

the **UN**religious,  
**NON**family  
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## **Scars art**

Cover art of a flag against the Chicago Public Library downtown.

## **The Basement**

Mel Waldman

The 18-year-old boy opened the creaky door, flicked on the switch, and descended the stairs to the basement. The lights were dim and he could barely see the steps below, but he had forgotten something important, he believed. He had to find *it* now. At the bottom of the stairs, he pulled a string and the room lit up. To his left were three mirrors. Looking in the first mirror, he saw nothing and his soul screamed silently. Inside the second one, he discovered what had happened to him, wept in despair and then rushed slowly to the third mirror which contained his future in this tomblike waste land.



Emotionally Disturbed,  
art by Melissa Reid

poetry  
the passionate stuff

## Thirteen Seconds

Janet Kuypers<sup>5</sup>

a woman from my town  
jumped from a bridge

there was a creek nearby  
ten feet wide, two feet deep

and

and I didn't know her  
but we thought about it  
her jumping to her death

and we calculated  
at the height she jumped from  
at her speed while she was falling  
it took her thirteen seconds  
to fall to her death

thirteen seconds

she thought  
for thirteen seconds  
before she died

and the thing is,  
she might fall  
through the nearby tree branches  
and we thought about that

the silver maple trees  
might hold her back,  
slow her down

well, she hit those trees  
and they didn't save her  
so this is what I think of  
those thirteen seconds,  
give or take

that's what I think of



art by Eric  
Bonholtzer

## While My Guitar Gently Weeps

Michael Ceraolo

Tonight,  
on *Interstellar Idol*,  
our five finalists vie for title  
in a marathon talkathon to see  
who can talk the most and say the least  
Beam your votes in now

# Ten Minutes

Janet Kuypers

I watched a cartoon  
where a boy was caught shoplifting  
he stole a game for himself  
and he made up to his mom for it  
by getting a picture of himself in a frame  
and his mom was so proud

and all I could think of  
was that I stole something once  
and my parents made me feel like hell for it  
and I wasn't getting a game for myself  
I was getting them Christmas presents  
everyone made me feel  
as if I had to spend  
as much money as everyone else  
and everyone else had a job  
and was an adult  
and I was a kid  
and I was twelve  
and I had fifteen people to buy presents for

but I was getting THEM presents  
because they made me feel  
like I had to be more than an adult  
to compete with them  
to compete for them  
and it never won  
and I never won  
and I'm still not winning

so is this part of why I'm so messed up?  
so is this why I'm an overachiever  
so is this why I do so much  
so is this why I feel the need  
to always succeed?

I always do,  
but is it always at my cost?



Jesus Under Glass,  
Oaxaca image from  
Brian Hosey & Lauren Braden

## Jesus and How He Must Have Felt

Michael  
Lee Johnson

Staggering  
up the stairs  
after an all night drunk-  
I thought of Jesus  
and how he must have felt  
after his resurrection  
dragging  
his holy body  
up that endless  
staircase  
spiraling toward  
heaven.

Jesus  
is Lord,  
image by  
Peter Bates



grassbabies,  
art by  
Christine  
Sorich

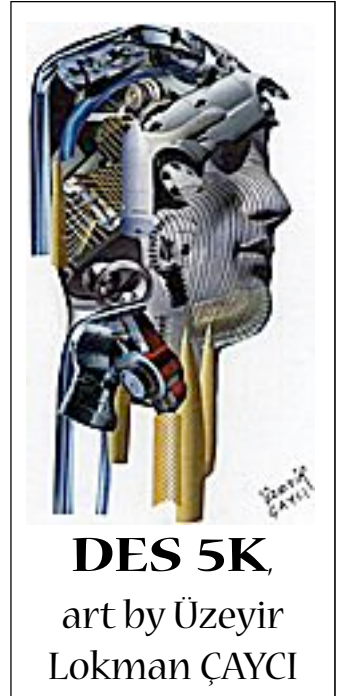


## The Vandals

David Waite

we walked in tripped in,  
lay down on the velvet couches,  
took off shirts and shorts, five kids in the hot tub  
tired and sweaty and wasted  
sitting around in our underwear.  
our clothes hung limp on timbers  
stretched across the balcony,  
we laughed though we knew we were sinking.

in the morning  
the sun raked my body  
lying naked in a single bed.  
the others slept on, I head one's  
slow, untroubled breath.  
head still reeling,  
walked out the glass doors  
to sit and watch the dawn crawling,  
my feet wet in the tall grass.  
a white dog laying down beside me  
to put his head in my lap.  
and though we were misanthropes, laughing as we burned,  
we were very lucky bastards  
soon to drive on and leave this shame behind us.



**DES 5K,**  
art by Üzeyir  
Lokman ÇAYCI

prose  
the meat and potatoes stuff

# The Everlasting Immortality of Kevin P. Johnson

Skookum Maguire

The warm morning sun infused Kevin P. Johnson with a feeling of belonging as he maneuvered his garbage truck down a quiet shaded street in the Pacific Northwest town where he'd always lived. It was the Lord's work he was doing—he knew it was, and he'd already given this day to the Lord, earlier, while brushing his teeth—as he did each day since he'd quit drinking. He contemplated the lost years, as he leapt from the truck to grab an extra bag in front of Old Lady Weithenstahl's house, something he would not have done a year-and-a-half earlier, prior to his saving. Extra garbage was against company policy, after all.

But his manager was not a believer, and the company owners were known to revel at late drunken parties. So he picked up the bag as an agent of the Lord, in retribution for the management's unholy ways.

Kevin had worked in the mills until the mills shut down, and now he felt lucky to have a job, any kind of job. And local women were attracted to men with jobs, there were so few of them. Especially women with children. But he'd been saved, and was scheduled to meet Harvey Blevins and Sam Whiteside out at the site after work. The three of them had volunteered to build the new chapel, and Brother Mathiason, the acting pastor, had even promised to help. Harvey was a journeyman carpenter—thank the Lord—and Brother Mathiason would probably take over as full-time pastor once the building was completed.

Kevin couldn't wait to show the crew his new Skilsaw, though it wasn't really a Skilsaw, it was a Sears brand circular saw. His Sears charge card was the only way he could buy it, but he was sure it would work just fine.

After dumping his last garbage can he started back to the transfer station, a route that took him by the Lone Wolf Tavern. In years gone by, Kevin had spent many an hour in the Lone Wolf. Of course, he was above that now. But just as he let off on the fuel for a car slowing to turn in front of him, he noticed a wide-hipped young lady in a short bouncing skirt jiggle her way through the front door of the place, and old urges came back to haunt him.

He didn't think of his wife often, the gaunt, bony woman who'd borne his four children—whose approach to sex was “just lie there and take it”—and he didn't think of her now. But he had trouble forcing visions of the girl from his mind, so he concentrated on scripture to help him.

When he arrived at the site, Harvey and Sam were already there, putting up batter-boards to line out the foundation. After Kevin parked, while he was remov-

ing the tags from his new saw, Brother Mathiason arrived and led the men in prayer. The pastor went through a long litany of folks to thank, but he didn't just thank them, at least not directly. The way it went was, "Thank you Lord, for providing Joe and Maggie McArthur for donating the land, and thank you Lord, for inspiring Ace Building Supply to furnish us with lumber and nails, and thank you dear Lord, for bringing us Harold C. Rasmussen, such an able attorney, to help us with applications and zone changes and building permits, and thank you Lord, for ..."

The good brother's list also included this plea: "And Lord, please help us in our quest to persuade Happy Valley Redi-Mix to provide us with concrete." Finally, he ended with, "And most especially, Lord, bless our own brothers Harvey, Sam, and Kevin for providing the labor we need to construct your new house, and to put the whole thing into working order."

Kevin felt like a million bucks after that. He rose from his knees and went to get the rest of his tools. He felt like a divine source had taken hold of him, inspired him with energy, and was directing the movements of his arms and legs. There were tears in his eyes. He noticed Sam and Harvey were walking slower too, staring at the ground as they went about.

He was so happy he'd found the Lord. He had a place in the world now; he belonged somewhere for the first time in his life. People actually looked up to him—some people anyway.

Harvey told the other men if they could get the batter-boards up and the footings marked out, his brother-in-law—who was not a believer, but who owed Harvey money—would come by in the morning with his backhoe and dig out the footings for concrete.

What that meant was the three of them had to work extra late that night. Brother Mathiason left to run down one of the partners of Happy Valley Redi-Mix, redoubling his efforts to procure the badly needed concrete, while the other men set about their work with a vengeance.

In spite of the long summer days—additionally bolstered by the insanity of daylight savings—it was starting to get dark by the time Sam and Harvey could mark out footings. They used string lines and orange colored paint.

Kevin was nailing up the last of the batter-boards, but he let his mind wander just a little, and, while thinking about the girl at the tavern, he smacked his thumb with the hammer. Only a year-and-a-half ago, he would have screamed, "Jesus-Fuckin'-Christ!" and pitched the hammer across the lot in a fit of rage. But now he'd been saved, so he merely shouted, "Ouch!" and put his thumb in his mouth for sucking. He figured the whack on the thumb had been retribution from the Lord for thinking unholy thoughts, and silently thanked his savior for leading him away from temptation.

Once the batter-boards were up, the men finished marking the footings fairly quickly. Then Kevin began his drive across town, thinking of the warmed-over dinner and the bony wife he knew would be waiting. He had to go back by the Lone Wolf Tavern to get there, though, and his curiosity got the better of him. He stopped briefly, just to see if the girl was still there.

He hung by the door when he first walked in, knowing he'd have to let his

eyes adjust to the dim light before he could make out faces, and he had a plan, of sorts. If someone he knew spotted him, he would go over to them and try to persuade them to see the ways of the Lord. If he did not see anyone he knew he would just seek out the girl to satisfy his own curiosity.

The girl was not among the patrons at the bar, nor was she to be found sitting at the tables along the outside walls. Fortunately, he didn't see anyone he knew either and finally decided she'd probably left. After all, several hours had passed since she'd come in. But he felt awkward just standing there, so he turned to the bar to order a short draft beer.

And there she was.

She was the barmaid, and he smiled at her when he ordered, drawing a quick smirk back from the girl. She wasn't beautiful, at least by Hollywood standards. She was tall enough, but her nose was a little crooked, and she was a little overly plump. Yet she did possess those great big wide-apart eyes that always demand male attention.

To further distract him, the girl had a habit of turning her back on the patrons at the bar while drawing beer from the tap, and she would bounce on her heels while beer foamed into the pitcher. Her rear end shimmied while she did this, under her short pleated skirt, drawing lust-induced stares from the men at the bar; and that kept them ordering pitchers. Kevin could not remember when he'd seen anything quite so tempting.

He was tempted now, and he knew it, so he took a short sip of beer, smiled at the girl when he had her attention, and left with the intention of never coming back.

The following day he discovered two plastic jugs of used motor oil in a garbage can, and had to call for a supervisor. Motor oil had been classified as hazardous material, and he was forbidden from picking it up. The supervisor came out and took the illicit material, reported the incident to the authorities, and Kevin went on his way. But he was late finishing his route, and late to the building site. Harvey and Sam were forming the tops of the footings that the backhoe had dug earlier in the day.

They worked late again that night, but before they left, Brother Mathiason came by to confess to having no luck with Happy Valley Redi-Mix.

"Another day or two, and we'll be ready for mud," Harvey announced, disappointed.

Kevin drove slowly as he passed the Lone Wolf Tavern that night, but he did not stop. Instead, he kept driving, while reciting some long-lost prayer he vaguely remembered about not being "led into temptation."

In spite of the fact that his Thursday route took him to the poorest part of town—a place where mobile homes had been erected in the 1950s, before the city council saw fit to ban them—Kevin gave the day to the Lord and went cheerfully about his business. Here, almost every house had an extra box, bag, or bundle, and many customers had not paid their bill in a couple of months. Kevin was required to put a red tag on the trash cans of the non-payers, and he was not supposed to empty them. He tied the red tags to the cans, but he emp-



tied them anyway and he picked up the extra items on the curb.

It was a long tedious process to gather trash in this part of town, so it was almost noon when he got to the end of K Street—a dead end, where he'd have to back up three times to turn around in a driveway. Once he got going again, he noticed a woman in a bathrobe, pulling a little kid's wagon full of trash, out to the street. It was a place he was supposed to red-tag. A year-and-a-half ago, he would have driven right on by, pretending not to see the woman. But now he'd been saved, so he stopped to help the lady. When she bent over to take the trash from the wagon, he recognized the girl from the tavern.

