



children
& churches
& daddies

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the Holiday Issue

the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag

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Scars art

2 (the old <http://www.janetkuypers.com> web front page for displayed on a Blackberry). Cover art of a Christmas tree.

Cleveland Cinquain

Michael Ceraolo

Playground
on the same lot
as a police station
is empty twenty-four-seven,
thus safe



art by Eric Bonholtzer

poetry
the passionate stuff

Cell Phone

Mel Waldman

Like zombies roaming mindlessly across the barren earth,
bereft and condemned by a voodoo curse, and possessed
by the Voodoo Priest,

dumb humans wander the streets, clutching toxic cell phones,
prisoners of surreal Super-Companies and Super-Sales-Freaks,
selling Orwellian *truths* and *dreams*.

Beware! We're *real* creatures in 1984.
Big Brother is watching, listening, and
monitoring our compulsive movements,

aware of our interests, preferences, and
purchases, creating needs and selling us
mindless talk.

Now, face-to-face communication is almost obsolete.

Physical and psychological space are contaminated by
human beasts blasting cacophony into cell phones,
screaming in the streets at no one visible,

like antediluvian schizophrenics screeching in private
dreamscapes, and howling on trains, buses, and planes,
like coyotes in the wilderness.

What possessed humans to *eat* cell phones 24/7?
How did they become addictively attached to
these little machines?



1984 is here. Unconsciously, humans zoom across a dispassionate highway, crashing their *toy* cars and smashing their skulls as they drive toward *Eternity*, talking on the cell phone to someone-*not there*.

Humans travel on the Super-Highway of Death and cell phones are their lethal companions. Yet a few have escaped the inevitable curse and consequences of the tiny monster.

Like Stephen King, I do not own a cell phone. Call me old-fashioned or simply *free*.

What about *you*?

Sneakers Like
Cars
from
www.worth1000.com



Carl the mechanic
was the first poet
I ever met—
livin' at home
takin' a few classes
at the local CC
I think us younger guys
in the neighborhood
kinda looked up to him
because he was sort
of a regular guy
but when he
came out cryin' one day
and showed us his
first publication
he sniffed that he'd
tried to show

his old man
what he'd done
and all the old drunk
could do was laugh
and drip snot
all over the pages
Carl said this was typical
of how people
treated poets
which was why I knew
I'd never be one
so I asked Carl
to pop the hood
of the Charger
and show me
the spark plugs
or something.

Grease Poet

Richard King
Perkins II

Legacies

Je'free

After his modest funeral,
About ten or eleven years ago,
His little girl found his diary on the altar-

The leather-covered journal
Where a father poured out his heart,
His sentiments during adulthood
Up to his final few days before exit

Pages of words would not be wisdom,
If not for the years of work in the factory,
Or stories about those blondes & brunettes
That have touched a daughter's heart

Every drop of ink,
Even the faded or the fading,
Longs to smear itself over a spirit
Of a child in an overwhelming loss-

Writings about pubs and motels
She never thought he would have gone to
Names, like Megan, Luis and Cassandra,
Never mentioned when he lived
Lessons he had to learn the painless way,
The excruciating way, and both ways

Right before the climactic chapters,
The sentences were full of wretchedness,
His character was full of ignorance,
The sun never rose anywhere,
And the gates of freedom were locked

Nowadays, she fills out the blank sheets,
One autobiography after another,
Wondering if history will repeat itself,
If redemption will fulfill itself
Into triumphant chronicles
From where her children can dig out
Encouragement, optimism, logic, love



Brooklyn,
at by the HA!man
of South Africa
(<http://www.hamanworld.com>)

patience

Vanessa Leigh Watters

patience is a virtue...

for the egregiously passive aggressive

for the apolitical
the asexual
the apathetic

for the undriven
the unburdened
the unenlightened

for the inane
and the unadulterated

for the generic fuckwit

and for those,
with just plain nothing to do.

Madonna and Child (Wall-eyed Martie photo sitting)

CEE

Okay, chin down
A little bit
Not so proud
And to the left
Just
Up a little
Smile
Less demure, and
Ma'am
Ma'am?
Our clown's on break
Could you please make Him stop judging us?

Adoration
of the
Dumbbells,
art by
Peter
Bates



Working as clerk
in a porn store
sucks

I know there are worse jobs
but that doesn't make me
feel better.
There's also better jobs,
jobs where you don't have to work,
jobs that pay a lot to do nothing,
and even people who don't need a job
cos they already have all the dough.

So what if somewhere
there's kids working
for a dollar an hour?
I'm not one of them

And what if others work
harder than me?
Too bad for them

I'm stuck with a job
that bores me to hell
I barely make enough
to pay the rent
I don't have health insurance

Lucky to Have a Job

Ernest Dean

I don't have a car
but the worst thing is
I don't have time.

And that's what pisses me the most
cos I know there's lots of people
who wouldn't do shit with their lives
even if they had the time to do so
I know I would,
and I do my best
but it's never enough goddammit
and I'm tired
it's wearing me out
I can tell
soon enough
I'll become like them
and from the minute I get home
to the minute I go to sleep
I will watch tv.

Shit, I forgot.
I don't even have cable.

The Van Gogh

Michael S. Morris

She was attractive —
sex yet clung to her
like her grandchild

It was a big house
with gates and a drive
that curved past grand elms

Inside, the expanse
of home seemed to rise
and swallow her footsteps

The kitchen was full
of light shining on arrays
of greens, fruits and flowers

She would take me
across the grounds
naming the ages of trees

her battles with moles
and dedication to keeping
this home as a history

She was lonely
Her husband was in Vegas
running his cable show

He was a scream
she allowed, amused
and proud at his nerve

She was down to earth —
giggling the tale of the
recent show of Chippendales

She blushed, anything with asses
Then in silence, the house
swallowed her laughter

My work for her through,
she said, before you leave
I know you've written on van Gogh
There's something I wanted to show
you and parted two doors revealing
a double stairway, up which ascended

Matisse, Chagall, Doré,
and at the top of the hall
the Kandinsky - by the Hans Bol

She told of Picasso #37
lost for decades, hung
by the bathroom entrance

But there was more — Rembrandts
behind door after door-
until we stood before

the van Gogh; a piece
I immediately knew throwing
my face into the sowers shape

my eyes measuring all
dimension; vegetative,
humanistic, each stroke

I treasured after decades
studying this holy man
this misfit of unsurpassable means

Later, in a dream
I saw that empty house
and a lonely woman —

And a miracle hidden
in an echoing mansion
by no eyes ever seen

Sure Fire

Andrew Rihn

Back in 1997, when I was in 7th grade, my white suburban school brought in two speakers to give us budding teens a talk about abstinence (the only 100%, sure fire method). They used time from art class, the most expendable period from the administration's point of view, to schedule them. (Later I would read that in college, art majors have the most sex.) I remember the man announced that he, at thirty-one, was a virgin and proud of it. Some of the class laughed, a mixture of bravado and nervousness. Most of us were virgins too, then. But at thirteen, we banked everything on the unlikely day that we lost that title. The woman skirted the issue of her virginity, extolled the virtue of adopting a second one, which left us, so eager to lose our first, baffled. I don't remember what they talked about, probably marriage and rhythm and the supposed ineffectiveness of condoms. But they gave us pens with little slogans:

Put out the fire of your sexual desire.

The pens were shaped like matches: thinner than usual, the length of golf pencils, and with a large, red cap. I am very serious about this: they looked exactly like little penises. And we, already long-time members of the Pen15 Club, carried them in our pockets as jokes. We took them out whenever we needed to break-up the standardized monotony of class with a laugh. We learned the pens were not intelligently designed; our teenage heat was too much for them. In our pockets, the ink would burst from the ends, staining our pants, ruining our shorts to the world.

Knotted Hate

Janet Kuypers

I can't see my dying friend
because his relative
fat rich bitch
calls me selfish
because I wouldn't instantaneously
give away what money I don't have
to his employed wife

how selfish of me,
The one without a job
trying to keep myself out of debt

okay, girl
you can't tell her how wrong she is
and you can't tell her how
she is truly the self-centered one
so knot up the hate
add it to that tight little ball
that's been growing inside you
all these years

you remember what it's like:
you didn't want to know the names
of the people
who hit your car
when you were stopped at an intersection
when you were doing nothing wrong
but being a sitting duck
and were almost killed

waiting for that final shot
from the hunter,
looking for his final kill

you know people will listen
right after you're attacked
by an ex-gang member

but when you're underlyingly taught
That things like sexual abuse are your fault,
well, that's when you have to add
more emotion to the knot

that ball of hate
has been growing
since that acquaintance rapist ex of yours
made your hate flourish
with more phone calls,
cards, letters,
even recorded audio

his stare scared you
and you feared the tears
if you saw him in the distance
on the street

you swallow your tears
and stifle your hatred
when even the thought of him
instigated the constant pain
and the medical clinic
for round number one
of body-harming medications
since the American solution
to solving all health problems
is popping a pill

but girl,
you know you've dealt with this your whole life
because your fifties-styled family
was probably just like every other family:
with a nice-looking exterior
and well-mannered children in public
because children couldn't show their feelings,
their resentment
or their hatred

From their constant emotional battles
without consequence

you poor thing
you've been working for all these years
on that knot of hate
it's been growing quite steadily
you have a permanent place inside you for it

you've been trained well
to not let people see what's wrong
to not let people see your hatred
because that would be improper

you can't let anyone else feel what you feel
you can do this yourself
take it all in like the proper fifties housewife
You've been trained to be

keep that knotted hate
as that perfect circle
don't let any of it out
and don't worry about it's effect on you
I'm sure there's a drug out there
that will numb you
into not caring anymore

I went to the train tracks at night
put the duct tape on my mouth
to stifle the sound
tied rope knots around my wrists with my teeth
and waited for someone to strike me down

hours passed
as I watched the constellations dance across the sky
hours passed
and nothing happened
no one came for me
as my saliva loosened my mouth restraint
and my little wrists easily eventually broke free

put my head in the oven
waiting for the gas to consume me
woke up hours later
in the fetal position on the floor
with only the faint smell like a kitchen pilot light
flickered out

i even let my car
sit still on a road
while other cars decided to play
like we were electric bumper cars
knock me around,
push me over a hundred feet
but the electric line
for my little electric bumper car disconnected
and this could have been my chance

but those mechanics at the local hospital
couldn't leave it at that
and forced me to keep pushing myself to that edge
over and over again

**My
Attempted
Death**

Janet Kuypers

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

The Old Battered Suitcase

Joan Steffens

When she was sixteen she walked barefoot through the shattered pieces of her life. And she didn't know what else to do, so she bandaged her cut and bleeding feet, swept up the broken shards, and put them in an old battered suitcase. Then she caught the first train out of town. And when she was twenty-two, the train pulled out of a far distant station, leaving her behind to raise the babies by herself.

And she loved them so much, and she worked so hard. And she cooked for them, and cleaned for them, and made gingham curtains for their windows. And she painted old pieces of furniture the colors of the rainbow, just to brighten up their lives. And she worried because she knew she didn't know very much, so she read to them at bedtime.

She read Hansel and Gretel, and The Little Red Hen, and the Adventures of Little Brown Bear. And she read the poems of Emily Dickinson and the prose of Edna St. Vincent Millay. And she knew they were too young to understand the meaning of the words, but she thought the words themselves were crumbs of light leading out of the Forest of Darkness. And she prayed they would follow the path someday and make their way to the Land of Prosperity.

But sometimes, late at night, when the children were fast asleep, she would trip on the old battered suitcase. So she hid it away in a dark place so it would never cause the children to stumble.

And the children grew older, and she made hot cocoa on cold winter mornings before they left for school, and she baked cookies in the evenings before they went to bed. And she knew she still didn't know very much, so she read to them at bedtime.

