to throw at each other
and for punishment had to water

--which meant spraying
the hose through the screens
and hearing your parents
telling you how much
they loved you

And finally summer
for the older girls
on the fire escapes
after taking a shower

--their long curly hair
crystal-gleaming
and soon pollinating
blue collar factory-scape
once they sat before
window-filled fans
that once they were "reversed"
became homemade hairdryers
with a propeller big enough
to power a Destroyer

--the power you needed
to make a vertical fiery cascade
of tress that was long and thick
and even when freshly wet
still resistant to brushes

--making Theresa's or Lucy's
comb caressing
last all afternoon

And when you no longer saw
young women on a fire escape
brushing brushing brushing
what could never become
thin and straight American

--you knew that summer was over

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

Wrong Number

Craig Nybo

Ever since I received the telephone call I find myself asking: is what I did murder? Sometimes my conscience tells me so, but my logic center seems to have worked out all the culpable parameters. I have found peace. I'm okay with what happened. I have to be or I would probably be in an institution by now.

I sat at my small desk in the back clerk's office at Smither's and Andrus Financial—where I work to this day. The two partners' names remind me of a vaudeville act, complete with magic tricks and unicycles; the partners' demeanors can't be further from the whimsical and absurd. I am not a CPA, as they are. I wouldn't even dare pretend at rich and successful; I don't have the bank account or perfect, silver hair to show as symbolic badges. The fact is, I'm quick with a ten-key and own a white shirt and tie—all the qualifications I need.

I hate my office. All the best décor bejewels the foyer of S & A, leaving the less important extremities of the suite barren and utilitarian. Someone smoked in my little abattoir before the firm hired me. No matter what salves and sprays I try, I can't shake the scent of char and ruin—fitting I suppose.

The phone rang, disrupting my cadence. Klak, klak, klak, klak, spacebar – klak, klak, klak, klak, spacebar – ring!

Damn.

I picked up the receiver.

“Smither's and Andrus: clerical.”

“Is this the exterminator?” The woman's voice, fragile and trembling, reminded me of Dianne Rehm, that droning old woman who sounds so near death that old grim must have one hand on her shoulder for most of every day—at least during her daily NPR broadcast.

“Ma'am, I'm sorry, I'm not an...”

“I have a problem, sir. A serious problem.”

“Ma'am?”

“A vampire problem.”

I paused, arching my eyebrows. “A what problem?”

“A vampire problem, and I need an exterminator.”

“How did you get my number?”

“Out of the phone book.”

Intrigued, I decided to play along. My day, like every other, was filled with incessant uninteresting hours, punctuated by ardent requests from my boss, Mr. Andrus. Mr. Andrus wears blade-starched collars and reminds me of a retired Chip and Dale dancer with an over-tanned face and loafers. He insists that I call him by his sir name, Mr. Andrus, even though he’s shorter than me.

Vampire hunter? I had to dig a little deeper. “Sorry about the confusion; I have a day job on top of my extermination business. I’m surprised you reached me here. What can I do for you?”

“Can you bring your tools right away? I think it’s sleeping.” I couldn’t get the face of my great grandmother Hazel Jessup out of my head. This woman seemed to have taken on some of her traits, senility being at the top of the list.

“I can break away in about a half hour; can you give me your address?”

The old woman gave me a street number; I wrote it down.

“Where are you going? Haven’t you already taken lunch?”

I hunched. Mr. Andrus’s voice, reedy, drove like a 1 millimeter drill bit into the back of my neck; so much for a clean getaway. I wheeled around and looked down at him. He wore a tweed jacket and smelled like sen sen. I wondered if his wife knew he still smoked. “I have a personal emergency. I’ll put in a couple of extra hours tonight.”

“We need your honest eight, Lex. Ad them at the end of the week and the sum should forty. That’s what we pay you for.”

“I understand, Mr. Andrus. Believe me, I’ll be back to clock those extra hours.”

“Very well.” Mr. Andrus’s face creased into a slim smile, I suppose his attempt at professional courtesy. He had, of course, granted me leave from my insipid vestibule and 10-key—the attached cost of working late not withstanding.

I granted him a grin. “Thank you, Mr. Andrus.” I spun around and left, cursing after I closed the heavy oaken door behind me.

“I need something wooden, long and sharp.” I said.

The hardware store nerd blinked, his eyes unnaturally large, amplified behind a pair of dark-framed, near-sited specs. “Like a stake?”

I almost laughed. “Yes. Exactly. I need a wooden stake...and a hammer.”

“Just one stake?” The kid’s name badge said *Clyde*. The only other Clyde I have known was a porking fifth grader who beat the hell out me near the bike racks back at Burton Elementary. This pencil-neck was nothing like Clyde the clobberer. I still remember those fists, ouch.

“Yea, just one stake. That should do the trick.” I chuckled.

Clyde glanced at me sideways as he turned away. He led me to the gardening center. On the way, we stopped in the tools department where I hefted several steel hammers. I settled on an eight pound, ball-peen clubber. It felt lethal, just what I needed, I suspected.

Clyde checked me out himself. For \$16.50 I had become a vampire hunter.

I drove through the upper avenues in town where only two factions live, the old timers who bought their homes when they were still reasonably priced, and the artist wannabees who wear clothes purchase from the art director’s emporium, all turtlenecks and blazers.

I found the woman’s address. The house stood 2 stories high, casting a dark shadow over me as I got out of my hybrid car and walked the concrete path towards a voluminous, Victorian porch that wrapped around three-quarters of the building. I mounted the steps and made my way up to an expensive-looking cast iron and stained glass door. I didn’t recognize the image in glass—impressionistic, modern but done with an arcane medium—interesting. I knocked with the assistance of a classic Scrooge brass knocker, complete with a slack-jowled face that reminded me of Alfred Hitchcock. I almost expected the little head to come alive and warn me away.

The door swung slowly open, creaking, mysterious. I expected a prim butler with dignified, greased back hair and a fine Roman nose. Instead, a pair of soft eyes peered up at me through oversized bifocals. The woman seemed sincere and clean. She stood with nice posture. I could tell she had lived well.

“Are you the exterminator?”

“I am.” I used my best used car salesman voice.

“You don’t seem dressed for this line of work.”

I glanced down at myself: white shirt, yellow tie, dockers, loafers. How is a vampire hunter supposed to dress? What should I tell her? I left my cape and crucifix at home? Damn, I left my crucifix at home. I smiled down at her. “Like I said, I have a day job. I can’t exactly make a full time living doing this.”

She smiled and opened the screen door. “Come in, dear boy.”

I followed her through a darkly finished living room. An upright piano grinned at me from one side of the wall. Above the piano hung a

heavy portrait of a man, sepia and dreamy. The face in the photo reminded me of Douglass Fairbanks in his prime, wearing a white turtleneck sweater and a muffler.

“My husband, God rest his soul.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No matter. He’s been dead for fifty years years. He was a movie star, you know. Lived a fast life and ran with bad people. I fear it killed him in the end, God rest his soul.” She looked up at the photo and crossed herself.

I rocked awkwardly from one foot to the other.