"Startin' to get hot," he said, walking up behind her.

"Yeah," she nodded, turning to greet him, with no apparent sign of recognition.

She stood there smiling with her bathrobe open at the neck exposing cleavage, though there wasn't much really.

"Your can's scheduled to be tagged," he told her.

"No kidding," she laughed, turning to look at her backside.

"Your trash can," Kevin explained, feeling his face heat up with embarrassment.

"I don't get paid until next week," the girl said, in a kind of pleading tone.

She had a breathy, musical voice that didn't stay on the same note all the time. It wandered some, like the high notes of an accordion.

"I can empty it today," Kevin told her, "but next week I'll be in kind of a spot."

"I'll try to get it paid," she said, as Kevin threw the extra trash into the truck's compactor.

He emptied her can and began rolling it back to the house for her. "I know where you work," he said.

"You've been in?" she asked.

"Once."

"So many faces," she told him, by way of explanation.

"Yeah," he said. "I can imagine."

Two little toddlers, both blond with long hair—a boy and a girl—burst from the door of the mobile and ran down the driveway to meet them. Kevin's youngest boy was in the eighth grade now; all he could think of when he saw the two of them was diapers.

"Cute kids," he said.

"They keep me hopping."

"Husband?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He was a little late getting to the site again that night, and by the time he arrived, Brother Mathiason was already there.

"Happy Valley Redi-Mix has agreed to furnish us concrete for cost," Kevin heard the acting pastor say, as he walked up behind the group. "That's the best they can do. We'll have to pay the balance out of our meager building fund."

It wasn't a happy occasion, but it could have been worse, so each man acknowledged, in his own way, that "the Lord works in mysterious ways," knelt for Brother Mathiason's daily prayer, and went on about their business.

Kevin could not get the girl off his mind, as he helped with the forms for

the footings, taking extra precaution not to hit his fingers with the hammer. At one point he stopped for a moment with a sixteen-penny duplex nail half driven and remembered—in a state of momentary frustration—he'd forgotten to ask for her name.

When they were almost completed, Harvey went to his cell phone to call Brother Mathiason. He needed to know where they were going to get the rebar, and he came back a few moments later with a puzzled expression on his face to announce, "Brother Mathiason doesn't know what rebar is."

The men knocked off a little early, to allow their pastor time to struggle with the concept of rebar, and Kevin stopped again at the Lone Wolf Tavern.

He walked in just as the girl was drawing a pitcher of beer, and made his way to a stool to watch. She smiled when she saw him; he ordered a short draft, and when she brought it to him he asked, "What is your name, anyway?"

"Gabriella," she told him; she smiled again.

He smiled back and took a small sip of beer. Then he started to get nervous and downed half the glass. When he had the girl's attention again, he saluted her, and got up and left. The rest of the way home, Kevin wondered what had gotten into him and he recited scripture out loud to dispel the demons.

His Friday route was adjacent to his Thursday route, which brought him within a few blocks of Gabriella's house just before noon. He decided to drive by. If anyone noticed him, he could always say he'd remembered a can he'd missed from the day before.

When he went by, she was out in the front yard in a tank top and shorts. She was pulling a hose around from the back of the house.

He waved; she waved back.

He went down, turned around, and when he came back she was bent over, trying to adjust a portable rain-bird sprinkler.

He nearly ran up on the sidewalk, before she straightened up to wave again.

They worked late again, but they were behind schedule because at the very last minute Brother Mathiason decided to wait to dip into the meager building fund for rebar, causing it to be delivered late. Kevin knew better than to go into a tavern on a Friday night, so he forced himself to go straight home.

The next day was Saturday and the three men had all day to work on the church. They completed the forms for the footings, but their deal with Happy Valley did not include deliveries on overtime so Kevin and Sam started assembling forms for the stem-walls from plywood. "We're doing this all out of sequence," Harvey complained.

Sunday was a day of rest, so nothing was done on the new church, and all three men attended services at the local Methodist Church, where arrangements had been made to use the building after two o'clock in the afternoon each week. Brother Mathiason's sermon was all about "giving," aimed primarily at soliciting additional donations for the struggling building fund—and at the end of it all, he went into a long and deeply emotionalized spiel about the thankless services being provided to the congregation by the three men building the new church. "Men from our own flock are doing this work," he said, wagging his head back

and forth like he could hardly believe it himself.

“Let’s all give our heartfelt thanks to the Lord,” he said, “for the unselfish labor being provided by Harvey Blevins, Sam Whiteside, and Kevin Johnson. In the name of the Lord Almighty, let us pray.”

The entire congregation dropped to their knees and began mumbling along with Brother Mathiason, until he finally raised his voice to announce, in an emotionally charged crescendo, “... And in the name of the Lord, amen.”

After the services, Kevin wandered into the courtyard in a vacant trance, as people began to spill from the church. Folks came up to him—one at a time, and in groups—to shake his hand and tell him how proud they were of him, and how thankful they were for all he was doing. It made him feel like doing more, if only he could think of something more to do.

After a long conversation with an old man who used to “work construction,” and who “wished he were young enough to help,” Kevin found his bony wife and three of his children. The oldest boy refused to participate in the family’s new-found conversion, a source of deep frustration to Kevin.

The five of them wandered out onto the sidewalk where they engaged in a family hug for the entire flock to see. Then they walked slowly to his wife’s old four-door Oldsmobile. The adults, now with tears in their eyes, didn’t seem to notice as the youngest boy threw a water balloon at his sister; then they all drove slowly and deliberately away.

The route from the Methodist Church to his small tract home on the south side of town didn’t take Kevin anywhere near the Lone Wolf Tavern, so he had no trouble keeping his mind on things like salvation, forgiveness, building the church, and the more important aspects of living. He didn’t think of the girl again one time, until the following morning, just before he gave the day to the Lord while shaving. At which point he remembered he had to drive by the tavern on his way to the transfer station.

Out at the building site, Harvey and his crew had come up against a kind of conundrum. They only had about an hour each day to pour concrete before the Happy Valley drivers went on overtime, so they had to pour the footings in little short runs.

“This is not good,” Harvey explained to Sam and Kevin. “We’re going to end up with too many cold joints. Besides that, it’ll take forever to do it this way.”

The men agreed to try to get off work the following day so they could pour the remaining footings all at one time, so Kevin called his dispatcher. Before his salvation, he would merely have called in sick, but of course, he couldn’t do that now. It wouldn’t be honest.

The dispatcher was not agreeable at first, but he finally relented with the parting words, “I hope this doesn’t become a habit.”

The men had the footings poured by early afternoon, and went back to building sections of the forms for the stem-walls. By five o’clock they were beat and decided to knock off. “We’re not gettin’ much of anything done anyway,” Harvey admitted to his friends.

It was still daylight, so Kevin decided not to stop at the tavern—anybody

driving by would see his pickup—but after passing it slowly, he turned, went halfway around the block and parked in the lot of a stationery store behind the building. He then walked down the alley and slipped around through the front door of the tavern.

“You’re early,” Gabriella greeted him, like he was one of the regular customers.

“I took the day off,” he told her, “to work on the church.”

“The church?” she asked, laughing, rolling her eyes.

He got a little worked up as he watched her pour several pitchers of beer. Then, when he had her attention again, he waved to her and left.

The following Thursday he noticed her garbage can still displayed a red tag, so he got out of the truck to inspect it for trash. It was full, and he stood on the curb for a moment, wondering if there was any way his dispatcher would know if he emptied it anyway. Then she walked up behind him.

“I think I can pay the bill next week,” he heard her melodious voice say, and turned to greet it.

“I’ll just pay it,” he said. “Sometimes the dispatcher follows us around to inspect red-tagged cans. If they’re empty when he looks at them, we hear about it.” It was only twenty-eight dollars.

“I can’t let you do that,” she protested.

“You can pay me back.”

And that’s when she began to cry.

“What’s wrong?” Kevin asked, beginning to panic.

“Oh, I don’t want to bother you with my problems,” she blubbered.

“B-but ...” he stammered.

“My mother-in-law took my kids,” Gabriella wailed.

“I thought you didn’t have a husband.”

“I have an ex-husband,” she barked, and the tears dried up as her pretty face turned angry.

“But ...” he stammered again.

“I had to fill in for the day girl for an hour or so yesterday. I thought the kids would be all right, for just that long—I couldn’t get a babysitter anyway—who could I get? Anyway, I’ve got snooty neighbors, and Marlene found out about it. She called Children’s Protective Services; they called the cops, and the authorities came by and took Brenda and Billy. They gave temporary custody of my kids to Marlene.”

“I take it Marlene is your mother-in-law.”

Gabriella nodded.

They stood there for a moment. He knew she was vulnerable, and he’d never wanted anything so bad in his life. He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a hug; she didn’t try to pull away. “Maybe it will all blow over,” he said.

“You don’t know Marlene.”

He hugged her again.

Finally, she said, “Come in and have a glass of iced tea with me.”

“I’ve got to finish my route,” he complained, knowing he was behind schedule now, and knowing, too, he wanted to go inside with her in the very worst way.

“Just for a minute,” she said. “I’m lonely.”

He followed her through the door of the small mobile home, and following her made him lose concern for his route.

“Would you rather have a beer?” she asked.

“I’m driving a garbage truck,” he protested. “How could I drink a beer?”

He sat on her little hard couch. She brought him a glass of iced tea, but she opened a beer for herself. And as he began to sip at the drink, she sat down beside him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Garbage men have such strong shoulders,” she said, and she moved a little closer.

“We do all the work with machines, now,” he explained.

“I know, but from before.”

He pulled her head over to his chest, to smell the fragrance of her hair—it didn’t smell of shampoo or hairspray; it emitted the real earthy, tantalizing odor of female pheromone. He reached his hand up to stroke it.

Then he turned her head up, and pulled her lips to his face. She didn’t resist.

He knew he was a goner—nothing but Gabriella mattered at all to him. In another few moments, they were in the bedroom with their clothes off.

Gabriella was total energy between the sheets—a real live wire—it was like merging with a lightning bolt. It was an experience Kevin had not had since before his marriage—well, maybe a few times since, before he’d been saved—but nothing like this, really, never.

Her flesh was soft and warm; it shimmied as she moved under him. When they traded positions, she went down deep—deep—her flesh was alive, so alive and giving.

It ended with a crescendo of moans and shivers, until all either one of them could do was lie on the bed and pant.

When he could talk again, Kevin said, “I’m way behind schedule.”

“You’re timing seemed pretty good to me,” Gabriella smirked.

He rushed through the rest of his route, but he was late getting to the building site. Harvey and Sam were striping forms from the footings. Then they began to erect the forms for the stem-walls, and the men worked until well after dark to make up for lost time.

Kevin hurried home, after that, quoting scripture to himself all the way, wondering what he was ever going to do to atone to the Lord for what he’d done with Gabriella.

But by the end of the week, old urges got the better of him once more, and his life became a treadmill—rushing through his route each day to work on the church, stopping at Gabriella’s house on Thursdays, and cutting over to do the same thing on Friday. Parking in the empty lot of the stationery store each night to slip down the alley to get another glimpse of her, and then sitting in his favorite pew each Sunday afternoon while Brother Mathiason heaped praise on him and his fellow workers, only to be paid compliments by other members of the flock after the services.

It didn’t take long for an element of guilt to set in. First, he had trouble facing the folks in the courtyard. He quit having a physical relationship with his

wife at night—always a kind of hit-and-miss proposition anyway—and he quit talking to his oldest son, who had now taken up smoking. To make matters worse, every time he closed his eyes to quote scripture in an effort to escape the persecution of it all, all he could envision was the flesh of Gabriella's sexy backside jiggling up and down under her short pleated skirt.

It went on like this for week after week, until late one night she called him at home. His wife answered the phone; then turned, with a questioning look on her face, to say, "It's for you."

"Kevin, I'm pregnant," Gabriella gushed out, in a loud, gaspy whisper—he could hear laughter and voices in the tavern behind her. "I need money for an abortion."

"But you can't ..." Kevin started to say. Then, remembering where he was and who was listening, he replied, "I'll look into it the first thing in the morning. I'll call you."

"My phone's been cut off," she told him.

"I'll come in early," he told her, and hung up.