She read Treasure Island and Peter Pan, and she read about dragons, and unicorns, and Pegasus the flying horse. And she read the poems of Walt Whitman and the poetry of Robert Frost, and she thought the words were pixie dust, whisking them away to the Land of Learning.

But sometimes, late at night, when the children were fast asleep, the old battered suitcase would fall open. So she pushed it farther back into the dark place so the children would never find it and cut themselves on the broken shards.

And the children grew into teenagers, and she went to all the ball games, and all the gymnastic meets, and she watched every time the school band marched. And they invited all their friends home, and she cooked big suppers at night, and as they all sat around the table, she listened to their laughter.

And she didn't want them to worry, so she never told them that arthritis lived in her left thumb and ached sometimes at night like a toothache that wouldn't go away. And she didn't think to tell them that sometimes her feet hurt. And she had no words to tell them that she was lonely.

And she worked so hard, and sometimes she held down two jobs to try to make ends meet. And desperation began to gnaw at her, and pieces of her began to fall away, like autumn leaves from cold bare bark. And she didn't know what else to do, so she gathered up the pieces and put them in a bottle.

And sometimes, late at night, when the children were fast asleep, she tried to drink the pieces down. But she could never drink them all, so she poured what was left into the old battered suitcase.

And she worked harder and harder, but she was never able to make ends meet. And the tides of despair rose up around her, and the wind and the waves beat at her, and the weight of the old battered suitcase was pulling her under, and she thought she was drowning. And she was desperate to save the children. So she read to them.

She read David Copperfield, and Nietzsche, and the biographies of Winston Churchill and Thomas Jefferson. And she read about the ancient Greeks and about the bravery of a man called Alexandre Solzhenitsyn. And she thought the words were lifelines keeping the children afloat, and she prayed they could hang on long enough for the Lifeboats of Learning to arrive and sail them safely away on the Sea of Knowledge.

And the storms came, and the winds blew, and the waves broke over them, but somehow they hung on. And then they grew up and left home. And they all worked so hard, and they put themselves through college, and, one by one, they followed the crumbs of light, and escaped the Forest of Darkness, and made their way to the Land of Prosperity.

And she was so proud of them, and she loved them so much, and she knew they loved her, too. But they didn't seem to like her very much, and sometimes they treated her like she was an old worn out joke that wasn't really funny anymore.

And one day they came to her and said that when they were growing up she had left them alone too much, and they said she had worked too much, and they said that, sometimes, she drank too much. And they said they had been lonely. And they said she had read to them always, but she had given them no words of her own, and they didn't even know who she was. And then they went away.

And she thought they took the light with them, so after they had gone, she sat alone in the darkness. And she thought her heart was broken.

And she wished she could climb the wall of silence that surrounded her and call out to the children. She wished she could tell them that sometimes her feet hurt and that arthritis still lived in her left thumb and ached at night like a toothache that wouldn't go away. And she wished she could tell them that she was lonely. But the wall was thick and high, and she was too old by then for climbing. And anyway, the words that she needed were locked away in the old battered suitcase. So she sat alone in the darkness for a long, long time.

And she looked back down through the years, remembering all the books she had read, and she thought the words were golden threads weaving the tapestry of her

life. And she followed the threads back into the past and saw herself reading to the children, their eyes shining as they listened. And she watched as they flew away on the backs of magical horses, moonbeams dancing behind them as the night wind caught at their hair. And she saw the tears glisten on their cheeks as they listened to the sorrows of David Copperfield.

And a great sadness rose up within her, for she knew she had given the children all she had to give, and she knew that it had never been enough. Too much of her had been broken, or missing, or packed away in the old battered suitcase. And she knew she had never really known very much.

And she didn't know what else to do, so she picked up the pieces of her broken heart and packed them carefully away in the old battered suitcase. And she pushed it far back into the dark place.

And a cold wind blew up around her, and she thought she was freezing, so she wrapped herself in the warmth of the golden tapestry of her life. Then she reached out for the only solace she had ever known, and she opened the book. And she read.

And she thought the words were golden flames, lighting her way, there in the darkness.



BX-23,
art by
Aaron
Wilder

Operation: Hunger

Derek Devere

The fresh grease on Chucky's lips spread further from the edge of his mouth to his moustache and beard with each new bite into the *Special Deluxe* Operation: Hunger, the great new hamburger sandwich from the multi-million hamburger-selling fast food chain "Hamburger Attack." Chucky's best friend, Eddie, sat next to him in the passenger seat of Chucky's three month old H2 Hummer. Eddie smoked a Marlboro while he eyed the voluptuous rush with which Chucky bit into the burger.

Boyhood friends, teenage friends, college friends, and now mid-twenties Men About Town (Glendale), Chucky and Eddie struck an interesting visual contrast. Chucky was huge in girth, seemingly creating a larger waistline with each new passing week. His black beard helped create definition in his face and hide his enormous double chin as best he could. He breathed heavily and with nervous energy, even when, say, eating an Operation Hunger and starting his Hummer, as he did just then. In comparison, Eddie was tall, thin, clean shaven, and slow in his movements, consuming far less food than cigarettes.

While Chucky drove them to Eddie's parent's house to pick up Eddie's Best Buy uniform, the delights of the urban sights, sounds, and smells of Glendale whizzed by. The carnal, Christian aroma of Carl's Jr. latest Hawaiian Jalapeno Cheeseburger swam through Chucky's car window. He couldn't help but notice that. Smoky burger smell beauty. But, he was full. He already ate an Operation Hunger. Still, that smell was undeniably near undeniable.

"Wait, pull over there." Eddie requested suddenly.

"I thought you just got some." Chucky said irritably as his eyes caught the 'Turkish Tobacco' sign in the strip mall. He slowed down and turned right into the strip mall parking lot. "And why the fuck you want Turkish cigarettes?"

"Just the name, Chucky." Eddie said as he opened the passenger door and hopped out.

"Probably owned by a fucking Turk, too."

After getting his discounted 4 cartons of Marlboros (80 packs, with 20 cigarettes a pack, that's 1,600 cigarettes total, which will last him 6 weeks), Eddie hopped back into Chucky's Hummer. Continuing to drive up Brand Ave., they passed the "car lot district" of Glendale. One car lot after another – Toyota, Nissan, GM, Ford, Mercedes, BMW, and more – made its presence known.

"Damn ... it'd be nice to get the new Mercedes 4X1128, with gold rims ..." Chucky said, ogling the car in the lot while bringing his H2 Hummer to a stop for a red light.

Pulling up next to him was another H2 Hummer, with two African American young men blasting Tu-Pac from the car stereo. The music shot out into the open air, causing menacing vibrations in the surrounding vicinity of the H2. Chucky decided to compete by cranking up the volume for a NWA song on his stereo. Other drivers in

cars close by were getting annoyed. When the light turned green, the African American gentlemen in the H2 slammed on the accelerator, shooting them across the intersection. Chucky didn't compete this time, driving the speed limit of 35.

"Fucking monkeys." Chucky shot out. "They drive that thing as if it was a Masaratti. They could kill somebody."

"If they're monkeys, what does that make you, a grizzly bear?" Eddie interjected with a small chuckle.

They soon made it to Eddie's parent's place, where he left his Best Buy uniform two days before. Eddie's mom was withdrawn from the boys, busy with laundry and listening to a local Armenian radio station. Eddie and Chucky hated their native tongue, so quickly left the house once Eddie got his Best Buy shirt and two Double X "SPASM" energy drinks. "SPASM" drinks packed a punch. They were Chucky and Eddie's favorites. Recently, the company that produced the high voltage cans was under attack from health organizations.

There were allegations of people suffering from heart attacks after drinking a "SPASM," with one story of a man who actually died from a heart attack. Because of the high profile embarrassments, sales for "SPASM" drinks took a nosedive, and quickly thereafter stocks plummeted for the company. With everyone aware of the health risks, only people like Chucky and Eddie bought the drink (and made sure their parents stored some at their homes, too). Basically, the buyer was anyone who didn't care. There was also an excitement for Chucky and Eddie. Maybe they'd see the other guy get a heart attack.

Chucky and Eddie still had two hours before their shift at Best Buy so they decided to go to the mall. After finishing their SPASMs in the H2, they were pumped and ready. It was Mall Time. The Holy Shrine of modern consumer society was exactly that to Chucky and Eddie. It was their subliminal place of worship. The Path of Awe. Being full of energy drink super junk made them feel a little cocky, too. Perhaps they'd come across some chicks.

Before entering the grand main entrance to the mall, Eddie finished his 12th cigarette of the day. A pack and eight cigarettes left. He was usually at number 12 an hour later, but oh well. Earlier he was stressed he might've lost his Best Buy uniform, but fortunately, he didn't. The latest Justin Timberlake hit was blaring through the mall, especially at the entrance.

"I want to be your boy ... can I be your boy ... I want to be your boy-toy ... can I be your boy-toy ..."

"What a fag." Chucky stated as they walked past the Swatch store.

"Just the way you like 'em." Eddie said with a smile. "He wants to be your boy-toy."

"Dumb-ass. Look at that watch."

"It's alright."

"Better than the one you got. Hold on a sec."

Chucky proceeded to walk in front of Eddie and towards the jelly-bean store "Glendale Jelly." His eyes were locked on one particular jelly-bean, the neon blue *Bluey Bean*. That was his favorite. Chucky soon came back outside with a two-

pound bag of *Bluey Beans*, munching as he walked with Eddie further into the mall.

“Only two pounds today?” Eddie asked with hesitation. “You on a diet?”

Chucky laughed. They continued to stroll through the mall, now with Hannah Montana blasting in the air.

“Just another day ... just another day ... of hey, hey, hey, fun today, fun today ...”

Chucky was downing *Bluey Beans* and Eddie was wishing he could smoke as they passed store after store with utterly convincing boredom and blah. But this was a boredom and blah which they loved. Their mental and physical attention was fixed on whatever store they passed, whereupon they'd make some insightful remark on each one.

“Rocket Rackets,” a store devoted completely to tennis rackets and tennis balls. “Sexy Shoes,” a shoe store for women only. “Snow Drift,” an ice cream store. “Wookie Cookies,” a cookie store noted for its specialty Star Wars *Wookie Cookie*. “Fudge, Fudge, Fudge,” a store devoted only to chocolate fudge. “Sticky Stickers,” a store that sold only stickers. “Hot Skates,” a skater and roller-blader store. “Top of the Key,” a store devoted only to basketball apparel. “Candy Sweets,” a big candy store devoted to sweet candies only. “Far Away Adventures,” a dudgeons and dragons, role-playing store. “Silly Willy’s,” a toy store. “Beats,” a music store. “DVD Deluxe,” a movie store of DVDs. At “Energy Blast!,” a small store devoted to selling energy drinks only, there was a line. Chucky and Eddie went to the end to wait.

“What kind you want? Another Double X SPASM?” Chucky asked Eddie with heavy breaths. There seemed to be some excitement in his voice, or possibly it was just the fact he'd been walking. The big man was sweating quite a bit.

“Yeah, get me one of those. I'm gonna take a piss.” Eddie responded as he walked away.

In front of Chucky were two scantily clad, attractive, young Armenian girls. Their skirts were high, revealing beautiful, long, tan legs. Chucky couldn't keep his eyes off the girls as he waited. Soon, the girls made it to the cash register to order. Once there, the black cashier began flirting with them. They giggled at his flirtations good-naturedly. He was handsome, quick-witted, and educated. He didn't think highly of his job but was doing it to pay bills, as he let out during the chit-chat. The flirtations lasted a couple minutes, which irritated the hell out of Chucky. The fact that two sexy young Armenian girls were flirting with a black cashier also bothered him. By the time he got to the register, Chucky was an agitated, sweaty man.

“Gimme two Double X SPASMs.” He spat out quickly amongst his breathing.