She led me through the kitchen. I smelled cloves and tarragon. Oak cupboards and an ancient stove stood against one wall. A late model refrigerator ducked back into an elegant cove. She hadn’t spared any expense on the house. The marks of a typical old woman, the curio filled with knickknacks, the plates with John Wayne’s face painted on them, were absent. The home beckoned, a warm sanctuary that set my soul at ease.

We exited through a French door and walked across the back yard, perfectly clipped. A small pond, stocked with orange carp, fronted a bird-bath where several sparrows busied themselves, tossing water on their feathers with needle beaks. A Turkish gazebo shaded a family of expensive lawn chairs. I noticed a copy of *East of Eden* by Steinbeck on an end table.

“Right here, in the wine cellar.” The woman pointed with one bony finger. “You first, if you please.”

I passed her and led the way down a case of dusky stairs. I heard a click; a beam of light speared over my shoulder from behind. From somewhere in the dark she had procured a flashlight, long, the kind cops carry, the kind that holds five D-cells.

We reached the bottom of the stairs. Racks of empty wine shelves stood like skeletal remains of times gone by, stinking with the rot of ages, swarmed with spider cotton and dust. Girthy whiskey barrels lined one wall, short henchmen skulking about, up to no good.

“My late husband; he was an appreciator of fine wines. Never was my fancy.”

I looked down at her.

She smiled. “This way.” She led me around a series of racks to a stone wall. “Here.” She trained the light on an iron grate, three feet square, almost rusted through, orange with decay and corrosion.

“What is it?”

“The vampire, he lives behind the grate in the root ante.”

I crouched down and tried to look between the bars of the grate, but black choked my vision. “Can I borrow your light?”

“Certainly.” She handed it to me.

I shined the light through the grate, but couldn't see any better.

"It must be strong, the vampire, to get in and out I mean. I've tried; I can't budge the grate free."

I clamped my fists on two bars and pulled. It wouldn't move.

"Try this, young man."

I turned. She stood above me with a crow-bar. I jumped, startled; for a moment I thought I had fallen into a sick trap. She would brain me and burry me behind the grate, breast to breast with her latest victim.

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

"Sorry." I took the crowbar and hitched it into the groove along the top of the grate. I winced and sweated, exerting myself. After ten minutes, the grate finally came free. I sidestepped just before it clattered on the concrete floor.

"Mind the racket, young man; you'll wake the dead."

I turned to her and put on my best tough guy smile. "Not on my watch." I turned back to the open root ante and shined the light in. I gasped, rocked back on my haunches, and fell on my butt.

"You didn't believe me did you?" She scoffed.

Lying in the root ante, in the spear of my pallid light, was a coffin—dusty, choked with web and damp. I looked up at her. She appeared calm, prim. "Well, get on with it."

I took a deep breath of the dank air and crawled into the short chamber. I put my ball-peen hammer and stake on top of the oblong box and, with both hands, clamped down on a brass rail bolted into the back of its girth. I pulled, using the strength of my legs against the concrete floor. The coffin scraped along, inch by inch. Within a few minutes, it sat clear of the root ante, so damn big, so damn out of place.

"Young man?"

I turned to the old woman. She held the crowbar out to me. I took it warily and stepped up to the side of the coffin. I lodge the hook end of the bar under the lid and wrestled it back and forth. There was a crack and a hiss as I penetrated the hold and depressurized the coffin's volume. I moved to another location and worked the lid afresh. The lock snapped and the door popped free.

I glanced over my shoulder, up at the old woman. She fixed me with a stern well-get-on-with-it, stare, her arms crossed in front of her. I shook my head. What had I gotten myself into? My stomach rolled forward. There was only one way this could end; badly. I kept one eye on the woman—I had no intention of becoming her next victim—and reached under the lid with my fingers. I took a final breath and pulled up on the lid.

It creaked on ancient hinges, groaning, the voice of a dying hog. The lid stopped, jammed six inches open. I had to put the hammer and stake town to bear my strength on the half opened box. I put my shoulder to it and exerted everything I had. Something on the back of the coffin broke free and the lid shot upward, slamming open, loud and resonating, like the whamming of a castle dungeon door. I lost my footing for a moment and almost fell into the oblong box. Catching myself on the edge of the coffin, I righted myself and glanced over my shoulder at the old woman.

She stood board rigid, one hand over her mouth, her eyes wide behind her bifocals. Tears welled as she looked into the coffin.

I looked into the box. Lying in the coffin, hands crossed over his heart, was the man I had seen in the heavy photograph that hung above the piano. The same pencil mustache, the same slicked back hair. His body, perfectly preserved, looked almost angelic, dressed in an alabaster tuxedo and black bow-tie.

“Oh, Frederick.” The old woman said. “They got to you, didn’t they; those bastards got to you.”

“Ma’am?” I didn’t know what to say at that moment. But there was one thing for certain, I would have a hell of a story to tell later.

The old woman sniffed and shut her eyes for a moment, composing herself.

“Ma’am, what do you want me to do?”

She opened her eyes and folded her arms, stern, resolute. “Well, what are you waiting for? Do what you have been hired to do, young man.”

I stalled, not knowing what to say.

“Are you or are you not an exterminator?”

I swallowed then said the first thing that came to my mind. “Yes, ma’am; but I’ve never had a case quite like this.”

She sniffed once, temporarily loosing hold on her emotions. “I understand. But I also understand that what lies in that coffin is not my husband. It is a vile aberration that resembles what my husband once was. If it would make you feel more comfortable, I can wait upstairs.”

“No, that won’t be necessary.” I picked up my stake and eight pound hammer and moved in on the corpse. I placed the tip of the stake firmly on poor Frederick’s heart and drew the hammer up with my right hand. It astounds me what one can be driven to do when placed in unusual circumstances. The thing that I find most surprising when I think about that moment in the wine cellar is that I only hesitated for a second, just long enough to ensure a good swing with plenty of impact on the head of the stake.

The hammer came down, smacking on the stake with a dull thud. The tip of the stake drove into the corpse’s heart, true and fixed. That’s

when Frederick's eyes burst open and he barred his fangs. I stood up too quickly and pin wheeled away, lucky to keep my grip on the hammer.

Frederick reached for the stake and struggled to pull it free, but his strength seemed to fade with the copious amount of blood that poured from the wound.

"What are you waiting for! Finish him!" The old woman shouted, her voice booming and raspy, like that of a magpie.

I glanced at her. She seemed possessed by something much angrier. I looked at Frederick. His mouth and eyes twitched in anguish. Panic rose within me, a shaft explosion leaping from my stomach up through my throat. I quelled it with one hard swallow and ran at the coffin, raising the hammer over my head with both hands. With one graceful swoop, I let the hammer fall. It smacked down on the head of the stake. The shaft broke through skin and sternum, running straight through Frederick's chest into the wooden bottom of the coffin. Frederick writhed and undulated for a few more seconds then went still.

I dropped the hammer into the coffin and staggered back, away from Frederick.

The old woman strode across the concrete floor to the coffin. With one firm flick, she slammed the lid down, the loud boom reverberating in the cramped cellar. She wheeled around to face me. "Well done, young man. And what do I owe you?"

"Ah... er... two-fifty... I guess."

