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down in the  
revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

053

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Scars cover art of a delapidated PA barn.

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## Victory

Dimitris P. Kraniotis

Short  
is the life of victory.  
Stuck  
on the mud of the mistakes,  
on the mud of the tarmac.

# Friend and Benefactor

Ken Dean

John Ashley was sitting at his favorite coffee house at West 3<sup>rd</sup> and LaGuardia Place in Manhattan, sipping a latté and checking his email. This was the way he usually spent Saturday afternoons; his way to relax. Working for the government studying climatology was his mainstay, but he liked to write also. Some works had been published, both fiction and non-fiction.

His income from the government was more than adequate, but he would love to write for a living instead. With today's technology, he could write from just about anywhere in the nation or most places on the globe. Just imagine the freedom! He had worked for the government long enough now to think about retirement along with pursuing the second career.

John had been married once and had a daughter. He was now divorced from Andrea and he tried his best not to converse with her. All that came out of those discussions were bitterness towards him and the divorce. He, on the other hand, just wanted to forget that portion of his life. The only bright point was their daughter, Marcia, who was in college studying towards an archeology major with a minor in geology. She was quite bright and could accomplish anything she put her mind towards, and was also at peace with the divorce. She was old enough now to realize that it was an incompatibility issue.

Luckily he made enough to have money to help her with most of her college expenses. John liked to discuss theories with her occasionally about the climate during different time strata that she studied from some of the core samples taken in Antarctica; especially if it concerned the trend towards global warming.

Most of the booths in the coffee house around him were unoccupied. He was surprised to look up and see a beautiful, young blond woman heading in his direction. She had just the right amount of tan, wearing shorts showing plenty of leg, and had her hair up in a very feminine ponytail. Wow — enough to take your breath away. The epitome mixture of girl next door, beautiful blonde and tanned tennis female.

“Is it okay if I share this booth with you?”

Like he would say no?

“Oh... of course. No problem.”

She was carrying a backpack with her and sat down a latte on the table while placing the backpack on the floor.

“It's beautiful outside”

“Yes, it's quite a day.”

“Little warm, though. That's why I thought I would sit inside with the air conditioning.”

“Same here.”

Obligatory weather small talk.

She reached over to shake his hand.

“My name’s Becka Skysdale, glad to meet you.”

“John Ashley here, likewise.”

“What’s your occupation, John? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I’m a climatologist for the government. Research division. You?”

John realized something odd about her accent. It didn’t fit the New York area. He felt certain she was American, but her accent didn’t fit anything he had ever heard before in an American dialect; it was too perfect. Strange.

“I’m a student; no... more like a study.”

A study?

“And what do you study?”

“Actually, I like to research climatology also; global warming in particular.”

“Whoa! That’s my favorite field. Imagine you sitting down at the very same booth as myself. That’s quite a coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. Everything happens for a reason.”

“That’s cool – to each their own.”

“John, do you consider yourself an open-minded person?”

“I’d like to think so. I’ve found that open-mindedness is usually just a difference of opinion, with the supposedly open-minded person thinking they have a fresh new idea. Then when tempers rise, open-mindedness usually de-evolves into absolutism. So it’s hard to find a truly open-minded person. I can try to be though, depending on the subject.

“Good. Because there’s an idea I’d to run across you.”

“Great – go ahead.”

“What if I told you that I wasn’t from around here?”

“Where are you from, France?” John had to laugh inside. Sometimes his sense of humor was jackass and got him slapped, but he amused himself. Some shrink at one point in the past told him that was a good thing.

“No silly,” Becka chided making a funny but still beautiful face at him, “it’s much farther than that.”

John’s interest was piqued. “And just how far are we talking about?”

“How about somewhere between five to fifty light years? I can’t be specific because of secrecy issues and the fact that your species is extremely bright.”

‘Our species,’ he thought? He quickly looked around for cameras or other people watching, thinking he was being punked.

“Okay — you’re pulling my leg, right?”

“No John, I’m totally serious. I can prove it if you want.”

“Uh — I’m afraid you’ll have to. Call me skeptical.”

“Okay — here goes. Watch your laptop screen.”

Becka looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then she reached up and touched the top of his laptop screen while touching a bracelet she was

wearing. John's ordinary screen suddenly became a three – D view of space. It seemed to envelop his entire field of vision as if he had blinders on. The stars started to speed towards him for a few seconds and then slowed until a solar system was in view. He felt as if he could reach out and touch the planets.

"This is our home system," Becka's voice came from outside his range of sight, "Can't tell you where it is though."