“I don't think we carry that anymore.” The black cashier replied simply, but did notice Chucky's irritation while waiting in line.

“It's up there on your board.”

“Really? You'd be the first customer I sold it to.”

“There's a first time for everything.”

“We should take it down. People been killed with those things.”

“Well, it's not up to you, is it? All you do is sell the shit.”

“Already one dude in the Midwest died from a heart attack after drinking one of those things.”

“If I wanna drink the fucking drink, lemme fucking die. It’s my right.”

“*Your right* to die?” The cashier chuckled.

“Look, man, is your manager here? I don’t need to take your shit.”

“No, he’s not, but don’t worry. You want it, you can have it. I just hope you didn’t already have one today.”

“I did and I’m planning on having two more later.”

“Two more? You out of your mind? Four of those things in one day?”

“No, I’m not out of my mind. I’m a paying customer, so shut the fuck up and give me my drinks. One for me and one for my friend.” Chucky said with checked anger as he slapped cash down on the counter.

“And here’s to your right to die.” The cashier responded after getting the drinks, taking Chucky’s cash, and handing the SPASM cans to his paying customer.

Chucky shot him an angry look, then turned and walked away with the cans. Soon, Eddie came back to Chucky, smelling horribly like cigarettes. A person could almost see the smoke coming from Eddie’s clothes.

“You didn’t smoke in the bathroom, did you?” Chucky asked with a disgusted look.

“What’s it to you?”

“You coulda gone outside. It’s just as far a walk.”

“Yeah but I had to piss and I was dying for a smoke. Might as well kill two birds with one stone.” Eddie said as he opened his Double X SPASM and took a sip, with Chucky following the same motion.

Chucky’s cell phone began sounding off it’s ringtone – “Suck it, Bitch” by Killah Killah. He grabbed the phone and answered with his usual “whassup.” It was his mom. She was in tears. It was apparent she’d been crying for a while before calling. She wanted him to join her that night for the annual ceremonial vigil in remembrance of the Armenian Genocide. But she already knew the answer. She knew he would give her some excuse. He wouldn’t go, like all the years before. In fact, the last time he went he was 12 years old. This time around, he was giving her the usual excuses about having to work and how much Best Buy needed him. He told her he was working until 11:00 pm, the vigil was at 8:00. He was actually working until 7:00. She hung up without saying goodbye.

Chucky and Eddie went back to their stroll through the mall, going from store to store, sometimes buying something, sometimes not. Eddie bought a new Blackberry. He was tired of the two he already had, so he got a new one. Chucky bought a new pair of shoes, the new Kobe Bryant’s. Along the way, they ran into the same sexy young Armenian girls from before. The guys tried flirting with them but after Chucky and Eddie asked if they had boyfriends, the girls walked away. Well, at least there was the new blackberry and the new pair of shoes.

It was time to go to work. On the way, Chucky drove his H2 Hummer to McDonald’s to get lunch. Eddie had a Fish Fillet combo, which he didn’t finish, and Chucky had two large Big Angus Beef hamburgers with mushrooms combos. Two burgers, two large orders of French fries, and two large cups of Mr. Pibb. While finishing the McKieDee food, they made it to Best Buy.

Soon, their six hour shift was over. Neither Chucky nor Eddie helped many customers, and actually went out of their way not to help people. They made themselves look busy by pretending to stock items, going back and forth from the stock room and the store floor. They could get away with this kind of behavior because no one else knew more about video games than them. If the manager or any other staff couldn't answer a question from a customer, Chucky and Eddie were there to save the day. And now that their shift was over, the two video game aficionados went to work on research.

Chucky and Eddie knew pretty much everything there was to know about most games. There was some kid in Iowa who they met on a video game blog who seemed to know more. But this kid didn't have to work nor even go to school (he was a home-schooler). Chucky and Eddie, on the other hand, were hard workers and lived busy lives. Their knowledge of video games was somehow more impressive because of this. They could tell you, for example, that the best games for the new PS3 were "Resistance: Fall of Man," and "Metal Gear Solid 4." For the Wii, "The Legend of Zelda: Twilight of the Princess," and "Metroid 3: Corruption." For the X-Box 360, "Gears of War," and "Halo 3."

When Chucky went home, he was pooped from all the day's activities. He checked his answering machine while sitting down. His mother left a message, half in English, half in Armenian, but throughout her voice struggled over anguished tears. It continued to pain her intensely that Chucky didn't care about the Armenian Genocide. The world didn't care about the Genocide when it happened. And now, she said, almost a hundred years later, the United States - the country which had the second largest Armenian population in the world - still hadn't officially acknowledged the systematic massacre. Chucky mentally shrugged his shoulders as he turned on his big widescreen TV. She must still love him, otherwise his parents wouldn't continue supporting him financially the way they did. They were great parents, mom and pop, Chucky thought as he watched the first season DVD of "Lost" while eating leftover pizza from Domino's.

The next morning, Chucky woke up with a horrible stomach hangover. It was bad. His stomach was churning. He was sweating and breathing heavily, and his heart was beating fast. He almost couldn't take it. It was worse than usual. He rushed to the bathroom and took one of the worst, most painful, longest (protractedly so) dumps in recent memory.

He had to work at Best Buy earlier than usual, at 11:00 am. Maybe he should call in sick. No, he was a hard worker and they needed him. Besides, "Thunder Ax 4: The Exodus" for the PS3 was coming out today. Oh, that's right, Chucky thought to himself as he wiped his ass, that's why he wanted to work early today. Get the game before it sold out.

As he drove his H2 Hummer, he felt like shit. He really never felt this bad. At one point he almost pulled the military vehicle to the side to stop and rest. As bad as he felt, he had to get to work. There was no way he wasn't getting "Thunder Ax 4" today. Maybe a couple Whoppers and fries at Burger King would help. He went to the Burger King drive-thru and got his desired two Whopper combos. He scarfed

the burgers and fries down as he continued driving the H2 Hummer to work. He still felt like crap and decided a Double X SPASM might help pick him up.

Chucky went to the mall, and struggled to get to the “Energy Blast!” store. There standing behind the cash register was the same black cashier from the day before, smiling. It was a ridiculing smile in a way, once he saw Chucky coming towards him, but it wasn’t a hostile smile. It was just that Chucky was sweating and breathing heavily, still so god damn enormous a creature, and he looked like crap.

“What’re you ... what’re you smiling about?” Chucky asked through heavy breaths, sweat dripping off his face and onto the floor.

“Man, you don’t look good.” The cashier replied with a chuckle.

“You making fun of me?” Chucky shot back.

“No, no, don’t worry. What can I get you?”

“Gimme a Double X SPASM.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, give it to me.”

“Ok. Your life.”

“That’s fuckin’ right. No, you know what? Gimme two Double X SPASMs. Both for me, and I’m gonna have another two after work.” Chucky snapped aggressively.

“Look ...” the cashier said seriously, taking a pause and looking Chucky straight in the eyes. “I’m not trying to mess with you. I actually am concerned you might hurt yourself.”

“And I’m not trying to mess with you by coming here! Your store’s the only god damn place that sells the shit!”

“Don’t you think there’s a reason for that? The owner of this place is a money-grubbing prick. If he wasn’t, we wouldn’t be selling it, either. The SPASM company practically gives it to him for free.”

“What’s your name?”

“What?”

“What’s your name? I don’t wanna call you something else when I tell the owner what you think of him.”

“Man, what’s your problem?”

“Ok, don’t tell me your name. I can describe you to him. Just sell me the two Double X SPASMs.”

“No.”

“Whatta you mean ‘no’? Sell me the fucking drinks!”

“There’s no way I’m selling you those drinks. One, they’ll kill you. And two, you pissed me off.” The cashier said as he began putting some things away, then started for the back room. “I’m getting somebody else to help you.”

“Don’t you fucking walk away from me!” Chucky said in fury as he went to where there was a latch-door on the counter, and quickly raised it up.

Chucky then rampaged like an elephant towards the cashier. Once Chucky rushed him, the cashier tried to fight him off with punches and kicks, but to little effect. Chucky was too much, too much a mammoth of a man, too much a beast ... Chucky punched the cashier squarely in the face, making the poor customer service

representative stagger helplessly. With that opening, Chucky grabbed the black cashier and began to beat him relentlessly in the face. He then took the cashier's bloody head and started pounding it against the counter ... a shocked crowd had gathered around the fight ... In minutes, the black cashier was dead as his body slumped to the floor.

Justin Timberlake's song, "I Want to be Your Boy-Toy," was heard playing loudly throughout the mall.

Win

Heather Rae Nelson

I shuffled into the mall, hood up, sunglasses on and earphones blaring, the universal collegiate sign for fuck off. I did not really expect anyone to bother me until I was at least clocked in and on the floor. I had been on a chemistry bender for the last few days and was punch drunk on theorems. I was awake on sheer will and Rockstar energy drinks. I did not want to fucking be here. I did not want to be in heels for six hours, my boobs up to my chin and a smile shelaqued to my face as I measured some old lady's sagging rack. Jesus Christ, some of these women's tits looked like a deflated balloon animal. They wouldn't pop if you stepped on it. I walked into the store after a quick hit of pixie sticks, crack for kids who can't afford heroin, and was immediately assaulted by blindingly bright lights and slutty perfume. Welcome to Victoria's Secret, what can I help you find? I hate people, like humanity in general. Not a great combo when coupled with my sociopathic tendencies. How did I end up working in this whore haven, much less ascend to the heights of upper lower management astounded me. Cathay was working today, a sweet and moderately dim girl. Thanks god she was a born trophy wife and self aware enough to admit it. She would never find another legal job that would allow her to wear her current ensembles. She was quite a feat of mammary engineering and Maybelline. She mouthed the word "hangover" to Myra the stock lead. I flipped her off behind my back as I walked to the backroom. I put my fourth energy drink of the day into fridge and locked myself in the office. I logged in and checked the computer system to see how we were doing for the day. Well shit. We were down almost a thousand for the day and it was barely four o'clock. The mall was empty, no way we could make that up. A few more clicks to the payroll screen, and it seemed that neither could payroll. Someone's day just got a lot shorter. Fifteen minutes, a push up bra and some mascara later I was on the floor, jangling my keys like some retail leper. I was ready to diffuse emotional fires and irate old ladies. Fucking bitches. I hate my life. I comfort myself with an inner monologue that chastises almost every woman that walks into my store. What is it about this mall? Does it emit some pheromone that attracts damaged people? These women need to