He turned to the imploring look on the bony face of his wife and explained, "They think somebody's taking kick-backs." It was a problem that came up from time to time with garbage men. A customer would have an old couch or a worn out carpet they'd want to throw away, and they'd pay the garbage man twenty bucks to take it. Sometimes a desperate driver would take the trash and keep the money. Once word got out that a driver would do that, everybody on the block seemed to have something to get rid of. Suddenly, the volume of refuse the company had to handle at the landfill would skyrocket, but the revenue stayed the same.

"But who was that on the phone?" his wife wanted to know. "I know all the girls who work there, and that didn't—"

"It's a new girl," Kevin cut her off. "They told us she was a new hire, but she probably really works for the auditors. They've been known to do that, you know. Remember when they caught ol' Harry Stapleton?"

"Why would she call you here—and so late?"

"That's what they do," he said. "Call around, get the fellas worked up, find somebody who knows something, and then try to get them to spill the beans."

The following morning, he went in early. Drivers were not suppose to start picking up garbage until 6:30 AM, to give customers a chance to get their cans out to the curb, but some of the guys always came in early and went to Jack's Truck Stop for breakfast. Kevin would join them from time to time, but not this morning. This morning he had important things on his mind. He didn't go to Jack's and he didn't go out on his route—instead, he went to Gabriella's.

He had trouble waking her; she'd only been off work for a few hours, but when he finally got her to let him in, he found a warm bed and a willing participant.

"I must have screwed up on my pills," she explained, as they lay spent on the mattress.

"An abortion isn't the answer," he told her.

"What is the answer?"

"You can't just kill one of God's children," he said, feeling anger rise in his

body, knowing what Brother Mathiason would say.

“Right now,” she told him, “it’s not even a tadpole. What will happen if I don’t do something? Are you going to get a divorce and support me and the baby?”

“A divorce?” he howled.

“Besides, if I show up pregnant now, I’ll never get my kids back.”

Kevin left Gabriella’s mobile home with the weight of the world on his shoulders. For a while, he dreamed of divorcing his wife and spending a carefree existence with Gabriella. But he knew things would not be carefree—she had kids of her own—and there were his children to think about.

Finally, after working on the church until well after dark, he stopped by the Lone Wolf Tavern, ordered a short draft, and when he could catch Gabriella’s attention again, he asked, “How much would it cost?”

“About six hundred and fifty dollars,” she told him.

He whistled.

She looked at him expectantly.

Finally he took a quick nip of beer, told her, “I’ll see what I can do,” and left.

Kevin had two choices. He had a credit card with a pin number that would let him borrow two hundred dollars per transaction through an ATM machine, or he could borrow the money from the credit union. Neither was a good option. His wife would have to sign for a loan at the credit union, and the credit card company would send out monthly statements which would go directly to his house.

What he came up with was this: The following day he went to the post office and purchased a box for six months. He put it in the name of K. Peter Johnson, feeling the name was more biblical. Then he found an old statement from the credit card company, sent it in with the minimum payment, and changed his mailing address over to the post-office box.

The following day was Thursday, so when he rolled around to Gabriella’s he told her he’d have the money in three or four days.

She didn’t seem overjoyed about waiting that long, but told him, “I’ll make an appointment.”

The next day, Friday, when he detoured over to Gabriella’s house, she wasn’t home. He didn’t stop at the Lone Wolf that night, and on Saturday, he worked all day at the church. They were putting up roof trusses—the building was starting to look like something.

He’d been looking forward to Sunday all week; he needed to get his thoughts straight. And while Brother Mathiason railed on about cryptic predictions in the Bible, making a case for the essence of Israel, Kevin was silently asking the Lord to forgive him for his affair with Gabriella, for straying from his wife and children, and more importantly, for participating in the girl’s abortion. Tears came to his eyes when he mumbled under his breath about the abortion.

When it was over, he strolled out into the bright afternoon sunshine, to greet other members of the flock who all praised him and thanked the lord for sending him to help with the new church. And by the time he was on his way home, he felt like a new man, ready to move forward in the world—praise be to the Lord.

His account at the bank cycled every 24 hours—but it did not cycle on

Sunday—so it was Monday night by the time he had the money, and he stopped by the tavern to present the cash to Gabriella.

Even though he was smiling and friendly, she seemed kind of snooty when he pushed the envelope of cash across the bar. “I’ll let you know,” she told him, and then turned to draw a pitcher for a group of young men at the bar, who whooped and punched each other with their elbows as they watched her.

The church was coming along swimmingly now. Brother Mathiason had gotten a large donation from an elderly woman in the congregation who, he told the men, “The good Lord just happened to send our way.”

But Kevin had not heard from Gabriella. So on the following Thursday he stopped by. The red tag was off of her trash can—he had paid the bill, after all—but she wasn’t out in the yard. He emptied the can, and then went to the door of the little mobile to knock. He waited a few moments, and was about to turn to leave, when he heard someone coming. The door opened, and as Gabriella stood there in her bathrobe he could see a larger figure behind her.

She came out and pulled the door shut. Then she told him, “I’ve decided to make a new start with Randy ...”

He didn’t know who Randy was; he didn’t need to. He simply muttered the words, “But I thought ...”

“Look, Kevin,” she said, “Randy doesn’t know anything about us. He isn’t married. Well, he was married, but he got a divorce. If I’m ever going to get my kids back, I need to ...”

He got the picture. It wasn’t a development he was particularly fond of, but ... He stood for a moment, then wished her luck and bent forward to kiss her forehead.

She pulled back.

He could feel the eyes of the other man on his back as strode back down the driveway to the truck. He scanned the little mobile on his way back down the street, in hopes of getting another glimpse of her. For the rest of the day and well into the night, Kevin thought rejection from Gabriella must be retribution for all he had done to strain the Lord’s trust in him. And knowing this to be true, he mumbled prayers as he drove, and hummed hymns while jumping in and out of the truck to pick up extra bags and boxes. He recited scripture aloud with the window rolled down on the highway going back to the transfer station.

On Sunday, while Brother Mathiason was thanking this person or that person for being motivated by the lord to donate money to the building fund, Kevin was on his knees thanking the Lord for keeping the affair from his wife, for helping him see his way out of the dilemma, for not striking him dead for giving Gabriella money for an abortion, for providing him with a church to build as a way of paying the Lord back for all the favors he’d been shown, for ...

The only thing left for Kevin to worry about now was paying off the credit card without his wife finding out. His original plan was to tell her he’d purchased something to help with the church, but that would never work. She would wonder why he hadn’t made the contribution up front, so Brother Mathiason could give him credit, publicly, in front of the flock.

And that’s when he began to take kick-backs.



It started one morning when an old man on his Tuesday route offered him fifty dollars to haul off an old overstuffed chair. Then, the following day, some teenaged kids in the ritzy part of town wanted him to dispose of ten cases of empty beer bottles before their parents got home from vacation. At this rate, he could get the credit card paid back in no time; and, as soon as it was, he could quit taking kick-backs. Then he could change his credit card mailing address back to the house, and his wife would never be the wiser.

But in order to stay straight with the world he had to continually ask for the Lord's forgiveness for taking the kick-backs. He felt he had to do this each Sunday afternoon, during Brother Mathiason's sermon. That way, he thought, everything would come out in the end.

And although he didn't want to, he had to start leaving some of the extra bags and boxes on the curb. He couldn't let his overall volume increase, which would prompt the management so suspect him of taking those kick-backs. He felt so fortunate that the Lord had inspired him to start picking up all of the extra things early on; that way, he had room to take the kick-back items without causing his truck's gross weight to increase at the scales.

But there were no kick-back customers on his Thursday route, the poorest part of town where Gabriella lived. Of course there were a lot of extra bags and boxes. When he came to her house, he looked longingly at the mobile home door which was closed to him now. But he went on about his business, knowing the good Lord was punishing him for what he'd done, and knowing, like Job, he simply had to learn to deal with it.

When her bill came due again, he paid it, though he didn't know why, and he didn't even feel particularly good about himself for doing it.

The new church was going up by leaps and bounds now. They were finishing the outside, and were about to tackle the long, laborious chore of completing the inside. Harvey told Kevin and Sam, "In another six to eight weeks we'll be able to get a certificate of occupancy from the county." And shortly after that, Brother Mathiason could move his flock into the new building for services.

So life was good. By the first of August, Kevin figured he'd have the credit card paid off; then he could drop the post-office box. After that, he could bask in the glory of having members of the flock come up to him each Sunday afternoon and feel totally gleeful about accepting their thanks and praise. That would go on until the new church was completed, and maybe even for a few weeks after that, and ...

But it was Thursday again, and he was working to keep Gabriella off his mind. Then, in an instant, a bunch of teenagers dashed out into the crosswalk in front of him against the light on Seventh Street. He had to stop, hard, part-way into the intersection; the light changed and he was stuck there. And while he was waiting for a chance to go again, he looked around at a part of town he hadn't paid a lot of attention to lately. And that's when he caught the glimpse of a busty young redhead, bouncing her way through the front door of the Sportsman's Lounge and Grill.

Kevin remembered the Sportsman's. He'd spent many an hour in there before he'd been saved. Of course, all of that was behind him now, but...

# Squeeze

S. William Hepner

The first thing that happens is a black linen bag covers my head. It's cinched tight around my neck—almost too tight because I immediately start to cough and gag. My hands are bound behind my back, wrists hugging each other via the nylon-rope-method.

The next thing is me muttering something about being the wrong guy. There must be some kind of mistake. I'm a close personal friend of the governor. Anything. But a hard, solid punch to the solar plexus shuts me up, good and quick.

Then there's the comforting hand on my shoulder followed by a boot kick to the back of my right leg direct in that soft fleshy part behind the knee between those two vertical tendons holding it all together. I drop like a hangman on the gallows.

I remember when I was younger trying to impress a girl, showing her how tough I was by slamming my forehead against a cement wall. I like to think that it was mighty impressive, but all I remember is waking up on the floor to all of my friends laughing at me. I still remember what it feels like—that first hit.

That's what's next: a cement wall-punch to my temple. That feeling of trying to impress the girl comes sweeping back into my mind. That tingling and that sudden rush of cold circle my entire body. I don't feel my legs buckle, but I do get nauseous and lightheaded. Then I hit the ground and the lights go out.

And believe me, that's the best part of my day.

When I open my eyes, the beautiful woman stares back. Her haunting eyes drill deep into me. It's a comforting way for me to awake. It's a nice transition between the semi-truck impact of whatever the hell it was that knocked me out and whatever the hell it is that I'm in store for. But anyway, that beautiful woman...

She gazes down at me. The thing that I quickly recognize is that she smiles at me when I want her to smile at me. I want her to wink, and she winks. I want her to shake her hair, and she shakes. I want her to blow me a kiss, and she blows. And it hits me in the face hard. I see it coming and cannot turn away. I brace for impact, and I take it—the best I can.

It hurts like hell, the kiss, the fist to the bridge of my nose. That tingling returns but this time I stay conscious. The pain from the nose builds so much pressure that my eyes feel like they're going to explode. It feels like a balloon is being inflated inside my head. Blood escapes my nostrils with a violent current down my cheeks—both sides—over and into my ears. That kiss, it's a helluva kiss.

I'm lying on my back on a metal slab of a table, and I can't move. My arms and legs are bound tight to the table—no wiggle room. I struggle to shift even an inch and am entirely unsuccessful. Worse yet, I can't move my head. With a cold, hard pressure against both sides of my face, I can only stare up toward the ceiling.

My eyes dart from one side to the other. I'm seeing what looks like a room in a dirty abandoned hospital. The walls are painted green but soaked dark in the corners—armpit stains on a derelict wall. Over head, the florescent lights hum, sus-

pended by chains like the lamps that hang above pool tables in bars. The lights dangle from a drop ceiling—two-foot by four-foot panels resting on a metal grid system. The panels—each placed into its own slot—are stained in areas due to water damage, but mostly they look dusty and scratched. The texture effect has a sand and pebble appearance. Bumps and cracks. Small holes and even bigger dents.

It's in the panels that I see the woman. It's in these textures that my mind sees the images. The bumps and scratches—like constellations—form her eyes. The sand and pebbles become the curves in her skin. The small holes and dents shape her features—nose, cheeks, chin, lips. All the cracks on the panel above help produce her flowing hair.

You find an image in the chaos. You narrow in on it and capture it as a whole. It is, in fact, just a bunch of imperfections. It's nothing until you connect the dots. You try to hold your attention on it because looking away for a split second and you just might lose it. You focus until something breaks your concentration.