"That's reasonable. Follow me back to the kitchen and I'll make out a check."

Since then I have decided that my act in that cellar was not murder. To kill that which is already dead is not killing at all. As for me, my life hasn't changed much. I still work at Smithers and Andrus. I still put in my honest forty every week, klattety-klacking on the 10-key. But there is one difference. If you flip in the Lakeside yellow pages to the V section, you will find an ad that reads:

Vampire problem?

*Call Archie Lomand, exterminator, now on call during day-light hours,
Monday through Friday.*

555-5102

*Let Archie Lomand help you say adieu to your *nostferatu*.*

Big Bertha

Ed Coet

They didn't have air conditioning in Central Texas in 1867. August was so hot that a smoky mist seeped from the ground as if the dry cracked soil were perspiring, gasping, and even begging for a cool rain. It was on this burnt ground that the small, one-room rust-painted wooden schoolhouse sat by itself amidst a forest of live oaks, mesquite, and cedar trees. A forest of parched trees that were collectively struggling and clinging to life in the midst of one of the hottest and most unbearable summers in historical memory.

No one would have ever guessed in 1867 that this same ground would one day be the home of a thriving city of over 100,000 citizens known as Killeen. It would also host the largest and most sophisticated military installation in the world: Fort Hood, Texas.

The tiny schoolhouse crammed in seventeen students ranging between 6 and 16 years of age. First through 10th grade were taught in one room by a single teacher. Few students stayed past the 8th grade. No students went beyond 10th grade. Teenagers were part of the much-needed agricultural labor pool. Their labor was needed on the farms and in the forests.

Miss Warlock, also known as Big Bertha, taught all the students. Bertha Warlock had a very strange family history. Legend has it that she was the daughter of Gertrude Warlock, a wicked witch. She had cast a spell on Allen Warlock, Big Bertha's father. This spell caused Allen Warlock to fall in love with Gertrude. The wicked witch Gertrude was decrepit and vile-looking. She had squinty gray eyes; bushy eyebrows; large ears; a cleft, protruding chin; and rotting teeth.

Even so, the spell she cast on the trapper Allen Warlock made Gertrude appear beautiful to him. While under her spell Allen asked Gertrude the witch to be his bride. They quickly married on January 1, 1868. Ten months later on Halloween night, October 31, 1868, the wicked witch Gertrude gave birth to a very large and an unusually ugly baby girl. She named the baby Bertha. This baby would grow up to be the legendary Big Bertha.

After two years, Gertrude's evil spell wore off Allen Warlock. He was finally able to see the wretched witch that he married while under her evil spell. The sight of her was so shocking that Allen Warlock almost succumbed to heart failure. It took him months to recover and even then it was not a full recovery.

The thought of having to spend the rest of his life with such a wicked wife filled Allen Warlock with despair. He lost his will to live. The end finally came when Gertrude forced her affections on Allen. He was bedridden and defenseless. Allen tried to fight her off but his brave attempt was no

match for Gertrude's evil magic. She placed yet another spell on him.

This spell forced Allen Warlock to hold his breath until he fainted into unconsciousness. He died soon thereafter. The final cause of his death was the subject of much speculation over the years. Most believed that Gertrude murdered her husband while he was in his unconscious trance. Others thought he died from another heart attack while being forced to hold his breath under Gertrude's evil spell.

The truth remains a mystery to this day. Whatever the actual cause of death was, heart attack or murder, nobody disputed the fact that Gertrude's evil spell led to her husband's death in some manner.

It was common knowledge during this period that Allen had nothing to do with his daughter Bertha. At the time of his death, Bertha was only one year old. Even at this young toddler's age, Bertha was mysterious and overpowering. Her father was afraid of her. The normal father-daughter bonding never developed between them.

Bertha was known to dislike males of all ages. She avoided the company of boys and men whenever possible, unless she had some particular use for them. Some of the boys and men whom Bertha came in contact with mysteriously vanished. They were never heard from again. No one knew why. It was widely believed that Gertrude the witch was teaching her daughter, Bertha, to hate men even at this tender young age.

The circumstances surrounding Allen Warlock's death became public on the second anniversary of his death. Human bones were found around an outdoor barbecue pit next to the log cabin of Gertrude the witch. A rawhide identification wristband identified the remains as being that of Allen Warlock.

Within days of this discovery, Gertrude Warlock was tried and convicted for murder and cannibalism. The evidence proved that Gertrude had barbecued the remains of her husband. Afterwards she ate his flesh. It is not known if her daughter Bertha shared in this feast of human remains.

Since Gertrude Warlock had been convicted of witchcraft, sorcery, murder, and cannibalism, she was sentenced to death and burned alive at the stake. A single newspaper report of the execution was discovered many decades later. It was the only record of what took place that day. This report reflected eyewitness accounts of Gertrude the witch laughing as her flesh burned. It was as if she felt no pain. Her eyes were reported to have turned crimson red. It said her head turned slowly from left to right with an evil and chilling glare.

Seconds before dying, Gertrude shrieked out a warning. She said, "Beware, my magic will live in my other flesh. I shall return and gain

my revenge on man.”

Up to this point her skin and flesh only peeled under the heat of the intense flames. Then suddenly it turned to ash and vanished in a mysterious manner.

It is uncertain what Gertrude meant about returning in her other flesh. Most folks believed she was referring to her daughter Bertha who was, of course, of her flesh. From that day forward Bertha was held highly suspect. She was avoided by practically everyone.

Bertha Warlock, or Big Bertha, thus lost both her parents at a very young age. Ordinarily this would be a tragedy, but in Big Bertha's case it was a blessing in disguise. The police investigated further and discovered the skeletal remains of 27 missing children. They were also buried near Gertrude's cabin. Gertrude the witch had placed spells on them.

These spells put the children in a trance, whereupon Gertrude would kill and eat them. Afterwards she would bury the remains. Had Gertrude not been executed she might have killed and eaten her own daughter, the legendary Big Bertha. The prevailing concern at the time was that the blood of Gertrude ran through Big Bertha's veins. Many feared that Big Bertha would become like her mother.

Grandma Warlock, Big Bertha's paternal grandmother raised her. Grandma Warlock was a good and kind person. She taught Bertha good values and the importance of getting a good education. Bertha studied hard and earned excellent grades. Other than chores she did nothing else but study. Bertha tried to make friends at an early age but was always rejected. Everyone associated her with Gertrude, her witch mother. Parents did not permit their children to play with or associate with Bertha. The boys teased her and the girls made fun of her.

Bertha quickly became bitter and angry. She learned to hate boys and lost interest in making friends with other girls. She became a complete outsider. She was a loner. Bertha didn't fit in with anyone. She often talked to herself or so it seemed. It was as if she were somehow communicating with her long dead mother, Gertrude the witch.

On occasion, Bertha was seen mixing potions waving her hands over them in a mysterious way. When questioned, she said she was learning to cook and that she was reciting recipes to herself. Was it cooking or was it witch's sorcery as many believed? Nobody really knew for sure.