stop raiding their teenage daughter's closet. You look like a twelve inch hot dog in an eight inch bun. I hear Jackie at cash wrap start to sound a bit desperate. She has a return. Hopefully it is just over her limit and she needs a quick key turn, but I know it's not. Because it is me. I am academically hungover, I will have to cut someone from payroll which means I will be here until ass o'clock making sure every fucking panty is in order. Sweet, there goes any shot in hell of a break. It's going to be some toxic panty set, I can almost smell the must in the air. The client does not fail me, A bleach blonde of indeterminate age and race awaits me. She looks fifty but could be a ridden hard and put away wet thirty five. I make a mental note to never sleep in my makeup again. Her nipples are being pryed in by that tank top and the store is obviously a bit chilly. Chipped fuschia talons tap irritatingly on the black formica and I had to shudder. A quick reboot of my smile and let it begin. "Ok Jackie, what do you need?" She gives me the look, awesome. The look means that there will be latex gloves and Purell involved, and not in a fun way. I peek inside the bag and see what might have once been a bra and panty set. I look at the client. She seems to be almost daring me to say something. Oh it is on bitch. Making sure there are some teeth in my smile I ask if she had a receipt for her return. "No, it was a gift." Of course it was, I crack my knuckles, enjoying her wince, and prepare for battle. "I am very sorry ma'am, but our new return policy clearly states that we are only able accept new, unwashed, unworn merchandise with the tags attached." I pick up the bra straps with a pen, unwilling to let it touch my hands. The tag twists away from it, writhing away from its abusive owner. 34B, girl in your dreams. Unless you think muffin top is a cute look. Which judging from your Daisy dukes, you do. I can't tell if the skin above your shorts is ass or really tragic back fat. "It was a gift" she repeats. Yeah, I know, I heard you the first time and I know you heard my answer. "I only washed it once and it fell apart." A quick and regrettable sniff informs me that it has indeed been only washed once. I know my next comment will blow her top, the red flag to the bull. I lower my voice so at least the inevitable call to HR will not say that I yelled at her. "I am very sorry but this merchandise is obviously used and I will not be able to return it." That did it. Her foundation cracked, the purple eyeshadow creased. For a terrifyingly fanciful moment I thought she was going to erupt into some skanky monster and rip my face off. "This is wrong. I just got this few days ago. I want to speak to your manager. I demand a full refund." She leaned over the black counter and started to get in my face. I would have gone toe to toe with her but I was afraid of her nasty feet. "I am the manager right now" I pulled out the bra again, there was no way I was going near those panties without a pair of tongs. I laid it out on my register. "Ma'am, this bra is obviously worn. The cup is wrinkled and is quite stained." There was a suspicious white stain on the corner. Jesus, if you are going to return it at least get him to try and aim. She looked at me, trying to find a crack. I stared her down with my thousand mile stare that deters slutty little girls and shop lifters alike. She grabbed her vile merchandise and stuffed it into her bag with a huff. "I want your customer service number and I will be talking to your manager about the customer service at this store." She flounced out, jiggling as she went. I went to the back to warn Veronika about the tirade coming her way and took a victory sip of my Rockstar. Round one to me.

Wells' Snipes

Jim Meirose

Wells held his hands up before his face.

These hands will one day be neatly folded in a closed casket deep underground, he thought. Then, picking up the wide black-handled knife, he went back to carving the bird; the big twenty pound turkey for today. The others waited out in the dining room. The murmur of voices and rustle of movement could be heard through the brown door.

The Gorla Snipe entered the kitchen where Wells sat and began laying down a bed of harsh branches. It intended to raise its young in this spot and laid a thick gnarled nest in place beneath the chair where Wells sat carving the turkey. A scrap of white meat fell to the ground and the Snipe gripped it in its long bill. It threw up its head and leaned back and opened its bill and the scrap of meat neatly flew into the air and went down its gut. It once more closed its bill and lowered its head, eyes half closed. Wells leaned his great bulk over.

Shoo, he said to the Snipe, waving his hand down.

Shoo!

The Snipe stayed put on the nest and its eyes slowly moved watching Wells' hand wave from side to side.

I do not have to move, it said.

Wells pushed back his chair with a loud scraping sound, rose and bent down toward the Snipe after plunging his carving knife into the flat white side of the turkey's breast.

You are not supposed to be able to talk, you are a mere bird.

The Snipe's eyebrows rose.

A mere bird? it replied. I am no mere bird, I am me. Like you. I could say you are a mere you, could I not? How would you feel?

Wells stepped back shuffling his loose brown shoes across the linoleum, his mouth gaping at the talking bird.

What kind of bird are you, said Wells.

A Gorla Snipe. Nesting.

Nesting here.

The turkey sat squat on the tabletop with the knife handle sticking out of its side. Before Wells could answer the Gorla Snipe spoke again.

What is that up on the table?

A turkey, said Wells, shuffling back.

Why do you have a dead bird on the table and why are you carving slices off its side?

The murmur of conversation rose and fell beyond the kitchen door as Wells answered.

Because it's Thanksgiving.

Out the window to the side of the room golden brown and red leaves fluttered on a thick-limbed tree.

And what is Thanksgiving, asked the Snipe, waving its head from side to side.

Wells laid his hand on the edge of the table and leaned forward and said Thanksgiving is the day that we have a great feast to give thanks for all we have been given.

Given by who?

The Gorla Snipe squinted and lowered its head waiting for the answer.

Given by God, of course.

Who is God?

The room stood squarely about them surrounded by the turning leaves around and the blue sky above and the deep dark damp black earth underneath stretching forever beyond the foundation of the house and the murmuring rose and fell past the kitchen door as Wells answered.

The one who made us, said Wells.

Satisfied, the Snipe nodded. Wells sat back down and finished carving the turkey and took a steaming plate of meat through the kitchen door to the dining room. The kitchen door closed behind him and the murmuring went on and the guests ate and left and days went on winding around and through Wells and the Snipe sat on its rough nest quietly until one day it raised its head. The nest sat in the living room and the Snipe blinked toward Wells trimming a tall deep green Christmas tree. As Wells trimmed the tree, from time to time he touched the tip of his nose and sniffed back loosely.

Someday this nose will protrude from a face in a casket buried deeply underground, he thought, as he moved among the boxes of silver and red balls littering the room and the long shining strings of garland wound about the floor. Wells walked around the tree stringing the garland and stepped aside stumbling each time he passed the nest of the Gorla Snipe. Finally as he stumbled he dropped a red ball that rolled out of sight under a couch and he stopped, looked down, and spoke to the Snipe.

You should not be here. You are in my way.

The Gorla Snipe waved its bill before it and spoke in a low voice.

I have a right to be here, I am nesting.

But you should not be here because there should not be such a thing as a talking bird in a nest in the middle of my living room, in my way as I try to trim my tree. Many guests will be here tomorrow to celebrate, and this tree must be done, and done right.

You trim your tree, I'll nest, said the bird. Its grey feathers spread out from its side. One thing is just as important as the other, it continued—but why are you doing this? Trees grow outside, not inside. Why have you brought a tree inside and why are you putting all those things on and around it? And you're not trimming, no you're not trimming, if you were trimming you'd be cutting down the branches of the tree and you aren't—and why will there be guests tomorrow and what is there to celebrate?

Wells stood open mouthed, the silver garland hung in his hands, his eyes trained on the Snipe.

Well—trimming is what we call decorating the tree, he said. And what's being celebrated tomorrow is Christmas Day.

The Gorla Snipe lowered its head and waved it from side to side, its black eyes

sparkling.

And what is Christmas day? it said.

The anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ.

And who is Jesus Christ?

The sparkling garland rustled in Wells' hands.

Jesus Christ is the son of God.

The Gorla Snipe wriggled more deeply into its nest and narrowed its eyes.

The son of God? Who is God—oh, I remember, I remember.

Wells watched the Snipe sway from side to side, look down, then up, once more wide eyed.

And why is it important to go to all this trouble to celebrate the birth of the son of God?

Wells leaned his weight over on one leg and let the garland fall loosely down his leg to the side.

Because God sent his son to earth to die for our sins.

The Gorla Snipe cocked its head, eyes half closed, thinking. Wells looked away and stepped over and continued winding the garland about the tree and stepping clumsily over the nest each time he went around.

And why should someone else have to die for your sins? asked the Gorla Snipe.

Wells wrestled with a tangle of garland in the higher branches of the tree and snapped off a quick answer.

Because he did—you ask too many questions.

The Snipe scowled darkly and looked down as Wells won his battle with the garland in the tree and the lights in the tree shone red over the garland and the balls went up one by one all silver red and green until finally, Wells stepped back. The tree was done.

The Snipe stepped off of the nest and stood squarely in Wells' way, blocking his view of the tree.

Look, said the Snipe, pointing its bill down to the nest.

A large pure white egg lay in the nest. The snipe winked and stepped over the nest and settled onto the egg.

You just laid that? asked Wells.

Yes, said the Snipe. Now I need to sit on it.

But where's your mate, said Wells, looking around. To have made an egg you must have a mate—

Never mind that, said the Snipe, in a low voice. That's been taken care of. That's all you need to know.

The snipe gently settled onto the nest and closed down its black eyes. Wells shrugged and cleaned up the room and put away all the boxes and bags scattered around and the next day his home was full of guests all complimenting him on the look of the tree, its shining and shimmering ornaments sparkling in the light. No one said anything about the Snipe underneath, nesting. Then Christmas day went and the tree came down and everything on it went back into their boxes and the tree disappeared and the days wound forward spiraling Wells and the Gorla Snipe out

past December into January and past late January into February. The clean white egg lay warm beneath the snipe day after day as a chill grew around the small square house and Wells stepped to the window and pulled back the grey curtain showing a barren dirt field stretching off into the distance, flecked with patches of snow, freezing under the weight of a grey streaked sky. The heater droned in the basement beneath the floorboards. Wells flexed his toes in the feet of his black slippers.

Someday these toes will point upward in tight shoes in a casket of oak deep under the ground, he thought, as he held the curtain aside.

Its cold in here, said the Snipe.

That's because it's February, said Wells, letting the curtain fall back over and turning to the room, leaning to one side, tugging at the fingers of his gloves. He stepped up to the Snipe.

And still you sit there, he said. In my way, as always.

Yes of course I sit here. I have to hatch my egg. But you—why do you just pace the floor all the days and pull back the curtains and look out the windows and go to sleep and wake up and go to work and come home and go to sleep and wake up and go to work again day after day. There is no turkey, there is no tree. What kind of days are these?

Wells turned fully to the Snipe and flexed a gloved hand.

There are no holidays or special occasions from Christmas and New Year's until late May.

The Snipe's head pulled back. Its eyes scowled.

Why not?

Wells looked around the empty room.

I don't know, said Wells. That's just how it is.

Isn't there anything to celebrate or be thankful for? asked the Snipe, raising its bill. Is it just a time to pace and be cold go to work and stare out the window once in a while?

Wells clasped his gloved hands together.

There are always things to celebrate and be thankful for, he said.

But then why are there no special days?

Wells looked down, then up past the ceiling, then squarely at the Snipe.

I suppose what God intends you to do, he said, is to treat each day as a special day on which you've been blessed by good health and good fortune and nothing bad happening.

The Snipe wriggled its way deeper into the nest.

So every day should be like Christmas day, or Thanksgiving day? So its really the most special time of the year because every day is a holiday—

—well, said Wells, after coughing slightly. Every day is not a holiday—

But every day is a special as a holiday. That's what God wants, right? said the Snipe, tilting its head.

Yes, said Wells, shuffling his boot on the wooden floor. The heater droned beneath them and outside past the walls around them the dirt field lay flecked with snowy patches and the wind silently moved the empty branches of the tree close by

the house tapping the branches lightly on the window-sill.

Well, said the Snipe. Soon there will be an extra special day for me.

Why?

My egg will soon hatch. I can feel it. Just look at it.

The Snipe stood up and stepped aside and the egg lay warm in a single ray of sun come through the cold air from the slight part in the window curtains. Wells left the room and the Snipe sat on the nest and as the days flowed past the egg began gently moving beneath the Snipe. Day after day Wells complained of the nest and Snipe being in the way, no matter where he went they were in the way, but he put up with it. And each day as he sat in the seat of his car on the way to work he felt the seat pushing up from below and thought Someday I will feel the casket pushing up from below, as I lie pressed full length into the deep white pleated padding.

And as Wells moved his legs using the pedals of the car he thought Someday these legs that move within these pants will be stretched out in dark trousers within a casket deep underground.

The Snipe just sat.

Suddenly the time of year came when buds pushed up from the damp ground and began appearing peppering the trees and the temperature came far up above freezing—and the Snipe awoke and jerked itself erect.

The egg had broken open beneath it with a sharp crack.

The Snipe rose and looked down and a small grey ball of fluff with black eyes and a short bill looked up.

Cheep, it said.

My child, said the Gorla Snipe.

Cheep.

The baby Snipe sat in the nest mouth open, hungry.

I must feed my young, said the Gorla Snipe.

I must feed my young.