I stare intently up at this beautiful woman, until a loud, hefty voice interrupts my star-gazing. It shakes me loose from anything beautiful that I still think exists for me.

“One question: do you have the money?”

I know the voice. It's Banner. He's big and mean and tough as hell. He works as muscle for Packer Wells, a big-time loan shark who I've never even seen—despite owing him well over a hundred grand.

I would rather not give Banner the time of day—not say a word—but I can't move my head to shake it or nod. So I have to say no, I don't have your god-damn money.

Banner yells a lot about the money that I owe his boss. I song and dance Banner as best as I can, but he's heard it before, several times—from me. My assurances—at some point they aren't worth much. There's a certain dollar amount that I accumulate in debt when it doesn't matter what I say anymore. I just have to accept that someone's going to put the hurt on me when I can't pay.

But I'm not worried, entirely. Alive, I'm worth over a hundred grand. Dead is just bad business.

I just have to take another beating for a time—while Banner tries to squeeze me for the juice.

I try to ignore Banner and focus on the beautiful woman, but I can no longer find her. Instead, I see a fluffy-eared dog, tongue out and panting. Suddenly, Banner's fist drops powerfully onto my right kneecap—now both sides of my right leg hurts like hell—and the dust and panel scratches turn the fluffy dog's pant into a snarl. That sharp sting on my right leg, and I can't even writhe in pain.

Banner yelling: Wells wants his damn money.

Banner growling: We're getting real tired of this game.

Banner dancing his fists against my body: You have only yourself to blame for this.

Then I hear the door to the room open and the *click, click, click* of footsteps. Now, another voice in the room—one that I don't recognize. And the sounds of metal scraping metal.

Banner's above me, behind my head, saying all the same things that he's been saying. My head starts to ache. The pressure on the sides of my face is building. The blood that gushed out of my nose is now dried to my cheeks. Everything I hear is somewhat muted, either because of the blood droplets in my ears, pooling around the tympanic membrane, or because of whatever the hell this thing is that's holding my head in place.

However much blood is in my ears, I do hear a cranking noise, twisting metal. It sounds like a tightly wound metal spring, getting tighter. And it's making my headache worse.

Banner's making threat after threat, and I'm trying to work his heart-strings. It's not working. So I give up on all the talk. I'm sure he's been told how far to take this before he eases up. It doesn't matter what I say.

So he says, do it, and I feel cold metal against my skin. Until now, it doesn't even occur to me that I'm not wearing any shoes.

The metal presses tightly against both sides of the little toe on my right foot. Its edges are sharp and threatening. My ear holes aren't entirely filled with dried blood because the next thing I hear is a quick *crack*. And it doesn't even register what has happened until I hear my little toe go *thud* on the cement floor.

Digital amputation.

It's modifications to the bones and surrounding soft tissues of the fingers and the toes. It's refined carpentry, however you look at it. It's cutting through the muscles and the tendons. It's slicing through the nerves and the blood vessels. It's sawing through the bone.

It takes two full seconds before I feel the pain. Two seconds can really seem like a long time, unless, of course, you've just had your toe amputated without anesthesia. When that happens, you savor every single millisecond that it takes for the nerves to send the signal to the brain.

During second one: The specks on the ceiling panel show me a firefighter saving a baby from a burning building.

During second two: He drops her.

The searing pain is so intense that I feel the sting crawl up my leg and bite down on my testicles. My eyes fill with tears. I scream so loud that the noise coming out of my voice box actually scratches the back of my own throat. My body shakes so violently that I manage to move off the table—at least an inch or so.

My heart is tachycardic. I breathe deeply and slowly, trying to slow it. I squeeze my eyelids as tight as I can to juice the wetness out of the corners. The tears roll down my face—a saline drip. I blink and blink to regain focus on the ceiling. I need solace, some comforting.

But I can't find her.

*Where is that beautiful woman?*

Banner's saying: Jesus.

Banner's barking: You made us do that.

Banner's threatening: Don't struggle.

I hear the crank again—the metal spring turning slower. The pressure on the sides of my face, my head aching.

The sound below me is a *tuh, tuh, tuh* of the blood droplets dripping—from the hole that used to keep my little toe—onto the floor. It feels like my toe is still attached, even though I know it isn't. I feel as if I could wiggle the phantom limb if the wound wasn't so painful from *neuroma*—the swelling at the end of the cut nerves—and *oedema*—the swelling of the stump.

Stump pain.

My body goes cold. I'm shivering and sweating simultaneously. I'm coughing, and every time I do, my chest hurts. My entire right foot is numb and tingling. And I feel like I'm going to vomit.

Banner's still yelling and getting more and more pissed off that I'm not saying anything in return. My mind is sort of focused on other things, you might say. I do manage to mutter one word:

*Stop.*

"This will all stop when you pay Wells what you owe him."

More of the crank, more of the twisting metal, more of the pressure on the sides of my face. More of the head pain.

Banner says, do it again, and I feel the metal on the big toe on my right foot. They must be saving me a couple of digits in the middle so I'll still be able to walk. They aren't going in order. For sure, this little piggy's going to hit the goddamn floor.

Whoever is on my south end presses down hard—and I feel the squeeze—but nothing happens. My big toe must be too big, too thick for whatever tool is being used to snip it off. There's a release—a relaxing feeling—just for a second and then again the sounds of metal on metal. The switching of instruments.

What's next is a razor blade slice to the top of my big toe. The incision drags the circumference of the digit. And suddenly, I feel a suction release as the *fascia*—the fibrous tissue that binds together the skin and the muscles—are pulled from the toe, like taking off a glove, exposing that yellow clumpy tissue and revealing the bone.

Then metal scrapes—the changing of the guards. And the snip. It sounds like someone taking pruning shears to a piece of old bamboo.

I'm screaming again.

In the panel above I see a mushroom cloud.

*Where is that beautiful woman?*

Banner's getting sick, and the voice that I don't recognize says, keep it together, man.

"Crank it again," the voice says, and my head hurts like hell, again.

Then I finally understand what is happening. I know why I can't move my head. I know why it hurts every time that I hear the twisting metal...

My head is being held in a large, metal vise, and then I start to smile.

"What the hell is so funny?"

This isn't anything that I'm looking forward to. But I'm finding it really

satisfying.

“What the hell is so damn funny!?”

When I realize that my head is wedged between the metal clamps of a vise, I know how things are going to turn out. I burst out in laughter. These pricks have no idea how much money they’ve lost their boss.

Not like I’m going to pay him anyway. More like, not like I’m ever going to be *able* to pay him.

“Why the hell are you laughing?” goes the unknown voice. And he pushes Banner aside and gives the vise another crank.

I’m laughing because I’m relieved that I’ll never have to yield to this kind of torture ever again.

I’m laughing because it hasn’t dawned on them, what they haven’t taken into consideration.

I’m laughing because...

I’m thinking about the girl that I’m trying to impress when I’m young. I’m thinking about waking up to my friends’ laughter. I’m thinking about the sirens and the ambulance ride to the hospital.

I can’t hear much back then either.

When I thump my head in the front, I fall backwards and the back of my skull pounds hard onto the concrete floor. The doctors say that I’ve suffered what’s called a basilar skull fracture. The blow to the back of my head causes the separation of the suture between the occipital and temporal lobes. And I can’t hear because the cerebrospinal fluid—a clear fluid inside the skull that surrounds the brain—is leaking from my nose and my ears.

Mighty impressive.

“I’m going to ask you for the last time. What the hell is so damn funny?” the unknown voice says. And he cranks again.

I’m laughing because Banner’s getting sick in the corner.

I’m laughing because Packer Wells is never going to get his money.

I’m laughing because it takes a lot less pressure to crush a human skull if it’s already been crushed in the past.

The unknown voice gets upset because I’m still laughing. And he cranks the vise—one last time.

My face starts to swell, and, suddenly, I can’t hear a damn thing. That fluid must be building up in my ears. Because I can’t hear the *pop* or more like a *poof* as the back of my head caves in. Then I start to lose my vision. The blood from the fracture tracks down into the soft tissue of the eyes. And I look like I’m wearing a mask.

Raccoon eyes. Periorbital bruising.

It’s weird, but I can feel the back of my head drop from my body. It hits the concrete floor in a liquid pile. I’m not smiling anymore. I’m not laughing. My vision is fading. I focus on the ceiling as my head falls out of my head.

*And where the hell is that beautiful...?*

Oh, thank God, there she is.

# Stairway to Heaven

Warren McPherson

When I was nine years old I believed my religion was the only true religion and that come Judgement Day, as I rode that escalator to the clouds where I was sure to find an eternity of happiness in heaven after having lived a life of sin on Earth that was technically erased by an act of repentance on my death bed, I would see all other believers of all other faiths free falling from those white fluffy clouds into the fiery red pits of Hell below. As I went up, up, up, they came raining down all around.

As I got on in years I realized my vision of the after-life was a little simple and just a tad cruel. I formed a newer vision (although only slightly different) in which I still pictured myself riding up the big escalator, but now instead of falling out of the sky and plummeting into the inner-bowels of the earth where they would most assuredly receive an everlasting array of unspeakable horrors in Hell; all those religious fuck-ups were crammed onto one big escalator like mine, except going down; To hell, where they would of course reside for all of eternity as tortured souls.

By the time I left for college I was already questioning the religion into which I was raised. Actually, I was a little beyond questioning and more into the area of disowning. (It really is a fine-line keeping those two apart.) I decided college was the place I could begin to really study alternatives. I took Jewish Studies 101 with Professor Zipperstein my first quarter. Within a few weeks my after-life vision was altered. I was still cruisin' up on the escalator, but now the hell-bound were sliding down a big ol' slide. At first I figured "Hey, the powers-that-be probably want all those losers to have a little fun before their souls reach Hades were they will slowly rot and eventually burn in Satan's fire, only to be continually resurrected so the torment can be repeated indefinitely." It is only now that I realize with each alteration in my vision of the after-life I was slowly taking steps towards beginning a full-blown religious epiphany.

One day, after a Jewish Studies class viewing of "Schindler's List", I manifested a new vision; and this time it was scary. I was one of the damned riding the slide down to Hell. What if I had been deluding myself all these years and Catholicism was not the real escalator ride to heaven it had promised to be? Could it be that one of those other jerk religions was going to watch yours truly "slip slidin'" away on Satan's Slope as they rode the "Stairway to Heaven."

Professor Zipperstein explained to all us naïveté that every religion thought they were going to be riding that escalator. Jews called themselves "the chosen people" for Christ's sake. And man, as far as organized religions went they sure had their shit together. I really empathized and admired them for their tenacity and durability throughout the ages. Plus, they practically owned Hollywood.

And then it all started to make sense, I was Jewish. For some unexplainable reason I had not eaten pork in years. I loved Mel Brooks's movies. (I must have seen

Spaceballs about a million times.) And I had always been against Nazism. My eyes were suddenly opened and I had what alcoholics refer to as a moment of clarity. I knew in my heart of hearts that I was one of the “chosen.” All the “heaven or hell” inner conflict was not a doubt of my true being, but rather a result of a loss of faith in the religion I had been dealt. I knew I had to make a change.

But like most epiphanies, the answer did not come so easily. Even if I was a “chosen person”, or decided I wanted to convert to Judaism there were still things I felt weird about accepting as truth. I would have to resolve that all Mormons are going to Hell because they were, by no fault of their own, not the “chosen people.” And, sure, I know there are a zillion Buddhists out there and how can that many people be wrong, but I’m sorry, they’re all going to Hell. (I guess that is what makes Hell hell; all the people.)

But why? The Buddhists are good folk. Just because they are not the “chosen people” they are going to go spend the rest of time in the most vile of other worlds? It was bad enough they had to live in India and China while they were on Earth. The Mormons are different, they are going to Hell because they are a bunch of inbred cultists with a shoddy religion that is about as stalwart as an origami crane, and I can’t help them. (Even the Buddhists would agree with me here.)

The more I thought about religion on those long lonely nights when I was the only soul awake the less I started to question the availabilities and the more I started to question the institution itself.

