A photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans, sitting on a sandy or dirt-covered ground. He is looking down at his hands, which are resting on the ground. The image has a soft, slightly blurred quality. Text is overlaid on the right side and bottom of the image.

Revealing all your  
dirty little secrets...

April 2005

v020

down in the dirt

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Front Cover Art: David on the beach in Naples.

## Secrets

William Wright

I feel like I can trust you.  
Or maybe I'm just not concerned about  
hurting you, or being hurt by you,  
since I don't really know you.  
We've never even slept together.  
I'm uncircumcised.  
I used to mind, but now I kind of like it.  
It gives my dick character.  
I'm addicted to nasal spray.

# 1420

*Michelle Greenblatt*

1420 soldiers died yesterday  
Again: 1420 soldier was the tally.  
The sun had set by 7 o'clock when

I was watching CNN so put this  
In parentheses it was 3:04  
A.M. in Iraq 7:04 P.M. here

But I bet hardly any Iraqi  
Was sleeping they were churning  
The cement mixers in their stomachs

They were trying to put out the fires in  
The shrapnel shocked buildings with  
The Americans' Hoses which is a perfect

Example of how some prep-school butcher's finger  
Tips trailed lines across a map until he found some  
Country that pissed

him off enough, & some willing, God  
-Fearing patriots to follow him. He spoke  
an assembly line speech, manufacturing

Words of triumph, saying, "Dear Little  
People (My Fellow Americans)" his voice  
Grinding the bones of soldiers like a machine's..

1.28.2005-3.26.2005

# X-RAY SPECS

Mike Lazarchuk

I remember a big  
Dream of childhood.

I sent for pair  
Through an ad in the  
Back of a Dell comic book.

I thought when they arrived  
I'd be able to see through walls,  
See through the dresses of high  
School girls, see tits & stuff  
Just like ad promised.

Thing was, after what seemed  
Like months of waiting they finally  
Showed up in a flimsy envelope my mom  
Handed me & I tore open they turned out  
To be these crummy cardboard frames  
With cellophane lenses like the cheesy  
Glasses I got when I saw 13 Ghosts at  
The Mayfair, & when I put them on  
They didn't work.

All grown up now with real glasses  
I don't need X-Ray Specs to see what's  
Under a woman's dress though I still can't  
See through walls unless they're  
Made of windows...

Ah, the cons foisted on children  
Through comic book ads & other  
Equally tricky teasers,  
Kind of makes growing  
Up worthwhile,  
Doesn't it?

# The Sirens

Angela M. Carreira

It was drizzling that day. The sky was dark and gray, it was January, and cold. As soon as I was certain I was alone, I began rummaging through both medicine cabinets, determined and unemotional, opening every bottle, and indiscriminately dumping the contents into a large plastic Seahawks cup step-dad brought home from a game one Sunday years before. The cup was so old, the design on the side was wearing off in giant sections so now all you could see was half a football and the letters AWKS.

Mom never threw out medicines when no longer needed. So there were lots of pills. The sixty-four-ounce cup in my shaking hand was almost three-quarters full. I didn't leave a single pill in either cabinet. I put the empty bottles carefully back on the shelf so not to arise suspicion. I would do this. And I would succeed.

I knew step-dad had severe allergies, so there was probably some of that medicine in there. And there were mom's diet pills. And there was penicillin from when little sister had Strep throat the year before. The penicillin was my best bet, since I was allergic to it, and knew it could kill me. There was also lots of aspirin, and Ibuprofen, and sinus medication.

Once I had all the pills, I filled a thermos with water. I wrapped the blue and green watch I got for Christmas the month before onto my wrist. This way, I'd know when they'd start coming to look for me. I hoped by the time they thought to look near the railroad tracks, it'd already be over.

I pulled the blue cozy knit sweater I'd worn to school that day over my head, and tossed it on the back of a chair in my bedroom. I straightened my hair, and looked around the room, knowing it'd be the last time, and made sure everything was in place – neat and clean. I wondered, briefly, if I should leave a note. But what would I say? "I'm sorry"? I wasn't sorry.

There'd be no note.

As I walked out the front door, the totality of what I was about to do hit me, and I began to cry, without making a sound. Hot, silent tears streamed down both cheeks as I walked quickly toward the tracks in a thin, pink t-shirt and jeans. The tears felt especially warm in the cold air. I might as well let mother nature help me get the job done more quickly. If the pills wouldn't work – maybe I'd get hypothermia.

Our dogs, Sunny, the four-year old golden retriever, and Murphy, our two-year-old cocker spaniel, followed me. They wagged their tails, pink tongues hanging out, excited to be on a walk. I yelled, my voice choked with tears, and frustration, “Sunny! Murphy! Bad boys! Go HOME!” I pointed toward the house with the most authority I could muster, trying to shame them, or scare them, into leaving. Sunny briefly put his tail between his legs and cowered, upon hearing my voice, but soon dismissed me, and resumed his play. Murphy wasn’t fazed by my scolding, or my demands. The dogs ran ahead, stopping every now and then to sniff something, or chase a bird. I didn’t have time to mess around with the dogs. Time was running out. I had to do this now. I couldn’t wait any longer. I’d just have to ignore them.

I reached the steep, rocky trail, newly muddy from the recent rain, under the railroad bridge, that led down to the river. I had to get down quickly, and without spilling the pills or the water. It was difficult to balance, and I slipped once, almost falling, as I ran down the narrow trail, and the dogs pushed past me forcefully, in a hurry to beat me to the bottom.

Under the railroad bridge, next to the raging river and tall cedars, I sat down and started swallowing the pills, shivering in the cold. I saw goose bumps on my white arms, and my teeth were chattering. At first I took two or three at a time, and realizing how long that was going to take, starting shoveling mini-handfuls into my mouth. Sunny and Murphy were running around, sniffing ferns, and lapping up rain puddles that had settled on the riverbank. I was frantic to get the pills into my stomach, but it was challenging to swallow and cry at the same time. I choked a little bit. Sunny ran over and licked my face, as if to comfort me. Murphy, seeing Sunny near me, jumped into my lap, knocking a few pills out of my palm. Their warm bodies and hot breath stopped my shivering for a moment. Despite myself, and through my tears, I smiled at them, cooing, “Good boys. Good puppies.” I looked down at my new watch – mom and step-dad would be home in an hour. I had to hurry. I couldn’t allow for them to come home and start looking for me while I was still alive.

I swallowed another small handful, and by now I was running out of water to drink. I’d have to get some out of the river. I had to swallow all the pills. I didn’t know how much time it was going to take for the pills to kill me. I choked and gagged as I stuffed more pills into my mouth.

Tears and snot made everything wet and I dropped the plastic cup. Little white round pills, pastel pink oval pills, bright blue gel-filled pills. Yellow caplets and green capsules. The perfect little clean pills spilled onto

the muddy ground. I thought how harmless they looked, and how small. I rushed to rescue as many of them as I could, screaming, “Sunny! Murphy! Go away! Stop it! Get out of the way! Don’t eat those! GO HOME!”

I had to take the dogs home and lock them in their cage. I couldn’t do this in front of them. And they were getting in the way and messing everything up. I couldn’t bear to look at their bright eyes and wagging tails any longer. I couldn’t bear for Sunny to lick my face as if he knew something. They were making me feel like I was making a big mistake.

I ran home, knowing the dogs would follow, which they did, and locked Sunny and Murphy into their cage. They looked at me from behind the metal rungs, sadly, as if I ruined their good time, and didn’t understand why I’d do this to them. I said, “I’m sorry you guys,” and turned around, heading back. I was on the street, running toward the railroad tracks, panting, and anxious, when I heard little sister’s voice, from somewhere behind me, shouting, “Katie! Katie!”

I turned around and saw her get out of a car, and the car sped away. She came running toward me, asking me what I was doing, first curious, then with concern. I yelled, since she was still far away, “Don’t worry about it! I’m just going for a walk! Go home, I’ll see you later!” I tried to make my voice sound normal.

But I guess she knew something was wrong. Maybe because I wasn’t wearing a coat, and it was freezing out. Or maybe because she was my only little sister, and we were bonded in a way that allowed her to know. Whatever the case, she followed me down to the river bank, running behind me, and asking me to slow down so she could catch up. When we got to the bottom of the trail, she saw the cup with the pills, and the thermos, and some of the pills still stuck in the mud below. She screamed, “What are you doing, Katie? What are you doing? Have you swallowed any of these? What’s going on?”