The Gorla Snipe fed the young one seeds and large black bugs and bits of meat it found here and there in the stubbly weeds lying about the house and Wells ignored it all just going through the warming days to work and home and back again. Spring began turning to Summer and warmer rays of light came in the window and the young Snipe filled more of the nest every day until its sides were pressed tight against the sides of the nest. One morning as the Gorla Snipe stood feeding the baby Wells came in wearing brown shoes brown shirt and brown pants and began walking past the Snipes on his way out but the Gorla Snipe stepped in front of him.

Where are you going, said the Snipe. You are not dressed as you usually dress for work.

I am going to the Memorial Day parade, said Wells.

What is that, asked the Gorla Snipe.

The young Snipe also tilted its head attentively.

You stand on the curb of the road under trees full of new leaves with with lots of other people, and watch bands go by, and fire trucks, and floats. Some of the people wave flags.

And what is the significance of this parade, asked the Gorla Snipe. The young snipe's eyes widened.

It marks what's called Memorial day, a day on which we honor the memory of those who have fallen in the defense of our way of life.

What do you mean those who have fallen? asked the Snipe.

Those who have tripped and fallen?

Wells smiled.

No. Those who went and fought and died in wars against the oppressors who plot and scheme to take our freedom.

The Snipe glanced to its young and back again.

And what way of life? The way of life that says you must go to work every day?

Wells lightly kicked the woodwork by the side of the room.

No. The way of life that says we are free to do and say what we wish.

You mean you are free to not go to work if you please?

No, I must go to work because I need money—

Then you are not free, said the Gorla Snipe strongly, folding its wings before it. The young Snipe fluffed out its feathers and laid the look of its black eyes straight into Wells'. Wells stood motionless for a moment, then stepped from the wall and pushed out a hand.

But I am free to choose the manner of work that I do—and I may say anything I wish about whatever I wish. Money is different. Everybody always needs money—

Then no one is free, said the Gorla Snipe.

Wells stepped back.

I am not free, the Gorla Snipe went on. I must gather nuts and seeds and bugs each day for my young one here. See, I have my money and you have your money. We're not free. No one is free.

The Gorla Snipe paused and lowered its head before continuing.

Imagine, it said, what your God would think if he knew you thought you were free.

What do you mean, said Wells. What's God got to do with it—

Think about it, said the Snipe, darkly. If you break your God's laws, you will be punished. If you fail to go to work, you will starve. If I fail to feed my young, it will die. True freedom has consequences. Are you willing to face them head on, and really be free? I think not.

The air about and between them grew thick with silence until Wells suddenly spoke.

Well—think what you wish, said Wells, speaking lightly, slapping a white cap onto the top of his head. I need to get to the parade.

Wells sidestepped the Snipe and left abruptly, anxious to get to the parade where there'd be people and noise and color and movement. His cap lay back on his head at a rakish angle and his shoes squeaked across the loose wooden floor and the brown door tapped shut behind him. The Gorla Snipe shrugged and scratched at the ground. The baby Snipe suddenly hopped from the nest and stood by its parent. They were already of the same height. The Gorla Snipe stepped back and looked its young up and down.

You are as large as I am, it said.

I know, said the youngster.

And you speak.

That's true.

They nodded and winked at each other and the nest was pushed into the corner of the room where from that point on it lay unused. Two months later Wells came from the kitchen into the living room wearing red shoes a white shirt and blue pants. He rubbed his hand on his ear as he looked down watching the floor go by and he thought, someday this ear will be on the side of the head of a corpse in a casket deep in the ground—but his thoughts abruptly dropped away as he stopped to let the Snipes finish crisscrossing the room which is what they spent most of their time doing when they were not out gathering bugs and seeds.

And where are you going in that get-up, said the Gorla snipe to Wells. Its young one's eyes bugged out.

To the Fourth of July Parade, said Wells.

What's that?

That's where you go downtown and stand under the green trees with lots of other people and watch bands and fire trucks and floats go by—

That's just like the Memorial Day parade, said the older snipe.

No it's not, said Wells. It's—

What's a float, interrupted the young snipe, scratching at the floor with the long claws of its right foot.

Wells cleared his throat and rubbed his cheek.

A float is a big truck, he said, all fixed up to look festive and containing a symbol celebrating some aspect of the holiday for which the parade is being given.

And what are some of the aspects of this fourth of July parade that make it different from the Memorial Day parade, said the older Snipe, its grey feathers waving.

Yes, said the young one. What are the aspects?

Wells coughed lightly into one hand before speaking.

The Fourth of July parade, he said, celebrates the founding of our country many many years ago—

And how was the country founded, asked the young Snipe.

The Declaration of Independence was signed, freeing us from England, said Wells.

What is the Declaration of Independence.

A document that says we are free.

Rolling their eyes, the snipes looked at each other.

But, said the young Snipe, we have already said that no one is free.

Right, said the Gorla Snipe. Just because we write on a document that we are free that makes us free?

Well it made us free from England—

But you still need money—

As we need bugs and seeds—

England or no England—

Why have your kind this big hangup with freedom? asked the older Snipe.

Yes why this big hangup, intoned the younger.

The room spun as the Snipes went on and Wells looked from one to the other until the young one asked a final question.

And what symbol would be on a Fourth of July float?

Wells was grateful to finally be asked so easy a question.

Well—a float with a large eagle would be appropriate—

An eagle? said the Gorla Snipe.

Yes, said the young one. An eagle? Why an eagle?

Because the eagle is the symbol of our country, said Wells, abruptly. Listen—I'm sorry, but I must go now. Or I will miss the parade.

Lowering his head, Wells went around the Snipes carefully and went out the red white and blue draped door into the deep green yellow sunshine filled hot day.

The Snipes looked at each other.

Why would a Snipe not be the symbol of this country, said the young one.

Apparently they think it appropriate for some reason to choose a large aggressive bird of prey.

They looked at each other for the next several weeks until only the young one stood there. Wells came from the kitchen with a gold and green coat on and a sharp brimmed hat set sideways on his head. He felt around his teeth with his tongue and thought someday these teeth will be in the cold head of a corpse in a casket deep in the ground until he noticed it was surprisingly easier to cross from the kitchen through the living room to the front door because there was only one Snipe. Wells stopped.

Where's your parent, asked Wells.

My parent died.

That's too bad—

The bird saved Wells from having to find something comforting to say by asking him a question in a loud voice.

Where are you going in that get-up?

Wells stepped back and looked down at himself.

Get-up? What do you mean, get-up—

The funny hat and the funny colored coat. Where are you going?

I'm going to the Labor Day parade. Its a small parade, but its still a parade.

And what is labor day all about?

Wells cleared his throat before answering.

Its a day on which we celebrate the working man who's sweaty labor built this country.

Like the sweaty labor you do when you go to work every day?

Yes. Like that.

So you're celebrating yourself.

Wells bit his lip.

Yes—I suppose.

Never before had he thought of himself as being one of those who was building the country. So he stepped past the Snipe with a spring in his step and at the curb at the Labor Day parade he stood chest out wide eyed and proud among all the other

people. He had the Snipe to thank for this and it felt good standing chest out wide eyed and proud in the lowering sun in this the first week of September and here and there brown leaves fell too few to be noticed but still there; coming.

Unseen, the end was coming.

Time passed.

One day the young snipe pushed all the remnants of the nest in which it had been born into the corner of the kitchen up against the tall yellow garbage can with the flip-up lid.

The Snipe stood tall and straight, straighter than its parent had. Younger, stronger, it stepped toward the door of the kitchen on its way to the hallway leading down through the foyer to the front door.

Time to build my own nest now, it thought.

But not here.

Not here.

Someplace else.

Wells came in the kitchen wearing a white shirt and pants and with most of the hair of his head gone and with many wrinkles and blotches on his face and on his hands, years older than before.

What's wrong, he asked the Snipe.

Its time for me to go build my own nest.

Why can't you build a new nest here?

Wells himself was surprised that he had said this. The young snipe kicked out a leg.

But you used to be very critical of the space my parent took up with its nest. Why would you invite me to build my nest here? Because it would be the same space taken and the bother and the being in the way of you as before.

Wells stepped back, rubbing his face. Why had he said build the new nest here? Why had he said it? He struggled to know but the Snipe spoke up sharply.

But if I go it means the end, said the Snipe. Do you understand that?

What do you mean, it means the end—

The young Snipe went through the door of the kitchen and down the stairs through the hall into the foyer and went through the front door and left. Wells' eyes grew wide, he took a deep breath, threw out his arms and fell dead of a stroke. He was found by a neighbor and given a fine funeral with the space around the open casket piled high with flowers and with many crosses rosaries and bibles strewn around and the white lining of the casket gleamed like a halo all around him; and then he was put in the ground in the casket containing hands neatly folded and a nose on the face of a corpse and toes inside of tight burial shoes and a rear end pressing down in the padding of the casket and legs stretched out in black burial trousers and two ears on the sides of the cold head of a corpse and teeth in the cold mouth closed forever never to talk again eat again or argue or complain again. The Snipe ascended to the next house and kitchen. It was not the Gorla Snipe, it was similar, but different—but it still began laying down its bed of harsh branches beneath a chair where a man sat at a table looking deeply into his hands.

Ten days from Janett's imprisonment, Rick dropped their daughter off at the Desonier house. Little Nell loved playing with Josh and Aubrey, especially in that ritzy neighborhood. As Rick passed the security checkpoint, he remembered the first time he called in a restraining order on his ex-wife. Five such calls surfaced before Rick gained enough visible bruises to prove his abusive wife guilty. Judges in this country show partiality, make no mistake. Regardless, ten days ago the consequences caught up with her.

At a smooth forty-five miles per hour, Rick drove the quick six blocks. Turning up the steep driveway, he turned off the Ford Escort and jacked the parking break as high as it would go. Somewhere behind the backyard tree line an amber sun set. He walked toward the blue front door of that white townhouse his father built him. Rick learned to drive that year. Still drives that same car, in fact.

Sticking the key in the handle, he turned the knob and pushed lightly, for the door swung open with ease, at least in Rick's history.

It didn't budge.

He pushed again, this time hard, and still the door stayed put. Pulling out his key ring once more, he inserted the key again, now into the deadbolt hoping it worked.

It did.

The door swung open, sighing relief as it swung. "That's odd," he thought. As he stepped across the threshold, a slight twinge of pain rushed into his right cheekbone and a heart race with it. "Janett's in the asylum..." he thought, "it's ok."

She really charmed the fellas in her own right. Perhaps too sexual at times, she none the less enchanted Rick, and Rick had natural resistance to enchantments. That one quality, however, could never outweigh the fights, rather, the massacres where she berated him with pots, pans, the iron, words, and anything blunt within her reach.

Just to assure himself, he walked past the staircase, into the den, around the corner, through the living room, dining room, kitchen, on past the study, and back into the foyer among the front door. "Empty house," he said, his two words reverberating through the stagnant air.

Like a panting dog, Rick licked his lips thirsty for that bergamot-spiced black tea his friends mocked him for loving so much, especially Michael Desonier. Back through the study, under the archway of the dining room, and straight to the kitchen he went, grabbing a pot handle from the closest counter in a walk-by spin.

Water in, burner on, and boiling came the message to his hands. Then, with a reach slow as a hidden thief, he opened the topmost cabinet. *Earl Grey* read the title in classic letters beneath the *Twinnings* lable. "Just like the queen drinks," Rick thought, ripping off the packaging of four consecutive tea bags. He tossed them lackadaisically into the pot. Two landed with belays over the side, strings dangling for support, using their labels as counter-weights.

Step by step he nudged into the living room as the fatigue set in. Today might never end, but lucky for Rick, he owned a T.V.

Turning on the vacuum tube, he flipped through the channels two full cycles. Assured nothing interesting could come over the airwaves, he landed on local news. The sound pulsed through the house.