What is religion and why do people need it so? Webster’s defines religion as:

1. people’s beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of a deity or deities, and divine involvement in the universe and human life
2. a particular institutionalized or personal system of beliefs and practices relating to the divine
3. a set of strongly held beliefs, values, and attitudes that somebody lives by
4. an object, practice, cause, or activity that somebody is completely devoted to or obsessed by
5. life as a monk or a nun, especially in the Roman Catholic Church

After five religious studies classes and many sleepless nights of soul-searching, I deduced that people need religion to fill the gaps in their lives that cannot be filled with real, physical materials. Religion is used to answer all the questions that people cannot otherwise answer on their own. You’ve seen it a million times:

Person 1: Why did that happen?

Person 2: I don’t know. I think it was because of God.

Person 1: Oh. You know, I think you’re right.

Person 2: Let’s build a temple to him.

Person 1: Okay. Let me get my purse.

Well, I had a ton of questions no one could answer. Actually I really only had one, but it was a doozy: Why can’t I sleep at night? Even the great Judaism couldn’t answer that bad boy!

Now, instead of throwing religion aside as a ridiculous manifestation Man cre-



ated because he is weak and needs some form of justification and explanation, whether it be viable or lousy, for all occurrences and actions; I went the other way and, even though the greatest of religions could not answer my query, embraced religion. After all, when all is said and done I am still but a man. A tired man.

And so, I decided to start my own religion.

Around the peripheral would be the same old run of the mill “Don’t kill, Do good” type bullshit that you already know so I won’t bore you with at this time. But at the core of the faith would be the more recent eternal question of “Why can’t I sleep?” My followers and I would pray to a God for the answers. He would be the God of sleep and all other things important. An all-encompassing type deity. But most importantly, sleep-encompassing.

I thought I would have a lot of success with my new religion. I marketed to the ignorant and lazy, figuring that lazy people are less likely to work to try and find the answers and would more readily accept my answer of “...because of God.” I also noticed the more ignorant a person is the more religious said person tends to be. As luck would have it most ignorant people were lazy, and vice-versa; so I had myself quite the little demographic already established. The first truly miraculous act of my God.

One could pray to my God for answers to all the tough questions. Like “Why can’t the teams I bet on ever cover the spread?” or “Why can’t we travel in time?” People needed a God they could ask about possibly stopping mysterious bodily oozes; they needed an entity they could pray to to help them exact revenge on their enemies. It was a long time coming, but we finally had him.

Being the creator of this new religion I was yoked with a tremendous amount of new responsibility. People wanted me to make appearances, write scripture, talk to our God. It was difficult keeping up. I started to have no problems sleeping at night. In fact, my insomnia problem seemed to disappear. It was a miracle, my religion worked!

I enjoyed the sleep, but did there have to be so much toil involved? I don’t mean to sound like an ingrate, but why does there always have to be a price to pay for anything you receive from God. Hell, I created my own God and even he wanted 40% off the top. The disciples needed more and more each day, I couldn’t come up with a good name, and I’m not gonna lie to you the work just got too consuming for yours truly. The religion was hard, so I quit.

The insomnia came back.

Some might look at my religion and think it a failure. Ah, but that was quite the contrary. My God responded to my prayers and gave me the answer to my most penetrating of questions. It is through meaningless labor that we find peaceful slumber. The fact that my God’s actions ended up killing the religion; some might call that ironic. I like to call it, well, ironic...so what! It doesn’t change the fact I’ve been given divine knowledge.

The truth is that having to actually do labor is just not appealing to people of my generation. Free, easy answers; that is what my religion was all about! Hell, they don’t even have to be free; I’ll pay \$5.95 for a bottle of whatever if it’s going

to give me answers. The fact of the matter is if you're a motivated, hard-working type who is looking to get into the religion starting business there is a whole group of us out here that need answers and are more than willing not to do any work to get them. Don't think it's feasible? Brigham Young got a university named after him; put that in your pipe and smoke it!

After my "failed" religion, my receiving of divine knowledge, and the end of my religious epiphany I was still in a bit of a throw over my vision of the after-world. I figured since I was a religious innovator the almighty one might allow me into heaven based on the greatness of my mind and my ability to think "outside the box." (Folks always want those types on their team.) But, then I remembered that Satan himself was the first one to think "outside the box" and look where that got him. So, where did this leave me vision-wise?

I am not sure.

I had no visions for many months and then a new one popped up recently. In my new vision I am in my most professional looking business suit, sitting and waiting in the lobby of an unknown corporation. The secretary keeps coming out and calling people in one-by-one for their interviews. All the other applicants have nice leather briefcases but I have nothing. But that's not what's bothering me; what's worrying me is that I have no idea what I am interviewing for. I may be applying for a job I don't really want at a corporation I despise...



Beginning of  
the End, art  
by Aaron  
Wilder

The package was delivered by billboard. Ernie McDougal woke up that morning to the sound of pounding footsteps and car alarms going off. He rolled out of bed and waddled to his front door, still in pajamas and shaking with excitement. He was not disappointed. The metal sign towered above the neighborhood, stepping over cars and power-lines, heading straight for Ernie's house, this advertisement flashing all the time:

"INSIDE Inc, INSIDE Inc, INSIDE, Inc. It's what's *inside* that counts. So bring the real you out. INSIDE Inc, INSIDE Inc, INSIDE Inc..."

All the dogs up and down Boon Lane were going crazy. The kids waiting for the school bus gawked and shouted—the younger ones, who had never seen a billboard this close before, scurried back to their front doors, looking over their shoulders, sure they were about to be eaten. However, the big, flat monster merely stopped in Mr. McDougal's yard and bent down. Two long, thin, metal arms extended a very large cardboard box to Ernie's outstretched, wiggling hands.

As he watched the billboard tramp into the horizon, heading back to its usual route up and down the freeway, Ernie thought, "What a brilliant marketing technique. I wish I could have an idea like that."

His own job was so much pencil pushing—and that side of it was the most positive. Being a plant supervisor meant he *told people what to do*, a prospect that made his stomach cramp every morning. But if he didn't give orders his workers would come looking for him, demanding instructions.

Hiding in the bathroom didn't help; he was always eventually found, a sweat-mess behind the stall door. Well, his job was going to be easier from now on.

"No more hiding for me," Ernie whispered as he stuck his head into the cardboard package marked with two capitalized I's on the side. He almost fell right in.

Work was pure delight. Ernie quivered inside his box, listening to his digital likeness bark hearty orders and give out brotherly commendations. Strangely, most of the employees pretended not to notice the change. No one offered any comment at all until Ernie approached them directly (which he could do now, with the touch of a button) and brought it up himself.

"It looks really good on you. It really does. Yeah. Wish I had one," the workmen would say when cornered. Usually the well-tanned, barrel-chested crew Ernie managed intimidated him, but not today.

"They respect me," McDougal sighed from within his container. "And how could they not?"

Indeed, the men could barely hold their grins on their faces, they seemed so happy for the manager.

"Thank you for saying so," the beaming image on the front of the box would reply.

"How silly that this seemed difficult before," the man inside chuckled.

Still smiling, he would let his box remind his worker of their duties and then

go on about his own—chubby little legs that peeked out from the bottom propelling the cube forward, eager for the next challenge.

That afternoon after work, Ernie met a woman in an elevator and they hit it off, or rather, their boxes did. Furthermore, their boxes, after comparing personal data, decided to spend the rest of the evening together. They went out to eat, shared interesting stories and jokes, and saw a show. Then, at the end of their date, the boxes decided to have sex.

Ernie was elated. He had set his box to pursue spur of the moment relationships but had not imagined the process would work as smoothly as this.

When Ernie and his friend closed the door behind them their boxes took full control, as they had been programmed to do. Foreplay was about to begin and so the chance of embarrassment was too great of a risk for the humans to be trusted. The last thing they did was activate their sex ports.

The boxes remained in holographic form for awhile. However, as things progressed and a rocking motion and thudding element developed, they automatically and necessarily solidified into tangible block shapes. The two cubes, already facing, now melded their glowing fronts together. Both lovers watched an image of the other on an internal screen from inside their boxes.

She was slender yet full, mature but youthful, and infinitely gentle. Ernie, electrified by the suddenness of events as well as the activity itself, began losing himself.

“Just this morning,” he thought, “this was impossible.”

The fact impressed him so much that he began whispering it.

“This was impossible before. It was impossible.”

His excitement continued to grow when he said it out loud. Soon, he was shouting at the bouncing, twitching picture. When that image did not react, he leaned closer, wanting to tell her. He twisted against pumps and probes, becoming tangled in cords. The struggle only intensified his need to communicate, which, like himself and the wires, had become twisted together with his sexual desire. He was straining towards the shimmering wall and ignoring the beep of a warning alarm.

Then, with a sad, wet noise, Ernie was tumbling out of his box. Sweaty, meaty folds smacked the cool sheets and then his back struck the cold floor. He lay there a moment, the sudden lack of sensation ringing through his trembling body like loud music turned off too quickly.

Ernie strained up into a sitting position and looked around, rubbing the areas where the suction cups had jerked free. The boxes were still on the bed, shuttering and rocking against each other. He stood, dazed.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he perceived a shape across the room. The figure on the other side of the bed had not yet noticed him. He approached her. She was also on her back, having come to rest between the bureau and a wastebasket, leaning back on her elbows, knees in the air. She was also staring up in pained disbelief at the boxes.

Ernie’s eyes darted up and down, hypnotized by the sight. She was bleach-white and imprinted with freckles that began at her forehead and continued

down, decorating the top of her chest and back, peppering her shoulders and forearms. The cool air had raised goose-bumps everywhere. She had scrawny knees and a mannish cleft in her chin. Where her body folded skin bulged. Her matted hair stuck to her forehead and there were sweat-beads above her lips.

This was so new. No commercial, poster, or movie; no daydream, fantasy, or masturbation session; not even the handful of hurried (almost apologetic) fumbling incidents with women who had prepped, plucked, and decorated themselves beforehand, could have equipped him to understand what he now saw. This was an alien. And she was terribly beautiful.

He spoke. It was not a word, because, in his fascination, all Ernie could muster was a bit of air pushed over the roof of his mouth and through his nose. As he mumbled, Ernie started forward, hands outstretched, lips quivering. The strange flower raised her head.

That's when several things happen at once, very fast.

Having yet to regain her bearings, the sight of a large, naked stranger with an awestruck expression coming towards her in the dark understandably alarmed Ernie's date. She jumped up with a shriek. However, as she did so she remembered something that scared her even more: she was also naked.

Ernie was still trying to explain and still finding no words. When the woman leapt up, he paused and took a step back—she looked almost ready to fight. The next instance, however, her face changed again. Her arms flew around her body, not to her breasts or genitals, but to cover her belly and hips. She was the one who finally found words and they were shrill, accusing, and on the edge of tears: "Don't you look at me."

All spells were broken then. Ernie realized his nakedness as well and, with a little, whining moan of pain, fled to the opposite corner of the room.

After a moment of blazing humiliation in which they realized there was nothing else to do, the humans began shuffling around the room, heads down, searching for their clothes and trying not to look at, or be seen by, one another. Meanwhile, the boxes had completed their imitation romance. The walls desolidified and an "ERROR" message began flashing on all four screens.

Ernie and his date, everything else pushed out of their minds, ran back to their bed of failure with fresh anxiety, forgetting each other and their shame, at least temporarily. Not even the flashing lights, spinning on the glass of the window and throwing shadows through the room in time with the rhythmic earthquake outside could distract the un-boxed lovers.

Outside the motel, two billboards had stopped short; facing one another down. The one advertising a daily drug regimen to cure and keep freckles away had encroached on the Inside Inc billboard's territory. It seemed a fight might break out until internal programming clicked and the two ads straightened up into friendlier postures. It turns out both companies belonged to the parent corporation. Holding each other, metal claw in claw, they tangoed up and down the boulevard, city-goers fleeing beneath their crashing feet, dancing away into the night.

# Sic Transit . . .

Pat Dixon

1

Roy owned the only drive-thru funeral business in Maine.

“The terrible economy, some great technology, and a very amiable divorce settlement converged about four months ago to make me one of the great pioneers in my field,” he told the semi-pretty TV reporter from Bangor, who had been sent over to Oxcan on July 12th to interview him.

Wendy Li of Channel 22 had not mentioned that her editor’s wife had seen a twenty-two second video clip about him on an “Oddball” segment of *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* two weeks earlier, but Roy Blount rightly guessed that some such luck had befallen him. His business had tripled since that spot first aired on cable and had then been posted on YouTube by his fiancée and three others. He now expected that the free publicity of the present interview would further enrich him.

