

down in the dirt

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

039

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Scars art, pages 2-6, 14, 16 (statue of a man on a horse in Beijing China, and a horse in Puerto Rico). Cover: Sequoia, stretching an back porch carpeting in Chicago.

Kat Whisperer

Pat Dixon

Karl Gutmann is an educated ignoramus—a seven-fingered clueless holder of a useless master’s degree in violin playing and a useless doctorate in medieval Dutch philosophy. And, true to form, he has no idea the intermittent pain in his abdomen is peritonitis.

It’s been four days since Karl’s had “a movement,” and he’s out mowing his lawn, thinking to himself: Need t’ get another bottle of prune juice when I get done feedin’ the kitties. Maybe do another—ho, boy!—ow! ow! ow!—another thirty sit-ups to pass this freakin’ goddamn gas!

Karl raises his blue Yankees cap over his blotchy balding head with his good hand and wipes his sweaty forehead with the thumb of his bad one, the one mutilated in ‘Nam the morning he earned a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star and nearly died. He pulls his cap back down, wipes his thumb on the thigh of his khaki work pants, then absently rubs the seat of his pants, gently scratching the area where a third of his right buttock had been shot off that same morning.

As he is about to push his mower forward again, it stalls out. Three times he tries to restart it without success. Sighing with mild irritation, Karl pulls the mower a few feet closer to the gas can on his front walk, gives his mower the finger, and reaches for his car keys.

Maybe Tommy’ll let me pet ‘im THIS time, he thinks.

Half a mile from his little split-level house, Karl smiles as fifteen feral cats of all colors and sizes bound out of the tall brush into the street as his dirty gray car approaches. Twelve of them mill about with tails erect like a little troop of ring-tailed lemurs—accompanied by a large black and an old one-eyed brown tabby with broken tails and a small red tabby with a five-inch stump. Six of the pack engage in sudden, brief scuffles, some playful, others to establish or contest their relative status.





“Ho there, pretty guys and dolls! Time for chow! Got to keep your strength up, little sweeties!” he says with a soft chuckle as he stops his car short of them. With eight large cans of wet food and three quarts of dry, he fills the half dozen aluminum pie pans between a fire hydrant and a huge sycamore tree.

“Ho-kay, Tommy, maybe today? Billy, you aren’t a coy boy, are you? Nor you, little Bright-Eyes! Head-Bumper! Captain Flint! Zorro! Sounds like you got a bit of a summer cold—or are you allergic to tree pollen? Ah! There we go, Tommy! Took long enough! Felt good, didn’t it. Was it a good touch, little boy?”

The muscular brown tabby with three white “socks” and a huge head looks up at Karl questioningly. When Karl’s hand had rubbed the back of his neck for the first time, he had just leaped four feet away. Warily, looking up with huge unblinking yellow eyes, the cat he named Tommy approaches the dish nearest Karl. The man holds out an open hand with only a thumb and pinkie extended. Tommy stops just beyond his reach and lies down.

“Maybe again on Tuesday, then, little guy?” says Karl, wincing from another jab of pain and standing up. “Till next Tuesday, then, all you pretties—” and he croons in a cracked baritone voice as he climbs into his car, “We’ll meet again . . .”

At the nearby supermarket, Karl is counting his money to pay the cashier when the woman in line behind him speaks.

“So how many cats do you have?”

She points to the register belt which contains two bottles of prune juice and thirty large cans of cat food.

Karl looks at her thinking, Why would you ask a man a personal question like that? and then answers, “What makes you think I’m not on a fixed income and am buying cat food for myself?”

The woman’s jaw drops open but no answer comes out.

The cashier laughs and says, “Karl, don’t pull her leg that way. People can’t tell when you’re spoofing ‘em.” Then, turning to the woman, she adds, “Karl here is the famous Kat Whisperer of Koastal Konnecticut!”

The woman’s frozen face melts, and she gives Karl a timid grin. “So how many cats do you really have, Mr. Cat Whisperer?”

“That’s Kat Whisperer, with a capital K,” replies Karl, wincing from a

new jab of abdominal pain. “I have nine in my home—all of ‘em former strays I’ve tamed—an’ I feed twelve to twenty others twice a week at a vacant lot near here.”

“I’m basically a dog person, myself,” says the woman. “Aren’t you just keeping them going so they can make more and more strays? And what do they eat the other five days a week?”



Karl glances past her to make sure no one is waiting for them to get done with their purchasing. “Me an’ three ol’ ladies in the neighborhood trapped ‘em all an’ had a vet neuter ‘em an’ check ‘em for kitty AIDS an’ stuff—got a special group rate. Then we released ‘em—back into the wild where they’re happy for now.”

Karl winces again, then adds, “I’m the only guy in the group. They made me an Honorary Crazy Kat Lady—an’ even made up a funny certificate for me, spelling it with K’s.”

The woman’s grin fades—This ol’ fart is dissing women, she thinks. She heaves a dramatic sigh and tells the cashier, “Well, let’s get this show back on the road—Shirley. I’ve got to get these things home to the fridge.” And to Karl: “Glad to hear you get them spaded or whatever—we don’t need a hundred million cats overrunning the town.”

Back home, Karl sits on his toilet for twenty unproductive minutes. Chills are making him shiver even though the temperature of his house is in the low eighties. Mus’ be some kind o’ fever, he thinks fuzzily. Two empty plastic enema bottles on the rim of the bath tub hold his attention for three minutes. Snap out of it, Karl, he thinks. Got to feed the children.

In the living room, six male and three female cats mill around his feet with their tails, like little masts, all erect. Shuffling through them on slippered feet, Karl leads the way to his small kitchen. A chorus of voices, each of them distinctive to his accustomed ears, begins as he fills nine bowls with a quarter cup of dry food and then lays little strips of chicken breast on the top of each. He grips the edge of the counter and swears aloud as the worst spasm yet runs through him. “Got to have a couple aspirins,” he says in a soft voice. He sets the nine bowls down on the tiled floor, refills three large bowls of water, and shuffles back to the bathroom for the pills that will reduce his pain and lower his fever.

At 12:17 a.m., Karl is awakened by his full bladder. Turning on the light beside his bed, he shuffles bare-foot out into the hallway. At the top of the short flight of stairs, he steps on a soggy, slippery hairball. Turning on the hall light, he raises his foot to inspect the sole of it—and loses his balance.

At the bottom of the stairs, Karl comes to a stop with a broken shoulder and broken hip. He is lying on his side, his head at the bottom and his feet resting on the second step. His chills come back, and he wishes vaguely that he has a blanket—or an overcoat. He feels bloated and needs to urinate—and then he does, and he feels even more chilly than he had. Dimly he thinks about Duns Scotus’s distinctions between form and matter and how useless this knowledge has been to him. With G.I. Bill, I earn a freakin’ Ph.D. an’ then can’t get a job teachin’ any place, he thinks—as he has done three thousand times before. And so he learned to fix radios, TVs, and VCRs for a living. About his career as a pianist before being drafted, he hasn’t thought in more than thirty years.

Lying on his side, aching, with Danny Boy bumping him and purring loudly, Karl wonders whether the cats view him as their slave or their god. Probably a mix of the two—they probably think I’m a bit slow witted in answering their prayers. Susie joins Danny Boy and begins licking his left cheek. Three others hover nearby.

Around half past noon Karl dies, never knowing that he had diverticulitis and that one of his fifteen diverticula had burst, spilling “stool” into his abdominal cavity five days before—“left-side appendicitis” probably caused by the processed low-fiber diet his parents’ high income had permitted during his “wonder years.”



Three days later, around half past noon two policemen enter through Karl’s unlocked garage. Neighbors have wondered about the lights that have been on all night long and the mower next to his front walk, but, after seven unreturned phone calls, it was the leader of the Crazy Kat Ladies who finally called 911 to report a missing person.

“Pee-yew!” says Officer Ross, the senior of the pair, opening the doorway to the stairwell. A large gray tabby formerly known as Sneaky backs away from the doorway and

hisses at the policemen.

“Oh cripes, Jim! Tell them we’ve got a dead one here, an’ it’s”—he pauses to retch for a couple seconds. “It’s pretty ***in’ disgusting! I don’t think you want t’ see this.”

Jim Kantor, curious as always, glances around the corner and up the stairs to the first-floor landing.

Karl is lying there, parts of his ears, nostrils, lips, and eyelids chewed off his face. Half an hour later, the team that retrieves his body will notice that his genitals and the webbing between his finger stumps have been gnawed away.



The M.E., Amélie Wells, following an examination of Karl Gutmann’s body, completes her report and submits a summary to the national data base. Wrinkling her nose and pursing her lips with mild interest, she notes that forty similar cases have occurred this week across the nation—single people dying with pets in their houses or apartments. Nearly six thousand of them last year were partly devoured before they were found. And already over three and a quarter thousand this year. Y’ can learn something new every day, she thinks.

For a moment Dr. Wells wonders what becomes of the thousands of pets whose single owners die of heart attacks or whatever away from home, or whose married owners die together, say, in car wrecks or other accidents. No way to get any figures on that kind of thing. She shakes her head sadly with a rapid sigh and a quick shrug.