John's vision returned suddenly and he noticed Becka removing her hand from his laptop.

He was feeling a little vertigo. Normal vision returned after shaking his head for a second.

"Enough proof?"

John was impressed, for sure.

"That could be a programming trick for all I know; although a really good one."

"Okay — this calls for more advanced methods."

She grabbed his wrist and looked him directly in the eyes, and he realized suddenly how strikingly blue and beautiful her eyes were in contrast to her blonde hair. He suddenly heard a clear voice in his head.

"John, can you hear me? Answer back by thinking the words if you do."

Becka's lips weren't moving at all, but it was her voice!

"Yes — I can hear you," his lips not moving either.

She let go quickly.

"Wow! What was that?"

"A rudimentary form of telepathy. But it requires touch to initiate."

"Okay — you have my full attention." He had to admit it would be pretty hard to pull a trick like that.

Could this be possible, an actual being from another world? They must be marketing experts though, sending a female looker like Becka knowing it would pique his curiosity from the start.

"If you're an alien, how is it you look so damn beautiful and human?"

"We're very similar to your species, just a few minor genetic differences. The close similarity is what attracted us to your world. It was almost like looking in a mirror. We're much more technologically advanced though, as you will find out."

"Why did you pick me to contact?"

"Oh — you weren't the first. There have been several down through the years. We've been watching your planet and intermingling with your population for some time now.

"And just how long has your advanced species been watching us?"

"About fifty years or so. Once we discovered your radio and TV transmissions we started a study. We have a sense of humor just like you do. You're 'I Love Lucy' and 'The Three Stooges' shows have to be some of the best. But we've seen a progression leading to more of a normalcy towards violence, which will have to be addressed eventually. We faced the same hurdle ourselves, and luckily made it through. And we're happy to share our wisdom on the subject. We don't want

your species to vanish, John; it has attributes that are very interesting.”

“Interesting how?”

“The fact that you’ve made it this far speaks volumes, given the fact that you could have destroyed yourself many times just in the past century. Your species has a ruthless side and also a compassionate one. That makes you fairly unique. Not many species we’ve studied have that attribute. We’re a lot more alike than we are different; that’s why we’ve taken such an interest in your progressive advancement.”

“I’ll have to say I’m impressed and awed. Your interest in us is flattering. And what are your plans for our advancement and this visit to humble, little old me?”

“Well, the first issue is one right up your alley. Global warming. It will advance much quicker than your studies lead you to believe. You might have ten years left before your civilization is overcome by it. And you won’t have the capacity yet to escape your planet or save yourselves once that time comes.”

“That’s a damn short time frame. How can we stop it before it’s too late?”

“That’s where your friendly, neighborhood alien comes in; we have a way to help reverse the process.”

She reached into her backpack and brought out a silvery disk that looked like a hockey puck.

“Pray tell how that little thing will do any good.”

“A little faith, John. Great things come in small packages. All you have to do is get in a private plane or drive up a mountain road until you’re above two-thousand feet. Toss it up in the air at that altitude and it will take off by itself. It’s totally self-powered and will ascend to the level in the atmosphere where the layer of carbon dioxide gathers. As it circles the globe at the same level, it will turn just the right amount of carbon dioxide into harmless gas elements. Then it will stay in orbit to ensure there’s a normal amount in the atmosphere. It will take about a year to do its job, and it will stay there indefinitely making sure the levels of carbon dioxide don’t increase. How’s that for magic?”

“I’m awestruck; all in that little package?”

“Don’t be; humans would have come up with the same technology, just too late to do any good. Like I said before; your species is very bright and intuitive.”

“But why me? You could have done the same thing much easier.”

“Let’s just say its part PR, part testing your resolve, faith and determination. We want a human to be part of the process; makes for better species bonding. Plus I’ve brought along some other gifts for you. Partly for helping, and partly for convincing. And I’m not worried if you say you met an alien; most people wouldn’t believe you. If the disk or any of the gifts are tampered with, they will turn into inert and unrecognizable components. There will be nothing to back up your story. We’re not ready for full exposure yet.”

“Gifts? Sounds like when the Dutch traded Manhattan from the Canarsee Delaware Indians.”

“Not quite that level of barbarity — just a way of thanking you for hopefully being part of the process.”

“How can you be sure I’ll do what you’re asking?”

“I think you’ll make the right choice. Our people have been watching humans for a while now; you in particular recently. It’s made us fairly good judges of human character.”

“You’ve been watching me? To what extent?”

“Not to worry; it’s all been on a professional level. Let me show you what else I brought.”