“This here building was just a regular funeral parlor when my first wife’s mother owned it,” said Roy, gesturing behind him. “For eight years I worked for Martha Blount as head embalmer and coffin salesman, and when I married her daughter, May Blount, I was proud to take their last name as my own. ‘Burials by Blount’ has been the proud name of the business for over seventy-two years, and it seemed a respectful and a wise thing to do.”

Roy modestly glanced downward, moistening his lips with his thin tongue. Wendy Li pulled her hand-held microphone back towards her own mouth.

“Mr. Blount, could you share with our viewers and I a bit about those two factors which led to your—”

She consulted a slip of paper on the palm of her free hand.

“—to your ‘revolutionary conceptual breakthrough?’”

“A pleasure, Ms. Li. I do not see this as an unparalleled, world-shaking paradigm shift—nor myself as the Philo Farnsworth of funerary foresight. Mr. Farnsworth, as you know, is widely regarded as the inventor of television—although four big companies made all the profits and left him in the dirt. In my case, Ms. Li, the converging three forces were the economy and two other things. The economy, as viewers will appreciate, can crush the dreams of the small business owner with recessions—or when big corporations undercut the small person’s fair prices. Although our industry’s motto—‘There will be one funeral for every person ever born’—is still true, our market share here Blount’s was dropping and sinking and dwindling away. And that disaster leads me to factor number two: material opportunity—the actual premises behind me.”

Roy held up two fingers towards the video camera and smiled, nodding his head.

“As you can see, Ms. Li, ‘Burials by Blount’ does not possess any parking lot. You may think this unusually odd—so let me briefly explain. That large lot on the left, belonging to that seafood restaurant—it once was—all ours.”

Roy sighed, flashed a professional smile, and continued.

“When my first spouse and I amiably parted, our agreement was that I get the building and its furniture and equipment, hearse included, and continue running Blount’s for at least a year as an unweid entity. She, on the other hand, took full title to the adjacent parking lot—as well as the house we’d owned jointly—and also the house we inherited from Martha Blount, her mother.”

Clay Vance, the cameraman, focused briefly on a huge sign behind Roy. In large red letters vaguely resembling crustacean legs or claws, it said: “Foah Great Lawbstah, Pawk Yah Cah In This Yahd!” Beneath these words, in smaller black letters, was a less inviting message: “Customers Only! Violators Will Be Towed Away At Their Own Expense By Michael Gorton’s Wrecker Service!!”

“May Blount, my first wife,” continued Roy without pause, “decided to lease that lot—at a price I was unable to even consider—which was precisely the spur I needed. Technology of all sorts was awaiting to be adapted to this problem—and it is the third leg of the stable stool of my enterprise, Ms. Li. Once ‘Burials by Blount’ was limited to its driveway and whatever on-street parking our patrons might find, it was forced to evolve—or die. Fortunately I, with the aid of my new soulmate and fiancée, have been able to adapt to the changing times. Our original insight came from her noticing how one of our Oxcan banks looks like a big ol’ ice vending machine from the outside.”

Roy gestured towards the south, and for a moment Clay Vance’s video camera faced in that direction.

“That—um—would be—oh—ten blocks from here,” said Roy frowning slightly and clearing his throat.

“Here at Blount’s,” he continued brightly, “as I am certain you already know, we now feature drive-thru viewings of all of our currently held remains—at any hour, any day, day or night. During regular business hours six days a week, I or my fiancée are on duty, much like tellers at any drive-thru bank. At all other hours, we have an automated self-serve system in place. All anyone needs to do is drive up on our west side there, make a nominal \$3.00 donation via cash or debit card, similar to what can be done in most post offices—or most ice vending machines. They then select a particular Loved One from our ‘menu’ using our simple little keypad. We have a conveyor set up indoors that brings the appropriate coffin or urn to the plexiglass window for their respectful viewing for up to five full minutes. If the viewers wish to purchase flowers for the deceased, they can make their selections from another menu and pay in a similar manner. And if they wish to buy a CD containing an array of the Loved One’s favorite music and a slide show of photographs of his or her career from childhood up till—well, that is often available to them in a similar way for a mere pittance. Of course, Ms. Li, Blount’s does right by the copyright holders of recorded music, and that is figured into any costs.”

“Well, Mr. Blount,” said Wendy Li, brushing her long bangs from her eyes, “this sounds very thorough—and very very unique. But let me ask you another question. I gather that you’ve had a great many—um—favorable feedbacks from your satisfied—um—clients?”

“Oh my lord, yes, Ms. Li. All in all, most of our clients find that ‘Burials by Blount’ has provided exactly the proper amount of deeply caring support and service for their means, especially in these difficult times. It’s been said with much truth by the bard that ‘We mortal millions live alone,’ and in these times many of us scarcely know three or four of our own neighbors and have almost no relationships with anyone we work with. Who can afford now to rent a large hall in a funeral home to have a service for—say, as a typical number—only five or six mourners—or often fewer? We at Blount’s scale things back to what is real—and eliminate the expense of costly refreshments. Did I mention that, for another nominal charge, folks driving through to pay their respects can leave recorded messages about the deceased persons? This further eliminates the discomfort often suffered by the surviving relatives when they’re button-holed by folks that get way too long-winded—or are too—too inappropriate in any number of ways which we’ve all of us experienced. Here, as with, say, your own home answering machine, you can just conveniently skip past anything you don’t want to hear and go straight to the next message.”

“How—very interesting, Mr. Blount. I understand that you are currently residing on the—uh—premises? Yes? Doesn’t that—well—get a little—*creepy*, sometimes?”

“Oh, most assuredly *not*, Ms. Li. For anyone with a proper mindset, such as I and my fiancée Gloria have—that’s Ms. Gloria Mundy, a state certified cosmetologist and the true inspiration of this enterprise—living in a funeral home with ‘human remains’ downstairs is the most normal and natural thing in the world. Of course, since we are not yet wed, we most properly and definitely do have our own separate rooms—with locks on our doors. No, Ms. Li, it’s not the least creepy at all, I assure you. And—it’s *far* quieter than living over a bowling alley! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“How very—um—interesting, Mr. Blount. Now—could—you—”

Wendy Li again consulted the slip of paper in her free hand.

“—could you—please tell our viewers in your own words just one or two facts—one or two details about—a recent client or two? If—that is—if it would not be any—privacy—any invasion of anyone’s privacy. Channel 22 always is a great respecter of privacy—human dignity—as our viewers appreciate.”

Drawing himself up to his full five feet nine inches and squaring his slender shoulders, Roy Blount nodded his head vigorously towards Clay Vance’s video camera.

“It would be a pleasure, Ms. Li. I don’t want to sensationalize the passing of any human being—but three of our more interesting—uh—‘adventures with mortality,’ to coin a phrase, have to do with—uh—incidents that were fully reported in our local paper, the *Oxcan Bi-Weekly Independent*. But I would bet that not many viewers elsewhere—uh—Down East—uh—have heard about



them yet—and I would even bet that a few local Oxcans are totally unaware that ‘Burials by Blount’ handled the—uh—the services in our new manner for them. They were among our first—uh—uh—services.”

Roy paused to clear his throat, flash a little grin at the camera, and run his right hand across the side of his glossy black hair.

“Briefly speaking, Ms. Li—and I trust that none of this will shock to your feminine—uh—system in any way, shape, or form. I’m sure you, as a highly trained and experienced and attractive professional, are accustomed to seeing all sides of life—uh—many sides of life. Briefly speaking, we at Blount’s handled—provided for—the remains of Leroy Shanker when he was shot three months ago while cruising up and down the main street of Buena Vista, our sister village, in his customized off-road pick-up truck. Mr. Shanker’s life partner could not afford a lavish—uh—service, and in any case it had to be a closed casket affair, since his little body was—well—he was shot maybe two hundred times—allegedly shot—by Billy Bob Singleberry. Thelma Lou Hunter, his soulmate who shared his trailer, had tried to—but never mind that. Mr. Shanker was our first big ‘draw,’ so to speak. Maybe our biggest so far—over nine hundred and fifty drove through just to see the casket.

“And then there was Charlie Bennett. Mr. Bennett was a highly respected retired French teacher in our Oxcan high school—over seventy years old. One Saturday, about a month ago, he was visiting his very elderly mother over at the Trudeau Center for Health and Rehabilitation—our local nursing home—and he just stepped into a lavatory and locked the door—and had a fatal heart attack, right there on the—on the seat. Wasn’t found till late the following Monday. My fiancée did a wonderful job with Charlie. You wouldn’t believe how much he soiled—he—. Can—uh—you edit this tape—uh—back in your studio? You can? Good. Excellent. No need to get *too* graphic for the viewers right at dinner time. My own intended, my Gloria, worked her magic on Mr. Bennett, and the result was just wonderful. He was in an open casket, and well over five hundred folks came to pay their respects. His poor dear mother has no idea *how* he died—nor even *that* he died. And we heard from his nearest kin—a niece in Virginia, who arranged his funeral by phone—that his mother doesn’t remember she ever had any kids nor even was ever married. She just—well—you know.”

Wendy Li pulled her hand-held microphone back to her own mouth.

“Well, yes I do, Mr. Blount. I guess a lot of our viewers have been there! This is Wendy Li, reporting for Channel 22 on an amazing new phenomena—the first drive-thru funeral home, here in beautiful Oxcan, Maine! And—cut.”

“Uh—Ms. Li—I would be glad to redo any of those examples—or even tape another to replace one of them. Currently we are preparing the—the remains of a college professor—Arthur Hamilton Welles—who was allegedly stabbed by his wife after winning a little bet about math with her. She used—allegedly used—an icepick right in their—. No? Well, I’m sure you’re the best judge, being a professional newswoman—and it is still a pending case—but then so is the Leroy Shanker matter, legally speaking—but—.”

A greatly abridged segment of Wendy Li's special report on "Burials by Blount" aired on Channel 22 four evenings later. Roy's clever fiancée, Ms. Mundy, posted a copy of it on YouTube the next day, and seven more copies of it were posted later that week by four residents of Maine, one of New Hampshire, and two of New Brunswick.

Business at "Burials by Blount" continued to thrive throughout the summer months, with the bodies of Professor Arthur Hamilton Welles and two others setting new records there.

Roy owned the only drive-thru funeral business in Maine during the spring and summer.

In early September, the Fairleigh Funeral Service of nearby Beard, Maine, opened its own drive-thru facility. In mid-September, Talbot's Memorial Parlor, just seven blocks from Blount's in Oxcan, followed with one of its own. By late October, the state of Maine could boast of at least sixty-six similar establishments, ten of them owned by a national chain that had been started up from scratch.

In late November, Roy's fiancée resigned from Blount's and departed Oxcan to take a position in the metropolis of Orono, teaching three special courses in the University of Maine's new Drive-Thru-Funeral-Home Design and Management Division.

Sic transit Gloria Mundy.



No Picnic,  
art by Cheryl  
Townsend

# Rose and Sunshine

Marc Tamargo

Ever since I was a little girl I have been fascinated by the legends of Europa. Like the world I live on Ganymede, Europa is a moon of Jupiter's and was terraformed centuries ago, and like Ganymede it is a world covered in one vast ocean littered with large artificial floating cities for people to live on. But unlike Ganymede, Europa is said to be a paradise where everyone lives in peace with one another, a world without hatred. What fascinated me the most about it was that no one throughout the entire solar system had been to Europa in over a century.

My mother used to tell me stories about Europa when I was a child. That is, before she died when I was seven. It was said that, on Europa there was no sickness, no wars, no hostility toward one another and that no one had to ever work. And the oceans of Europa were said to be crystal clear and beautiful as opposed to the dark blandness of Ganymede's ocean. It was said that the ocean of Europa were blessed by beings that had lived there billions of years ago, and that anyone swimming in it experiences a feeling of ecstasy.

It was said that the peaceful people of Europa feared that the violent chaotic nature of the rest of the human race would infect their perfect paradise, so they erected an impenetrable energy barrier around the entire world, making it impossible for anyone to leave or enter. Many people tried to get through the barrier. Warlike worlds like Io launched massive militaristic assaults on the barrier attempting invasion, while more civilized worlds like Ganymede and Mars attempted to use scientific and technological means to take down the barrier, but no attempts were successful. Eventually after years of failure everyone gave up and accepted Europa as a forbidden place.