The S.O.P., she was told by a police lieutenant an hour ago, is to keep all mention of the post-mortem petit déjeuner à la fourchette—little meat breakfast—out of all the reports released to the press and to family members (if any). That makes a kind of sense, she thinks, gazing towards the ceiling without focusing her eyes.

The officers have told her that Karl’s nine cats have been divided equally among three crazy cat collectors—elderly neighbors of Karl. I wonder how they would react if they knew what these kitties have been eating for three days. Dr. Wells smiles to herself as she glances over at Karl Gutmann’s corpse.

bio:

durenda was born in palm springs, ca in 1981. was attending uc berkeley but is taking time off to be with dying mother. she writes to foment la revolucion against tyrannical horrors and end all levels of oppression. she prefers german beer, whiskey sours, and medical marijuana as a favorite form of sustenance.

“As long as man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of lower beings, he will never know health or peace. For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seeds of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love.” - Pythagorus

let's take a holiday

durenda

there is a 6 year old girl
both parents dead of AIDS
which she has harbored since birth
and even if she didn't she would soon
for her aunt sold her into prostitution when she was 4

tourists flock with glee to the underage brothels
where this 6 year old girl lives
the children are cheap compared to sex workers in industrialized nations
a john usually hires 3 for the whole night

even when our freedom fighters leave the bases
who knows what they'll do next
rape the children or pay them extra not to wear a condom
throw in the mother as a package deal
like some super saver special at k-mart
let's all fly to Haiti for the summer

Thief

Alla Vilnyansky

He sees her
like a vision
steals her
like a jewel
lolls her
like a baby
unwraps her
like a chocolate
He reaches for her
like a star
uses her
like a sheet
breaks her
like a twig
buries her
like a bone
Under the sand
he hears her cry
like a widow
And dissolves
in her tears

PAYBACK

Steve De France

I go downstairs.
My neighbor's feeding fish heads
to some local dogs.
I find my car.
The day's hot enough to
glaze pottery in the back seat.
I start the engine & crank up the air
conditioner. It's running hot.
I flip on the radio.
Bombers race toward Baghdad.
People on the street look dazed.
At the corner, a pregnant woman
stops in the center of the busy street
doing a body count of her growing family.
My knuckles grow white on the wheel.
I miss the light.

Hot. No wind.
The car's a jar with a lid.
I roll the windows down.
Try to cool off.
Trees on the street cringe
from the heat. Birds have stopped
flying, instead they huddle
in melting pools of color,
grey, brown, and black,
heads bobbing slowly.
Next to me on the car seat,
a half-eaten Chocolate Hershey Bar
has exploded.

All that is plastic is devolving
into petroleum ooze.
Fillings in my teeth are burning,

touching a nerve.
Rounding a corner, the asphalt's
melting---heat ripples rise
as if from an Iraqi mirage.
High Noon in L.A.
Ahead----two sweating men charge
snarling from trucks, it's all about a parking place.
They fight in the street. Bone & flesh collide.
Under a deserted building, a lone dog wails.

I eye the ageing buildings on this
block--- dying Victorians---blemished,
battered, broken & bleeding.
Dwellings filled with growing families.

Spilling over stoops, rambling down steps,
scattering into the street, where they spray
each other down with water hoses.
Lupine smiles seem to contradict the menace
glinting from their predatory eyes.

Just as it is too hot for the fat red spiders
who sit in heat shock---watching
the death dance of the web-caught flies.
These predators are not in a hurry.
It is too hot for them to dine on me.
They will dine when the sun's down.
I turn right onto 7 th Street.

All in all, it's a day that causes
ordinary men to break cue sticks over bald heads.
A day so sweltering it makes
common thieves too hot & too wet to steal.
On this day---shrieking babies are being
smashed against cement walls,
and regretfully married women are sharpening long knives,
sweating and staring at the soft underbelly
of their husbands' throat.

It's a grand day for getting even,
a day for settling festering scores.
A day for payback
a day designed for vengeance.
A day to use baseball bats in alleys,
A day to swing socks filled with ball bearings.
A day for reprisals by the damned
It's just that kind of day.

Driving by the Park on 7 th Street,
I see hawks hankering for retribution,
sitting in the shade of hemlock trees
considering all possibilities.

THE MAD GURU OF BROOKLYN

Mel Waldman

Can't make sense of the ubiquitous evil around me.
Can't breathe, for I'm suffocating in the noose of
Humanity.
I pray mournfully to a god I stopped believing in
half a century ago.

In the winter of my despair, I walk along the Boardwalk
after midnight.
Looking up at the Coney Island sky, I eat snowflakes
drifting to earth.

And suddenly, a mad guru leaps out of the darkness
and approaches me.
Says reality is an illusion. Evil's unreal. There's only
Heaven and oneness, peace, joy, and love.

When I shriek sounds of separateness, pain, sin and evil,
the mad guru tells me to forgive. Then he saunters off,
vanishing in the darkness.

As I gaze into the Void that swallowed the stranger,
I hear an explosion on the desolate
Boardwalk,
followed by an anguished silence.

A deep sadness grips me. I whirl into a violent seizure,
shake uncontrollably, and spiral to the ground.
I forget this earthly existence and sleep.

In this ferocious sleep, I have shocking visions of the
universe. I am dumb. And after this tempest,
I am free.

A distant voice in the labyrinth of my soul whispers:
"Forgive!"

At dawn, when I open my eyes, I see Heaven for the very first time.
Or am I still asleep?

LADY LUCK

Cynthia Ruth Lewis

It had been that kind of morning:
the pelvic cramping and blood spotting
warning me of a possible loss

I wanted to turn down our big trip to Reno;
we'd planned months in advance for it
mapping our course, saving our money,
hoping to hit it big to dig us out of
the hole we were in, never expecting
a third person to come along for the ride

I didn't think I should go--thought I
should stay off my feet, knowing there
might still be a chance to redeem, however
slim, but I give in, sitting motionless
in the car; quiet, watching life slip by
through the window--you, even unaware of
the situation, chatter endlessly on,
taking my silence as mere trepidation
of losing

The casino looms like an all-knowing
demon. I follow you, unseeing, through
the overly-bright building, hearing coins
dropping, bells ringing, everybody happy
and carefree, and me, knowing there would
be no sense in fighting a battle already
halfway lost, walking freely amongst the
happy people, a murderer of hope, a bucket
of coins clutched tight in my sweating
grasp, abusing each precious moment,
eventually pushing the coin through the
slot, pulling the lever, taking my
chances, knowing the ball had already
dropped, now rolling completely beyond
reach, no stopping at all
no going back

Escape

Evan Walsh

Insanity looms as an enviable option
Oblivion without worms
Pleasure without guilt
Judgements aside

I PROMISE

Gerald Zipper

I looked up to the blinding sun
seeing stars and planets
meteors and moons
whirling through skies
colliding exploding
taking no notice of each other
yet one meteor might break through
it takes only one
ripping through our atmosphere
crashing down on people's heads
wrecking cities countries and continents
slamming the ocean over shores
inundating streets
turning people to dust
drowning millions
but I would find you
I would search under the avalanches of water
climb over every mountain range of debris
lift each boulder
squirm into every crack and crevice
dig until my arms fell away
until my fingers bled torrents
I promise
I would find you

Cellphone

Corey Cook

A man in a yellow SUV
holds plastic to the side
of his head. He speaks
through the plastic filter
to his wife. Words should
be anchored by a face
I think to myself.

Waiting in the kitchen

David Van Bebbler Jr.

He rest the weathered deck on the table
And his stiff aged hand rises from the cards
bringing a Cigarette to rest comfortably between his lips.

Gradually, he pulls the smoke deep into his lungs
as if every ounce were necessary for sustaining life.

The priceless smoke bellows out.
“One more drag”
as the ashes near his fingers.

He embraces the fleeting pleasure
repeating what he’s done a million times.

With his thumb he snubs the slow burning tobacco.
Smoke has clouded the kitchen.

Leaning back he resumes the long task
the solitary game.

Another day alone again, waiting, dreaming
and remembering, what used to be.

untitled

Umesh Ghoshdastider

I’m relaxing all the time and doing nothing valuable
I’m telling this as I’m not immortal
There is after all no security I’m here after
A moment and you may simply shut up for now.

New Baby

Jodie Haley

The water in the tub has gone cold, my body trembles. Salty tears make their way down my blotchy red cheeks and neck.

I can hear my newborn daughter cry from her crib in the next room. I embrace the flesh on my lower abdomen, which houses my hollow uterus. It's emptiness overshadows everything in my life. I miss sharing my body with her; I miss never being alone. I know my misery has never been good for her but she gives me reason to care for myself, she is the only thing in my life that helps hold me together. I long for her to be back in me so I will never have to suffer alone.



I am repulsed and overwhelmed by the feelings of loneliness that dominate every day I see. Bewilderment from so many mixed thoughts defeats me, my chest grows tight, and I find it hard to catch my breath. Panic attacks have become so frequent; I scarcely notice them anymore. Yet I still do not get up. I can not fight it, I don't think I want to.