She dug back into her backpack again and brought out a small bag, sort of a Ziploc-looking plastic one, about sandwich size. Also there was a masculine bracelet; not bad looking. Next was a laptop that looked to be an exact copy of his.

“Hey — my laptop, I mean, one that looks like mine.”

“Looks like it, but very different. It’s already loaded with everything you normally use day to day, which was fairly easy to do, but there are several enhancements. It’s indestructible; you could drop it from ten – thousand feet and you wouldn’t even see a scratch afterwards. Plus it would still work. You can also contact me if you wish using your standard e-mail program. My name is already pre-loaded into your contacts. Oh, a big plus, you won’t need a power source or broadband connection; that’s all taken care of.”

“A modern geeks dream!”

“We thought you would like that. The next item is this bracelet. It’s a distress beacon and time-space locator, along with what you would call a Swiss Army collection of other functionalities. All you have to do is touch it and think ‘help’ and I can be at your side in about ten seconds. And don’t worry about false alarms; we can tell if you’re sincere or not. It also has a shield function, touch it and think ‘shield’ and you will be protected with an impenetrable, invisible shield. Turn it off the same way. Another attribute is the ability to touch it and think of a place you want to go to and you will be there; but be very careful with this function. It is very powerful. Plus if you do use it, do so discretely so as not to cause alarm. ”

“Plus I’m sure you can also use it to track my movements.”

“Of course, that’s part of the process for it to work. But remember, we have only your welfare in mind.”

“Okay, I guess I could live with that. I’ve no secrets to hide anyway.”

“Don’t even worry about that; you’re always free to live your life the way you want. Now...I’ve saved the best for last. This plastic pouch holds a skin patch that, if you decide to wear it, can make dramatic changes to your physiology. You only need to wear it overnight once. The next day you will feel different. It’s basically a genetic enhancer geared towards your species.”

“What kind of dramatic changes are we talking about?” he asked nervously.

“First off, you’ll feel much younger, twenty-five years old to be exact. You won’t age past that point, although you’ll still look the same as you do now to avoid suspicion. You’ll never be sick or contract any disease, plus you’ll heal incredibly fast from any injury. Try not to let anyone see that happening, because

it would cause suspicion. But then again, who would believe them? And don't let your government get their hands on you. If they would happen to hear about someone with very special abilities they would become a little too curious. And from what I've seen, they can be tenacious. Once they know your identity, they wouldn't leave you alone. But if you were discovered and they become a problem, we have non-lethal means to make them 'forget' about you."

"I would encourage you to try these items, especially the patch, as a way of convincing you of our sincerity. If you decide to pass on using the disk, we'll have to find someone else, as your planet's future depends on it. The gifts you can keep as a token of our friendship."

"Becka, I'll have to admit this is a lot to take in. But I will give it some deep thought. That I can promise you."

Becka reached over and took his hand. He could almost feel what was like an electric tingle from her touch. Her eyes were hypnotic blue; deep enough to swim in. Damn he was attracted to her! Maybe that was part of their plan though. He still couldn't totally trust an actual alien. She pulled her hand away, looking a little sheepish. Maybe she had read his mind.

"I hope you do carry through with this, John. Besides being extremely important to your planet and species, we would still be able to work together in the future. I think we would make a great team. Now if you'll excuse me, there's someone else I need to talk to. Go ahead and take your items and try them out, ask yourself if you're totally convinced. We'll know if and when you've deployed the device."

"I do hope to see you again also; and for all the right reasons."

"Of course — same here," she held her hand out to shake his, "to the future?"

He took her hand and held it more than shook.

"I'm still quite overwhelmed by all this, but to the future."

"Great," she said as she picked up her backpack, "catch ya later."

She looked around to make sure no one was looking in their direction and then gave him a wink, touched her bracelet and was gone.

All he could say at that point was 'Holy shit!' He plunked down hard in his seat and just sat for a few minutes, thinking. Could all of this be real; a beautiful alien with fantastic technology asking for his help to save the world? He wasn't dreaming; it all felt too solid.

There was only one way to be sure. He gathered up the items she had given him and put them in his briefcase, handling them carefully, although he wasn't sure why. It was heavy now with two laptops and the extra items. Exiting the coffee shop, he made his way home to his townhouse on the upper west side of Manhattan. Once there, he walked into the kitchen and laid the items out on the kitchen table.

There were a few other essentials he needed. He reached into a junk drawer and pulled out a basic hammer; next, the cupboard for his beloved coconut rum.