After my mother died, my father's passing interest in Europa slowly turned into an obsession. Being the brilliant scientist and engineer that he was, he became convinced that he could build a small stealth ship capable of penetrating the energy barrier. I asked him what made him think that he could do what thousands of the system's greatest minds had failed to do, and he answered that they were looking at it the wrong way, that they had always tried to overpower the barrier instead of trying to send a ship with little power to slip through. He would also say that there had been many technological advances since they last tried and that they would work better, but no one was interested in Europa anymore. He worked all the time on his ship, and even showed me how to operate it in case I went with him.

I have lived what some might call a sheltered life. My father was pretty good at protecting me from pain and hardship. I had many friends I would talk to at school but no one that I felt close to. I was known for always being in a bright and cheerful mood. That and my long bright blond hair is what earned me the nickname Sunshine. My father often called me that when he was in a good mood.

One night when I was seventeen, I came downstairs after studying to find my father looking very distraught. I felt alarmed and concerned. I ran to him to ask him what was wrong. "You deserve better than me." He said.

"Nonsense." I told him sincerely, "You've always been good to me."

"But I haven't been honest with you." I started to worry, that didn't sound like my dad. "Jennifer, you have a sister." I was in far too much shock at the time to recall exactly what my physical reaction was but I'm fairly certain my mouth hung open and my eyes went wide.

"Wh-what do you mean?" I managed to say.

"Before I met your mother she was very briefly married to someone else. They had a daughter named Rose. She never told you because it ended badly with her and her first husband. She didn't have much contact with Rose either. She planned on telling you when you got older but then she died and I... well I never had the heart to tell you." I was speechless, I had never experienced anything in my life to prepare me for this moment. I was overwhelmed with many emotions not the least of which was anger, so I simply turned around and went back to my room without a word.

The next day my father avoided me. I think he felt ashamed and was afraid that I hated him, but my anger had long since subsided. I was never one to hold a grudge. I made sure to hug him and let him know that I still loved him, but I also told him that I wanted to meet my sister. He said he would make some inquiries. The next day he told me where I could find her. She lived in the city of Hawkins which wasn't too far away, only twenty minutes by air shuttle, but it was quite different than Canterbury, the city I lived in. Canterbury was a relatively small and quiet community where not much happened, whereas Hawkins was a large Metropolis over run with people and from what I'd heard crime. The thought of venturing in anywhere save the city center of Hawkins frightened me a bit, but I decided that I really wanted to meet my sister.

The house where I was told Rose lived in was a sickly looking thing in a poor neighborhood. I tried to go over in my head what I would say to her but I really had no idea, so I just quickly knocked on the door. A girl slightly older than me answered, she had unnaturally bright pink hair which was cut in an even fringe that looked short around the back and long around the front, and it kind of covered her eyes. She wore clothes more dirty and revealing than anything I would ever wear and had a body that was quite thin. I put on my best smile for her, "Hi, are you Rose?" I knew even as I spoke that I didn't keep the nervousness out of my voice.

"Yeah." She causally said while leaning against the wall with one arm, looking bored.

"My name is Jennifer, I'm...uh...your sister." I added my most enthusiastic smile after that statement to emphasize my point.

"What?" She looked angry, I was starting to get really scared. She turned back to a fat middle aged man who sat on a couch watching the holoveiwer and drinking from a bottle. "Dad, there's a girl at the door who says she's my sister." She yelled at him.

“Yeah, so?” He said apathetically.

“So, is she?”

He leaned over to glance at me, and then said, “Probably.”

“I have a sister!?”

“Yeah.”

She picked up some dirty laundry that was lying around and hurled it at him. “You asshole! Why didn’t you tell me I had a sister?”

He dodged it without much consideration. “I don’t know. What do you care?” He took a big swig of his beverage, and then turned all of his attention back on the holoviewer.

Rose turned back to me with a friendly smile, “I’m sorry... Jennifer was it?” I nodded. “Do you wanna come in?”

“Sure.” I replied with as much enthusiasm I could gather, feeling as uncomfortable as I did.

She escorted me to a flight of stairs. As we passed her father she extended her middle finger toward him and said to me, “Never mind this asshole, he can go fuck himself.” He flashed her a brief patronizing smile. Rose took me up to her bedroom, which like the rest of her house was a total mess and had a peculiar smell.

“So how the hell are you my sister?”

That tone caught me off guard. I started to defend myself, “I’m not lying, I...”

“Oh, I believe you,” she said in a friendlier manner, “That tub of shit down there wouldn’t have said you were if you weren’t. I take it we share the same mother, since she abandoned me when I was a child.” I nodded, “Where is she now?” She then lit her cigarette.

“She died when I was seven years old.”

“Well, at least that explains why she never came to see me. So tell me about yourself, what is my long lost sister like?”

We made small talk; I did most of the talking. I told her all about my life at my boring school and living with my father. She told me little about her life, but she seemed more interested in what I had to say. She seemed particularly interested when I started talking about the legends of Europa. She seemed impressed that my father was trying to go there.

“Wouldn’t that be something, if he actually did go there?” She said between puffs of her cigarette. “I mean, I always thought it cool too, you know, the forbidden world, where no one can go. But you can see it right there in the night sky most nights. And it’s supposed to be like some sort of paradise. I wonder if it really is.” She suddenly leaned towards me, “Hey, do you think you’d go with him, if he like, did go?”

“I don’t know, I never really thought about it.” I lied. I had thought about it a lot, the truth was I didn’t know if I wanted to go or not.

“I’d go.” She said with enthusiasm.



Feminie Wiles, art  
by Edward Michael  
O’durr Supranowicz

“Really?”

“Hell yeah. I’d feel like a real explorer or some kind of hero or something. Plus any reason to get off this shit hole world. I’ve heard that on Europa everyone has their own personal robot servant who follows you around. And he has some kind of magical power or something and is able to grant you your every wish.” I smiled; I was really impressed with her fearless spirit. I saw in her all the brave qualities I wish I had.

After another hour or so I realized it was getting late and decided to go home before it got dark. “Well, I should get going. You’re probably sick of hearing me babble on anyway.”

“No, not at all.” Then she did something that took me by surprise, she gave me a hug. “You should come over more often, we’ll hang out.”

I smiled a grin of relief. “Sure I’d like that.” I went home a bit stunned. I was certain that she would want nothing to do with a sheltered geek like me, but I was wrong.

So I started going to see her all the time. Rose and I connected on a level that I’d never experienced before. We were so different from each other; I was sweet, simple, cheerful and complacent where Rose was vulgar, complex, and rebellious. Yet we seemed to connect on a level that was subservient to all those things. Maybe it was because we were both lonely and longed for a companion who understood us.

She was delighted when she heard my nickname was Sunshine, she thought it really suited me. “I got an idea!” She said with excitement, “We should go out and get tattoos together.” I noticed that she had several tattoos, a crescent Jupiter on her ankle and a dragon on her back, but I never liked the thought of getting a tattoo.

I scrunched up my nose at the thought. “I don’t know...”

“Come on, it’ll be great! I’ll get a tattoo of a rose on my left shoulder and you can get a tattoo of a big bright sun on your right shoulder, and when we put them together we’ll be Rose and Sunshine; a great combination. Come on.”

The way she put it actually made the idea sound appealing to me. It would be symbols of our bond of friendship and I could tell it was really important to her, so I said yes. We went down to the shop and got them done. Mine was a bright yellow sun; it was on my upper shoulder so most of the time it would be covered by my shirt. Rose however preferred to wear sleeveless shirts, so the bright red rose with a green stem that extended down to her elbow would always be showing.

We would always hang out at my place, sometimes we would get drunk, a habit Rose taught me. After a few months Rose wasn’t satisfied with hanging out by ourselves anymore. She wanted to go out to clubs. I really didn’t want to, but I didn’t want to be disagreeable either, so I went. The nights usually went like this: I would sit by myself in a corner sipping my drink, trying not to get too drunk while Rose would go off dancing or flirting with random guys. Some times she brought people over to talk to me, and if I was drunk enough sometimes I did, but usually I would just sit there quietly. Rose seemed to be oblivious to how obviously uncomfortable I felt in these situations because she started wanting to go out more and more. Eventually I actually started to loosen up and meet some

new people, until the night that it happened.

One night I was sitting alone by myself when I realized that I had no idea where Rose was so I went off in search for her. I found her outside in a near by alley way. She was making out with some random guy. I was a bit tired of her always going off and leaving me by myself so I decided to just go home. But as I was walking away I heard screams and I knew without a doubt they belonged to Rose. I ran back to her as quick as I could. I arrived to see her holding a knife to the guy she had been necking with. I called out to her and she said, "This fucker tried to rape me." The guy was calling to his friends and before I knew it she was encircled by five vicious looking men. They were yelling stuff at her, mocking her while she kept saying, "Back the fuck away from me or I'll fucking kill you."

One guy got too close to her so she lunged at him with the knife, but while she did that another guy grabbed her from behind and got a good hold of her. After that, they easily knocked the knife out of her hands. Then they pounced on her like a pack of wolves. They clawed and ripped at her clothing while others punched her if she put up too much resistance.

For a moment I just stood there stunned. I think I was in a state of shock. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go get help but I didn't want to leave Rose alone while this was happening to her. And I wouldn't gain anything by attacking them, I was too weak. So I started crying out for help as loud as I could. We weren't that far from the club so someone was bound to hear me.

I walked closer to the club while I continued to scream, but not going too far as I couldn't still see Rose. In fact my sight was so fixed on her that I didn't notice the man who had stepped directly in my path. "Hey, do you mind? We kind of like our privacy, so if you know what's good for you..." the last part he screamed at me, "You'll shut the fuck up!"

Fear started to overwhelm all my sensations as I sensed I was about to be attacked. The next thing I knew my attacker suddenly went limp and his body tumbled to the ground. I looked up to see a guy in a dark coat lunging at Rose's attackers. He too caught them off guard, but he was more prepared to deal with them. I watched as the guy in the dark coat, armed with a lead pipe quickly and effectively knocked all of our attackers to the ground. He then grabbed Rose and helped her run away. I quickly came to Rose's other side and put my arm around her to help prop her up, she was obviously still weak from her assault.

"We gotta hurry. Those guys won't be down for long." The guy in the dark coat said to me. We were running as fast as we could, but before long I knew he was right. Our attackers were in pursuit of us and it wasn't long before they were on us. Just when I thought they were going to catch up to us a ratty old car appeared seemingly out of nowhere right in front of us. The doors were already open. "Get in!" The guy in the dark coat yelled, so we quickly hopped in.

"Go, Dawson, go!" The guy shouted. The car quickly took off in the air leaving our pursuers behind on the ground as we sped off. I looked to our rescuers, the guy in the coat appeared around Rose's age. He was a somewhat tall fellow, but had an unthreatening face. He had shoulder length dark hair. The boy who was driving

the car whose name was apparently Dawson, looked young, slightly younger than me. He was unhealthily thin with pale skin and very short cut brown hair.

I held Rose, most of her clothes had been ripped off, but she still had her undergarments on. It seemed she had managed to fight them off long enough to prevent them from violating her, but she had paid for it. Her body was covered in knife cuts and bruises. The guy handed me his long coat and I quickly wrapped it around her while I held her tight.

"I'm sorry I didn't get there sooner." Our rescuer said to us. "I heard you screaming when it first began, but I had to get Dawson here, to plan our getaway."

"That's okay," I faintly said with what little strength I had. Rose just stared straight ahead, looking into nothingness. Her lips were softly moving, but I couldn't hear anything. When I listened closely I could faintly make out the words 'those fuckers' which she was repeating over and over.

"Where to, Michael?" Dawson asked the guy, Michael. In response he looked back to us.

I thought for a moment, and then told them to take us to my house and I gave them the directions. When we got there Michael helped me carry Rose inside. We took her up to my room where I treated her with a first aid kit, and left her to rest.

"Thank you." I said to Michael when we had gone back downstairs. "I know Rose will be too proud to admit it but you really saved us back there. I hate to think what would've happened..." my voice trailed off as a single tear came to my eye.

"Don't give it another thought. I'd like to think anyone else in my position would've done the same thing."

"Yeah but it wasn't someone else."

"Well, on that note we do have a favor to ask."

I turned to stare directly at him in sincerity. "Name it."

"We kind of need a place to stay tonight. We don't really have..."

"Sure." I said interrupting him. "There's a spare room you guys can have. I'll just stay in my room with Rose. So don't worry about it. Stay for as long as you need."