Bertha grew much faster than other children her age. By the time she was 14, Bertha had already reached a height of 6 feet 2 inches. She weighed over two hundred pounds. By her 20th birthday Bertha had matured in to a 6 foot 7 inch 325-pound woman. She had very little body

fat. Bertha was as solid as a rock.

Occasionally Bertha would have disagreements with some of the tough loggers and trappers in the area. This happened only when she went shopping in town for her grandmother. Feeling the effects of too much whiskey, the loggers sometimes teased Bertha about her unusual size and her homely looks. Bertha usually just turned her back to them. Then she would walk away from them.

However, if they brought up Gertrude, Bertha's witch mother, she would lose control. A fight would break out that was a spectacle to witness. Not once did a logger or trapper walk away from a fight with Big Bertha. She would pound them unconscious. Her hammer fist was as powerful as a sledgehammer. She smashed it against the side of the face and other body parts of anyone who challenged her.

Some did not survive the fight. Since these fights were always witnessed and because Bertha acted in self-defense, she never faced criminal charges. Those who survived a Big Bertha beating were never the same again. You could spot her victims a mile away. They were the crippled remains of once gallant and strong men. Their deformed, twisted, mangled and disabled bodies were unsightly and pitiful looking. They begged considerable compassion from onlookers.

Bertha Warlock's exceptional grades earned her a full scholarship to the University of Texas. It was there that she set out to fulfill her life's ambition of becoming a teacher.

There are no records that speak to what transpired until August 28, 1892. Big Bertha was 24 years old at the time. She had just accepted the teaching position in the rusty-colored, one-room country school in Bell County, central Texas. She was the only teacher in the school.

The land upon which this school was built would some day be near the center of a city that would become known as Killeen, Texas. This fact would later prove to be significant. The record is very sketchy after this, except that it is known that a few influential locals tried to fire Big Bertha from her teaching position. Their reasons for wanting to fire her remain sketchy. However legend has it that they were acting on a popular public appeal.

Their efforts to fire Big Bertha failed. There is no record of why it failed. It is only known that two of the five men who sought her dismissal mysteriously disappeared. The other three, the brothers Clyde and Jethro Belton and their cousin Jessie Stillhouse were in a complete state of shock. They had witnessed or been subjected to something awful. They could not be persuaded to speak about what transpired, not even when threatened with death, so great was their fear.

Big Bertha's name was perpetuated by her students because of her enormous size, strength, and what seemed like her supernatural powers. It is known that Big Bertha remained a spinster, having never married. She did not like men. She could also be ruthless with women if they crossed her. Big Bertha lived alone and remained a loner her entire life. She would go into violent rages if anybody disturbed her peace.

Big Bertha was known to be an excellent teacher. She was also extremely tough. She could be a mean and ruthless disciplinarian. Big Bertha was usually nice to students who tried their best, received passing grades, and who demonstrated good behavior.

However, Big Bertha was mean and ruthless with poor students who demonstrated bad behavior. She built her own paddle. The students nicknamed the paddle the "butt buster." The butt buster was 18 inches long and 18 inches wide. It was 3 inches thick. It had 21 small holes and 21 metal welts screwed into it. Just three swats with the butt buster left a student crying in agony. It always left bruises, blisters, and welts on their behinds. One could hardly survive more than four swats with the butt buster. The students quickly learned: *Don't mess with Big Bertha.*

Big Bertha was so strong she could pick up the largest kid in the class, with one hand, by the back of his neck. She could lift him completely off the ground while swatting him with the butt buster using her other hand. Even the older teenagers would cry and beg for mercy when someone was being punished by Big Bertha. Not many students dared to screw up in Big Bertha's class. If they did it was only once. They made sure never to get her angry again. She was downright scary and she always inflicted great pain on badly behaved students.

At the age of 57 Big Bertha suffered a severe heart attack and died. She had no living relatives. The local officials decided to bury Big Bertha in the back of the old wooden school house. They placed a simple wooden marker over her grave. The grave marker read, *Here lies the best, meanest, and toughest teacher that ever lived— Big Bertha.*

Nothing more needed to be added to the marker. Her legend spoke for itself.

With all the mystery and suspicion surrounding Big Bertha, she was always considered to be an outstanding teacher. Her students always did better academically than their peers. In adult life her former students usually became more wealthy and successful. Their success was largely credited to Big Bertha's exceptional teaching skills.

Big Bertha thought of her students as family in a perverted sort of way. This was because she had no living relatives. Being buried by the

schoolhouse was indeed a great tribute and memorial to her. It was the one place that she could most rest in peace assuming, of course, that nobody ever disrupted her peaceful rest.

Two years after Big Bertha's death, lightning struck the old wooden school house. It burned the school and Big Bertha's grave marker to the ground. Soon thereafter another school was built in a new location, several miles away.

Trees, brush, and grass grew over the area of the old wooden school house and Big Bertha's grave. Because her grave was no longer marked it was forgotten about within a decade.

About a century after Big Bertha's death, the city of Killeen had grown and thrived in central Texas. It was overrun with students. In 1994 a new school, Brookhaven, was built on the exact spot where Big Bertha was buried. Nobody realized that her grave was still there because no marker identified the gravesite.

Just prior to opening the new Brookhaven School a routine check was made with the city graves registration. Only then did they discover that the southwest corner of the Brookhaven School had been built over Big Bertha's grave. City and school district officials met to decide what should be done. It was decided that it would be prohibitively expensive to tear down the school and move the grave. That plainly was not an option.

Since Big Bertha had no living relatives and only a few people knew her grave existed, they decided to do nothing at all. They acted as if it hadn't happened. This would prove to be a frightening mistake.

After the Brookhaven School opened, the school's custodians started to complain. They were concerned about some very strange happenings that occurred while they were cleaning the school after dark. There was talk of eerie noises, unexplained flying objects, and just plain spooky events.

Brookhaven experienced a large turnover of custodian personnel. The custodians were quitting almost as fast as they were hired. They told anyone who would listen about the spooky events, but nobody believed them. Nothing ever happened during the day when the students and teachers were there. Hence, the authorities assumed the spooky stories were being made up by disgruntled employees, the custodians.

About five months into the school year Brookhaven started a Behavior Management class for students who were having difficulty with their behavior. These students were occasionally required to stay after school for several hours because of poor behavior. This was called after school intervention but the students themselves called it late night.

It was when these students stayed for late night that the authorities

finally found out what was really going on. They quickly learned that the custodians had been honest about their spooky encounters.

Recall that legend said Big Bertha was tough and sometimes ruthless with badly behaved students. They were students much like those who had to stay for late night in modern times. It turns out that when they built the Brookhaven School over Big Bertha's grave the construction disrupted her peaceful rest. Big Bertha's spirit came to life. Her ghost started haunting the Brookhaven School. She would never come out of her grave during daylight hours. That is why none of the students or staff who were at Brookhaven during daylight hours saw or heard her. Big Bertha's ghost was only active after darkness fell. This explains why the custodians experienced all the strange and spooky happenings at night.

Big Bertha's activities could be heard but she would rarely show herself unless bad students were in the school or on school property. Her ghost usually remained indoors, in the southwest corner of the school, near her grave. However, on occasion her ghost would fly to other parts of the school. Sometimes she would go outside on school grounds. It was as if she were protecting her turf.