I may stay in this bath forever, with the freezing cold water and worn out gritty tub bottom. So many nameless questions in my head with no answers, I can't even comprehend the thoughts. I try to think of solutions to the problems I can not identify. I encourage myself to believe I am a strong, respectable mother

I tell myself I have a good marriage. Thoughts of my husband, who has gone back to live with his parents, rush through my head. I have driven him away. I have projected all my insecurities on to him. I know sitting here that he has not done all the things I loathe him for, yet I can not extinguish the hate.

I am brought back to the moment by my baby who still screaming. I cover my ears with my hands and strike the back of my head against the tile wall. I don't feel the pain, but scream out in misery over something I don't understand. I am not sure how much more I can take, how long can this go on before I break.

My husband says I am crazy, nuts, and psycho. He did nothing to help me, except to leave. He never tried to understand what it is like. How can I do this by myself, raise our children and care for our house?

Blood has begun to run out of my nose and over my shivering lips, I can't figure out what I'm doing. The baby is quiet, I pray she has fallen asleep. I touch the blood that is now dripping onto my chest, it is warm, and I rub it into my skin. I look around in disgust at my bathroom. It has been weeks since I have cleaned in here. I despise the mess, yet find it impossible to complete any housework

I have forgotten what happiness feels like and have long since giving up hope it will return. I have spent many days lying in the fetal position on my bedroom floor, trying to convince myself that it may be a good idea to cut the soft tissue off my face, so maybe then others would understand my hurt. I consider it again. It could make no difference; my face is old now and so weak looking. The weight of pregnancy has changed my appearance to almost unrecognizable. I know my husband could not be attracted to me any more.

I hate this selfish act I play, I think sometimes I do it for attention. Can medication be an option, would that not mean that I am weak? If I accept I am unable to care for myself then I would also be admitting I can't care for my children. My insanity could just be due to stress, or maybe finical problems. The source is all I need to fix these tears. I can't even remember yesterday let alone when this all started. I sleep all day and stare all night. Something has to give.

I close my eyes and touch my face, my skin is icy, and clumps of my long dirty blonde hair are trapped in the dried blood. I think of my baby, sleeping safely on her bed. I have to get better for her. I have to recover before she thinks spending your days weeping is natural. Her beautiful face always gives me hope of a superior day tomorrow. She never judges me, and has a smile for me in every circumstance. I sit in this filthy bathroom when I could be with her, protective, and kind.

I have fallen apart, physically and mentally. I am weak and insecure, yet my exquisite baby sees me as perfect. How could someone that was made and carried in my body be so different, happy, and beautiful?

While I stand up and reach for my towel, I know I can change this, I can get help to recover. Knowledge of a problem's existence is not enough to understand or fix it.

Little Miss Sylvia, lovely and sympathetic, I thank you my beautiful baby.

SUBSTITUTE GEEK

Sandra E. Waldron

A wimp of a man in too-tight black trousers and a yellow knit shirt shuffled and stumbled out the front door of Walnut High, oblivious to the two husky youths in maroon and gray school jackets leering at him from across the concrete walk.

George Sergeant, the school's star quarterback, elbowed his best friend, Fred Sinclair – better known as Monster. "Here comes that geek teacher, Mr. Otis Proffer."

"Yeah. He's goo-goo eyed over your Cynthia."

George's own dark eyes narrowed to slits. "Too bad for him."

"Look at 'em," Monster said, chewing a toothpick protruding from the corner of his mouth. "He's gonna ride his little red bicycle home. Ain't that cute."

"It's a wonder he don't split the ass right out of those tight pants, straddling that rusty old bike."

Monster sniggered. "I hear he buys his clothes in Goodwill."

"No. I think they are hand-me-downs from the Fifties. And that ridiculous straw hat he wears tops it."

Just then a tall, attractive girl in navy blue pants and a white sweater rushed out the front door, her long chestnut tresses streaming behind.

Otis Proffer spotted the attractive Cynthia Adams and tipped his uncomely hat and smiled hugely. She nodded politely and went over to George, who'd been waiting for her.

"What the hell you even look at 'em for, Cynthia? Proffer is the nerd of nerds."

"He's also my history teacher." There was a note of aggravation in her otherwise pleasant voice.

"Substitute," George corrected.

"Whatever. He's still a teacher and deserves respect."

"Sorry. I have a bit of a problem respecting geeks."

Her hazel eyes flared with anger. "Shame on you, George. Mr. Proffer really is a very nice man. And ... a very good teacher ... even if he is a substitute. In fact, he makes our lessons much more interesting than old Mrs. Fletcher.... But all you see is the outside. Right?" Without waiting for a response, she briskly walked away.

"Hey! Don't you want a ride?"

"No!" she called back without even glancing over her shoulder. "I'd

rather walk than ride with the likes of you!”

Monster sniggered and shrugged his broad shoulders and headed for his black Toyota Camry. George ambled behind, obviously frustrated. He stopped at the car for a moment and shivered. There was a chill in the air that had not been there earlier, and a pile of red and brown leaves stirred at his feet.

“Coming or not?” Monster asked.

“Yeah ...” George ducked in on the passenger side.

An hour before dark, Cynthia was sitting on the front stoop reading her history lesson for the next day, when the big tan boxers from next door started barking and carrying on. She glanced up from her book to see Otis Proffer frantically peddling his red bike down the street, desperately trying to flee from Mr. Thompson’s dogs.

“My God! They’ll eat him alive!” She tossed her book aside and ran out to the street, reprimanding the dogs harshly. They knew her well and reluctantly obeyed, loping back to their own yard, but still barking. The largest one, the male, turned and faced Cynthia, curled his upper lip slightly, almost as though he were going to speak, then sighed disappointedly and flopped down beside his mate.

“Better,” Cynthia said. Now facing Mr. Proffer and gazing into his reddened face, she realized how much he resembled the actor who had starred in all those old Jaws flicks. What was his name? Roy ... something or the other? Of course, the actor was no geek and was certainly better looking, but there was a definite resemblance. And she would have never thought the actor a wimp.

“T-Thank you!” Proffer managed to sputter, still winded from his mad peddling. “Those dogs would have devoured me with great relish.”

“I don’t doubt that. The dog warden has fined Mr. Thompson more than once for letting them run loose.” It struck her then that she never had seen Mr. Proffer in her neighborhood before. Did he have certain motives for being there? Could it be he was purposely riding by her house? Perhaps to catch a glimpse of her? Or was she being egotistical? “I didn’t know you lived close, Mr. Proffer?” she bated.

Sheepishly, he rolled his light-brown eyes up to hers. She was a good inch taller than he. “I ... I really don’t. I ... I am gathering cans.” He indicated to the bulging, dark green garbage bag that was tied neatly to his bicycle bars. “I save them ... to sell for extra spending money.” He half-chuckled. “Don’t tell anyone. I get teased enough as it is. If certain persons were to find out, they would never leave me alone.”

Cynthia knew all too well who he was referring to and nodded that she understood. "Your secret is safe with me, Mr. Proffer."

"Thank you. And please ... call me Otis." He flushed a deep crimson. "I don't mean to sound like I am getting personal ... but I'd like you to call me Otis."

"I'm honored, Otis. But at school, I think I'd better stick to Mr. Proffer."

"Yes ...yes. Of course, you are so right. I didn't consider that. Point made. I'd best be on my way. Saving money to buy treats for Halloween. Coming up in about a week, you know. Can't let the kiddies down." He seemed to consider what he had just said for a moment, then added, "It's not that I don't have the money, I simply just try to save all I can of my paycheck for the future."

"Your finances are you business, Otis. You don't have to explain."

He blushed again. "Well ... some folks think I'm weird. Guess I have this need to explain things because of it... Have a good Halloween."

"Yes. Halloween," Cynthia said with a warm smile, then added, "Just about my favorite time of year, with the jack-o-lanterns, spooks and what have you. I may be seventeen, going on eighteen, but when it comes to All Hallow Even, I am still very much a little kid at heart."

A deep smile kindled in his eyes. "Mine too," he said softly. "It is my favorite." He started to peddle off, and then stopped, looking hopefully back to Cynthia. "Have anything special planned this year?"

The question surprised her. Had he actually gathered sufficient nerve to ask her for a date? "Well, I usually do something with George. There's always a party at someone's house. I believe Monster's mother is putting one on this year."

Otis' face darkened.

"Is there ... any particular reason you asked? I have no specific plans, as yet," she carefully added.

His face brightened instantly. He appeared to think it over for a moment, and the brightness faded. "No ... You wouldn't have any fun. It is just that, for a moment, I got this insane idea that maybe you would like to drop by my place, see the way I decorate for the little ones. They really get a thrill out of the spooky delights I fix up for them."

He looked so pathetic, she felt sorry for him. She didn't hesitate in saying, "I'd be honored to drop by and see it, Otis."

"Really?" The lights in his eyes were suddenly doing a twinkling dance.

"Really." She assured.

He cocked his head to one side and his brow furrowed. "You're not

putting me on, are you?"

"Never, Otis. I am not like the others. You should know that by now."

The corners of his eyes wrinkled in a smile. "I know. That is why I like you so much. You are so much nicer than the rest."

She reflected his smile and thanked him.

"I'd best be on my way. Have a lot of cans to sell. Want this Halloween to be extra special!" He winked in a timid sort of way, waved and was on his way, peddling fast and stirring up dust from the road.