I begged her to leave, and forget about it, and just go home. I tried to make my voice sound calm as I pleaded with her, “Sissy! Don’t worry about it. PLEASE. Just go home. PLEASE. Let me do this alone. You don’t understand. And this doesn’t concern you!”

But she was hysterical by now, crying and asking me questions I couldn’t make out through her sobs. I hugged her, and stroked her hair, and asked her to please just go home. She pushed me away, turned around, and ran up the bank, up the trail, and I knew she was headed to the nearest neighbor’s house. And I knew she was going to call 911.

I had some time before they’d come – maybe if I took more of the pills

they'd kill me before the ambulance could arrive. But in reality, I knew it was over. I knew it was too late. That I had fucked up. That I was caught.

But a tiny part of me held on, hoping I still had time. I swallowed five more pills, and instead of the pills going down, already-swallowed pills came up. I puked a watery substance, mixed with still-whole pills that were rejected by my stomach – covering the muddy ground around my feet. The more pills I tried to shove down my throat, the more I gagged. The more I puked up. I couldn't control my gagging reflexes. My stomach was so full, it hurt.

I was such a failure. I knew I was going to be in big trouble with my parents. Even bigger trouble than ever before, and I was scared as hell to find out what would happen to me now that I had failed. I didn't have a Plan B, because I didn't think I'd need one. The pills were the only plan, and I had no back-up if it didn't work.

Before I was lifted into the ambulance, I heard mom, crying, and a stranger asking me, "What pills did you take?" My sister shrieked, "Is she going to be alright? Is she going to live? Mom? Dad? Will Katie be alright?"

Step-dad stood back, looking on, expressionless. I knew he was ashamed of me – disgusted by me – thinking how weak I was.

I was slipping in and out of consciousness – everything was confused. A young E.M.T. looked down at me on the stretcher and asked, sarcastically, "What's wrong? Did you and your little boyfriend get into a fight? Is that why you did this?"

Hearing this, hot tears of shame and embarrassment ran down the sides of my face, into my hair and ears. I knew this was how people thought of those who tried to kill themselves, and that was why I didn't want to fail in the first place. This woman was wrong – she knew nothing about me or my life. But I could still feel her judgment, and I knew there was nothing I could say.

The ambulance rushed me to the hospital, and the inside of it was dark – I could see red lights flashing. I guess they were reflecting in the windows. I could hear the siren of the ambulance, and we seemed to be going really slowly.

I cursed myself for my stupidity and failure.

Next time, I wouldn't be so stupid. And I wouldn't fail. I'd use a gun, or hang myself, or slit my wrists. But next time wouldn't end like this.

The sirens echoed in my ears for months afterwards. And sometimes still ring in my head.



# The Bet

Chisto

“You think you know everything, don’t you?” Johnny scowls at his long time friend, and accents his point by spitting towards the floor.

“Not everything,” Sal smirks. “I can’t cook to save my life. I wouldn’t pretend to know a thing about it.”

Johnny stares at his friend, anger burning slowly rising flames in his eyes. He grinds his teeth to try to suppress the urge to scream. “I bet you think you’re funny too huh?”

Sal smiles, but only on the left side of his mouth. Johnny has always hated that smile. He knows the attitude behind it. Sal is his friend, and has been for years, but the man is so smug that it’s nauseating. “Don’t look at me like that,” he tells his friend.

“Oh please,” Sal says, obviously struggling to fight off laughter. “I don’t think I’m funny. I think you’re bitter. Considering your track record at betting with me, you shouldn’t use those words in a sentence.”

“You know what?” Johnny snaps. His hands shake with the rising adrenaline. “I’m right this time Sal. I know I am.”

Sal lets the laughter flow from deep inside of him. It’s a hoarse deep sound that sounds like it echoes off the walls of a cavern. “You don’t know anything,” he says.

Johnny jabs a rigid index finger towards his friend’s face. “How can you be so sure? Huh? Why are you so confident? I did it right this time man. I know I did.”

With a sigh, Sal buries the laughter back down in his gut. He regains his composure, and his face grows serious once more. “Ask yourself the same question buddy. How can you be so sure?” He shakes his head in irritation. “Don’t ever point at me like that again either.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Johnny snaps, followed by another spitting session.

“Will you just finish this so you can go buy me my beer already? I’m getting thirsty.” Sal turns his back on his friend, and starts to pace.

“There’s nothing to finish. I’m telling you. Hey! Stop pacing and look at me okay? You’ve got no respect for anybody.”

Sal stops in his tracks, and turns around slowly, grinding dirt and dust with his heel. He sighs, and rolls his eyes. “Don’t you ever get tired of fighting the same losing battle all the time Johnny?”

With one large thick fingered hand, Johnny tries to wipe some of the tension from his forehead. Sweat drips down his brow. He is tired of being wrong, but he can't be wrong all the time. Just going by the law of averages, he's bound to eventually win this bet. They've been through it a thousand times, and no matter what he says, Sal says the opposite. His choice is always the one that proves true. Nobody can understand the level of frustration that can cause after several years. Johnny refuses to give up though. Massaging the back of his neck, he says, "It's not the same battle Sal. It's the same war, but it's always a different battle, and one of these days a battle is going to go in my favor. I really think today's my day."

"Go ahead and think it," Sal says, too annoyed to smile anymore. "I don't care what you think. I care what I know. Once again, you're wrong, and you owe me a beer."

The anger inside Johnny overwhelms him. He slams his fist into the wall, causing dust and plaster to burst out in a cloud of white smoke. Pain shoots through his fist and he knows he broke his knuckle. He doesn't even care. He's so sick of this. If it wasn't the wall, it would be Sal, and that would bring him nothing but trouble. His friend probably doesn't realize how many times Johnny's fought the urge to hit him square in the jaw.

"Please. I need help," a voice says, followed by a cough. The voice comes from near the ground. They both know who it belongs to.

Sal finds it in him to smile again. Raising his arms, he says to his friend, "You happy now? I told you. I knew he was still alive. Right again...as always."

Johnny looks down to the man on the ground before him. The man clutches tightly to a bullet wound in his abdomen. His face is white. He sure looks dead, but then, the dead don't talk, and ask for help, now, do they? He sighs, and raises his arm. In his hand is a nine millimeter pistol. He points it down at the man, and pulls the trigger. The man is moaning in pain and mumbling something unintelligible. The gunshot causes him to fall silent. Johnny sighs with disgrace, and shakes his head.

"Can we go now?" Sal asks.

Johnny doesn't answer with words. Instead, he steps over the man that he now knows is dead, and heads for the warehouse doorway. With a glance back at the dead man, Sal follows behind him. He smiles victoriously, another bet won.

"One day, I'll get it right, and I'll win," Johnny says, pouting like a child.

With a small conceded chuckle, Sal tells him, "My liver will fail before then."

# The Last Taste

Todd Wiese

Alright. This is the last one, my last cigarette, as it were. And then...cold turkey. One more fool to stuff in the bag and then I'm giving up this so-called career for good.

It's early—nine-fifty in the morning. I told the guy yesterday, Randy, that I'd come at ten o'clock. He was over-excited. He didn't try to weasel out of it or anything. "Yeah, ten o'clock would be great! I'll be home," he said.

When I'm about to suggest coming to the house, the more skittish ones usually change their minds at the last minute. "Uh, well, that's not a good time for me," they say. "I, uh... I have a bowling league to go to that night." Yeah, tell me another one.

But not Randy. Randy is a prime pigeon. "I'll have the house to myself tomorrow!" "Okay then. How about your wife?" I asked. "Won't she be joining us?" "My wife?" Randy said. "No, I ain't married, thank God. My mom will be at work, so it'll just be me." Kid's got mom's money to burn, excellent—this'll be over with quickly.

I breathe out a sigh and check my briefcase one more time. I step out of the car, stamp out my cigarette, and walk up the drive to the house.

Randy is living the high-life. Nice painted-brick, two-story home with a dog in the fenced-in backyard. Manicured lawn.

I run my hands through my hair and straighten my tie. I ring the doorbell.

"Just a sec!" I hear from inside. A stereo blasts the same bad heavy-metal music I heard yesterday on the phone. The volume goes down and I hear Randy tromp towards the door.

It swings open. "Hey! Mr. Tapp! Good to see you, man. Thanks for coming."

Randy is a tall, scrawny character with a long mane of black hair.

He's wearing a skull-emblazoned T-shirt, jeans, and sandals.

"Sorry for being so early, Mr. Smalls," I say.