Big Bertha's ghost was off-white, almost creamy in color. It was also transparent in that you could see through parts of it as if looking through a hazy cloud like substance. Her hair was pure white. It was shoulder length and was parted in the middle. Her eyes were big, round, and pitch black. Big Bertha's ghost still wore her long white burial dress. It had ruffles around the neck, the bottom of the dress and around the wrists of her long sleeves.

Big Bertha's nose was very wide and long. Her cheeks were full and rotund. She had a large mole near her square and dimpled chin. Her lips were full and pale. Her mouth was wide. She had a few missing teeth. Those teeth that remained were large, pointed, and sharp. Her fingernails were also long and pointed. They resembled the claws of a wild beast.

When Big Bertha appeared she hovered in mid-air. She slowly turned her head from left to right. She glared in each direction. It was very eerie. When she saw a bad kid, Big Bertha would let out a high pitch screeching scream. It was a kind of "eeyeee" sound. Big Bertha's ghost could look at objects such as trash cans, desks, and chairs and with mind control could send them flying through the air at a high speed. Sometimes she would intentionally miss the student, intending only to scare him. That was what she usually did to misbehaved female students.

Recall that Big Bertha was much tougher on male students than female students. Most often, if it were a boy, she would let the object hit him. For the worst behaved students the butt buster would magically

appear. Big Bertha would levitate the student as if picking him up by the back of the neck. Then she would attack him with the butt buster. These students either died from the whopping or ended up in the hospital badly beaten up and in excruciating pain.

On one occasion, two teachers tried to come to the aide of a couple of students. Big Bertha, who usually left teachers alone, became very angry when they tried to interfere. She levitated the largest teacher, who weighed over 265 pounds, and threw him into the other teacher. They both crashed against the wall with considerable force.

The smaller teacher was crushed to death. Being hit with the velocity and force of the larger teacher that came flying through, was more than the smaller teacher's body could endure. The larger teacher ended up with a broken back. Big Bertha's ghost levitated over him for a few seconds. She waved her index finger back and forth at the suffering big teacher. It was as if she were trying to say "naughty naughty, don't ever do that again." Then she vanished.

To this day, several students, parents, teachers and other staff have seen the ghost of Big Bertha. All the sightings have been at night and especially on Halloween. Recall that Halloween is the anniversary of both Big Bertha's birth and her death.

Most people who have seen Big Bertha elect not to talk about it. They fear that nobody will believe them. Others, out of concern that the Brookhaven students might become alarmed or that parents will worry, elect to deny the existence of Big Bertha. They frequently tried to end her legendary story, but the Legend of Big Bertha lives on.

What do you believe? If you are in doubt someday you might see Big Bertha yourself. If you do, for your sake, I hope that you have been a good student. Always remember to stay away from the Brookhaven School on Halloween. The ghost of Big Bertha will make a believer out of anyone.

The Prose Poem

David B. McCoy

Just beyond our yard, where the nature preserve starts, was a rock that looked just like a sleeping bear. It's funny that we have lived here 20 years, and I never noticed it before. Every morning this winter, when I would look out the window over the sink, I'd think to myself, "That rock looks an awful lot like a bear." This morning my wife, as she was looking out the window, announced, "Oh my! I see our bear is gone. Didn't it look just like a big rock?"

Logan the Runaway

James Cannon

In the darkness, the scream of a woman, followed by the crack of a whip, echoed off of the damp, crumbling drywall. Logan Velar's eyes dropped to the crack of light beneath the heavy maple door. The cracking continued, as he watched the shadows jumping to and fro underneath where his eyes lay. He slowly crept from the side of his bed to his door, and carefully turned the knob. He cracked it open just enough to see his father bent over his mother, his belt folded in his hand. He was shouting obscenities that Logan had never heard used by his parents before. He recognized some of the words from those he heard at school. The "cool kids" would call out these words, as the skimpy teenaged girls would walk by. He closed the door with a heavy sigh, and glanced into his mirror. His deep purple eyes almost scared him. He looked kind of like a vampire the way his dark, shoulder-length hair wrapped around his pale face. He walked back to his bed to ponder the nightly event, and wonder why his father treated his mother this way.

He lied his head down on his pillow, and closed his eyes. No sleep came to him though.

"Why God, why?" he muttered under his breath. "All I want is some understanding... is that so much to ask?"

He heard his front door slam loudly, and his parents' cars start shortly afterwards. He jumped up, throwing his covers into a heap at the end of his bed. He ran to the window and peered out. He saw his father's car rip out the driveway, leaving tread marks for at least ten feet. His mother's car pulled out slowly and neatly, probably heading to her escort service across town. She spent many nights there, where she catered to her clients' every whim. She did everything from dinner to sex. He understood why, though. She had to pay for his father's drugs and her shabby apartment where she took her many clients. If she didn't then the only person who knows what would happen to her is God.

Logan walked over to his old phone and picked up the receiver, praying for a dial tone. When, after a seemingly long wait, the tone finally came and he dialed the familiar number. The phone rang for about three minutes before someone answered.

"Hello?" said a women's voice

"Hi, Is Cindy there?"

"Logan?" asked the women "how many times have I told you not to call here after eleven?" she grunted "Okay... hold on one moment."

He heard her phone fall onto their counter. His gaze shifted to the mirror again. He fingered the scar on his left cheek. The sting of his father's sharp blade

was still fresh in his mind. He could still feel the warm blood running down his soft, clean cheek. He shuddered and shook the thought from his mind.

“Hello?” said a wonderful, sweet voice “Logan? Sweetheart? You there?”

“Hey babe...” he said in a sad tone “he did it again...”

“What did he do again sweets?” she asked

“That bastard of a father raped her and whipped her again... That’s like... the fourth time this month,” he started to tear up “babe... what am I goanna do? What can I do? ... Can you come over for tonight?”

“Um...” she hesitated, then whispered “yea sweets... I’ll come over in an hour... when my moms sleeping, I love you”

“I love you too Hun” he said happily

He leaned on his wall for a few minutes before going back to his bed. He plopped down on his bed and pushed the power button on his half-broken T.V. remote control. He didn’t know why he tried. Maybe his mother had managed to save enough money to pay the cable bill. Only white static filled the screen.

“Should have known,” he said.

Logan sat on the edge of his bed eagerly awaiting Cindy. He watched the window with anticipation, hoping to see her angelic face within the frame. He sat for what seemed like an eternity, then, finally, she knocked on his window. He ran to the window and opened it as quickly as he could. She climbed through and he grabbed her. He held her like he hadn’t seen her in years and wouldn’t see her in many more. Tears began to fall down his face as she slowly turned her body toward him. They held each other in a loving embrace.

“You’re everything to me baby...” he said with tears streaming down his face. “I love you more then anything on the earth, you are my angel from heaven, and God sent you to take my pain away. I love you so much!”

She began to tear up. She had never known how much she meant to him. She felt the same way about him, but she had no idea it was returned. She was so happy she could scream out to the whole world. Logan had a sudden thought, but was afraid to bring it up.

“Logan,” she said, “What’s the matter? I know when something’s bothering you.”