The boxers sprang to their feet and were about to pursue Mr. Proffer again, but Cynthia challenged them very vocally. They whimpered, made slight grunting noises and plopped back down.

"Better." Before picking up her book and entering the house, Cynthia stopped to savor the brightly colored leaves floating onto the lawn from the big maple in the front yard. Fall was such a wonderful time of year. The air already had that crisp, refreshing tingle. She loved it! As always, it gave her a strange inner warmth, kind of a glow. Almost like a rebirth. Most people would say that about spring, but with Cynthia, it was autumn.

"Finished with your studying?" Margaret Adams asked her only daughter, her only child, as she stirred the homemade vegetable soup. She was a short stocky woman of Irish descent and attractive in a matronly way.

"I've read the chapter three times. If I don't know the answers now, I never will."

"And while we are on the subject of history. Wasn't that Otis Proffer you were chatting with outside?"

"Yes, Mom." She laid her book on the kitchen table. "He really is a nice little man. I detest the way the jocks tease him."

"No denying that. But you've got to admit he does dress a bit weird ... especially for a teacher."

"Mom, everyone is weird in some way or the other. He is just very conservative."

"Now that's a new way of putting it. If he really buys all his clothes in junk stores, he is more than conservative. Eccentric would be polite."

"Mother!"

"Okay. But I am sure he could afford better." Margaret placed the lid on the boiling soup and turned the burner down to medium and sat down to the table. "You kind of like him, don't you? Otis, I mean."

"Not romantically. Otherwise, of course. In his own unconventional way, I think he is kind of cute." She moved to the window, admiring the gold-yellow leaves hanging on the maple tree just outside the mullioned

window. “You know, there is something about fall, Mother, that makes me feel so ... so ... new inside. It is almost sexual. You ever feel that way?” she said and turned her face towards her mother.

Margaret had just selected an oatmeal cookie from the maroon crystal platter on the table and her mouth was open to take a bite, but she stopped. An odd expression came over her.

“Did I say something wrong, Mother?”

Margaret pondered for a moment, bit off a small portion and chewed, waved the cookie in the air, then spoke, “Course not. It is just that you have never mentioned it before.”

Cynthia took a seat next to her mother. “It was just a statement. You act as though I’ve said something ... a bit unusual. Have I?”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean anything. Nothing unusual about it at all. Lots of folks love fall.”

Cynthia scrutinized her mother. She wasn’t telling all. “Why do I have this gut feeling you are keeping something from me?”

“Forget it, Cynthia. I’ve just had a busy day. I love fall too. And, yes, I do feel that newness you were speaking of – a wonderful feeling.” She scooted her chair back and got up to stir the soup that was bubbling up the lid. She turned it down as low as it would go.

Cynthia could see her mother wasn’t going to fess up. She knew her mother all too well. Subject-change time. “Mom? You think it would be okay for me to spend Halloween with Otis? Instead of going to some goof-ball party with George?”

Margaret sat back down heavily in her seat. “Isn’t he a bit old for you? He’s got to be forty, at least.”

“It’s not a real date, Mom. I know he’s too old for me. Wouldn’t even consider him that way. He told me he gets a big kick out of decorating his place for the kids. He really wants me to see it. And, frankly, I am sick of George and his friends. They’re all such ... such ... jocks.”

“If I know George, he isn’t going to take this very well. He’s going to be a little upset.”

“Pooh! Let him get upset. I have been seriously thinking of breaking up with him for a long time, anyway.”

“Well ... since you put it that way.... Only, I hope George doesn’t try to kill poor Mr. Proffer.”

“He’d best not even go there. He will have to come through me first.”

“Well ... since you feel that strongly about it, maybe you should. Just hope this is what you really want and you aren’t making a big mistake.

You have been seeing him for quite some time.”

“Mother, believe me. I really don’t think that breaking up with that goofball is a mistake.”

Margaret didn’t look so certain. “You have always been so crazy about him, Cynthia.”

“Not lately, Mom. I have had it with him.”

“Well, okay.” Margaret rose from the table once more to tend the soup.

“Give me a reason!” George bellowed, his face turning crimson.
“Give me a damn good reason!”

“Already have. I just don’t feel about you the way I used to.”

He threw his hands up to the side of his head, breathing heavily. Then threw his hands down in frustration. “It’s someone else, isn’t it?” he gasped.

“No ...” she shook her head. “No! Absolutely not!”

He looked at her straight on, jaw twitching. “You’re lying!”

She slapped him hard across the face. He lunged back, more from shock than pain.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“Don’t ever accuse me of lying again!” Everyone, including teachers, had stopped in the hall, curious as to what was going on. “I have been totally and completely honest with you. I am just sick of jocks. And, unfortunately, you are the epitome of jocks! We’re through! Finished! That is all there is to it.” She swirled on her heels and stomped off in a huff, leaving George stunned and embarrassed in a way he had never experienced before.

At his locker, Monster had been honed in on the conversation. He slammed his locker shut and shuffled up to George. “Bet it’s that geek – Proffer.”

It was as though true enlightenment swept over George. His face changed rapidly from red anger to sweet revenge. “Yeah! You’re right! Since that little freak started filling in for our history teacher, Cynthia has been acting strange.... Only, I can’t really dig what she sees in him?”

“You know how some chics are. Could be she’s developed a thing for the nerdy type. You’ve got to admit that if there ever was a nerd, it is Otis Proffer.”

George laid an arm around his buddy. “You know what, dear friend. I think you are absolutely right.” The two boys started walking down the hall and everyone turned back to doing whatever it was they were doing.

“You gonna let that geek get away with it?” Monster asked.

“Hell no!” George said. “Halloween’s coming. I’ve heard ol’ Proffer gets his kicks outta doing special things for kids. Well ... this year, we are gonna do some special things for Mr. Proffer.”

Monster sniggered. “Sounds like my kind of fun. But what about my Mom’s party?”

George looked up to the top of the door of his next class – Spanish. “No problema, mi amigo. No problema. We can sneak in and out while she is putting everyone through those stupid games she thinks we want to play. We will never be missed.”

Monster grinned hugely. “I hear ya, George.”

Margaret emptied the large cellophane bag of multi-colored suckers into her largest salad bowl and placed the bowl on the mantel. It wasn’t good dark and already she could hear the high-pitched laughter of excited children down the street. She glanced out the living room window. The moon was full. She released the olive green drapes and stepped back. She hadn’t realized Halloween fell on the full moon this year. A faint whimper exuded from her throat. She had been in denial so long, she had put off warning Cynthia? But Cynthia had already left for Mr. Proffer’s house. Maybe she should call? She started across the room for her cell phone on the counter by the sink, then stopped. No. Cynthia would not believe her. There was always the chance that nothing would happen.... Still, what if it did? Before she could make up her mind, a gang of trick-or-treaters came to the door. She went to hand out their treats.

“So delighted you could make it, Cynthia,” Proffer said, making a sweeping gesture, showing proudly, the elaborately decorated room. The east wall was midnight blue with a large full moon in the center. Underneath the moon, was a wooden bridge. An owl swooped low, between the moon and the bridge and dozens of bats flittered by in circular patterns. The entire wall was a well-done mural. In front of the mural was a hand-carved wooden horse. Straddling the horse was the headless horseman, very realistic. Hours of work had gone into such a magnificent display.

Cynthia was more than impressed. “I love it!” she shrieked. “You did all this yourself? I’m absolutely amazed,” she added as an afterthought, absorbing the eerie view in front of her.

Proffer flushed slightly and nodded in his shy manner. “Yes ... I did. Took me close to a year. Believe I started it right around the end of last November.”

“Maybe you should be teaching art instead of history, Mr. Proffer.”

“Otis,” he politely reminded her. “I do teach art sometimes. Night classes. Mainland College.”

“I hadn’t a clue. That’s great! You’re very, very good.”

“There’s more,” he said proudly, proceeding to show her the west side of the room. A werewolf hovered over a terrified female victim on the dirt floor. Behind them, was another mural of a deep, dark forest and a cloudless night. All kinds of night birds and bats hung from the ceiling, all carved from wood.

“You didn’t do all this in one year,” she said, amazed.

“No. Much of it has been done over time. The bats were made about five years ago. The werewolf and his lady were made two. I have older carvings stored in my shed out back. I like a change of scenery from time to time,” he said, smiling pleasantly.

“It is all so realistic!” she said, getting goose bumps. And it wasn’t cold in the room. “All this doesn’t frighten the kids?”

He pondered the question momentarily. “Sometimes. Halloween’s supposed to be the night of fright and thrills, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “Of course, Otis. You’re so right.”

“Anyway,” he breathed softly (she noticed it to be a little sensual), “I get a bigger and bigger following each year. More and more children coming to see what Mr. Proffer has new to offer in chills and thrills.”

Cynthia didn’t doubt what he was saying. After all, wasn’t she one of the crowd that always flocked to see a Stephen King or Clive Barker flick? But this --! So real! “Well, I am very impressed.” She noticed a small table in the center of the room, covered with a bright-orange cloth, and two black candles were on each side of a shoe box in its center. The box was piled high with what seemed an endless assortment of candy delights for the children.