It smelled fantastic as he poured it over ice in a tumbler. He could feel the heat running down his throat as he took several deep swallows. Yeah! That's



what I'm talkin' about.

Lord knows he needed a strong belt after what had transpired so far.

He made sure the laptop was sitting square on the table. Bringing the hammer up high, he then brought it down hard on the laptop lid. It was like he was hitting a steel beam. The hammer jumped and almost flew out of his hand. But he had heard a crack, and looking under the table he discovered one of the legs had almost split off, but not a mark on the laptop. He opened the lid and turned it on as he would his own. It powered up instantly, with no hesitation or wait time. Looking at the display, he noticed a small infinity symbol beside the battery and broadband connection indicators. Okay; so much for the laptop.

He didn't try the hammer on the bracelet, although he was sure it would be indestructible also. It had a good fit on his right wrist and felt comfortable. Touching it with his left hand, he thought 'shield'. Then he picked up the hammer and tapped himself on the chest with it; couldn't feel a thing. Swinging again harder, though not hard enough to really hurt him, the hammer made contact with his chest. Still didn't feel anything at all, but the hammer recoiled out of his grasp and imbedded itself into the far plaster wall. Damn!

This thing could probably recoil a bullet or knife, but he wasn't ready to try that quite yet.

He turned the shield off the same way it was turned on. Now for the other feature, which was a little scarier, but what the hell. Touching the bracelet, he thought of the Eiffel Tower where he had once been on the top observation deck during a trip to Paris. It was suddenly dark — no — there were city lights all around him. Wind was causing rain to pelt his face. He was overlooking the city of Paris! It was about two in the morning here due to the time difference. The trip was instantaneous. Damn this thing was powerful! He touched it again and thought of his kitchen; he was instantly back home again. This was going to be a fun toy.

After pouring another drink and drying himself off, he went to the living room to sit and think. Should he try the patch? Everything Becka had said about the items she had given him turned out to be accurate. Should he trust her and her people? What the hell, he thought. It was worth the chance if it meant saving the world.

Picking up the Ziploc bag, he opened it and took the patch out. It was wrapped in what looked like silvery foil. Tearing that open revealed what looked like a nicotine patch. It had no smell to it, although one side was slightly sticky. Examining the patch made him feel like a fucking monkey with a cell phone. Hey, what the hell, he was human. He pulled up his left sleeve and stuck it on his upper arm. Immediately he felt a tingling sensation that was spreading up and down his arm and across his chest. Drowsiness was starting to overtake him also. He quickly made his way to his bed and was instantly asleep.

*Somewhere far away:*

Becka was watching the monitoring panel. She turned to her supervisor.

"In the past 3 hours, John Ashley has tested the laptop and the functions of

his bracelet. He has also activated the patch and is now asleep.”

“Good. Hopefully by tomorrow morning he will be convinced that we are totally trustworthy and continue with his mission. Great work, Becka.”

Becka smiled. She liked John Ashley and was hoping to be able to work with him in the future.

*Back in Manhattan:*

John was waking up, rolling over to look at the bedside clock; about 8:15 in the morning. The sun was up and it was supposed to be a spectacular day. He noticed as he stretched and sat up that the usual small complaints from his body were absent: no sore back from laying a certain way on the mattress and his knees didn't pop when he stood up. His body felt different overall; strong and virile. Reaching down he felt his abdomen. Instead of the flabby belly of a fifty-three year old, there was flat, hard muscle. He realized that some new clothes would be necessary also, to fit his slimmer body. The bursitis he had been suffering in his left shoulder was completely gone. Looking in the bathroom mirror he saw the usual face staring back at him with his graying, thinning hair. As she promised he had what felt like a brand new body, but still looked the same. The weight loss and toning up could be explained away as regular exercise and eating better. Reaching up to pull the patch off his arm, he discovered it had fallen off by itself during the night. He went to the bed and found it, brought it back to the bathroom and flushed it. It was most likely inert now.

There was one more test he had to try; curiosity had the better of him. Making his way to the junk drawer in the kitchen, he pulled out an exacto knife with a razor-sharp blade.

Next he got a kitchen towel just in case the experiment went wrong. Holding the blade very carefully, he started making a very shallow cut on his left forearm. Amazingly, he saw the cut start to heal closed before he even finished! Along with that, he felt no pain whatsoever. The area he had cut looked perfectly normal, as if nothing had been done to injure the skin. Okay, this time a little more aggressive. Making a deeper cut in the same area, he saw a little blood come out, although there should have been much more. But it healed up just as fast, with very little blood residue on the skin. Again no pain. He wiped the slight smear of blood off with the towel. The cut area again looked as if nothing had happened. It had healed so fast! That was about as far as he was going to take this experiment, but it had made up his mind.