“Nothing... just an idea, but its stupid.” He said, “I wish we could do it though.”

“Just tell me silly!”

“Ok!” he exclaimed with a huge grin “I... I... want to run away with you... Just you and me babe.”

“... How would we get the money Lo?”

“I’ve been saving up since the day I met you.”

“Really?”

“Yea... I promise baby,” he said “ Lets just go, get away and be together forever!”

“Ok sweets, I need to get some stuff from my house. I’ll meet you at the train station in two hours. Ok?”

“Ok baby, I love you so much!”

“Love you too Lo.”

She snuck back out the window and he ran around his room grabbing every clean article of clothing he could find. He threw all the cloths into a blue JanSport Backpack. After he had all the cloths he needed he walked over to the corner where he kept his savings. The rug was unusually loose. He thought he had made sure it was tight last time he counted it. He pulled back the carpet and started to panic. The floorboard was loose as well. He knew he had tightened the board. When he pulled back the board he felt his insides twist. He reached down into the glass Jar and fingered what felt like a bill. He was hoping it was one of his two \$100’s... He was afraid to pull it out... When he slowly dragged the paper bill shaped item from the jar and the floor-space into the light, his eyes filled with tears. On the piece of white paper it read:

Sorry Son, I needed the money... for um... Lunch at work. Consider this an official IOU.

Love, Dad

His sorrow turned to anger. He heard his father’s car pull into the driveway and he stood. On his way out of his bedroom door he grabbed a piece of rebar he had found near the railroad. He reached the sorry excuse for a living room just as his father walked in through the front door.

“Hi... Dad.” he said, biting his lip.

“Is this about the money Lucas?”

“Its Logan, you drug-crazed loser!” He screamed as he swung the rebar in his father’s direction. He let go of the metal before it hit his father. Shifting his hand from being open to a fist he struck his father in the jaw... hard. Hard enough to knock his father into the wall and misshape his face a little. Logan ran up and fingered through his pockets. He found his two hundred dollars. He ran out the door and jumped into his car. He pulled out of the driveway like he was in the Indy 500. Smoke filled his rearview mirror as he flew down the road. He drove a few blocks past the train station and walked back to wait for Cindy. When he got there she was waiting for him. They looked into each other’s eyes and both moved in for a kiss simultaneously. When their lips touched for the first time his heart felt like it was on fire. They held each other and kissed until they heard the train pulling down the track. When the train finally stopped they walked onto the train hand in hand.

Just as the doors close both of Cindy’s parents run into the station. They looked confused as Cindy waved “Good-bye” to them. She then grabbed Logan’s hand and kissed him. As the sun rose that morning the train rode into the sunrise.

Shake, Rattle, and What?

Pat Dixon

1

“Get in step, you ****ing knuckleheads! Baker! You give the cadence for your sorry-ass newly activated fellow officers. Sing it out like you got a pair!”

“Sir! Yes, sir! Okay, guys! Pick this up and stay in step!” shouted Second Lieutenant Ronald Baker over his shoulder. Then he began to sing in a loud, hoarse voice.

“Jody, Jody, don’t be blue!”

Fifty-eight other lieutenants, most with smirks on their sweaty young, sun-burned faces, repeated the line, some deliberately out of tune, out of time, or in falsetto voices: “Jody, Jody, don’t be blue!”

“Two more years an’ you’ll be through!” sang Baker.

“Two more years an’ I’ll be through!” sang the group.

“Tell me *if* I’m wrong!” he sang.

“You’re *right!*” they responded, stamping their right feet down hard in unison.

“Tell me *I ain’t* wrong!”

“You’re *right!*” Down stamped their right feet.

“Sound off!”

“One, two!”

“*Sound* off!”

“Three, four!”

“Bring-it-on-down!” sang Baker.

“One, two, three, four! One-two, three-four!” the group responded, swinging their arms with grins on their faces and feeling better about their thirty-pound packs and their M14 rifles than they had since formation nearly three hours before.

“You had a good home, but you *left!*” sang Baker.

“You’re *right!*” sang the group.

“Y’ could’a’ stayed home, but y’ *left!*”

“You’re *right!*”

“Sound off!”

“One, two!”

Fifteen minutes later, Captain Brian Zinman, a junior tactical instructor at Fort Benning’s Infantry Officers Basic Course, gave the command to halt for a ten-minute break.

“Sergeant Corelli!” he shouted.

“Sir!” shouted Staff Sergeant Corelli from twenty yards away, snapping to attention with precision.

“Make sure that none of these newie-lewies go into the bushes to take a leak! They can stand on the shoulder of the road an’ piss into the ditch, but no one steps off this road!”

“Yes, sir! Listen up, all you new off’cers! You heard what the cap’in jus’ said. No one leaves this ‘ere road—even if you got t’ take a crap! Any ‘tenant needs t’ do that can dig y’rself a little hole in the gravel at the side o’ this road an’ jus’ squat over it. An’ then bury what you do—so the Enemy don’ find it!”

“Hey! Johnson! Get your sorry ass right over here! Now!” shouted Captain Zinman at one of the lieutenants who was bending down.

“Double-time, Johnson!” he added, wiping his forehead and straightening his sunglasses.

Second Lieutenant Anne Johnson picked up her M14 from the gravel road, held it at high port, and ran to Captain Zinman. Two feet in front of him, she stood at attention, her rifle at her side and bewilderment on her face.

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“Johnson, don’t you *ever* just lay your rifle on the ground when I’m around! If a piece of sand even gets in there, what could happen?”

“Sir! Stoppage, sir!” she replied, assuming a blank, pseudo-hypnotized facial expression.

“Damn’ right, lieutenant. An’ if you get a stoppage, what can be the result?”

“Sir, the enemy could kill me before I could kill him. Sir!”

“An’ what *worse* thing could happen?”

Lieutenant Johnson looked puzzled again.

“Sir. *You* could kill me. Sir?”

“Shee-it no, lieutenant! *That* would be a tender mercy! The enemy could kill five or ten of your *buddies* b’cause of your *****-up!*”

“Sir. Yes, sir!”

“Give me twenty push-ups, right here, lieutenant!”

She carefully slung her weapon over her back with the sling crossing diagonally over her chest and obeyed him, counting loudly to twenty as she did.

“Good! Now don’t forget this or it will be *fifty* next time!”

“Sir. Yes, sir!”

“Dismissed, lieutenant!”

She ran back to where she had been and added her weapon to the teepee of stacked rifles that someone had prudently built during her absence.

“Sergeant Romero!” shouted the captain.

“Yes, es-sir!”

“Two minutes. Tell ‘Tenant Johnson that she’s going to take care of the cadence for the next three miles!”

Captain Zinman and said, "Sir. Permission to ask a question, sir."

"Go ahead, Brochet."

"Sir, why aren't we permitted to go into the bushes to relieve ourselves, sir? This is especially hard on us female officers, sir, especially when we're being watched—or might be watched—by your enlisted men, sir."

"Brochet, have you ever heard what *lurks* in these woods, just off the road? Do you have any idea?"