“Breaking news!” came the cry of the reporter. “The Franklin Park Assylum confirmed a breakout this morning of three high-security prisoners. A guard and two inmates died in the breach. Authorities detained two of these women only house ago, yet the third remains on the loose.”

Before the reporter had a chance to read off the name, Rick said, “Janett.”

A blonde hair-do topped the mug on the screen “Her hair moose, that’s the smell,” he thought. “Only Janett would insist on having her hair moose in prison, and get it.” He sniffed the air, catching a tiny whiff of that smell. The same twinge of pain rushed into his right cheekbone and a heart race with it. Not only this, but the distinct sounds of stiletto heels clicking down the ancient stair filled the room. He wanted to move, wanted to run, wanted to take his daughter from the Desonier house and flee the continent, but there he sat, rooted in fear.

“Ricky, is that you?” said she.

Even his throat caught the proper response. He choked out a, “yeah.”

“I’m out early, baby,” she said, turning the corner. He kept his back to her, eyes searching for a weapon, something, anything. “You didn’t write.”

“You didn’t obey the five restraints, the seven judges, or the walls you just broke out of. I think not-writing’s a fair trade at least.” He kept his back turned. Alas, his empty mug!

“Course it’s not! We both know you were just playin’ hard to get.”

“No, I was playing witness protection agency.” In a flash, he wheeled around throwing the mug right at her face. She ducked. Running into the kitchen he hoped to grab something substantial.

“Let’s talk this out, baby! I need you!” She chased after him.

“You need help!” he cried. By the time he grabbed the handle on the knife drawer, she grabbed the handle on the tea pot.

Had he not fell into that brush fire back in the nineties, he wouldn’t have known how hard to flinch. Flinching well didn’t matter. A gallon of boiling water seared his every inch. He bellowed in pain.

“Now let’s talk,” she replied. “Why didn’t you call? Why didn’t you write?”

He groaned.

“What?”

No response. Richard Kellogg sat slouching against a column of metal cabinet handles. It might have been uncomfortable, but comfort doesn’t matter in the world of second-degree burns.

“Sweetheart, lemme help you.” She grabbed a hold of his heels and started dragging him toward the basement stairs. Several corners and furniture legs hit his head as they went on some pre-determined route below this hardwood floor.

When they arrived at the stairs, she pushed and he rolled. And swerved. And bounced. And slid down the rest of the way. The carpet on the steps cushioned the ride, but ‘pleasant’ does not fit what happened. She locked the door behind herself, and walked down an intentional step-by-step until she reached his tangled limbs.

By this time, Rick rediscovered his mouth muscles. They seemed to be the only thing working. “Kill me. Just leave Nell alone.”

She stood over him. “Baby, I don’t wanna kill you – I miss you too much for that. I’ve missed you at night.”

“You can’t have me. We’re done.” He pushed a bit with his hands. Something failed. One of the wrists sprained in the fall, he knew not which.

“I’ll have you here,” she said, fire in her eyes. Rick tried to get up, she pushed him down with her heel, kicked him in the head, and went straight to the big red toolbox in the corner of the half-done basement. Grabbing duct tape and zip ties, she walked back over to her ex. “Come here.” He jerked his hand away, and pushed again to get up, this time getting to his knee. She backhanded him, hard. He spit out blood, feeling real pain to match the phantoms from earlier.

In a tug, she had him over to the mini-bar. One tie around one limb, another on another, and the duct tape for the rest. Now he lay sprawled, helpless as a man before the woman of his faded childhood dreams. There she stood, pleased with all she had accomplished.

“Do you love me?” she asked.

“Can you love?” he replied.

“Yes. I’ll love you a long time.” She kicked off her heels, and straddled him as if to break a mustang. He squirmed to no avail. He kicked fruitlessly. Finally, he just focused all his thoughts on the most reviling, unattractive things he could.

His body didn’t respond. It knew its old partner, and she knew it. By the time she started removing her clothes, he started to cry. Then he wept.

A knock came to the door. “Hullo?” came the burly sound of Mike Desonier. “Anyone down there?”

She started yanking at his pants. Drawing breath in with all his might, as if to catch it blowing away, he yelled, “I’m here! She’s here, Mike! Help me! God in Heaven, help!”

Mikael pounded on the door. Janett didn’t listen. She got his pants down to his ankles where they caught on his shoes. Swearing under her breath, she ripped off both shoes, the pants, and went for his boxers.

With a crash, light poured out from upstairs. “HOLY –” yelled Mikael as he ran down the stairs, Nell right after him.

“What is it, Mr. Desonier?” Little Nell asked.

He decided in a moment for his friend over his friend’s daughter. Jumping Janett, he didn’t stop to untie Rick. They sprawled across the floor, and she head butted him. Adrenaline surging, he reeled back and punched her in the throat. She grasped both hands around her own neck, and her face started turning blue.

“Mike, get Nell outta here!” Rick screamed.

Mike ran to the girl whose eyes darted from her half-naked, tied-up father over to her unclothed, choking mother, and back again. She locked into that endless loop of eye-oscillation as Michael ran her up the stairs over his shoulder.

Within the hour the cops were there, pulling out the nearly-dead ex-wife of Richard Kellogg.

Within the hour, Richard Kellogg tried pulling out the images from his daughter’s mind.

Requiem for Salvatore

Mary Chandler

Warm water rushes over Greg's knuckles to the tips of his bloodstained fingers. As he watches, the water turns pink, then clear. A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. He soaps his nail brush and sinks the bristles beneath his dirt-encrusted nails, careful to keep his hands close to the drain. *Good*, he thinks as he checks the white tiled floor, *no telltale splatters*. Slowly, deliberately, he dries his hands before running a Q-tip around his cuticles. With another towel, he wipes the sink. Not one water spot remains.

Greg removes his clothes, places them in a neat pile beside the toilet, and steps into the shower. *Call the shots. Stay in control*, he tells himself. Water splashes down his back. His skin tingles. "Out, out, damned spot," he says, laughing. Over and over again he lathers, scrubs, rinses—until the water turns cold.

Greg dries himself, combs his mustache, and smoothes his eyebrows with a dab of Vaseline. He fluffs his damp, curly hair. Thirty years old and no receding hairline.

"We did it again," he tells the hazel eyes staring at him from the mirror. His perfect teeth smile back at him.

Gathering up the dirty laundry, Greg dumps it into the washer. Cold water works best. His mother taught him that before she ran off, the bitch. He checks his watch. Time for two wash cycles. That should do it.

"Greg! Greg!" his parrot squawks from the living room.

"Coming, Salvatore." Greg unlatches the cage door. "Didn't eat much, did you? Feeling any better?"

Salvatore cocks his head and perches on Greg's outstretched arm.

"Nice bird, good bird," coaches Greg, stroking the bird's yellow and green crest.

"Nice bird, good bird," repeats Salvatore.

A familiar pain tugs at Greg's guts. His mouth twists, and he closes his eyes. In the dark shadows, he sees his father.

"Damn birds! No seven-year-old kid of mine is gonna waste his life raising these damn messy pigeons!" His father scoops up Tony and twists his neck.

"No!" Greg screams, lunging at his dad.

Too late. Greg's father smiles and snaps off the tiny head. Tony's bones crunch. Blood oozes and drips onto the floor. His father flings Tony against the wall and grabs Isabelle.

"No!" Greg claws at his father's fingers. Kicks him. Bites his arm.

"Shut up!"

The metal toe guard of his father's boot slams into Greg's stomach. His head hits the concrete floor.

When Greg finally wakes up, the shed is pitch black. His shirt feels warm, sticky. He touches something familiar, but this time the feathers are matted together. The smell of blood fills his nostrils. Struggling to get up, he feels along the wall for the light switch. Tony, Isabelle, Giovanni, Pasquale, and Anna—all dead. Greg

feels dizzy, nauseated, like he's going to throw up. He gathers up the dead birds. Five. His eyes widen. Where's Dominick?

"Dominick!" he yells. "Dominick!"

Looking up, he sees his favorite pigeon impaled on a rusty nail beneath the boarded-up window.

Salvatore nuzzles Greg's cheek and picks at a strand of his hair.

"Wouldn't even let me bury my birds, Salvatore," Greg says. "Just tossed them out with the trash." A deep moan rises from his gut and pierces the air. "*SONO-FABITCH!*" he screams.

Salvatore slowly shuffles to his red ladder, perching on the first rung. "Kill him," he squawks.

"What?"

Squawk. "Nice bird. Good bird," Salvatore answers.

Greg checks his watch again. "Almost 9:00 p.m., Salvatore. Time to re-run the laundry. Let's put you to bed. That's a good boy."

"Good boy," Salvatore echoes, nibbling the clapper of a shiny gold bell attached to his ladder outside the cage.

"OK. You win. No bed." Greg kneels beside the bird. "Kiss Daddy."

The bird's beak meets Greg's lips.

Greg cuddles Salvatore. "Have fun. See you in two or three hours, if I'm lucky."

Outside, in his silver BMW, Greg sets his stopwatch and zooms down the freeway. He's at the boardwalk in less than an hour. Ludacris blasts from his stereo. Greg raps his knuckles against the steering wheel and turns up the volume.

Two skinny blondes wave, smile. "Bottle blondes," he mutters. He flips on the inside lights and lets them get close enough to admire his tan before he peels out.

"Screw you!" one of them shouts.

At Rollickin' Randy's, his luck doesn't change.

"God," Greg says, guzzling his Miller's draft, his eyes stalking the place, "where is everybody?"

"Everybody's me and you, pal," the stocky bartender replies, running his hand across his bald head, "unless you're fixin' to count Big Doris. She's in the john."

A few solitary beers and a couple of hours later, a hooker old enough to be Greg's mother sidles through the oak door, her black spiked heels clicking on the wooden floorboards. She wraps herself around him like a silk stocking.

He shakes his head. "I'm outta here."

Driving down the freeway, he notices the flashers and spots a parked red Corvette. He slows. Stops.

The woman inside rolls down the window.

"Trouble?" he asks.

"Hi," the attractive woman says, flicking her chestnut hair out of her eyes. "Guess I didn't notice the lighted fuel indicator." She pats the dash. "Charlie here just sputtered and died. Got a cell phone?"

"Not me."

"Spare gas?"

"Nope. Afraid you're out of luck, unless..." He pauses. Waits.

"Unless what?"

"Hop in," he says, opening the door. "I'll drop you off at a gas station. It's about ten miles up the road. By the way, the name's Greg."

Greg watches her eyes shift from him to her fuel gauge and back again. She hesitates, but only for a moment.

"Okay. Thanks. I'm DeDe."

That's right, DeDe, he thinks. Settle that gorgeous ass of yours into my leather seat. Good. Now, cross those long, slender legs s-l-o-w-l-y. He wipes one sweaty hand on his pants, then the other, swallows, and clears his throat.

"You live in Seattle, DeDe?"

"Not for long." She twists her wedding ring.

"Home problems?"

"Yeah." She reaches inside her purse for a tissue and dabs her eyes.

Greg shakes his head. "He's gotta be nuts. Most guys would kill to have a gorgeous wife like you." When their eyes connect, he smiles.

"You don't get it. Richard doesn't want a wife; he wants a business partner."

Unspoken words hang in the air. Greg waits.

She smoothes her shiny black mini-dress and pats her stomach. "He won't want the baby, either."

"You didn't tell him?"

DeDe shakes her head. "I've been thinking about an abortion."

Greg shudders. "You'd *kill* your own *baby*?"

"Where have *you* been? This *is* the new millennium, you know." She sighs and stares at her stomach. "Besides, at this stage you could hardly call it a baby."

His mother's voice pounds in his ears. "*Paid 500 bucks, and you still didn't die!*" she screams. "*Goddamn kid. Nothin' but trouble.*" He manages to keep his voice calm, controlled. "It's a baby at *any* stage, DeDe."