"Dude, call me Randy."

"Alright, Randy," I shake his hand firmly. "Are you ready to secure your financial independence?"

"Hell, yeah! C'mon in!"

The place is immaculate. Ornate, little collectable figurines line the mantle over the fireplace. All-leather furniture in the living room. It smells like a doctor's office in here—sterile. And just as if I were in a museum, I can look at everything, but nothing is to be touched.

A ceramic Dalmatian umbrella stand sits on the stone floor foyer.

“Nice place,” I say.

“Oh. This is mom's part of the house. I live downstairs. Follow me.” We walk down the wooden steps into the basement—half of which is an open laundry room. The other half is Randy's den. It resembles a bum's lean-to under an overpass. A shabby card table takes up much of the space.

A television is on and talking to itself. Dirty running pants and t-shirts lie haphazardly on the bed/couch. CD's out of their cases lie strewn about on the oval, brown frayed rug covering Randy's part of the cement floor. Looks like the kid never got out of the dorm-room phase.

“So this is the bachelor's pad, eh?” I pretend to scratch my nose, holding it shut against the B.O. for a glorious moment. I hope Randy buys in before I pass out.

“Yeah,” Randy says. “Just until I get enough saved up to get out of this dungeon. My mom keeps nagging at me to get a job. I got a job, I keep telling her. I'm a day-trader! But I really just need a chunk of cash to get a deposit for an apartment. And then, BAM!, I'm gone.” Randy reminds me a bit of myself before I got started in con-artistry.

Only I was much better dressed.

“Randy, my friend. Day-trading is peanuts compared to what I can set you up with.” “Well, if your program is easy as you say it is, then I can still do both, right?” “Piece a cake.” The ease of the “program” is what attracted me to this line of work in the first place. A Mr. Sam Yardsburg was an old pro who came to “rescue” me from my growing spiral of gambling debt. But, I knew that I was being conned even before Mr. Yardsburg delivered his pitch. I admired Sam's technique though and I saw the potential of what this racket could earn. So, instead of beating the shit out of old Sam, I made him tell me all he knew. He didn't make any money off of me, but he left without any broken bones.

Yesterday on the phone, I gave Randy the exact same spiel Sam had used on me: “It's easy. All you need is a determination to earn lots of profit.” “Hell, I got that!” Randy said.

“Have a seat, man.” Randy gestures towards the drink-ringed table. I take an orange plastic chair and open my briefcase.

Randy opens a rusty mini-fridge and takes out a beer. He sits.

“Okay. The process is simple,” I tell him. “This is a Self-Liquidating Loan.’ If you have a little money, you can make a lot of money.” “Cool.” I can smell his gullibility. It’s like spoiled lilacs. “It’s a five-step process. And it’s all about multiple loans and investments,” I say. “Using a circular progression, you use one loan to pay for more investments that pay for the original loan.” Randy nods and fingers his chin. “What you do,” I continue, “is take out a loan for a large sum of money—about \$100,000.00 or so.” “Whoa.” Randy’s eyes become as wide as silver dollars. He takes a swig of his beer, his eyes glued to the spread of glossy paper I’ve thrown upon the table. “Fuckin’ A!” I need to massage most of my clients into signing before buttering them up with the fancy brochures. My first job was an elderly woman—Mary Lipner. Her husband had just died and, as it often happens, he was the one who handled all of the financial obligations. I smeared on the charm and she let me take care of her. The circular investment system zipped over her head, but I assured her that her investment was gold. She eagerly scrawled a check, decorated with a country scene and a flowery mailbox, for the five-hundred dollar finding fee.

“You remind me of my grandson,” she had said.

Mrs. Lipner was a great beginner con’s dupe. After a little practice, I was able to convince most folks to roll over and beg. I was well on my way to paying off all my student loans. It didn’t matter that I dropped out of college, major-less, after two years of sleeping late and missing classes. Who needs a degree when there are suckers just waiting to be “taken care of”? And boy, is Randy is a sucker. I only need to convince him that he thinks he understands what he’s getting himself into.

“When the loan comes in,” I tell him, “use some of that capital to buy multiple Certificates of Deposit—about twenty. You use this as collateral for the loan. Then,” I point my finger in the air, “take another chunk of capital to buy dividend-paying investments—that I’ll find for you—which will pay off the original loan.” “Uh huh.” He nods with his mouth half open, arms crossed on the table.

He looks like a bobble-head puppy in the back window of Mrs. Mary Lipton’s K-car.

“You’ve still got a lot to play with from the hundred-grand, so you can easily pay the fees for finding the investments. That’s where I come in.” “Okay. I get it now.” He sits up straight and puts his hands on his hips. He scans the ocean of paper as if he’s hunting for Waldo.

“I was wondering what you get out of all this,” Randy says. “But, Mr.

Tapp—” “Please, call me Mitch” (which happens to be my name this week). I’ve had more names than an NYC phone book. I keep changing my P.O. box too. And I only pick the dupes that are too embarrassed after having been scammed that they don’t bother to come looking for me. I learned to do that after my encounter with Mr. Crimson.

He was a resident at the Shady Glenn Mobile Home Community. We sat outside at his rusty wrought iron garden table while I spewed a fountain of statistics and figures. Mr. Crimson chewed on half a cigar and scratched his ample belly. “Mr. Crimson, your investments will pay for the loan. All you have to do is find the highest yielding funds.” He seemed doubtful. “Now, wait a minute, Mr. Lawrence,” he said.

“Please, call me Frank—Frank Williams.” “You said your name was Lawrence.” “Did I?” I gulped.

“Hey what the fuck is goin’ on here?” He dropped the cigar and shoved the table on its end.

“Wait a second, Mr. Crimson, I—” All I remember after that moment was the stacks of phony applications, investment projection reports, and the purple and green “Financial Freedom At Your Fingertips” brochures, raining down like a flock of sparrows that had suddenly caught West Nile virus, slapping the makeshift cement patio square outside Mr. Cimson’s tilted trailer.

I’ve still got a few bruises under my white Oxford shirt and a scar above my left eye, which, thankfully, Randy doesn’t notice.

“Right. Mitch,” he says. “If this is so easy,” he looks me in the eye, “why aren’t you doing this yourself?” I smile at him. “Randy. I am doing this myself. The only advantage I have over you is that I don’t have to pay my own finder’s fees.” “Oh. Well, that makes sense.” Punks like Randy are so afraid of looking stupid that they will pretend to understand. It only makes my job easier.

“So the rest is cream, my friend,” I tell him. “You get to keep whatever’s left. Even if that’s only fifteen percent of your original hundred-thou’ that’s still fifteen-thousand clams—which I would guess would be enough to...‘get out of the dungeon.’” “You ain’t kiddin’!” “You could get a nice pad, man. I’d even start looking at houses.” “Oh, I got plans. I’m gonna get the band back together and get back in the studio. This’ll be fuckin’ great!” “Whoa, slow down, Ran,” I put my hands up. “Financial independence means taking care of priorities. Know what I mean?” “Hell, yeah. It’s gonna be a kick ass studio this time! No more cheap-ass garage set-ups.” He starts playing air guitar.

“Randy?” He doesn’t hear me.

“Mr. Smalls?” “Uh, yeah, yeah.” “I still haven’t approved your application yet. If you and I are going to do this, I need to know that you’re not a risk,” I say.

“What do you mean, Mitch?” “The system itself is fool-proof, but, the investors are only human, you know?” “Yeah, I know.” “Let me ask you, Randy: do you have any outstanding debts?” “Like what?” Randy’s eyebrows scrunch up.

“Do you owe your mom any money, Randy?” I lean forward, put my elbows on the table and look him in the face.

“I owe her a lot,” he says. “To tell you the truth, the day-trading gig isn’t all it’s made out to be.” I figured as much. He looks down at the table, sips his beer.

I fold my hands and nod.

“I keep telling her, as soon as my stocks jump back into the game, I’m good to go. No problem. ‘Get a job,’ she yaps. ‘Sitting in your mother’s basement staring at a monitor is not work. You never see the sun. What kind of job is that?’” Randy sneers as he mocks his mother, his head wobbling with contempt.

He leans back and empties his beer bottle. “She needs to get off my fucking back! Yap! Yap! Yap!” I can picture her yapping. Every afternoon standing behind him. He’s sitting in his Ohio U. beanbag chair that reeks of Old Milwaukee.

She’s clutching yet another black concert t-shirt or pair of ripped pants, sighing perhaps. Is this how a twenty-seven-year-old man is supposed to live?