"No, sir. Not exactly, sir. But I grew up near woods very much like these in Upper Michigan, sir, and I just cannot imagine there's much danger, especially if two or three of us women went into the bushes together. Sir."

"You can't *imagine*? Let me tell you, Brochet, there's *danger* in these woods—far greater than anything they've got *up* in your Michigan!"

He stared at her coldly over the top of his sunglasses.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

3

"Snakes! Big-ass cotton-mouths! Big-ass rattlers! Giant copperheads! Even little bitty coral snakes! Just a-waitin' to bite your dumb asses—and other *private* parts! Venomous ****ing vipers! Hey! Cogswell! Wipe that ****ing *smirk* off your dumb sissy puss! Drop down an' give me thirty! Now! Georgia is *not* a hospitable place for people who are inexperienced in the ways of deadly poisonous serpents! If you do not believe an experienced tac officer who has been down here in Georgia for the past eighteen months running little baby asses like yours through this component of your Officers Basic, then jus' ask any *enlisted* man! You *will* have a chance to test yourself against the snakes the day after tomorrow when you have the Escape and Evasion component—where you all get to try an' run an' hide in the woods from the Enemy from twelve-hundred *noon* through the afternoon—and all through the whole moonless ****in' *night* up till zero six hundred in the hayhem! *Some* of you will not *make* it!"

Captain Zinman paused for effect and took a long drag on his cigarette, watching the young lieutenants coldly through his sunglasses.

"Some of you will get caught and tortured—psychologically *and* physically. *Some* of you will get lost in the woods and beg 'em to come find you. An' they *will*! An' *some* of you will trip over logs or fall down ravines—or run y'r stupid heads into low-down branches, maybe put out one o' y'r eyes! An' the *really* unlucky ones'll meet up with one or more o' these deadly *serpents*! Jus' two cycles ago, I had a couple o' new little lewies, jus' like y'rselves, who were escapin' down a hillside in the dark, an' they somehow found a whole nest o' rattlers. *Rigor* had already set in by the time our dogs found 'em. Nothin' I could do but write a sorry 'Dear Missus Jones' letter to their mommas. 'Billy an' Sally died *heroically* in the service o' God an' Country!' Shee-it! Folks usually *hate* gettin'

those kinds o' letters 'bout their kids!"

He took a final drag on his cigarette, flicked the ash onto the gravel road with his finger nail, and tucked the filter into the pocket of his starched and creased green denim fatigue pants. With the sole of one spit-shined combat boot, he ground the ash into the loose reddish gravel.

"Put 'em out! Field strip 'em! Don't want the Enemy knowin' how many of us went through here! Mullens! You take the cadence for the next twenty minutes. Fall in!"

4

Barely two hundred meters farther down the gravel road, Captain Zinman ordered Second Lieutenant Mullens to halt the group. With a litheness that seemed incompatible with his puffy facial features and his moderate beer belly, he darted into the woods yelling, "****ing Christ! He's a big one!" Out of sight, Zinman's voice carried back to the lieutenants and sergeants through the thick brush: "Jeez, he's the biggest mother I've seen in the past five years! Oh—my—God!"

"Stan' fast, young lewies!" ordered Sergeant Stang. "Cap'in say *no* one go in them woods till he tell 'em to!"

The sound of underbrush being trampled and broken reached the road, but no more words were forthcoming. The lieutenants watched the thick green foliage that Captain Zinman had entered, sweated in the noonday Georgia sun, fingered the lids of their canteens, and said nothing. The sergeants alertly watched the lieutenants.

After three long minutes, a smiling Captain Zinman emerged from the brush some twenty feet to the left of where he had entered it. In his right hand he held aloft an eight-foot rattler by what might be called the back of its neck. The snake's fifteen rattles vibrated loudly in the silent Georgia roadway as Zinman walked proudly towards the center of the silent lieutenants.

"Cogswell! Where the **** *are* you?" said Captain Zinman.

"Sir! *Here*, sir!" said a voice far to the right.

"Move y'r sorry little pink ass over here, on the double, sonny!"

First Lieutenant Barry Cogswell snapped to attention two feet in front of the captain. Captain Zinman looked at the lieutenant coldly for a full silent minute. Then he spoke loudly, for all to hear.

"Cogswell, you seemed to be a skeptic 'bout snakes a little while ago. Prob'ly comes from you gettin' y'rself a special two-year deferment to go to grad school b'fore you came on active duty."

"Sir! No, sir!"

"Wrong answer, lieutenant. Don't you ever contradict your superiors. *Ever!*"

"Sir! Yes, sir! I mean, *no*, sir! I won't, sir!"

"This, lieutenant, is the kind o' venomous viper you just might be unlucky

enough to trip over during the Escape and Evasion exercise. Would *you* like to hold him for a couple minutes to get acquainted better with him, lieutenant?"

He lowered the snake to eye-level, and the lieutenant stepped backwards a foot.

"Sir! No, sir! No, I would not, sir!"

"No doubts at all in your military mind, lieutenant?"

"Sir! No doubts at all, sir! Not me, sir!"

"Good!" Captain Zinman turned to the group of rapt watchers. "Any of you spoiled, spoon-fed preppy scum a herpetologist here?" No one answered.

"Cogswell, what is a herpetologist?"

"Sir. I don't know, sir!"

"You seem to be sweating a lot, Cogswell. Hot day?"

"Sir. Yes, sir. Very hot day, sir!"

"Leech! You seem to be a smart little lewie. What's a herpetologist, an' if you tell me it's some one that studies your herpes, I'll make you give me fifty."

"Sir! I *think*, sir, it's a scientist that studies snakes, sir!"

"Good job, Leech! *I'm* a herpetologist, people! My motto is 'Know thy Enemy!' Just *one* o' your enemies out there is these here rattlers!" He paused. "My *other* motto is 'Respect thy Enemy!' My *third* motto is 'Be merciful when you're not at war!' You kids just stan' fast there while I put this fella back where I found him. Send him home to his missus an' the kids. That way the woods'll be properly stocked for such training as *you* ****ers'll be getting—an' all those that come *after* you!"

Zinman walked slowly into the brush, holding the noisy rattler aloft over his head. Two minutes later, he re-emerged and ordered Lieutenant Mullens to continue the march.

5

As Captain Zinman, four of his tactical training sergeants, and the fifty-nine new lieutenants—those who had survived thus far and were still well enough to march—disappeared down the reddish gravel road and their cadence song faded in the distance, the large rattler calmed down again and continued to digest the large chipmunk it had eaten an hour earlier.

Sergeants McNair and Scholl policed up the six beer bottles that they and Captain Zinman had emptied a short time ago and put them into the rear of their Jeep, next to the large wire-mesh cage containing the aging rattler named Spike.

Silently they cooperated in pulling a heavy tarp over the cage, and then McNair climbed into the driver's seat.

"Good ****ing duty, huh, Scholl?"

"Bet yo' white, cracker ass, Mackie-boy! Better'n doin' time over in the Gulf!"

"An' *much* better'n takin' a fifteen-mile hike in Georgia in July!"

Gator

Emily Ann Zietlow

Ted began to walk towards her, then stopped. I didn't mean it like that, he said.