There was an interruption of rapping on the front door and a child’s voice calling, “Trick-or-treat!”

Otis’ face lit up and he grinned hugely, hurrying to the door. It was obvious; he was a kid all over again.

George and Monster huddled in the bushes just outside Otis Proffer’s home and peered in from the side living room window. “Wow!” Monster blurted, unwittingly. “That werewolf looks genuine!”

George nudged him hard in the ribs with his elbow. “Not so loud, dork. They might hear.”

Monster ignored George’s warning. “You think he really made those all by himself?”

“Who gives a rat’s ass?” George said, irritated, not caring if Otis Proffer had built the Brooklyn Bridge. The geek was making goo-goo eyes at his Cynthia. What made matters worse was Cynthia actually looked

like she was enjoying it.

After what seemed an endless parade of clowns, vampires, ghosts, monsters of every fantasy and nightmare, the evening quieted, only an occasional trick-or-treater dropping by. Otis had switched on his stereo – Fifties music – and asked Cynthia to dance. Cynthia’s slight hesitation, if there really was one at all, lasted only for a fleeting moment. For she found herself much more attracted to the nerdy teacher than she ever dreamed possible. She was locked in the arms of Otis Proffer and gazing into fascinating green eyes that danced with mysterious lights and promised something, but she wasn’t sure what.

As Otis whirled and dipped Cynthia around the room, she became more and more drawn to him, sensing he was alert to what she was feeling. He was pleased. He whispered her name, ever so provocatively. She trembled, realizing the feeling of newness she had spoken of to her mother only a few short hours before, dwelled and thrived in this little man.

“Who are you ... really?” she suddenly asked, surprising herself, pulling back from him just enough to look deep into those enchanting eyes.

He smiled with obvious amusement. A spark leapt between them. “Don’t you know, Cynthia?”

“You’re my teacher ... Otis Proffer. But who are you ... really?”

He glanced at the cuckoo clock on the wall over the kitchen door. “Eleven-thirty,” he said, seeming to ignore her question. “Half an hour until the witching hour.” Then he grinned a charismatic grin and gracefully swirled her around the room in a magnificent manner.

Cynthia knew none of her friends would ever believe this. Otis’ appearance was so out of sync with his true self. He was anything but a nerd – he was fabulous!

“That does it!” George said. “We’re gonna end this little party right now!”

Monster grabbed George’s shoulder just as George stood. “We aren’t gonna just burst in, are we? Can’t we have a little fun? You promised.”

“Sure, Monster. We’d be stupid not to take advantage of Halloween. Go get our masks out of the car. Proffer will never know who or what hit ‘em.”

“Right. Got ya.” He was off to grab the masks.

Margaret could not take it any longer. Twenty minutes until midnight. What if it did happen and she hadn’t told Cynthia? She would regret it for the rest of her life. Quickly, she scribbled a note for her husband Ralph. He worked evenings, a security guard for the First National

Bank. He would be home before she returned. She didn't explain where she was going or why, only that she had an important errand to run. She snatched her blue sweater up from the back of the sofa and rushed out into the night, praying she was worrying over nothing.

There was a knock at Otis' front door, followed by a falsetto, "Trick-or-treat!"

Cynthia looked at Otis. Each had a strange hunch. Otis headed for the door.

"Wait, Otis. Maybe you shouldn't. It is awfully late for kids to be out."

"Don't worry, Cynthia. I can take care of myself." He swung the door open. But there was no one there. "Huh?" He stepped outside and surveyed his surroundings, still not seeing anyone.

Cynthia stepped out to join him. "Someone's playing games, Otis," she said, and had a gut-feeling she knew who it was.

There was a loud crash out back.

"My storage shed!" Otis said and tore off for the backyard with Cynthia at his heels.

"I don't believe this!" Cynthia cried, just as two tall, burly figures in masks dashed through the darkness and into the alley behind the shed.

Otis had gone into the shed. When Cynthia got there, he was looking at his years of hard work. Someone had taken a sledge hammer to all of it. Tears welled in his eyes. Tenderly, he picked up the remnants of an old voodoo doll. "I made this at nineteen. It was one of my best works in wood." The face was splintered, the nose smashed in, big gashes down the cheeks. "Poor Leona," he moaned, rocking back and forth, now down on his knees in the floor, cradling the cherished doll in his arms.

Margaret ran for all she was worth, wishing she was twenty years younger. Her husband had their Mazda, their only good car. Her Buick was in the shop for repairs. "Please let her be ... all right!" she called into the night. "She won't understand if it happens. Please!"

There was a loud swish-swooshing as flames billowed skyward from the front of Otis' house. Someone had torched it. "No!" Otis yelled. "Not my home!"

"Bastards!" Cynthia called out at whoever was responsible. And she knew. She heard deep mocking laughter coming from the darkness.

Otis dropped the doll and ran outside to the front of his house. He

hesitated only for a moment, then, with arms batting at the leaping flames, plunged inside. Cynthia went to run in after him, but stopped at the door. The heat was intense. "Otis!"

Monster and George appeared out of nowhere.

"I knew it! No one else could be so damn low!"

"Come on, Cynthia. You don't really care about that freak, do ya?"

"Of course I care. He's human. More than I can say for you two jerks."

Otis sobbed and danced around frantically. Flaming fingers reached out at him from all sides.

"You can't just let him burn to death!" Cynthia said.

"Maybe she's right," Monster tore his mask off. "I wanted to have some fun. But this --!"

"Gone chicken-shit on me?"

"Guess I have." He actually looked remorseful for what they'd done. He threw his mask down.

Otis needed help. Cynthia threw her arms up to protect her face and rushed in. "Otis?" she coughed. The smoke was thick. She heard him gasping in a far corner.

Panting and frantic, Margaret tore onto the scene. She had seen the flames from blocks away. "Where's Cynthia?" she demanded.

George didn't answer, but Monster indicated with a nod that she was inside. "God!"

Cynthia found Otis huddled in the corner by the kitchen, arms folded protectively around one of his bats. His face was red from the intense heat as he peered up at her with pitiful eyes.

"You've got to get out of here!"

"Can't. It's my life. Gone ... all over."

Otis, you can create more. Come on!" She took his elbow, but he wouldn't budge. She noticed, ironically, that the cuckoo clock was announcing midnight, and just as the little yellow canary let out his twelfth cuckoo, something came over her, a rush of strength she'd never known before, and with it, a tremendous power. Dancing flames were no longer a threat. She glared at them defiantly, raised her arms to the swirling smoke and strange, foreign words came forth.

The flames obeyed and dwindled to a whispering flicker. The black smoke curled in upon itself and died. With a few more words of the foreign tongue, a cool breeze filled the small house, instantly refreshing the air.

Seeing the fire had died, Margaret understood immediately and rushed in to her daughter, who was standing in the middle of the room,

puzzlement on her face and tears in her eyes. "Mother, I ..."

"I know. I've been meaning to tell you for a long time ... but I was afraid."

"Of what?"

Otis, his back against the wall, stood. "I understand, Cynthia. I sensed it from you since you were a child. I used to watch you play on the school grounds."

"I had an inkling about you," Margaret said. "Guess I was right."

"What? But where did the strange words come from?" Cynthia asked.

Outside, a car started and sped off into the night. Monster and George were escaping the scene.

"Cynthia," her mother said, "like me, you are a daughter of the old ones."

"Old ones?"

"The gods of old," Proffer offered. "Ancient ones."

"Huh?" She started to laugh but realized the reality of what she had just done.

Otis nodded. "You've proven your powers."

"Is that why you act so strange sometimes, Mother? Like earlier this evening?"

"Yes, dear. Halloween's very special, as is the full moon. When you have them together powers surface that might otherwise stay dormant in an unsuspecting individual ... such as you. I was afraid you'd ... you'd suddenly come upon your abilities and you'd harm yourself or someone else. Now, I realize I had no reason to fear. You used your powers instinctively in a wise way." She noticed Otis bobbing his head in agreement. "And one more thing. We have to watch out for followers of the dark one. Halloween is their night too."

"Yes ... yes," Otis agreed.

Margaret turned to him. "I know you're a history teacher, but how do you know of these things?"

He cackled, momentarily, then regained his composure.

Margaret took a step back, eyeing him suspiciously. "You're not a follower?"

"No! Of course not."

"Mother! Otis has lived here for years."

"Yes," he agreed, "and I've loved watching you grow, waiting for you to mature, waiting for signs of your powers."

"How did you know, Otis?" Margaret asked, still somewhat bewildered.

"Because I am the dark one! And I've come to claim my bride!" He snatched Cynthia's hand and they disappeared into thin air.

Margaret screamed as flames engulfed the house around her.

Harwichport Drug Rehabilitation Center Babysitter

J.J. Brearton

Esme walked into the Guild of Harwich Artists' Gallery located on Main Street in Harwichport. She had a painting in a large plastic bag. A woman was seated behind a table reading a book. Esme stood in front of her for a few moments, politely waiting until she looked up.

"Can I help you?" the woman said.

"Yes. I'd like to sign up as an artist."

"Are you a Harwich resident?"

"Yes."

"Where do you live?"

"I live at the Harwichport Drug Rehabilitation Center."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm a babysitter there."