"Look, I don't want to talk about it, OK?" Her voice softens. "Even birds kill their young, but not soon enough. *They* wait until after the eggs hatch."

Damn! He glares at her. Why did she have to say that? Greg feels his stomach churning. Perspiration forms on his forehead. The car swerves.

"What the...?"

"Sorry," Greg mutters. He blinks and drums the steering wheel. "Mind if I play some music?"

"Make it relaxing," DeDe says, closing her dark brown eyes. "I'm exhausted."

Greg watches. DeDe's head droops. Her soft hair hugs her shoulders, and those full breasts rise and fall, almost in rhythm with the music. Saliva collects in his mouth. He swallows—hard. *Stay calm, stay in C-O-N-T-R-O-L,* he tells himself.

He takes a long detour, circling the last two filling stations until the lights blink off. "Wake up, DeDe, he says, tapping her shoulder. "We've got problems." He points to the dark Texaco station.

"What time...?"

"Almost two."

Tears well up in her eyes. "How am I going to get help tonight?"

His heart pounds. “Look, DeDe,” he says in his kindest, most sensitive voice, “why not stay at my place until morning? I’ve got a futon, a spare room, and an extra blanket.”

“Well, I don’t know...”

He feels her eyes checking him out. He grins. “Well?”

She laughs. “Oh, why not?”

“Great!”

Greg pulls the BMW inside the garage, cuts the engine, and shuts the garage door. “C’mon in,” he says.

Squawk! DeDe jumps as Salvatore settles on Greg’s arm.

“Salvatore,” Greg says. “He’s friendly.”

DeDe holds out the silver disk at the end of her necklace. “Want to play?” she asks.

The bird opens his beak, but shuts it again.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Greg says. “He doesn’t look too playful tonight.”

Later, when he is sure DeDe is asleep, Greg flips all the other lights on. Then he latches and covers Salvatore’s cage, goes into the laundry room, and starts up the dryer.

In his bedroom, he slides his scrapbook out from beneath his folded underwear and scans the newspaper clippings. ALBUQUERQUE: Elderly transient found dead near railroad tracks. Multiple stab wounds. PHOENIX: Willie Grogan, street person, brutally murdered. SALT LAKE CITY: Man found stabbed to death in parking lot.

“Drunken, no good scum, just like my father,” he mutters. Greg removes his special hunting knife from the closet, gently runs his finger along the razor-sharp blade, and smiles. “SEATTLE: DeDe, baby killer!” He jabs the knife through the middle of the blank pages.

Baby, baby, baby, the voice inside echoes. Greg covers his ears, but only for a moment. “The hell with it,” he says, tucking the knife back in its sheath. “That baby’s dead, anyway. The beautiful bitch said so herself. Only now *I’m* saying when.” His skin tingles with excitement.

Later, in bed, he stares at the forest scene he painted when he moved in two months ago. Chickadees, robins, goldfinches, canaries cover the walls—nesting, perching, flying. He hears their songs. He smirks and opens his bedroom door so that DeDe can hear them, too.

Early the next morning, a muffled sob awakens him. Rushing into the living room, Greg finds DeDe sitting on the floor, cradling his dead Salvatore in her lap.

“What the hell did you do to my bird?” Greg screams. He feels the blood rushing to his face and clenches his fists to keep from yanking her up by the hair.

“Hold on, Greg. When I uncovered him, I found him toppled over in his cage. Look how swollen he is. Poor bird. Poor, poor bird.” She strokes his bright feathers. “Such a beautiful bird,” she coos. “Here, Greg.”

Taking the stiff parrot, Greg holds him close. For the first time since he was seven, tears stream down his face.

“I’m so sorry,” DeDe says, touching his arm. “When you’re ready, I’ll help you bury him out back.”

An immaculate linen tablecloth becomes Salvatore’s shroud. Greg wraps his

bird tightly and carries him outside.

“Please,” he says, handing Salvatore to DeDe, “hold him while I dig.”

The shovel feels heavy in his hands. Again and again he plunges it into the ground. Perspiration drips down his face. Resting his foot on the edge of the shovel, he glances over at DeDe. Her head is bowed, like the Madonna. As she gently rocks Salvatore back and forth in her arms, she sings a lullaby.

Later, they cut yellow sunflowers, cover the small grave, and walk slowly toward the house.

“Greg,” DeDe says, “I’ve made a decision.”

“You’re having the baby.”

“How did you know?” she asks, coming much too close to the other fresh grave.

“Intuition.”

Their eyes meet. Greg feels the sweat forming on his forehead, the excitement in his gut.

“I’ve made a decision, too, DeDe.” He thrusts his hands into his pockets. “Get the hell out of here! NOW!”

a way out— Steve Calamars

Tommy walked out the backdoor of his father’s home. It was his eighteenth birthday and Tommy was terrified. He walked across the backyard to the tool-shed and palmed the combination lock. He manipulated the numbers of the combination and entered his father’s birth year, 1 – 9 – 6 – 3. The lock popped and Tommy opened the door to the tool-shed.

He entered and walked passed the lawnmower. He walked passed the shovels, rakes, brooms, weed-wackers and leaf-blowers. Tommy walked up to a small workbench and found the garden sheers that he was after. He picked up the sheers and figured he had a way out—

As far back as he could remember, his father had been counting the days until his eighteenth birthday. Which meant Tommy had been counting the days until his eighteenth birthday, as well. Upon turning eighteen, his father had always told him, “It will be time for you to man up, no more bein’ a boy sleepen’ late and goofen’ off, you’ll have to act like a man.”

To act like a man meant work, a wife, a house, some kids and a dog. It would be Tommy who would be responsible for all of these things, he was the man. He was terrified.

Tommy stood in his father’s tool-shed, uncertain that he could provide such things. He knew that his uncertainty was not appropriate for a man, so he had set himself to finding a way out. Tommy held the garden sheers and knew he had found a way.

He dropped his blue-jeans and pulled down his boxers. Tommy extended his *manhood* with his left hand and snipped it off with the garden sheers in his right. He began to lose blood rapidly and used a dirty rag to apply pressure to the wound. He made it halfway across the backyard, jeans still down around his ankles, and passed out . . .

Tommy is now Tammy. She has a phat ass, 24inch waist, silicone tits, collagen lips and blonde extensions. She lives in a penthouse in downtown Houston. She is married to Marcus Evans, a handsome and very wealthy investment banker from Albuquerque.

She shops in high-end establishments and eats at only the most exclusive restaurants.

She doesn't drive, but has a driver and is known to wear fur coats in the summer. She is cultured and well traveled.

Tammy has never worked a day in her life—

Roll Up the Rim Edgar Bee

“One large regular with two milks on the side,” I ordered.

I left the counter with my coffee and two milks, and a small slip of paper saying I owed a dollar fifty-four with tax and got in line for the cashier. There was a long lineup, but that was no problem with me. I was in no hurry. I had my eyes on the cashier, and I wondered, not for the first time, if I could have a chance with her. She was affectionate enough with me, but then not anymore than she was with many of the male students.

I imagined myself nestling close to her and hugging, and felt a melting inside, like I was about to pour out of my skin.

Then the last student ahead of me was walking away and the cashier was smiling at me and reaching for my slip of paper.

“Hi there, how are you today,” she asked sweetly.

“Fine,” I said and tried to think of something smart to add to that, but came up empty.

“Are you going to win the car?” I heard her say.

“Eh?”

“Win the car,” she repeated, pointing at my coffee cup.

I looked down at the cup.

“Ah, yes,” I finally acknowledged. It was the roll-up-the-rim contest at Tim Horton's, and you could win all sorts of prizes, mostly free coffees and doughnuts, but also much bigger prizes, including a car.

“Will you come for a drive with me if I win?” I asked.
“You bet.”

“Then I'll try all I can.”

She laughed. “A dollar fifty-four.”

“Oh yes, I'm sorry,” I said, suddenly energizing, putting my coffee down and reaching in my pocket for my money.

“It's okay,” she said smiling. “Take your time.”

I handed her a five. She gave me back my change and I dropped the whole forty six cents in small change into a small cup for tips she had by her cash register, instead of the twenty-one cents I normally left, trying to impress her all I could. She thanked me and I moved away, searching my mind for a smart parting comment and coming up empty.

I headed for the employee lunchroom. I'm a cleaner in the McLennan-Redpath Library at McGill University. She works in the cafeteria in Redpath, franchised by Tim Horton's. I've been trying to make time with her for weeks, since I first saw her. I don't even know her name yet, or if she's even available or not. I've come up with

the most clever things to say to her, but I'm shy, and things get stuck in my throat a lot. But I was more pleased with my performance today than I normally was. That tidbit about trying my hardest to win if she'd come for a drive with me if I did was the sort of flirting that usually got stuck in my throat."

I was back in line the next day, with another coffee and my small slip of paper, and my eyes fixed on my dream cashier again. She was a winsome looking brunette, with eyes that were dark but clear, a nose short and straight, small ears from which thin, attractive earrings dangled weightlessly, and lips that were naturally moist and bright, all set attractively in a well rounded oval contour, beautifully accentuated by the way her dark hair was combed upward and tucked under a black cap that was part of the Tim Horton uniform. But it was her trim and shapely figure that really had me drooling over her.

"No luck with winning the car yesterday?" her voice purred inside my head.

"No," I answered, searching my mind again for something smart to say and coming up empty.

"Too bad," she said, grinning and flushing slightly. "I'd been looking forward to that drive you promised me."

I came close to pouring out of my skin again.

"Don't give up yet," I muttered, lifting my cup. "I'm still at it."

"Good luck."

"If Tim Horton's really wanted this promotion to be a success, they should have included your heart on there, as top prize," I heard myself say. "I'd be investing all my paychecks into rolling up rims if it was."

"You don't have to roll up any more rims if you really mean that," she said. "You're a winner already."

That melting again inside of me.

And then I was returning to reality, moving up before her, as the student immediately in front of me walked away with his coffee and doughnut. "Hi, how are you today?" she wanted to know, reaching for my small slip of paper. "No luck at winning the car yesterday?"

"No," I said.

"That's too bad; I'd been looking forward to that drive you promised me," she said.

"Don't give up yet," I muttered, lifting my cup. "I'm still at it."

"Good luck."

I opened my mouth to go on with my next line, but I hesitated. I was sure she must have someone younger and a lot more attractive than I in her life already, and just liked to joke around with older guys. I was going to look foolish for imagining I might have a chance with her, when she'd just been kidding with me and figured I was doing the same. And then the moment had passed. She had handed me my change and was greeting the next one after me.

I trudged away hating myself for being so shy. But then maybe it had been better that way. She was probably just joking with me, with someone in her life already, and totally unsuspecting about this older guy trying to make time with her.

Oh well, he would be back, and try again, I was sure.

The Lesson

Brian Duggan

There were many reasons to dislike Richard Ellison. He was spoiled rotten, extremely rude, got the biggest allowance on the block and was the person responsible for my untimely death. Yes, I said death, but don't call me a liar just yet. What had started out as the first day at the beach that summer ended up with my limp body being squeezed in the middle of a circle of curious spectators. The brief passage back from what seemed a predestined reunion to my unpleasant encounter with that swim-suited throng lasted just minutes, but it launched me on a lifelong search to find the pieces that I left in a place separating the living and the dead.