“But that’s all gonna change now, man,” he says. “I can feel it. First thing I’m gonna do when she gets home today is show her this deal you’re setting me up with.” He slaps my shoulder. “Then I’m gonna tell her to stick it!” He leans back in his chair, a toothy grin stretched across his teeth.

“I’m gonna be honest with you, Mitch,” he says. “I’m sure glad you came along.” He leans forward again and almost whispers, “I don’t know shit about day-trading. I’m lucky if I break even after a month. I’m just guessing at the numbers. But now, after the first check arrives, I’m walkin’!”

“If you ever come back here again,” Mr. Crimson had said, after he was out of breath, “I’ll make sure you ain’t walkin’ no more. Got it?” His fists were still balled. He was leaning over me, hyperventilating.

“Get your snake oil shit and get the fuck offa my property!”

“Man, I’ll tell ya,” Randy continues. “I’m in the clear. It’s Easy Street for me from now on.” He pulls a rose-colored checkbook from his back pocket and picks up one of my pens. “What did you say the fee would be?”

“Eleven-hundred dollars.”

“One thousand, one hundred,” he says as he makes out a check. “You don’t mind if I just sign this Nancy Smalls, now do you?” he asks with a tilted head and a sideways smirk.

“Would you mind terribly if I just signed my husband’s name?” Mrs. Lipner had said. “My husband’s accounts haven’t been transferred over yet, and he was the one who took care of all of this.”

“Why certainly, Mrs. Lipner,” I had said. “I want to be as flexible as I can with my clients.”

“You really are a nice young man, Mr. Thompson,” she had said. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come along. The kids don’t seem to want lend a hand. I guess they’re just too busy.”

“Here you go, Mitch!” He hands me the check. “Let’s celebrate!” He goes to his mini fridge and pulls out two bottles. He sets one in front of me. Before I have a chance to speak again, he’s downed half his beer.

“Look, kid,” I say looking at my hands. “I gotta level with you.” He sits.

“I actually don’t think this is the right program for you,” I tell him.

“What?” He almost chokes. “Of course it is.” “I’m thinking about the numbers now and I don’t think that—” “Hey!” he barks. “I know what I’m doing. And I ain’t no kid!”

“Right. No, it’s not that. It’s just... If you lose your investment it could cost—”

“What are your saying, man. We got a deal.” “It’s a deal you really don’t want, Mr. Smalls.” “Look. I can get this liquid loan thing set up from you or I can get it from somebody else,” he says pointing at me.

He’s got the “set-up” part correct, anyway. If I don’t scam him, someone else will.

“Randy. Mr. Smalls, your mother’s account will be emptied if this...when this doesn’t go through.”

“Oh, it’ll go through. She’s loaded! What do you need, man. I got Social Security numbers, pay stubs, you name it. She’s got lots in the bank.”

“That’s not the point, Randy.”

“Oh man. Oh man.” His eyes go wide. “You can’t turn me down. She’s gonna toss me out if I don’t come up with something.” He stands up and



starts pacing. “This is my ticket out, man.”

Mom’s money is ripe; I can smell it. It mingles with the acidic scent of Randy’s desperation and greed.

Randy’s panic begins to trickle down his check. I’ve casted the line, now it’s time to set the hook.

“That fucking bitch is going to throw me out, Mitch. Just take the fucking check, damnit!” He shoves the pink slip of paper at my nose.

Watching him writhe is like heroine.

I grimace and pretend to think the deal over. Randy needs to be taught a lesson. Randy will be outdoors—if not today, soon—whether I have anything to do with it or not.

Spoiled little greedy punk! He’s no different than I was.

“I admire your gumption, kid,” I tell him. “I mean, Mr. Smalls.” I sit up straight, smooth out my lapels, and pinch the check out of his hand.

Randy sighs loudly and sits down. “Oh thanks, man. You don’t know what you’ve done for me.” “Oh, I’ve done this before.” I move the Investor’s Agreement Form in front of him. “Sign here, here, and initial here.”

I twist the top off the other beer, as Randy scribbles, raise it in his honor.

He slides the now papers across the table and clinks his bottle with mine.

“To cash in the bank,” he says.

“Yep. Nothing tastes better.”

## Britney Has Herpes

William Wright

Pop princess Britney Spears confirmed that she does, in fact, have oral herpes.

Rumors spread after a paparazzi noticed what he thought was a cold sore and went to the tabloids.

Spears said she just wanted to put the issue to rest.

“Herpes is an awful disease,” she said.

“But I have it, and I’ll be OK.”

She said she planned to start taking medication to prevent future outbreaks.

“I control herpes, it doesn’t control me.”

# Ex Love

Christopher A. Clark

I dropped the empty box on the floor and filled it with the meager collection of videos she left behind. Most were recorded movies I rarely watched. I looked over each worn label and tried to remember each tape's contents. Moving, one of those harsh times for pack rats. Deciding what I could and couldn't live without stressed me, especially when I had nowhere to go but the motel.

I catalogued each tape in my brain and placed it into the box next to its brothers. I stopped when a seemingly innocent label in black marker caught my eye. 'Wedding'. That was all it said, but it may as well have said 'nuclear holocaust' as my insides raged. My hands held the tape like an archeologist holding an old bone and for a few minutes I actually forgot about what was in the trunk of my car.

In front of the TV, I sat with crossed legs and popped the tape in the VCR. There we were behind the wedding cake, all smiles. Hope filled our eyes and we laughed, stuffing cake into each other's mouth. I watched like some voyeur in the window of someone's life. Could that have been me in the tuxedo beside the fresh bride?

It seemed so far away, so long ago. That was not me on the screen, that was someone I used to be, someone that cared and loved. Someone I'd never be again.

She was smiling at the old me. No, she was beaming. Her special day, her little girl's dream coming true, walking down the aisle with a long train and a church full of people, was a reality. She looked at the then me with eyes filled with love and devotion. A stream of memories went through my head:

Her face smiling.

Her laughing.

Her face filled with the passion of lovemaking.

Her face while sleeping.

Her face crying.

Her face red and screaming.

Her look of indifference.

Her face while she lied.

Her face filled with pain and horror.

In the end, I'd seen all her faces.

I stopped the video and ejected it. In my hand, I stared at it like it was responsible for the old feelings. I closed my eyes and leaned against the coffee table, tapping the video against my foot, unsure if I would finish packing.

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"Come on," she panted between breaths. "Give it to me," said her voice, low and gravelly. I looked down at her body in the dark, older, much older than me.

"Come on baby, give it all to me." She tried to purr, like a good little actress, but it sounded more like mumblings of a bored phone sex operator.

I concentrated on the moment, the sensations of being inside her, but nothing, no enjoyment.

"I haven't got all night," she said a little louder, a clue to how much she really wanted it.

The last hour I hammered her with everything I had, but nothing. I moved her legs and body all around, trying anything I could think of, but no dice.

At last, I stopped and she rolled away. Her nakedness was luscious in the dark, but homely in the light as she clicked the lamp on in the motel room. She shook her head and lit a cigarette.

"Are you done finally?" she asked.

I said nothing, looking for something on the wall behind the TV. Maybe what I was looking for was there. She puffed hard on the cigarette and looked expectantly at me.

"You're the cutest customer I've had in years hon. I'll give you a few more minutes if you need it."

I shrugged and we went at it once again. I moved against her like I wasn't there, like someone controlled my body and I sat in a waiting room somewhere, waiting for whomever to come through a set of double doors and give me what I wanted. Twenty minutes later, she groaned and pushed me off.

"Maybe next time," she purred again, sounding like a doctor after an examination. I said nothing and lay down. Tired, sweaty and unfulfilled, I watched her wander into the bathroom. Urine tinkled and she soon returned, staring at me from the entryway of the room.

"You're a man baby. You must have drunk too much, that's all."

I hadn't the heart to tell her she disgusted me. I had thought I needed to satisfy an urge. She dressed, smiled again, and started to leave at 4 a.m., but I hurried to the door and locked it. Naked, I felt worthless and had to share that with her.

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Divorce court: no human being should suffer that moment, especially when neither of us could afford lawyers. Bearing all of life's problems to some middle aged man in a robe seemed so odd. Especially, when she lied. She stood before the bald judge, vile crap spilling from her mouth about how I hit her and her son. About how I forced myself onto her when I was drunk one night two years ago. She told him I slept with other women. She told him I left her homeless and broke when the two of us separated.