So they stayed with us for the next couple of months. We learned that their mother had died while giving birth to Dawson. They were raised by their father who was an alcoholic and would often beat them. Sick of the abuse they ran away from home when Michael was sixteen and Dawson was twelve. They'd been wandering ever since.

Rose was happy staying at home hanging out with them which made me really happy because she didn't want to go out to clubs anymore. I started to form new bounds of friendship with these two boys. I never really been around many boys before so it was a bit awkward for me at first, but Michael was a very kind man. He had a much more gentle nature than I would have suspected giving the circumstances of our meeting. And Dawson was usually a bit quiet so I didn't get to know him quite as well but he was fun to have around.

One day the four of us were hanging out together when I started thinking about my future. So I asked them. "What should I do with my life?"



Rose and Dawson just smirked and shrugged, but Michael looked to me with a serious look on his face. “Well, the way I see it you have three options, do the bare minimum to get by like Dawson and me have done...”

“And me!” Rose gleeful interrupted, and then banged her glass of beer against his in a salute.

“Or,” Michael continued, “You can join the criminal underworld. Or if you want to be involved in legitimate business, leave Ganymede.”

“What?” I said, “Why would I have to leave Ganymede if I wanted to be legitimate?”

“Look around you,” Michael replied, “I know you grew up in this small luxurious community, but you can’t be blind to the crime infested shit hole that Ganymede is. This is where most of the pirates from the asteroid belt come to unload the booty they get from raiding passing ships, and some many large criminal originations run everything. They have the fingers in everything, the government, so called ‘legitimate’ businesses, everything.”

Of course I have heard sentiments like that before, rumors that half the population of Calisto would visit here just to get stolen goods, but I think Michael was being way overly cynical about it. “Come on, it’s not that bad. There are plenty of people who live and work and have nothing to do with outlaws.”

“Oh yeah? Like who?”

“Like my dad.”

“If he hasn’t had dealing with the crime lords in one way or another, he will. Living on Ganymede, it’s inevitable.” I frowned in disagreement.

A couple days later I went out on the porch to get some fresh air only catch Michael and Rose kissing. Stunned, my first reaction was to go back inside out of embarrassment however I stood my ground. “Michael, can I speak to you for a second?”

They looked at each other. “Sunshine, what the hell are you doing? You’re not my mother.”

“I just wanna talk.” I said.

“It’s alright.” He said to her then came inside with me.

“You know I’m actually glad to see her with someone like you.” I said to him, “You seem to be an honest, decent guy. I’d just like to know if you plan on just ditching us in a couple of days, because she has had enough of guys coming and going in her life and... I... myself have been getting along really well with you and Dawson so I’d just like to know what your plans are.”

“C’mon, it’s not like I asked her to marry me or anything.”

“Don’t evade the question.”

“I don’t know... I don’t really have any plans. Like I said, me and Dawson are just wanderers, but since we’re being honest here... I’d have to say that we haven’t been this happy in a while. And truthfully I have always felt that the only reason we’d leave is if we got kicked out and you didn’t want to see us anymore. Because I haven’t met anyone like Rose before that seemed to understand me... better than I understand myself. And both Dawson and I are glad to be

around someone as bright and cheerful as you, it's a big change from the shitty way our lives have gone so far." From the way he kept nervously looking down I could tell he was being sincere.

"That's really sweet." I said. Then escorted back out to the porch where Rose was waiting. "You can have him back now." I said.

"Gee, thanks mother." Rose replied. I stuck my tongue out at her in response.

But while the four of us were getting along so great I barely saw my dad. His obsession with building the ship was getting out of hand. He spent all of his time working on that thing. He would be up working on it when I went to sleep at night, and he would be awake working on it when I got up in the morning. I was starting to wonder if he ever got any sleep at all. I decided to confront him about it.

"You're not happy anymore." I said, "Dad, what's going on? Something's got to be wrong."

"Look Sunshine, I..." I gave him a stern look and he sighed in resignation. "You know Landov Inc.?"

"Sure, that's the company that's been funding your work."

"Yeah well, they stopped funding my work several months ago."

"They did? Well, then how have you been able to continue your work?"

"I frantically went around trying to find someone else to fund my work, but no one wanted to do it, so I finally found someone who was willing to loan me the money I needed."

"Really, who?"

"Rudolph Spencer." My eyes went wide with shock. I recognized that name from Michael and Rose's conversations about the criminal underworld. Rudolph Spencer was the most notorious criminal master mind in all of Ganymede. "I told him I could triple his money in a few months, I lied. I'll never be able to pay him back."

"Dad, he'll kill you!"

"I was desperate! I needed to finish the ship and I couldn't get the money anywhere else. But don't worry, he won't kill me because he won't be able to find me." He grabbed my shoulders and stared directly into my eyes to reassure me. "I'll be finished the ship in a couple of days and then I'm going to go to Europa, to paradise. No one will ever be able to find me there. Sunshine, you have to come with me. As my daughter they'll come after you if they can't find me. If you stay you'll life will be in danger, so you've got to come with me."

"You bastard!" I yelled at him, "How could you do this to me?" I slapped his arms away and ran up to my room. I stayed there for a long time crying into my pillow. I was so distraught, I had finally met my best friend, a kindred spirit who happened to be my long lost sister and together we'd made a couple of good friends and then all of a sudden I was being forced to leave it all behind to go to some mysterious place that no one knew anything about.

I avoided my dad for the next couple of days. Rose and the others could tell there was something wrong, but I dodged all their questions and eventually they let it go. Then one day when my dad had gone out for supplies and the four of us

were upstairs watching the holoviewer when someone rang the door bell. We looked at the monitor to see who it was and it was a pair of police officers. “Oh shit!” Michael said, “Don’t tell ‘em I’m here. They could be after me for beating up those guys at the club.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it.” I said, and then went downstairs to answer the door. I considered the possibility that they could be after my dad; who knew what else he could’ve done.

“Yes?” I said after I opened the door.

“Jennifer Maritime?” One of the officers asked.

They knew my name! “Yes.”

“I’m Officer Johnson, this is Officer Shepard, we’re with the Hawkins Police Department. You were at the Karton Klub on fifth street in Hawkins on the night of April 20<sup>th</sup>.”

That wasn’t a question. “Yes.”

The other officer spoke, “Can you tell us if you’ve seen this man?” He flipped open a projector and a perfect hologram of Michael appeared in front of me.

“No I haven’t”

“This man, Michael Leonard Richardson, is responsible for the murder of an innocent man on the night of April 20<sup>th</sup> just outside of the Karton Klub.” Officer Johnson said.

“The night you were there.” Officer Shepard added.

“He beat him to death with a lead pipe.” Officer Johnson said, “Are you sure you’ve never seen him before?” I could feel them staring at me, I knew police officers were trained to detect lies, some even had special implants that helped them to do so, and I knew that I was a horrible liar.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“What about this man?” Sheppard asked and then changed the holographic image so that it no longer displayed an image of Michael but the image of one of the men who attacked Rose that night. I recognized him instantly as the man who had initially tried to rape her.

“No, I don’t recognize him either.” I could feel them staring at me. It felt like their stares were giving off heat, I think I might have been sweating.

“This is the man that Michael Richardson killed.” They stared at me a bit longer. “Well, if you think of anything that might be helpful, anything at all, please contact us.”

“And we’d appreciate it if you didn’t leave town, we might want to ask you some more questions.” Sheppard said.

“Sure.” I said putting on my best smile. I let out a huge sigh after I shut the door behind them. I didn’t think it had gone well at all. I quickly ran upstairs to find Michael pacing vigorously, Rose standing still, biting her nails, and Dawson working at the computer.

“We saw the whole thing.” Rose said. “Dawson’s checking the nets to see what he can discover. He found out that Michael did kill that guy while he was

saving me, but the police have no record of us being attacked.”

“Holy shit!” Dawson shouted out.

“What!?! What is it?” Michael asked anxiously.

“That cop, Sheppard, he’s on Rudolph Spencer’s payroll, and that guy you killed, he was one of Spencer’s henchmen.”

“Fuck!” Michael exclaimed. “They don’t want to arrest me, they want to kill me.”

“Wait a minute,” Dawson said, “those cops just applied for a warrant to search this house. It should only take them a day to get it.”

“We should’ve went to the cops right after the attack and told them what happened.” I said.

“No,” Dawson said, “If you’ve done that, then they would’ve just been able to find Michael quicker and he’d be dead by now.”

“No,” Michael said, “They wouldn’t have cared that those assholes were trying to rape you, Spencer’s men would have made sure an example was made of me. I gotta leave Ganymede. Hell, I gotta leave the Jovian System. No matter where I go they’ll find me!”

“What about Europa?” I said. There was a sudden thick silence as everyone stared at me in puzzlement. I think Rose was the only one who knew what I might be thinking since she knew about my dad’s plans. I told them about my dad’s ship and his problem with the gangsters, and how he will be leaving soon and that I was going with him.

“That’s crazy.” Michael said, “No one can get to Europa, everyone’s tried for over a century to get through the barrier. What makes you think you’re dad can do it?”

“Because he’s a genius,” I said, “and he’s determined. He said the ship is almost ready and I’m sure he’ll let you come along, he said there’s room enough for four people.”

“Dawson would have to come too,” Michael said, “If they can’t find me, they’ll find him and make an example out of him.”

“Okay, but there’s only enough room in the ship for four,” I said, “the life support systems can’t handle more than that.” We all looked to Rose.

“It’s okay, no one knows I’m connected to either of you, I’ll be okay if I stay here.” She said.

I ran to her and hugged her. “No, I can’t loose you. We just found each other.”

“I know,” she said, “it sucks, but if that’s the way it’s got to be then that’s the way it’s got to be.”

When I let go Michael grabbed her hand. “I won’t leave you.” He said.

“Yes you will,” She replied, “or I’ll kill you myself.”

As we were packing our things my dad came flying through the door. I’ve never seen him in such a panic in my life. “They’ve been asking questions about me around town. They’re coming for me. They’re probably on their way here right now. We have to leave, now.”

“Michael and Dawson have to go with us.” I told him about their predicament.

“That’s fine,” he said, “tell them to get in the ship. We got to go now!”

“Is it ready? Will it get through the barrier?”

“Yeah, I just need to make a few last minute adjustments.”

I gathered my friends up together and we went to the ship to prepare for our incredible journey. We packed very lightly for we had no idea what Europa would be like, only that was supposed to be a paradise. Michael, Dawson and I sat in the ship while my dad stood on the outside making his last minute adjustment. Rose stood beside the ship to bid us farewell. I was crying. I didn't want to leave her.

I saw Michael reach out his hand to hers, but before they touched the whole world around us rocked with a violent explosion. I looked ahead to see that the front hanger doors had exploded open. There was fire everywhere; I hadn't seen anything like it before.

All of the sudden men with guns started rushing in from the blazing hole. In an instant they opened fire, gunshots exploded all around us. I saw Rose duck behind the ship. I looked down just in time to see my dad get hit with multiple gun shots. I watched helplessly as the life drained from his body.

“Dad!” I screamed as loud as I could. I started to get up to go to him, but Dawson held me back. In the corner of my eye I could see Michael pulling Rose aboard the ship as gun shots continued to explode all around us.

“Get us out of here!” Michael shouted to me.

I was sitting at the controls but I was panicking. Tears blinded my vision and my hands were shaking. I felt Rose sit beside me. She gently touched my arm and whispered into my ear, “I know you can do this.”

Her serenity gave me the calmness and determination that I needed. I remembered what my dad taught me about flying the ship and we launched. The men with guns looked like little dots as we sped up into the atmosphere. Rose held my hand all the way until we were floating in space above Ganymede.

All of us were in awe; we had never been in space before. The tears started to subside, the magnificence of Jupiter looming over us made me forget my worries. I moved the ship around Jupiter until we saw a blue world covered in swirled clouds appear around Jupiter's horizon. It looked like Ganymede, only smaller.

Rose gave me a half hug. “I'm glad I'm here with you guys. I can't imagine my life without you. I wouldn't want to go back to that.”

I knew the ship would make it though the barrier, my dad was a genius. Then it was right in front of us, the legend, the forbidden world, our future. We were about to be the first ones in over a century to see it. “Next stop: paradise.”



Glass Figure YUN, art  
by Junior McLean



# children churches & daddies

the **UN**religious,  
**NON**family-oriented  
literary & art mag



**cc&d:** the **un**religious, **non**-family oriented literary and art magazine

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