That drowning exhibition questioned my cherished beliefs, which in a twelve-year-old are not too far on their way to being carved on rock. For the time being let's forget I mentioned that word, I really don't like rocks. Getting back to beliefs, I wanted new ones after my reunion and I stumbled upon Abraham Maslow's article, *A Theory of Human Motivation*. I was interested in all the pieces that form an individual and Abraham seemed to know what they were. His term, "self-actualization" implies the attainment of one's basic physiological needs; having your own inner security, sharing love, belonging to another, and of course creating your own self-esteem. I found self-actualization is very difficult when you're missing pieces. You should pay close attention to this story because it seemed to me back then that time passed slowly, but now looking back I realize my life raced by all too quickly. I don't know why that happened or if it's even true. Could it be just another missing piece? The best place to start is to join those curious spectators whose faces are stenciled into memory, remember we are talking about my death and that's personal.

The summer sky was a brilliant blue with a few scattered clouds that would whisk away in irregular shapes and then reform in the high winds that fanned ripples across Long Island Sound. I can feel those goose pimples rising on my small, tanned chest. I was inside a boy then, but I lost him that day. These were carefree summer days enhanced by personal freedom; I swam where I wanted. Boys then were mystical, physical and adventurous. They weren't held captive by Dolby-encoded, attention-grabbing 3-D graphics. We were enthralled by sleek, glistening grey forms arching above the waves, diving deep and reappearing far away. Those visitors had no schoolbooks or pockets burdened with Pez dispensers, rabbit feet or bulky jack-knives. We transformed ourselves into porpoises leaving the world above to glide over the wave-formed ridges of sand before they glistened in the sun. Richard and I had learned to hold our breath and with open eyes leave the surface to disperse crabs.

Back then boys did their thing; collected scars, chipped teeth, split lips, and taught each how to spit and whistle. Girls did the meaningless things that we never really cared about. There were no helmets when you rode your bike, just wind that brought tears. We began seeing our world from a rubber-wheeled horse and later heard a car engine from

resonating baseball cards fastened with clothespins. We had hair cropped into a thick one-quarter inch mat. In those days there were no cylindrical buoys a mere ten feet offshore with their restrictive, prohibiting red lettering to interfere with being a

boy. We brought glass soda bottles, played touch football, swam with our dogs, flew kites, kicked sand, and best of all dove out to deeper water to escape the watchful eyes of muscled lifeguards and vigilant mothers. It was a different time; we were part of nature, not an armored and defensive observer fearing injury on a bicycle or a long swim. Risk-taking was viewed as a good teacher and offered big rewards to small boys needing to impress bigger ones.

I never thought that playing catch using a tennis ball on that sandbar would change my core beliefs, but that is where they began to unravel. One's certain, unshakable believe in one's own immortality at the tender age of twelve, that has to be the biggest myth of childhood; Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the gods past and present with their legions of vexed devotees all pale in comparison. Playing catch with Richard wasn't fun; as usual he was making the tennis ball unattainable. I'm certain now that the idea in his twisted mind was to take me further and further from the safety of the sandbar to the shady waters harboring swift currents as the tide withdrew. Why am I certain, because he didn't stay to watch my beach drama unfold and he only looked me in the eyes once after that and it was years later.

I told myself two could play this game, so I was busy speeding the ball on its way. Trust Richard to complain," Knock it off, you can't throw hard and in my direction at the same time." The wet tennis ball whizzed past my ear to Richard's freckled face. I remember seeing it in slow motion headed right for the space between startled eyes. Those eyes got bigger and bigger, but he never flinched. Richard was raising his left hand in front of a head anchored in defiance. The ball stung his palm and bounced to his lower lip. When he reached to pick it up, I could see the start of tears but he fought them back.

Richard lofted the ball softly in my direction. I jumped up but it passed over my outstretched fingertips to splash down several feet from the sandbar. I glanced back to see Richard dive away toward the shore. I dug my feet into the sandy bottom, my toes piercing sand. I was in the best dolphin dive of my entire life with my hands out front and my palms together cutting cleanly through the water. The temperature was going from cool to cold and I realized that winter currents had been chiseling the sandbar gliding beneath me exposing a collage of assorted stones. A blue crab was on his toes waving pinchers from seaweed-covered rocks. My glide ended and I prepared to touch down and propel myself into the next ascending arc. Then the lesson of my life began.

I sank feet-first into deeper, colder water watching the tennis ball above grow smaller as it floated away. From my crouching position on the bottom I leaped to the sky waiting to open my mouth after I broke through saltwater to welcoming day, but my upward momentum ended quickly, welcoming light was two feet above my outstretched hands. I sank slowly without the reassuring supply of air that usually accompanies a descending porpoise. I scrapped a large rock and mounted a slippery, mussel-coated platform slicing my right foot. I glanced down to see thin green ribbons streaming away. I had a surge of energy and a heightened awareness unlike any I had experienced before. Consciousness had fused pressure on my eardrums, light filtering from above and a resolute silence. One sound did emerge and it was steadily mounting in intensity, the

purest I had ever heard. It was my beating heart. Colors were now a vivid panorama of blue water, grey sand and green seaweed. My legs pressed into the sharp mussels and with adrenalin pumping, I felt the water break over my head. I was thankful for warm air. I scanned the beach; it was an animated postcard, rich in color and sound. The fading cry of a seagull trailed off as I began dropping to the safety of my rock.

I folded my legs while my arms fanned the sea keeping me over my safe haven. That one rock on the down slope of a vanishing sandbar was my only way back to sky and life. The bottom was sloping away into deep water on my right. The beach must be to my left. All I needed was to get a full set of lungs and I'd dive again towards the beach. I saw it

unfold in my mind's eye, one dive would take me to shore and another to where on tiptoes my head would break the surface. Two more dives and I'd be in shallow, warmer water near the noise of splashing children and the chatter of women in beach chairs. A sprint on warm sand would bring a white terrycloth towel, a mother's smiling face and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich encased in wax paper. I could already taste it.

My left foot dug into the mussels and my big toe felt a sharp edge. The stab of pain didn't bother me as much as the frightening discovery that my rock was tumbling away. I

might never again break the surface or fill my lungs with air. I looked and saw the rock sliding farther down the slope. The surface was tantalizingly close to my outstretched

fingers. The only sound I heard was the drumming of a heart beating faster to spread what oxygen remained from worthless limbs to a resourceful brain. My legs were becoming rubber and my arms were heavier than they should be. I was slipping further down while my legs floundered in a losing effort to keep me afloat, and worst of all there was no air left in my lungs. I was a weight dropping to a floor of rippled sand. My eyes felt like they were being pushed out of my head in time to a drumming heart banging in my ears. I tasted the weak metallic-tinged aroma that ushers in a bloody nose. It was

hemoglobin racing out to bond with life-giving oxygen and it rode a wave of panic. My hands grasped a contorted face. My fingertips told me my eyes were truly throbbing. My body told me to breathe but I wouldn't do it. I knew if I let myself gulp salt water I would die. I wasn't going to frantically fight fate only to settle to the bottom to be an unknown something traveling to wherever we go when life ends. My heart was about to explode, and I so I did it. I took in a mouthful of salty, cold water and it went into starving lungs. That first gulp tasted like all human fluids; blood, sweat, tears, saliva, and maybe even the embryonic fluid I once had known as a fetus. It had no nourishment, but other strangely comforting swallows followed.

Suddenly, I had no urge to fight for life. Now this is the important part; I was resigned to my destiny and eager to experience that future. Where would I go? What or who would I become? I had settled to the bottom and was aware of a black, oval-shaped stone worn smooth by waves. This stone was pressing into my shoulder blade. I knew it was black and oval yet I never saw it. My eyes were open staring straight up at the layers of multi-colored water. Yes, I saw banded layers. Maybe it

was light going through different temperature zones or currents or both. As I looked through it far on the other side was a blank, colorless sky. My world down there was peaceful and quiet. I no longer heard my heart; there was an astonishing silence.

Off to my left I saw a large shadow that seemed to be spreading along the bottom. It appeared it would soon cover me just like it had the other objects populating the sand. I

looked at this shadow and it seems to be curling at the edges as it became darker. It was not menacing as it unfolded before me because I was fascinated. I thought were there undersea clouds too? The edges of this cloud touched my feet and it was warm and soothing. Here I was under a warm blanket-like cloud that was curling over me. My next awareness was the familiar voice of my dead grandmother, "You settle down, Little Man, and get a good night's rest." I had missed her voice and it resonated now in soothing tones. I turned my head towards her voice expecting to see her speaking to me, but not from that place.

That soothing blanket-like cloud had elongated into a bright passageway. Her face hung from the tubular wall of a luminous corridor. I thought, "I'm wide-awake can't I get up and walk inside closer to you?" She had heard me somehow and was telling me to walk as her smiling face beckoned me. At the same time there appeared to be a movie screen spreading over the inside lining of the passageway. On this screen I watched the smiling faces of everyone I loved. I saw my sisters, mother, father, and even those close relatives who had died. I even saw my brother. He appeared to be maybe twenty years old and he smiled while holding a set of car keys. It would be five years until I had that first glance into our mother's arms that held him. But that moment in a gateway to or from a watery world, I recognized the adult face of my brother, who would enter the world five years later.

I felt wonderful, totally at peace as I walked. I was on a deep warm carpet that felt luxurious and years later I stopped in mid-sentence as I touched my first Alpaca sweater.

Strangely I felt an overwhelming urge in a crowded men's store to remove loafers and socks and stand on that sweater. By then I would do almost anything to try and recapture that underwater experience. As I walked towards my grandmother who stood near the end of the tunnel, I felt weightless and contented. It was a contentment that was beyond peace. I have never felt that again and maybe I never will. Here is the strangest part, I reached out my hand to grasp my grandmother's extended hand, but my vision or reality ended when I touched her. I was now cold; in darkness unlike any I could even attempt to describe. I felt my nostrils first; they were moist, salty and dripping. Soon my eyes opened to see sky.

I saw my mother's tears of joy and was aware of the hushed crowd gathered in a tight circle around my shivering body. Life returned, but why had I come back? What's more, where did that passageway lead and even better where had I first really come from? I started looking for missing pieces and new beliefs, but I told you that. This adult believes that the stars made the chemicals that comprise living organisms. No man-conceived, instinct-inspired or self-deluding revelation caused this. It has been a long march from primitive bacterium to the red, white, black, brown, and yellow two-legged warriors that populating this planet. One seems more eager than the next to toss a bomb or

start another war to defend his uniquely fashioned deity.

I also believe we will join those who went to their death on the atomic level as they provide organic compounds for our living planet. I'm not choosy; I include, "Lower life forms" that the pious still call, "Animals." I believe life is limitless and self-perpetuating and can be found in billions of worlds that orbit in trillions of solar systems in expanding galaxies that approach the infinite. In the meantime, I'm treading air and waiting for my eventual return to another tunnel. I don't have a clue as to why I'm here except to learn. I've looked very hard but I never found that skinny kid I lost at the beach. Oh! Richard resurfaced. He came to town to bury a grandson. You should have seen his eyes; he was staring right through me. You see a car hit Oliver. My younger brother drove it but it wasn't his fault that Oliver had chased a tennis ball down a sloping lawn into the street. I can see it all now, Richard lofting the ball softly in his direction, Oliver jumping but it passed over outstretched fingertips. Some people never seem to learn.



Punk Head,
art by Cheryl Townsend

Serious Addicts Only

Timothy A. Boling

"Hi, I'm Nick and I'm an addict."

"Welcome, Nick!" the group said in unison.

I took a deep breath and began. "This's my first time attending Narcotics Anonymous, and I'm not real sure what to say."

I looked around the table. There were twelve of us, myself and my wife Laurie included. Each person at the table took turns talking about how drugs took control of their lives, and how they recovered from hitting rock-bottom. Now it was my turn.

"I've been clean for three hours and," I glanced at my watch, "seven minutes. I can't say drugs ruined my life. If anything, I guess drugs made it better. I don't think I've ever done anything extreme to get drugs...well, there was that house I burned down and those four dope dealers I killed just to get a suitcase full of Jane, but...I was doing a lot of good people a favor!"



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