"What's your name?"

"Esmerelda O'My."

"O'My, is that Irish?"

"Yes. We're originally from Ireland."

"How old are you?"

"Well, I'll be thirteen next year."

"Next year? How old are you now?"

"Eleven and a half."

"I see. Now, do you live here year round?"

"Well, just for the summer."

"I'm sorry. The Guild is for year round residents."

"Darn!" Esme exclaimed, stomping her foot lightly. She turned and looked around. She really admired the paintings there. On the other hand, she thought she could do just as well.

"O.K. Maybe I'll come back when we decide to live here year round."

"Please do," the woman said. "Come in anytime."

Esme stepped out of the gallery and sat on the stoop for a few minutes. She didn't have anything to do until 4P.M.

Grabbing the plastic bag that held her painting, she crossed the street to the bike rack and unchained her bike.

She started to ride away. The plastic bag smashed against the wheel of

the bike. Suddenly, it just seemed annoying. Stopping, she took the painting out of the bag, a nice oil and canvas portrait of a horse, and leaned it against a telephone pole. It looked good there. On the back of the canvas she had taped the name of the painting, "Rick Danger, Race Track Spy."

Rick Danger was the name of the horse. He could take care of himself. Esme said goodbye to the painting, and rode away.

* * *

When Esme got home, outside the back door she could hear her father swearing.

"This is it! This is the last goddamn thing! This is it! This is her last day. You tell her," her father yelled. Then she heard a door slam and it got quiet.

Esme opened the screen door and stepped into the kitchen. Her mother was sitting at the kitchen table. It looked like she was thinking.

She turned when she heard Esme come in.

"Hi, sweetie," she said. "Did you hear all the fuss?"

"Yeah," Esme said. "What happened?"

"Well, Patty's boyfriend---we think---we're not sure, may have stolen the TV."

"Oh, no. Not the TV."

"Yeah, sorry, honey. You can understand why your dad was upset."

"Yeah. I'm upset too. What are we going to do? Are we going to get another one? Is he going to call the cops?"

"Your dad doesn't like to call the cops. You know him."

"Yeah, so what are we going to do?"

Before Esme could get an answer, Patty walked in the kitchen with her three year old, Timmy.

"Hi, Penny. Here's Timmy. I've got to go. His things are in the bag."

She put a paper bag on the kitchen table.

"Okay, Patty," Esme's mother said. "You're all set."

"Thanks, Penny."

"No problem, Patty. You look nice."

She had a light blue summer dress on and a white t-shirt. It was a cool June afternoon.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll be back by five."

"Good luck," Esme said.

"Thanks Esme. Bye."

She quickly left out the back door. Timmy stared at Esme. "Toys?" he said.

Esme picked him up and carried him into the adjoining game room. She just caught a glimpse of her mother going out the back door. Patty was in the backyard unlocking one of the bikes.

Through the screen window Esme could hear her mother talking gently to Patty, breaking the news to her. Esme saw Patty spit in the dirt.

“That’s not fair. It’s not my fault.”

“No visitors,” Penny said. “That’s the rule.”

“Bull,” Patty said, and rushed off on the bike.

“Don’t be upset,” Penny called after her.

* * *

Esme set up some wooden blocks and got out coloring books. She started to read to Timmy. She had picked out an what she thought was an appropriate book, “Johnny and the Policeman.”

Timmy was a nice kid, Esme thought, even if he did disgust her. He always had a runny nose. He was one of the dirtiest babies she’d ever seen.

Esme’s parents, Jason and Penny O’My, ran the Harwichport Drug Rehabilitation Center. It was located in an old antique store in Harwich. They had moved out of Harwichport, and the basement of a framing shop there, as they had promised, in accordance with the grant they had received from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Jason had a master in psychology. Penny had one in social work. They’d met in Brooklyn College, and dreamed of setting up a drug rehabilitation center. Now the reality of it was setting in, and it wasn’t pretty.

“Fat people!” Esme heard her father yell.

He was in the kitchen.

“Penny, where are you? I’ve got it! Fat people!”

“What do you mean, fat people?” Penny said, as she came in the back door.

“Fat people. No more of these drug addicts. I’m sick of them. They’re too dangerous.”

“Keep your voice down,” Esme heard her mother say. “Timmy’s here.”

“The hell with Timmy,” Jason said, in a slightly lower voice. “He’s out of here.”

“Quiet,” Penny said.

“Fat people. We’ll do a fat farm.”

Penny closed the door to the game room.

After about a half an hour, Timmy fell asleep. Esme had gotten a warm bottle for him.

There was a knock on the outside game room door. Esme looked over. It was Ricky Walker.

“Want to play golf?” he said.

“When?”

“Right now.”

“I’ve got this kid.”

“Ask your mom to take care of him.”

“It’s my job, stupid.”

“So, how long do you have to do it?”

“She’s supposed to get back at five.”

“So, at five then.”

“Sure,” Esme said. “Five.”

“Okay, but hurry up. It’ll start getting crowded at five. Meet you there, okay?”

“Yeah, put a ball in the slot.”

“Right.”

* * *

Esme got her clubs together and waited for Patty. She got a couple of new looking balls and some tees. She started searching for a glove. Just then, Patty arrived. She was early. She picked up Timmy, kind of roughly, and said, “I’m sick of this place, anyway.”

Esme didn’t say a word. She just grabbed her clubs, put them over the handlebars of her bike, and headed off to the golf course. Widow’s Walk Golf Club, a nine-hole public course, was about a ten-minute bike ride. She didn’t need to ask Ricky where he wanted to play golf. Widow’s Walk was the only one that would let them play without their parents.

Ricky sat on the front porch of the clubhouse waiting for Esme. He wasn’t exactly sure about hanging out with Esme, but nobody else his age really knew how to play golf. Not as good as Esme, anyway. For nine holes, she could break fifty. She almost had a 44 once, but was too honest. She counted a lost ball, took a 6 on the ninth and ended up with a 46. None of Ricky’s other buddies counted all their lost balls and penalties. When you played with Esme, you had to play by the book. “No cheap pars!” she used to say. “No fake birdies!” She had a lot of rules.

Esme locked her bike to the chain link fence, pulled a nickel out of

her pocket and said to Ricky, "Call it."

"Heads," Ricky said.

He was wrong.

Esme teed off, and hit a low liner into the first fairway. Esme always hit low liners. "Only way to play in the wind," she said. Ricky knew she didn't do it on purpose. It wasn't that windy. For some reason, Esme just couldn't hit it high.

"Hey," she said, as Ricky teed it up, "do you know where you can get a used TV?"

"Sure," he said, and hit a brutal slice. "Fuck, I can't believe it."

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where can you get a used TV?"

"Jerry's"

"Oh, Jerry's."

* * *

The next morning, Esme was waiting outside of Jerry's at nine a.m., when it opened. Jerry's was an antique store, which sold used books and CDs.

Esme watched Jerry flip the sign on the door from closed to open. Then he unlocked the door.

"So," she said, when she got inside, "got any used TVs?"

"Yeah, I just got one in. What are you looking for?"

"Let me see what you got."

Jerry brought her into the back of the store. "There it is," he said, pointing to Esme's old TV.

"So," she said, "you just got it?"

"Yup. Bought it from an old lady on vacation."

"She had a TV on vacation?"

"Yeah, she said she didn't think her room came with a TV, but it did, and she decided she liked the room so much, she'd stay for a while longer if she could sell her TV. So, here it is."

"Was she a young looking woman?"

"What do you mean?"

"Blond hair?"

"I don't check hair color."

"Okay," Esme said on her way out. "Maybe I'll stop back later."

* * *

The next morning Esme was having a bowl of cereal in the kitchen. Her mother was washing the dishes.

“Mom, what’s this with fat people?”

“You heard that?”

“Yeah. You can’t help hearing when he yells.”

“Well, Esme, it’s not really fat people. You can’t say that. It’s overweight people, I think. There’s some euphemism, I’m sure. Not fat people. Don’t call them that.”

“Are we going to do that?”

“Well, not just fat-I mean, overweight people. It’s a stop smoking program, for overweight people. We have to do substance abuse, for our grant.”

“That sounds better. Do you think we’ll get anybody?”

“I don’t know, sweetie. It’s a long shot, but your father’s just fed up with the drug addicts. We sure do need some income.”

“I found our TV.”

“You’re kidding?”

The front doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Esme said.

When Esme opened the door almost all the light seemed to be blocked out, as if there was an eclipse. Then she realized a gigantic man was standing on the edge of the front step. He was smoking a long white cigarette.

“O’My?” he said. “Is this the O’My’s?”

“Yes,” Esme replied.

“Hi. I’m Jimbo Cunningham, for the stop smoking.”

“Oh, great. Come on in.”

Esme watched with awe as the six foot three, four hundred and fifty pound Jimbo shook the house upon his entry. The floor sagged.

“I might have a few friends coming, if that’s okay,” he said.

“You’ll have to speak to my Mom.” Esme said. “Mom-Dad--a Mr. Cunningham is here.”

* * *

The next morning, Penny heard a banging on her back door. She made a mental note to get the doorbell fixed. It seemed like she made

that mental note every time someone came to the back door. She looked at the clock. It said five of six. She put on a robe and went down to see who it was.