The judge stared at me like I was the worst piece of filth he'd ever seen. Like I was some miscreant that stormed into his condo and pissed on his couch in front of his family. He asked for my side because he had to, but in his eyes I saw I was done. He merely had to ask for the record. Of course everything she said was untrue, and I told him that.

Within minutes the judge banged down his all-powerful gavel and informed me I would forfeit the house, the car, and oh by the way, half my paycheck would now be sent to the state so that they can send it to her, since of course they could never give me her address.

The grin she sent my way as we left the courtroom was probably what made me snap. Somehow I decided she had to pay. The ironic part was not once did I strike her while we were married. Not once. So when I stood over her lifeless body in her new apartment, my hand still full of her bloody hair, I actually chuckled. The most horrific moment of my life, and I fucking laughed.

Digging the grave in the woods of Priest Point Park along South Puget Sound, I barely remembered. But carrying her body from the apartment to my trunk, that was like an eternity. Every sound, every movement of light in the dark parking lot made me aware of how alive I really was.

Back in the motel room, the old hooker wasn't so easy, probably because I didn't really have the heart to kill her. The passion just wasn't there I guess. She got away and screamed her head off all the way to the office. I locked the dead-bolt, the knob, and the chain, leaned the mattress against the windows, sat against the far wall, aiming my pistol at the door, and waited.

They'd be here soon. I was in no hurry. Holding the videotape, finger moving over the 'Wedding' label, I replayed it in my head. How did she go from beaming bride in the church to lying whore in divorce court? What transformation occurred, and how did I play a part? I did what all the books said, brought her flowers, and took her out on date nights, the whole shebang.

Someone pounded on the door and I set the video down, raising the pistol. It would be any minute now. It would soon be all over.

# TWO FOR THE NIGHT

KEITH LAUFENBERG

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## THE CHEESE LINE

*Opportunity makes a thief.---Francis Bacon, Letter to the Earl of Essex.*

Jimmy Miller's eyes fluttered sleepily, as he stared at the ceiling and dozed off. It was half past six in the morning and Miller was in the Labor World hiring office, in downtown Fort Lauderdale. His T-shirt, which had begun life as white as a ghost was now a yellowish-brown, as the dirt and grime he so frequently came into contact with had worked its way deep into the folds of the cloth. He was, as usual, broke and had been sleeping on the streets for over a month, after having lost his job as a roofer and having been locked out of his apartment for non-payment of rent. He had been sent out to a job the previous day by Labor World, sweeping and cleaning up at a construction site and had tried to get on, at that job, permanently but the foreman had refused to even talk to him. Miller well-knew that the construction company paid Labor World eight dollars an hour for his labor, even though Labor World only paid him half of that amount. His head hit his chest and he struggled back to reality, smiling over at the elderly, white-haired man who stood behind the Labor World check-in counter. The man smiled back and Miller stood up and ambled over to the counter.

"Hey, Mister Brumby, anythin' come in yet; y'know for today?"

"Naw'aw, sawry Jimmy."

"Shee-it. not even no broom work, sir?"

"Naw, sorry pal, nothing' yet."

"Yeah. well, okay then. You're sure there's not no work, then?"

"Why'nt you check back after one, maybe sumpin'll come in, you know?"

"Okay then thanks, maybe I'll come back this afternoon."

The old man watched Jimmy Miller shuffle out the front door, mumbling to himself:

“Yeah-ah, maybe I’ll go over to the piss-cah-bull church, maybe they got some free grub, shee-it, I could use some chow, right about now.”

Outside, Miller staggered down the street, trying to get his bearings. He hadn’t had anything to eat since lunch the day before, although he had drank a pint of whiskey, and his stomach was greedily rumbling for some edible nourishment. He needed the booze constantly, especially since he woke up this morning and picked up the newspaper to see that it was March 16, 1988, which was the 20th anniversary of the beginning of Jimmy Miller’s endless nightmare, for it had been 20 years ago that day, in a faraway land known as Vietnam, that Jimmy Miller had lost his sanity.

It had been in a village called My Lai and Miller’s platoon had been one of many on a search and destroy mission, searching for Viet Cong troops said to be in the area. They had found only civilians instead, Vietnamese peasants. But the order had come down nevertheless, from on high, to waste the vill’ and the ensuing massacre of the men, women and children had become too much for Jimmy Miller to deal with. It had been as if someone else had done the shooting, as if he had been standing outside of his body watching the other soldiers waste the entire village. Miller had been one of only a handful of soldiers to be charged with murdering innocent peasants and it had shocked him to the bone when he ultimately realized what he and his compatriots had actually done. Everyone realized that Miller and his fellow soldiers were being used as scapegoats but they were, nevertheless, charged and shipped to Fort McPherson. in Georgia. to await a court-martial. The charges were ultimately dropped but the men stayed at Ft McPherson for nearly a month, a month in which Jimmy Miller lived and relived the moment when he had taken part in the mass murder of so many innocent Vietnamese peasants. After the charges were removed, Miller met a woman in a bar and ended up marrying her. They moved up to his hometown in Jersey City where she had two children by him but the marriage eventually dissolved when Miller couldn’t hold a job or stop the nightmares. He slowly drifted down to South Florida after his divorce and ended up staying, working at any job he could find, just long enough to save enough money to go on a drinking binge.

As he shuffled down the sidewalk, Miller suddenly spied the First Lutheran Church, on Third Avenue, in downtown Ft. Lauderdale, a place where they occasionally provided meals for the homeless. He glanced at his watch, it was 7:00 am. and the streets were deserted. Miller had been there several times, when word got to the street that the cheese line was

open, a slang term street people used for the infrequent food giveaways the church sometimes had. You could also get a note from the church people that allowed you to go to the YMCA, just up the street on Fifth Street and Federal Highway, where they would give you a towel and allow you to use the showers.

Miller walked into an alleyway next to the church and saw that a side entrance door was ajar.

He nudged it open and slipped inside; there was no one in the church and he walked over to a large desk, sitting in the front of the worship hall. He tried the top drawer but it was locked, so he tried the side drawers and the one on the right side opened up. He removed about a dozen tithing envelopes, lying inside old brown basket, inhaled deeply and glanced nervously towards the door. He felt them and realized they had money inside, then quickly shoved them into his pockets and ran for the side entrance. He slipped out, into the alleyway, and closed the door behind him. He walked to the end of the alley and laid the envelopes on the ground, then tore them open and counted the money inside. He glanced up when he heard a noise but it was only a cat and he returned to counting the money but then jumped up and shoved it into his pockets. He ran out of the alley onto Broward Boulevard and headed towards the main library building, where he knew that he could get some privacy, inside of a bathroom, where he could recount what he had figured at nearly a hundred bucks. It looked to Jimmy Miller as if this luck may have finally changed and maybe now he could get a little respite from his many nightmares, even if for only a short period of time.

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## THE GIRL

*Necessity and chance*

*Approach not me, and what I will is Fate.*

*Milton, Paradise Lost. Bk. vii, 1, 172.*

The young girl knocked lightly on the door but no one answered it, even though she heard muted conversation coming from inside. She knocked again, louder this time, and heard footsteps; then the door opened and she inhaled and looked into the face of a portly man dressed in an expensive-looking, pinstriped Giorgio Armani suit. He frowned

perceptively and barked:

“Yes, can I help you?”

“Ah, are you Mr. Goldie?”

“What is it John?”

“A young girl For you Pres’.” The fat man stepped aside as the young girl stepped inside.

“Um-ah-um-ah, Mr. Goldie, ah-er, I’m here about a job. you see  
I.....

J. Preston Goldie stared at the young girl and quickly assessed her potential, she was street trash, as far as he was concerned. Probably had been abused as a child, usually by a family member. A typical day for Goldie, who owned several massage parlors and strip clubs, included going over his assets, the cash that he funneled through his clubs from drugs and other illicit business enterprises he invested in, and occasionally hiring an exotic dancer, something he infrequently did but nevertheless took immense pleasure in; he always had a private session with them before he gave the final okay. Ever since word had gotten out on the street that Goldie had hired Amber Star, who had gone on to become a legitimate movie star, currently earning seven figures, per film, a day seldom went by when at least one female attempted to replicate Amber Star’s good fortune. If it ever did happen again, Goldie was certain, it wouldn’t be by this emaciated-looking specimen. He might have used her in one of his massage parlors but the city was cracking down, as they infrequently but occasionally did, and so he dismissed her with, a wave of his bejeweled hand -

“Sorry, I’m full up at the moment but check back with us next month, sweetie.”