I'm sick of fighting, she said, without the tenderness he wanted. She was standing at the sink, staring into the backyard, sweat beads hovering above her eyes.

This isn't working then, Ted replied. I have to go; the night manager called. Ted took his keys and let the screen door crash behind him.

She waited for his engine to start then fade away, its low rumble finally overwhelmed by the sounds of the summer night. The sun was setting somewhere over the canopy of green that surrounded their house.

Wanda bent over the sink, her brown mascara running in brooks and streams over her face. Hot tears dripped down the sink to run through the pipes and escape the house.

Fifteen years working on a Crystal River guideboat had left her skin rough and wrinkled. As a waitress now, she spent most of her tips on products to make her cheeks smooth and her eyes large and light, but none of it took away the creases in her forehead or the dark circles around her eyes. She wore tight dresses and jeans underneath the restaurant apron, hoping to make up for the rough look of the river that was etched into her skin. Wanda stopped crying and leaned her face in close to the faucet to wash off her makeup and feel the cool water on her hot, swollen face.

Wanda stepped outside. She stood for a while, turning to stare at the house, running her fingers over the splintered paint. All of the things that had needed fixing three years ago when they moved in were still broken. The screen door creaked and there was always a draft of wind that pushed through the bedroom window when the door opened. Faded blue geometric shapes decorated the wallpaper in the living room and every time Wanda walked in, she wanted to rip it all away, but neither of them ever took the time to strip it down. But the back porch was sturdy and overlooked a branch of the Crystal River that cut through the neighborhood. Water oaks



and mangrove trees hung over the water and the grass was thick and tall with beautyberry shrubs coloring the landscape with bright fuchsia. There were trees on either side of a thin bank, shading their house from the summer sun. Everything was broken, but when you looked out the window at twilight, none of it mattered.

Wanda sat on one of the rockers Ted had bought for their first day in

the house. There was still enough light to see the water, the pools near the shore motionless until floating masses of green algae edged in from upstream. She watched the lightening bugs begin to dot the night below.

Oh hell Ted, she said to herself. What are we going to do?

There was rustling in the brush that overhung the shore and movement in the water. Something splashed, making tiny waves on the bank. She took a drink of her beer, then stood and walked down the steps, stopping at the bottom to peer over the brush to the edge of the water ten feet away. Wanda squinted and stared, then began to turn back toward the house when she saw him.

He was beneath the brush in the shallow water, showing an overbite with white incisors that peeked out at the end of his long snout. The water was murky so she could not see how long he was, but his face peered out at her, almost smiling as if he was pleased to have surprised her. Wanda stared at him for about thirty seconds before the gator shifted slightly and Wanda yelled, oh shit! then ran up the stairs. She turned back when she reached the door and saw his outline frozen in the darkness of the pool while ripples of water moved out from his body to the banks of the creek.

And then for a few minutes there was nothing. She stood on the porch overlooking the pool, and he stayed in the water, almost resting, almost ready to glide past the house, downstream, away from the houses and into the branches and corners of the river where there are no voices or footsteps to startle. She watched him, remembering a second-grade school trip to the zoo where the heat was so intense that the animals stood completely still. Wanda had gripped the rail, stood on the second pole of the fence to get a better view and bit her lip, watching for the flick of a tail or the lift of a lion's paw, searching for any movement at all. But nothing happened and eventually, Wanda relinquished her grasp on the rail and obeyed the tug at her arm that led her away from the frozen elephants and lions she had been waiting to see for months.

Now she didn't want the gator to move; she wanted to stay silent with



him in the fading light forever. After a while, he shifted again and gave a low bellow that seemed to have traveled from far inside his body. This broke the silence, and Wanda's mouth dropped open.

My God, she said out loud, then walked into the kitchen and picked up her phone.

It rang the full six rings. She tried again. No answer. A voice recording.

Dammit Ted, she said into the phone. I know you're not at the bar yet, you just left and you could at least pick up your phone especially 'cause I'm calling to tell you about the goddamn gator in our backyard. Go ahead though, and get your leg bit off at two in the goddamn morning when you come home piss-drunk.

Wanda hung up the phone and went to bed, waking every half hour thinking that she heard the gator shifting in the inky, stagnant water. She would look out the window to find the his long body, resting in the shadows and watching the house.

Ted came in through the front door at one instead of two and closed it loudly. He had heard her message halfway to the bar on the 98, surrounded by the tall green walls of forest on either side. He had thought about her standing on the porch, watching the gator and knew that she had fantasized at least once about the gator biting him good in the leg before she called to warn him. Ted had laughed at this thought, but then imagined her at the sink, trying to turn away from him to hide the tears, and this stayed with him the whole night so he had to wave off the night manager who liked to to stay and drink after they closed, and come home to her instead.

She was turned on her side away from him and Ted stood at the doorway, watching the curve of her body through the thin sheets. He settled his gaze on the glow of her skin in the moonlight, her shoulders and the nape of her neck shaded blue in the night.

Wanda lay still with her eyes closed, but as he moved toward the closet and took off his boots, she watched him undress. Most nights he would come home at near-dawn and undress slowly, the way you move when you haven't slept all night and the sun is brimming on the horizon. She would watch him while he froze, naked to stare at the sunrise, and the scars from his childhood would rise from deep underneath his skin to populate the area between his shoulder blades. Most nights, when he finally moved beside her, Wanda would pull close to feel the rhythm of his breath while he slept.

Ted pulled back the sheet. Jesus Wanda, he said. Move your leg.

You're already takin' over the bed.

Wanda lifted her head, Well, you've been preferring the couch lately.

Not *preferring*, Wanda. Banished, he said.

She moved closer to her side near the window.

Well, I still have both legs dear and I'm not piss-drunk, he said.

Do you want a medal?

No I don't. Ted paused. What do you want from *me*?

You could have called to see if I was dead or not.

Ted laughed. Dead? Honey, I half expected to be eating gator for the next week when I heard your message. Ted looked over to find Wanda's smile in the darkness.

Did you call anyone about it?

No. They would have shot him, Wanda said.

What if it eats something?

I almost threw him one of those damn dogs next door.

They settled into the sounds of the early morning. They were quiet for a while before Ted put his hand on Wanda's waist and said, I'm glad you called. Thank you.

Wanda was looking out the open window, the moon a ghostly gold through the screen.

Are you gonna leave me? She asked.

Ted rolled on his back and looked up at the ceiling, the moonlight from outside pushing shadows into the corners of the room.

No. This is our place to live. Are you gonna leave?

Wanda shook her head, and Ted put his arm around her, bringing his head close enough to smell shampoo in her hair.

An hour later when Ted was asleep, Wanda continued staring out into the night, watching the trees outside the window, intertwined as they grew over the creek. At one point Wanda sat up, Ted's arm sliding from her shoulders to her waist, and she looked out to the water. Suddenly, it was the same as before and everything was still; the branches stopped stirring and the water turned glassy while she paused with the gator in the lull and waited. And then, just like before, Wanda heard the gator's low bellow break through the static, and the water moved and branches snapped along the riverbank and she knew that he had gone. She fell back on the bed into dreams slightly scored by the muffled sounds of their house and small splashes in the water further downstre a.m.





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