She opened the door and saw Ricky Walker standing on the back porch.

“Here to pick up Esme,” he said.

“Esme? I didn’t hear about anything.” She glanced past Ricky and saw his mother, sitting behind the wheel of their car, idling in the street.

“We’re playing golf. It’s a tournament, actually. She didn’t tell you?”

“Well, why don’t you go ahead? I’ll give Esme a ride, and we’ll catch up with you.”

“I don’t know. You want me to tell my Mom to go home? I could wait. You could drive me over there too.”

“Hold on,” Penny said. “I’ll be back in a second.”

She ran upstairs to Esme’s room.

Esme was asleep. Penny shook her shoulder. Esme didn’t wake up. She was a very sound sleeper. Suddenly the clock radio alarm went off. Esme’s hand reached out to hit the snooze button. She opened an eye. “Mom, what are you doing here?”

“Ricky’s downstairs.”

“Oh, yeah. His Mom’s giving me a ride.”

“Where? Where’s she giving you a ride to?”

Esme jumped out of bed, ran down the hall and slammed the bathroom door behind her. Penny followed her down the hall, and then knocked on the door. “Where are you going?”

Esme opened the door, toothbrush in hand.

“You say something?”

“He said you’re in a tournament.”

“A what?” Esme said. She now handed her mother the toothbrush. “Here, hold onto this.”

Esme ran down the stairs and out the back door.

* * *

“I signed you up,” Ricky said, when they got to Widow’s Walk.

It was a bit foggy out. They stared at a big poster tacked onto the wall inside the clubhouse. It said, “Cape Cod Junior Tournament.” Ricky and Esme looked over the pairings with a few other kids.

Esme was a little disappointed. She was paired with Ricky. She shot him a glance, wondering if he had arranged it.

“Who set up the pairings?” she said.

One of Ricky’s friends, Cyril James, was standing there. “Evil Miss Nancy,” he said.

That meant the owner’s girlfriend, The Intolerant One. Nancy was standing near the first tee. “E. O’My and Ricky Walker,” Nancy announced.

Esme picked up her bag and stepped onto the first tee.

“What are you doing here?” Nancy said.

“I’m E. O’My,”

“I don’t know if there’s supposed to be girls.”

“Oh, come on, Miss Nancy,” Ricky said. “There are no other girls for the girls tournament. You know. Jacky said so.”

“He did?”

“Sure he did,” Ricky said. “Because there were no girls for the girls championship.”

“Well, if there were no other girls, that would just mean that she won the girls’ championship, not that she could play in the boys’ championship.”

“It’s not the boys’ championship,” Ricky said. “It’s the junior championship. It’s in the rules. It’s okay.”

“It’s in the rules?” Nancy said.

“Yup,” Ricky said.

“Well, then, what are you waiting for? Tee off.”

Esme hit a low line drive into the fog.

* * *

“How’s it going?” Evil Miss Nancy asked, as they came across the road off the fourth green and headed to the fifth tee.

“Not bad,” Ricky said.

A strange statement, perhaps, for him, since he was four shots down.

The Intolerant One watched in silence as they teed off. Esme hit a nice drive to the right side of the fairway. Ricky duck hooked under the trees on the left.

Esme and Ricky walked in silence on opposite sides of the fairway. Ricky was away, so he hit first. He hit a ground ball with a three iron that careened off a tree trunk into the middle of the fairway. He hit his next shot over the green with a three wood.

Esme hit a solid three iron just in front and to the right of the green.

When she got up to her ball, she noticed Ricky in the graveyard

behind the hole, looking for his ball.

"I'll just hit this," she said, "then I'll help you look."

She chipped on to within about eight feet.

When Esme got to the graveyard, Ricky yelled out, "got it." He was in a bad spot though, in some bushes that divided the green from the graveyard. His ball must have hit a gravestone and bounced back. He was lucky he wasn't out of bounds, and didn't have much of a shot. He was just able to chunk it on to the fringe of the green. He putted and left it about two feet short.

"That's good," Esme said. Ricky had a six. Esme could two putt and win the match. It was only a nine-hole tournament. She looked at Ricky. He was staring at the sky. He wasn't too happy. She felt bad about closing him out on the fifth hole, the quickest way possible, and thought about three putting on purpose.

She just couldn't. She knelt down on one knee and lined it up. Then she putted it straight in.

"Want to finish the rest?" Ricky said.

"Sure," Esme replied.

* * *

When they were in the clubhouse afterwards, they looked over the pairings again. They had to write down their score.

"Put down 10th hole," Ricky said. "Like it went into overtime." Esme grinned and wrote in, 10th hole.

"What's next?" Esme said.

"Chatham."

"Will you go with me?"

"What do you mean--to watch?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Okay, I'll watch."

* * *

A week later, Esme's father pulled up at the curb next to the Chatham Golf Course.

"Sorry I can't see this, Esme," he said. "I have to get back to the house."

"No problem, Dad," she said.

Esme and Ricky got out of the car and headed over to the pro-shop.

They went inside and saw a scoreboard written out on white paper on the wall. Esme was to be paired with Bobby Gantry.

“You know him?” Esme asked Ricky.

“Yeah,” Ricky said. “He’s not that good.”

“You think I could beat him?”

“It’ll be close.”

* * *

Esme and Bobby shook hands on the first tee. He was a skinny kid, a bit smaller than Esme.

They both hit good drives on the first hole and each had a par. Bobby had a five on the second hole, a par four. Esme had a six. The next hole was a disaster. Esme hit her ball in the trees to the right. Bobby hit into a gully just short of the green. It was a par three. Esme found her ball, and got all scratched up from brambles and rosebushes. She hit out into the fairway short of the green, and hit her next shot fat. Still, she wasn’t on the green. She took a six. Bobby had a five. She lost the next hole too. She felt rattled. Her arms were bothering her from the scrapes and the sweaty heat. She just wasn’t playing well. She was three down, with four to play.

The next hole was a par four, over a rise to a blind green. Esme popped up her drive to the left. Bobby hit a low slice to the right, just getting over the crest of the hill.

Esme hit a three wood, and hoped she’d get a good hop. She couldn’t see where the ball ended up.

When Esme and Ricky came over the crest of the hill they saw Bobby looking for his ball in the high grass near the pond. It was a tough area, with quite a few geese to contend with--not to mention their droppings. Ricky and Esme helped Bobby look for his ball. After a few minutes Bobby called out, “Here it is. I’ve got it.”

Ricky and Esme saw Bobby pointing to a ball in the rough. They walked to the green. Ricky whispered to Esme, “he dropped one.” It seemed like Bobby took a ball out of his pocket and dropped it when they weren’t looking.

When they got to the green, Esme noticed her ball was on the fringe. Bobby hit a bad chip short of the green. Esme two putted for a par. Bobby had a bogey. She finally won a hole.

The seventh hole was a tough uphill par four to an elevated green. Esme hit a nice drive in the middle of the fairway. Bobby sliced his to the

right. Esme had another par, Bobby a bogey. She was hot!

She parred the next hole too. Bobby had a bogey. It was all even.

Esme felt really confident now. She always played the ninth at Chatham well. Esme and Bobby both had nice drives. Esme hit her second shot into a bunker to the right of the green. Bobby was further off to the right. He hit a fairly good chip into the tricky multi-layered green. Esme blasted out to about seven feet. Bobby hit his putt short. Esme had a seven footer to win. For the first time, she noticed there were spectators around the green. All of a sudden, she was nervous. She couldn't ever remember sinking a putt on that green. It was impossible to read. She was feeling cocky though, as if she could play forever. She turned to Bobby and said, "I'll never make this putt." True to her word, she missed.

They went back to the first tee. It was sudden death now. Like Widow's Walk, Chatham was only a nine-hole course.

They both hit long drives. As she was walking up the fairway, she heard her mother and father yelling out the car window as they pulled into the parking lot, "Hey, Esme!" her father yelled. "Esme!" her mother called out.

Esme's concentration disappeared. She found her ball in some high grass to the left, with a clear shot at the green. Bobby was off to the right, looking for his ball. She knew she shouldn't, but for some reason couldn't help herself. She improved her lie, rolling it up a little so that it wasn't down so low in the rough. Everybody was over looking for Bobby's ball, so they weren't watching what she was doing.

Ricky came over and said, "he's got it."

Esme was away, so she hit first. She had the ball propped up so well, she skied it, and the ball fell well short of the green. Bobby had hit his second shot on the fringe. Esme's next shot was hacked short of the green. She then hit a weak chip to about fifteen feet. Bobby had a three-foot putt for his par. Esme didn't know what her score was at that point, but she was so mad that she just picked up her ball, threw her bag over her shoulder, and started walking back to the clubhouse.

Esme heard someone in the crowd say, "where are you going? Putt out! You should putt out. You never know!"

Esme knew.

Ricky walked hurriedly up to her. "Hey," he said. "Maybe you should have shook the guy's hand. You know, congratulated him."

"Nah, I just couldn't," Esme said. "Maybe I should have, but I couldn't. He's no better than I am, but I had no business winning that match. I cheated. I'll tell you about it later. Let's get out of here."