“Bu..... but Mr. Goldie I, I.....

Goldie glared at the girl, who appeared even younger than her actual 17 years, and hissed:

“Get out! I said check back with us next month and not with me; check with the club manager, maybe they’ll let me reopen my parlor on Federal Highway.”

“But, but I meant a job in one of your.....

“Twenty-one, ah you twenty-one girlie?”

When the teenage runaway failed to respond, Goldie nodded at the heavyset man standing at the door, his attorney, and the overweight shyster barked:

“Hit the pavement girlie.”



The girl's face reddened and she slunk towards the door of the garish nightclub. Twenty minutes later, Goldie and his lawyer, John Upchuk, were inside an air-conditioned limousine, headed for a restaurant he and his attorney-entrepreneur owned.

"Did you get a whiff of that young hustler John?"

"Oh shit, Jay-Pee, did I ever."

As the limo sped down the drug-infested northwest section of town, Goldie nodded out the tinted limo window and rasped:

"Speak ah the devil John, isn't that her?"

"Who, the girl? Where?"

"Over there, standing on the corner of Sistrunk. By the stop sign, Johnny,"

"Yeah, yeah I see her, sure looks like her Jay-Pee, a pity, a real pity, huh?"

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## STREETLIFE

*I play the: Streetlife, because there's no place I can go,*

*Streetlife, it's the only life I know.*

*Streetlife, The Crusaders, featuring Randy Crawford.*

The young girl leaned against the stop sign listlessly; she had just turned 17 and had run away from an abusive stepfather, who had sexually abused her for the past six years, as well as beating her up whenever it took his fancy. She paled noticeably when a police car screeched to a halt, at a small neighborhood carwash, just across the street. She saw a huge black man throw his hands in the air and snarl:

"Man, again? I got a license man!"

Two policemen exited their patrol car and one barked:

"This place is an eyesore. I'm issuing a code violation,"

The other cop nodded at a black man washing a light green 1986 Cadillac.

"You need to desist washing that vehicle sir. It is a code violation of city law. All carwashes must be enclosed."

The man washing the Caddy glanced at the cop, then at his cousin, who owned the carwash, and frowned. He looked across the street at the white runaway who everybody knew was prostituting herself, standing less than a hundred yards away, then glared at the cop and then at a drug

dealer and several crack-addicts.

‘Are you kiddin’ me or what?’ He went back to washing the Caddy but stopped when the two cops pushed him to the ground, where he was handcuffed, then taken into custody.

The young girl brushed at her scraggly hair and watched as the cops argued with, and then arrested the two men washing cars in the open. She glanced at her watch; it was already past noon and she was still stone, cold broke. She wiped at her glistening forehead, as the sweltering South Florida weather did its duty, causing anyone in the open to perspire, as the 86 degrees-plus temperatures and almost 100 percent humidity began to become intolerable. A tall, rail-thin black man, dressed in a purple, silk undershirt and a pair of light green, silk shorts, approached her. He smiled showing her a pair of gold-capped front teeth, a star etched into one of them.

‘Hey baby, din’ I tells jew dat Doreen working’ diz co’nah?’

‘Ah well, but I mean, I.....’

‘Lookit here now ho’, I gone let jew work annudder co’nah if you does me ri’, jew unnerstan’ wha’ I means ho?’

‘Ah-er-un-nah-ah, wha.....I mean?’

Eddie ‘D.C. Slim’ McKinley put his hand against the girl’s cheek and stroked it, then smiled a golden smile and hissed:

‘You gone works fo’ me now ho’, unners’tan’ wha’ I means?’

Two bulky-looking black men roughly pushed past D.C. Slim and Slim smiled and barked:

‘Hey, y’all bloods lookin’ fo’ some whi’ meat?’

The biggest of the two men stopped for an instant and glared at Slim, then barked:

‘Get outta my way niggah, we ain’t lookin’ fo’ no gash.’

D.C. Slim’s hand went immediately into his pocket, where a straight razor resided, but he quickly withdrew it when he noticed a Saturday Night Special protruding from one of the men’s back pockets, as they bent over and wrestled a street sign up out of the ground. They yanked it out and one man said:

‘Shee-it Willie, fo’tee cents a pound fo’ ‘luminum, we gots at leas’ a hundred pounds here, know wha’ I mean?’

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D.C. Slim was escorting the 17-year old runaway into a notorious, well-known drug house, while Willie ‘the Enforcer’ Miles and Tony

'Double X' Mohammad were busy removing a stop sign from where it had been placed, years before, and, all the while, a police car sped down Sistrunk Boulevard with two black men, their hands handcuffed behind their backs, heading for the county jail; the charge being washing cars in the sunlight.

And life trudged on in South Florida, as life has a way of doing.

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Jimmy Miller clutched a small canvas bag that he had just purchased at the Salvation Army.

Inside the only slightly used bag resided a clean pair of under-garments, socks, a razor and a bar of soap, along with a pair of tasseled loafers. The loafers were something that Miller had always desired, at least since he had seen the executives, the bosses, all wearing them. It would make him feel like a boss; a success; it might not last, and Miller well-knew it wouldn't but as long as it did he would do anything and everything to prolong it. He also had a suit, still encased inside the dry-cleaning wrapper and hanger, and it was slung over his shoulder, as he walked towards the YMCA building, on the corner of Federal Highway and Fifth Street. Walking inside, he strolled to the main desk and the attendant saw him and barked:

"You got a note from the church Jimmy?"

"I got it right here pal," Miller barked back and handed the man a crisp, new five-dollar bill.

"Well, found some work huh? Good, here, here's a receipt, you can use it 'till ten tonight."

Jimmy Miller smiled and took the receipt; he would use the weight room and sauna without any embarrassment this time, maybe even take a swim in the pool. With the note from the church you were only allowed to use the shower and he been caught playing basketball one time, a few weeks ago, and had been run out of the building, an embarrassment for anyone much less a man twice the age of the attendant who had evicted him that hapless day in the past.

Jimmy Miller was bound and determined to feel good this day because his luck was changing, he could feel it in his bones and it was about time he felt like a human being again. He had spent about twenty dollars on the clothes, the suit and shoes and gym-bag, and still had eighty smack-

ers left. As he slipped a quarter into the slot to open a small locker, where he would store the remainder of his booty, Jimmy Miller let a confident smile cross his lips, for once he knew he would sleep in an air-conditioned room this night and on a mattress, a nice soft, comfortable mattress, with clean, cool sheets.

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## A HUMAN BEING

*"Twas a thief said the last kind word to Christ:  
Christ took the kindness and forgave the theft.  
Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book. Pt. Vi, 1. 869.*

The pimp known by his street name of D.C. Slim smiled his golden smile at one of his best earners, Lucille 'Juicy Lucy' McNeece.

He nodded towards the 17-year old runaway and hissed:

"Diz here be Presh-suz, Juice. Now, she be thankan' 'er name be Linda, hee. Turn it out Juice." The pimp glared at the girl for an instant and then strolled to his 1987 Jaguar and roared away.

Juicy Lucy smiled at the young girl and rasped:

"You aw'rye honey? Slim hit jah, din' he?"

The youngster put her hand to her quickly blackening left eye and hissed:

"He, he that is he....."

He pack yo' peanut butter din' he chile? I knows, Slim ah anee-mule but he makes sho' yo'bees safe from'nah po'leece annah crazies."

"He, that is, he....."

"What baby?" Juicy Lucy put her arm around the girl's shoulder and pulled her closer.

"Did it hurt, you ain't nevah hadda man do 'at to you before, huh sugah?"

"My stepdaddy did it to me for six years. Just like it, only he did other things too."

Juicy Lucy exhaled audibly and hugged the girl closer, then purred:

"Oh. you po' thang."

She sobbed lightly, as she had been on the streets for almost three months straight now and had encountered many, many people, over that

period, mostly cops and street people but Juicy Lucy was her first encounter with another human being, and the touch of another human being brought tears.