THE DEAD HORSE

Luis Cuauhtemoc Berriozabal

Beating
the dead horse
was such
a bad idea,
even if
it was just
a dream.

The horse
was a fine
animal,
an awesome
thing to
behold.

The dead
horse took
the beating
and didn't
make
any fuss.



AND LITTLE BOY BEGAT FAT MAN

Michael S. Morris

“I became death
the shatterer of worlds.”
Oppenheimer was taking bets
laying odds that the atmosphere
would ignite, combust endlessly
in a geometric afterbirth His pearls,
Little Boy and Fat Man, laid before swine. And they,
Prometheus and Beelzebub, dancing with Pandora and
Icarus, secretly musing between them - (All life
on earth!/Curiosity Was High!) flying into the sun
Collecting, of course, would take place in the boilingsea
which would create a melting pot of Gasses! A Paradox!
An odd physicist Laffer Perhaps the glowing
God legacy of man would be unbiodegradable, soulless
inorganic... “One word, Benjamin, my boy –
Plastic!...”

And that, joked the Mephistopheles
of this brood, was to Hiroshima – as death is
(to Nagasaki) – inevitable as taxes –
They reasonably argued against any forewarning
They cheered wildly when told of the never before
dreamed of destruction they brought to bear
on this defeated, desperate, savage kamikaze
Many a boy spared routing the flock of Samurai
to whom Christ was but a paper Tiger, the descendant
of the sun, their divine emperor, who understood the Jew as
self desire the chosen disease of the Jew. Now we’ll see –
the true revelation come And Little Boy begat Fat Man
and Oppenheimer lost a few dollars – of sleep,
to conscience – One said Kaddish, lighting candles,
canting prayers for those Chosen/Damned To a Man
they knew two volatile remnants pulsed in the tides
blood-echo Two indelible ghosts haunting beyond time,
one, history is a mask put upon both vanquished and
victor, an ill fit burnt through by the other: one quarter million human
beings...the sacred, innocent children, the waiting women
the old, the infirm, not dissident villains but Cities
absent armies...

he told me his dreams nine

Janet Kuypers

this also appears in the chapbook Dual

She said: Do you know that feeling you get when you're starting to fall asleep and then suddenly you feel like you're falling very quickly and you instantly wake yourself up? Everyone gets that feeling sometimes when they sleep. Did you know your body does that on purpose? You see, it happens when you're very tired and your body starts to fall into a sleep state at too fast a speed. Your heart rate, your breathing shouldn't slow down that fast. So your body makes you feel like you fall so you'll wake up, feel a little tense, and fall asleep more slowly.

He said: No, no, that's not what I'm talking about. I know that feeling, but what I'm talking about is being in a dream and going to the edge of a cliff and jumping.

She said: Well, what happens? Do you land?

He said: Sometimes I wake up before I land, sometimes I land gently and live. You've never had a dream like that before?

She said: No.

He said: Why do I have dreams like this? Why this cliff? Why do I fall? How do I land?

walking home from school

Janet Kuypers

this also appears in the chapbook Dual

once when I was little, I was walking home from school filled with fear, like I always was.

the other kids made fun of me. they called me names. sometimes they threw rocks at me. once they pushed me to the ground. I went home, bleeding knees and tears.

but once, I'll never forget, Patti from 121st street was walking behind me and threw her gym shoes at me. they landed right next to me as I was walking down that first big hill. I don't know if I stopped but I remem-

ber for a brief moment looking up at the tall tree branches next to the road - all the entangled dead branches - and I thought that all I had to do was pick up her shoes and throw them as hard as I could and she would never get her shoes back.

I looked at the trees for only a moment and I continued walking as fast as I could, as I always did, and suddenly the shoes were long behind me.

and the others were laughing.

I look back now and wonder why I didn't do it. was I scared of them? was I scared of myself?

I still keep asking myself that.

last before extinction

Janet Kuypers

this also appears in the chapbook Dual

Now he has so many opportunities. He has nothing to lose. Why not come out of the wilderness, attack everything it sees. Kill something. Suck the blood out, make him feel alive for once more. Let them try to restrain him. He has nothing to lose.

And for now it can fly to the highest redwood, look out over the world. Despise the world, the world that made him be alone, leaving him alone. Who will carry his name? Who will care for him when he is old? Who can he read bed time stories to?

Now it can feel death creeping upon him, closer and closer. He wants to scream. He calls upon nature; the tides rise, earthquakes shatter homes. He does not feel vindicated. He has lost.

And for now she can swim to the deepest darkest cave in the Pacific, hide from the solitude, swim lower and lower; can she find where all of the other animals of dying species hide, can she find them. There must be others. They can understand, they can live together, at the bottom of the earth. Could they show their pain for their species, share what is left of their love, create a new race?

Soon they will be no more and we will be taking their bones, reassembling them, studying their form, rebuilding their lives, revering them more than we ever did in life. This is what it all becomes. This is what it all boils down to. Study the bones. Study the mistakes. Study the bones.

Poam: Militant Man With Schizophrenia

Janet Kuypers

this also appears in the chapbook *Dual*

the problem with people in this country today is they don't love the US of God-damn A anymore. All these yuppie faggots riding their trains to work, their bmws, their jags, and I went to war for 'em - went to hell and back. we chanted Sodomize Hussein for 'em. and we loved the God damn wars: WWI, II, Korea, 'Nam, Nicaragua, Iraq cause we were fighting for something. something real. what the hell - what has this country come to?

Ha. He thinks he's really funny. Strong. I'm Jennifer. I know him. He has - n't been laid in years, and most of the times were with foreign women. What does it mean when you have to pay for sex? It means you're not a man, and he knows it. He doesn't usually let me come out. But, you see, I'm really stronger than him. Oh, and that kills him, a woman being stronger than him. But, you see, he never lets himself be loved. He tries to hide himself in his stupid war talk. But I come out every once in a while, put on my little red dress, put on the lip - stick. Mmm, you know, lipstick feels so good gliding across your lips.

I shanked a nigger faggot when I was in the clink. the faggot tried to rape me but he didn't know who he was dealing with. I'm a man, Goddamnit. I've robbed stores. I've killed men. I've had women. and there's always an enemy and I can beat 'em all. once when I was in grade school a kid called me a pansy and I beat him so hard they had to take him to the hospital. nobody messes with jimbo breen.

I know I'm better looking than all those Hustler magazines he keeps. He keeps these old magazines, you see, old car and drivers, old soldier of fortunes, old hustlers. Some of 'em gotta be ten years old. Usually when I take over I just look through those sex mags and laugh. They don't know what they're doing. I

could make a man happy. I could give it to him any way he wanted it. God, I want a man inside of me, in my mouth, in me now. I could even climb the corporate ladder, if that's what would turn them on, if only I could overpower that bastard's mind. I could be fucking every man I saw. I could walk out on the streets and be whoever I wanted. God, I could be something.

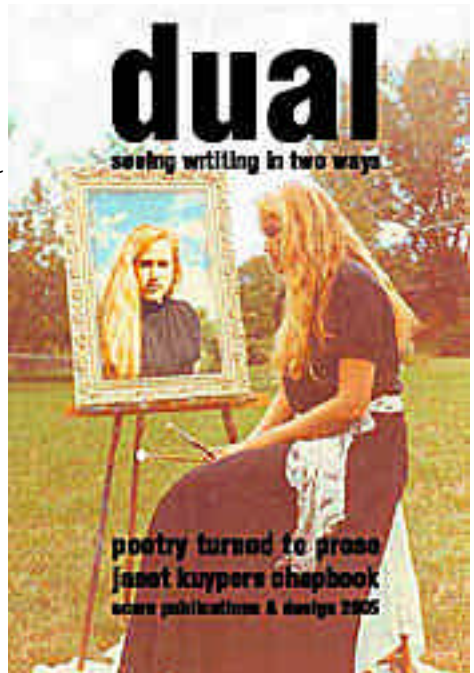
women are such bitches. they can't be trusted .

Who is he hiding from? Let me come out.

this is a good country. nobody's got no God-damn pride anymore, and I'm sick of all the faggot yuppies, these God-damn cowards, corporate cogs - they don't stand up for what they believe in. and people don't fear the Lord anymore. know who they should look up to. I have a picture of Ollie North. it's an eight-by-ten. it's framed in my kitchen.

I wish he'd clean this place up. I'm not going to do it. What, does he think I'm gonna cook for him too? Why doesn't he get a job, one that lasts for more than four months, one that's not in a liquor store so he can get drunk every chance he gets. Thank God he doesn't have the guns anymore. He used to have a ton of 'em, keep them hidden in every corner of this one-bedroom hole above some old bag's garage. If the guns were still here, I'd kill him. No, I couldn't, I'd be killing myself then. He's all I got. I just wanna get out, I wanna live, I wanna stop hiding. I want him to take down his guard for just one minute, that guard of his that is still stronger than his sargeant's from Korea. Damn it. I wish his mind would just rest, so I could take it over again, but it seems to always be there, on the defensive, darting around, looking for ways to protect himself.

there's a war behind every corner. you're gotta learn to fight. people don't know who to trust anymore, what to believe in, but I do. I am jimbo breen.



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