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## MILLER TIME

*I have fed purely upon ale; I have eat my ale, drank my ale, and I always sleep upon ale. Farquhar, The Beaux' Stratagem. Act i. sc. 1.*

Jimmy Miller smiled and lit a cigarette. He was dressed in his Salvation Army suit, with black, executive tasseled loafers on his feet, and was headed for the room he had just paid for, for two nights, in advance. It was a nice little motel just off federal Highway that they had wanted 20 bucks a night for but Miller had struck a deal on, for 35 smackers for the two nights; cash talks bullshit walks, Jimmy Miller always said. He had always liked drinking his namesake and was especially fond of Miller's Lite, but had been drinking Milwaukee's Best for the past several months, considering it was the cheapest beer in town at \$3.59 for a 12-pack. He actually stepped up a notch and bought Old Milwaukee, which he liked better, and splurged on it, as they were \$4.29 for a 12-pack. It was almost six p.m., and the hookers and drug dealers were just waking up and moving onto the streets of the inner city, as they were on streets the world over, as the day turned into night, for they did work that was best done in the cover of darkness. Jimmy Miller turned the key in the door that led to his private little motel room and walked to the bed and laid down, closing his eyes for several minutes, as the cool air seeped through the pores of his sun-baked skin. His eyes opened and he sat up and reached for his first brew of the night; he popped the cap on it and chugged it down in one thirsty gulp, then quickly popped the next one. Maybe he would go out and find some of his old street buddies and share some brews with them, he pondered silently, then smiled, as the alcohol worked its way into his bloodstream. He meant to turn that familiar glow into an even more familiar buzz and he meant to do it as soon as he possibly could because if there was one thing Jimmy Miller knew for sure it was that when he was high he was safe, safe from the nightmares and safe from all his many shortcomings and failures.

## THE PICK-UP

*All wickedness comes of weakness.---Rousseau, Emile. Bk. i.*

The car pulled to the curb and the lone driver pushed the button that slid the passenger-side window down and motioned towards the young, garishly-dressed white hooker and barked:

“Hey baby, you workin’ tonight?”

The young girl approached the ear window and smiled at the man.

“Yes-ah, what do you want?”

“Hah! What do I want? What’s jer name baby? I ain’t seen you around, you new to town?”

“Well, ah, yes, I am.”

“Well, what’s jah name baby?”

“Well, Presh’uz.”

“Precious huh. Well, get in Precious, C’mon, I won’t hurt you, c’mon lil’ babe.”

She looked over her shoulder and couldn’t see D.C. Slim. She kept looking for him when she felt the door bump her behind, as the overweight man had reached over and opened it.

“C’mon there Precious, get in. I won’t bite jew? Unless you let me ahah, hah!”

She slid onto the seat and the man pulled the door shut and barked:

“How much Precious honey?”

D.C. Slim had told her what to charge and so she mumbled:

“Well, wha’chew want? Some head costs you thirty, half-n-half’s fifty.”

“Wha... what? Shee’it, I can get a nigger over on Federal for a sawbuck.”

The girl’s eyes shifted to the man’s trousers where he had his hand stuffed down the front. Slim had told her what to do when she encountered this behavior and so she reached for the door-handle but the man grabbed her hand and hissed:

“Whoa there baby. Wait a minute, Fifty is okay.”

He put his car in gear and the girl shrieked:

“Wait, wait, where are we going?” D.C. Slim had shown her where to bring the John’s, to a room where he could insure that he got their money before anything happened. She panicked until the fat man put his hand on her leg and cooed:

“Don’t you worry now lil’ babe, I gotta nice apartment and I know how to treat a lady like you. Nothing bad’s gonna happen.” His tires squealed as he pulled away from the curb and D.C. Slim peered from inside the small room he was in, out of the Venetian-blinds, and saw the ‘83 Dodge Dart with his new ‘property’, Precious, inside it and he turned towards Juicy Lucy and spat:

“Diz ho ain’t payin’ no atten’shun Juice!”

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## THE MEETING

*o God! that one might read the book of fate! Shakespeare. II Henry IV. Act iii, sc. 1, l. 45.*

Jimmy Miller stood over the toilet bowl, where he had been urinating for over sixty seconds and frowned. He finished what was left in the beer can in his hand and then stumbled back into his room and collapsed onto the bed. Empty beer cans were littered throughout the room, along with cigarette butts and Miller’s suit coat and shirt. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was past two a.m. in the morning and searched futilely for a full can of beer. His search quickly proved fruitless and he walked to the front door of the motel-room and opened it, causing the blast furnace that was South Florida to slam its 95 percent humidity and 94-degree temperature straightaway into his face. He took a step backwards and the refreshing air inside the 65-degree air-conditioned room felt cool on his face and as smooth as silk inside his nostrils; he couldn’t remember the last time that he had felt so comfortable or so safe, safe from the screaming bosses and safe from the shakes and safe from the nightmares and failures. But, then he swallowed and looked around the room, at the littered, empty beer cans and his yearning returned. He walked out the door and into the 94-degree night and stumbled and staggered towards the all-night liquor store that he knew was just around the corner and where he also knew that he could buy some more happiness. He bought a six pack of old Milwaukee and a bottle of cheap whiskey, a sure sign that he was now willing to escape into a total world of darkness. He was heading back to his motel-room when he saw something moving in the bushes next to a large dumpster. He stumbled over and saw that it was a young, garishly made-up girl and that she had a large welt under-

neath her left eye and blood trickling from her forehead and nose. He put the brown paper bag containing his six-pack and whiskey on the ground and bent down next to the girl. He put his palm on her cheek and she moaned, then sat up, looking dazed and confused. Miller took out the whiskey and twisted off the cap, then poured a drop into her mouth. She gagged for a second and spit out saliva and blood, then hissed:

“Ah, were, ah-er where am I?”

“You’re in Fort Lauderdale.”

“I mean, I mean, where am I?”

“Ah-er-um, well, this is Federal Highway. Wha.. what happened to you?”

She stared at Miller dully and suddenly, inexplicably a shiver ran down her back and she took a quick swallow of the now opened whiskey.

“Well, I, I don’t really remember too much. I think a man hit me and threw me out of his car.”

“Oh, Gee-zuz. Wha... what’s your name?”

“Ah, well, Presh’us, ah-er, I mean Linda.”

Miller helped her get to her feet and then guided her towards his motel. They were almost there when a helicopter flew by overhead and Miller dropped to the pavement and started howling. It was the young girl’s turn to help him stand up and they both stumbled to the door of his motel room, which he opened and they both tumbled inside onto the floor. Miller realized that the chopper had brought back to his memory-bank that day, 20 years ago now, in Vietnam and he pulled the whiskey bottle out and took a long swallow. He offered the girl a sip and she took one and then stared at him.

“Are you aw’rye, Mister?”

“Aw-er-um, yeah-yeah sure I am, sure.” He stood up on unsteady legs and then helped her up.

“You wanna use the bathroom, take a shower? Help yourself, plenty a clean towels still in there. I showered at the Y earlier, y’know?”

The young girl nodded and headed for the bathroom. Thirty minutes later she walked out of the bathroom, with nothing on but a towel wrapped around her scrawny body. She saw Miller sprawled on the bed, the whiskey bottle, now half-empty, clutched in his hand and she walked over and sat down next to him.

Miller stared into her face and she smiled and he offered her a drink of whiskey, which she took, causing the towel to slide down her bosom and fall onto the bedspread. Jimmy Miller’s long asleep loins suddenly



came alive and, when she put her hand on his leg, he leaped on top of her and quickly ripped his own clothes off. It was all over in five minutes and Miller felt ashamed, she was so young, just like in 'Nam. He reached for the whiskey bottle from where he had set it on a small table and it fell off and quickly drained onto the cheap linoleum floor. He scowled and got up and went into the bathroom.

The girl was sitting with her knees resting underneath her chin when he returned to the room and had her hands wrapped around her legs, staring dully into space.

"Look, ah-er Linda. I gotta go got another bottle okay?"

"Yeah, sure, gaw'head."

"Where...where are you from?" Miller said it off-handedly, as he reached for the door-handle but her answer froze him in his tracks.

"Atlanta. Well, I was born there but I grew up in Jersey City. My mom moved there when I was only three."

"Jah....Jersey City?"

"Yeah, my Dad was from there. He left us when I was little and I....."

"Whoa, wait a minute, Wait a minute." Miller's head was spinning and his ears were ringing and not just from the alcohol. He stared at the girl; He had two daughters, named Linda and Susan and although Susan was born in Jersey City Linda had been born in Atlanta. It had to be a coincidence; it couldn't be what he was thinking but he inhaled deeply and barked at her:

"What was your mother's name, Linda?"

"Rhonda."

This answer took the breath from Miller's chest and he collapsed onto the floor; things were spinning out of control.

"See my step-father he abused me, he, he molested me and when I saw him start to look at my younger sister I knew I had to leave or kill him. I should have killed him bu....but I was scared."

"Hah...hah... how about yah ah father?"

"Well, my Daddy was in Vietnam and he couldn't....."

"GOODGAWD!"

The girl stared at Miller and she saw that he appeared to be hyperventilating.

"Ah-er, what's the matter Mister?"

"Was, was your father's name Jimmy Miller."

"Why, why yes, did you know my daddy?"

Miller barely made it to the door before his stomach rumbled and he

vomited, all over the door and rug. Vomit was streaming down his shirt when the girl touched his arm and she gasped:

“Wha..... what’s smatter with you Mister? Wh.... who are you?”

“I’m Jimmy Miller. I’m your father, Linda, I’m your father!”

Suddenly, the girl’s face turned ashen and she ran past Miller, out the door and into the street, screaming and hollering hysterically as she ran, naked as the day she was born, screaming “no-no-no” as she ran north on Federal Highway, down the middle of the highway.

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Bobby Rolex had been driving his taxicab for over fifteen hours and he was bleary-eyed, as he drove down Federal Highway when the call came in for a pickup, just past Sunrise Boulevard and Federal Highway. He immediately sat up in his seat and stepped on the gas-pedal and, just as Linda Miller ran out into the street, Rolex’s eyelids closed for barely an instant, but in that instant his cab plowed into the 89-pound, emaciated body of the girl who had been known on the street as Precious, for the last eight hours of her life.

The impact threw her into the air and onto a telephone pole, then onto a city sidewalk, where she lie, as dead as she could possibly be. Jimmy Miller began screaming hysterically upon seeing the collision and he collapsed onto the pavement next to his daughter. He glared up at Rolex who barked: “I din’ see her Mister, really I din’. Look, I called the cops, they should be here anytime now.”

Miller stood up and walked to the cab; he saw it almost immediately, a .45 caliber pistol, just like the one he had in ‘Nam. Before even he realized it, it was in his hand and an instant later it was in his mouth.

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## TWO FOR THE NIGHT.

*Night is the time to weep;  
To wet with unseen tears  
Those graves of memory, where sleep  
The joys of other years.---James Montgomery, Night.*

Joe Misery and Pete Winslow were the two paramedics that got the

call. Two dead bodies, one a young girl, was naked and her body was twisted and crushed beyond recognition by the impact of a one and a half ton automobile that slammed into her emaciated, tiny frame, while the other corpse, a male, was a lump of unrecognizable skin, bloody facial hair and bones where, at one time, a face had been. They pieced together what had happened from the officer on the scene and the cab driver. They figured the girl was a hooker and the guy was out of his mind, on drugs, probably crack, so easily purchased in Ft. Lauderdale.

Bobby Wilson, the policeman, yawned and noticed that it was nearly four am. He finished up his report and nodded at Bobby Rolex.

“Don’t worry cabbie, they were both messed up.” Joe Misery, who worked the graveyard shift and hadn’t missed a night in over a decade, shook his head and rasped:

“Just two more for the night guys, two more or the night.”

Wilson stared at Misery, then Winslow and Rolex. He seemed about to say something but walked to his patrol car instead. He glared for an instant at the two dead bodies, both now ensconced inside the ambulance, and croaked: “Just two more for the night, Gee’zuz I gotta get off the night-shift.”

The ambulance rolled down Federal Highway and Joe Misery was oblivious of the night. He turned on Fifth Street and whisked past the darkened building of the YMCA, then shot past Andrews Avenue and rolled over the railroad tracks. He was totally unconcerned with the blaring music that reverberated from the innumerable boom boxes, or the hookers and crack-heads waving and yelling at them; it was just another shift for Misery, as he glanced at his watch and noticed it was half past four in the morning. Misery had spent almost a decade in the Navy before deciding to rejoin civilian life and had spent two tours in Vietnam. He glanced out the window and wondered idly if the streets of Saigon were as littered as they had once been, with hunger, poverty and prostitution.

It was four-thirty in Ft. Lauderdale, what time was it in Saigon? He had been there in 1968 and ‘69 and wondered if what was happening in South Florida was still happening there, as well as other parts of the world? He had been in ports all across the world, from as diverse as Alaska to as faraway as New Zealand and knew that everywhere there was poverty and prostitution and wondered why? As he stared transfixed at the pimps, hookers and jitterbugs that lined the streets of N.E. Ft. Lauderdale this early in the morning, he needn’t have pondered the question of poverty and hopelessness, for, as the Devil must get his due, scenes similar to this one on the gritty streets of the inner-city of Ft. Lauderdale were

being played out in one form or another in every major city in the vast expanse of land known as the United States, as well as innumerable others the world over.

As the ambulance, that was now masquerading as a hearse, rolled on, Misery wondered about the young female corpse for an instant, so young and fragile.

Where was she from? Was she just another abused child and how did she get to where she now was, a corpse in the back of his ambulance? Misery needn't have surmised for at this very hour, in a house just off Newark Avenue, in Jersey City, the reason why the child's corpse lie on the bed in his ambulance, was entering the room of his last remaining stepdaughter, 11-year old Susan Miller McCloskey, as she lie asleep in her bed, dreaming of the school lunch she would eat the coming day, as they were having chili dogs, her favorite. She had yet to experience the sheer horror that had been her older sister's life for the past six years but, as her 300-pound stepfather began moving towards her bedroom, she was about to become yet another statistic and one that would end up, as her sister had, dead, or scarred beyond repair, never being able to return to any form of what the human race considered normalcy or sanity. The morbid thought of the corpse soon left Misery's mind when he pulled the ambulance into an open all-night McDonald's, something no ghetto dare be caught without, as fast food outlets and all-night liquor stores were a mainstay of modern day America; they littered ghettos from the Four corners of the country, from Seattle to San Diego and from Boston to Ft. Lauderdale, as well as every major city, and even numerous minor ones, within it boundaries. At this particular McDonald's they were having a special, Big Mac's for 99 cents, and as Misery rolled down his window and prepared to order, he glanced for an instant in the rearview mirror at the two body bags. Pete Winslow followed his gaze but quickly put it from his mind, as he shrugged his shoulders and barked:

"Get me two Big Mac's, a large fries and a large choc-lit milkshake Joey, shit I'm hungry."

Misery shook off his thoughts also, of the girl and the older man. Hell, it didn't matter anyway they were nobodies. nada, nothing. They were two more for the night that's all, just two more for the night, that's all they were and all they ever would be, now. Misery convinced himself of this, as he licked his chops when the smell of the cholesterol-ridden, fat-saturated, all-American fast food hit his nostrils and he salivated, which put a wide smile on his otherwise somber pasty face.

# JACKIE'S GIRL

*Mike Lazarchuk*

used so much  
hairspray that  
day afraid of wind  
knocking over the  
hornet's nest  
that when she  
struck the match  
to light the cigarette  
the flame hit the  
fuming shellac  
like hairstyle  
4th of July  
& she ended up 6 weeks  
in the burn center  
feeling her head blister  
scar & distort  
lying there knowing pain  
with her finger on  
the remote control  
television fumbling  
through the soap operas  
cursing the pretty faces  
wishing these weren't the  
days of her life

# The Rocky Road

Ronald M. Rowe

The rocky road passed by trees  
laden with Spanish moss; she was like  
a shining cord wrapped around a Christmas  
tree.

And the road was bordered with rough shoulders,  
like women wearing necklaces of  
agate stones.

You may find that she will quench your  
thirst for the grace of earthy elements,  
like the urn of Aquarius pouring forth  
pristine waters.

The rocky road hummed with automobile  
wheels, vividly reminding me of  
the folk-singing of Dave Van Ronk:  
("Green, green rocky road...")

And like a talisman she made me remember my  
twenty-third year, when I became  
vegetarian and traveled unto an  
imaginary star, (discovering the intoxication  
of youth).

The rocky road seemed to promise an  
infinite expansion in a meek voice of  
stone, (as humble as a child offering  
a flower unto Jesus).

Like a scripture mouthing words of scattered quartz,  
she refracted the rays of the sun  
with a promise of adventure and rational  
purity, (emblematic of the qualities of  
thunder and twilights blending a trail  
unto a new day).

# ANY PARK, USA

Luis Cuauhtemoc Berriozabal

In the swings  
you can hear  
the laughter  
of children.


Across town  
a troubled woman  
buries syringes  
in a sandbox.

One afternoon  
bystanders rescue  
a man hanging from  
a tree in a park:

A suicide  
averted, a park  
saved from disgrace  
and infamy.

Drug peddlers  
convene in another  
park, use the restroom  
as an office.

# down in the dirt



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