It was a beautiful Sunday. He decided to drive to a park near Shandaken in the Catskill Mountains that he was familiar with. He could have used the bracelet, but it might have drawn too much attention being daylight and he also had no control over where he would show up in the park, although he figured the device was intuitive and wouldn't land him in the same space as a another object. And the elevation was right; Becka said two-thousand feet, and Shandaken was around four-thousand. It took about two and a half hours for the

drive to Max V. Shaul State Park along route 30. He pulled in and parked. There were lots of folks here enjoying the perfect summer day. Damn; he would have to find a more secluded spot.

The hockey puck was in his pants pocket. A hiking trail might be a better idea; more privacy. He had dressed in just shorts and polo due to the excellent weather. There was a hiking trail just across the parking lot, and he made his way towards it. Hiking up and down the trail, he finally found a spot where he was alone. Pulling the puck from his pocket, he fingered it for a moment, still amazed at the array of advanced technology he had been introduced to. Looking around to make sure he was still alone, he reared back and threw the puck as far up as could, Frisbee style. It arced up into the sky, stopped and leveled out. Then it began to glow blue and snapped up into the sky with no noise and was out of sight in seconds. Curious; why hadn't the puck taken off by itself right out of his pocket once he reached two-thousand feet? Must have been designed to have sentient intervention before it started working. John stood there for a few minutes looking up into the sky. He had no doubt it would work as promised; he had seen what their technology was capable of.

*Somewhere far away:*

Becka was again talking to her supervisor.

"John has deployed the device as we had hoped."

"I didn't think he would fail to be convinced after all we had shown him. You now have permission to work with him in the future. But be careful to not get too emotionally involved. Their species is very similar to our own. It could cause complications."

"I realize that and will practice caution." Becka replied. But to she thought to herself, 'It might already be too late for that.'

*Back in New York:*

John took his time driving back from the Catskills, taking in the beauty of the early summer drive. Most of New York State was beautiful country. He wished he could have seen it about five-hundred years ago before the European settlers had come and left their inevitable scar on the countryside. He had stopped at a small roadside diner along route 28 for a bite to eat. Couldn't beat it; the food was homemade and excellent. Had to make a mental note as to where it was for future reference. The beauty vanished, of course, as he neared the Manhattan area.

Deploying the carbon dioxide controlling device had left him with a real sense of accomplishment. Hopefully in a year the results would be seen.

John arrived at his townhouse in the early evening. Once inside, he headed straight for the kitchen. Opening the new laptop, he started up the email program. Sure enough, there was Becka's contact info. He keyed up a new message to her:

'Becka, I'm sure you're already aware of this, but the device was deployed at approximately two PM this afternoon. What's next?'

He clicked send.

# The Volunteer

by Pat Dixon

to Megan

“So, young miss, you already have three college degrees, an’ now you’re working on your fourth one? Well, I won’t hold that against you—but I can’t speak for Roscoe here.”

Patrick Growel squinted at me and pursed his lips in what looked like an angry expression. *Two big pussy cats! Two big, mostly toothless, old Toms!* were my amused thoughts. I have no idea whether Roscoe, purring in Patrick’s lap with a gnarled, spotted hand kneading his neck, had been neutered, nor did I care to know. I did not speculate about Patrick’s sexuality either—and I trusted that he wasn’t thinking at all about mine. Because my work in the field demands it—both for comfort and to get along with “male native laborers”—and because I’d rather have my brain be the center of people’s attention, almost always I dress androgynously, with my hair tucked up and my figure—unrevealed.

“Roscoe’s one of the great cats,” I said. “He knows it, I know it, and he knows I know it. That makes me all right with him. And as long as he’s in a *warm* place, he doesn’t care a rat’s ass about any other kinds of degrees.”

I’d hoped my little pun or even my use of the word “ass” would provoke a smile or at least some other reaction from Patrick, but his expression did not change. He just slowly looked down at the tabby’s huge head, which he began scratching where its capital “M” is. Then, without looking up, he said, “Truer words were never spoken, young lady. She has *your* number, Ross, ol’ fella.”

His mouth stayed open at the end of that sentence, and I expected he would add a comment like “I guess there’s a little hope for her yet,” but he just wheezed a little and said nothing further.

“Can I fix you a cup of coffee, Patrick? Or a cup of tea? I saw you have a nice selection of tea out there in your kitchen. Any preference?”

He squinted over at me and after a long pause said, “Some of the licorice tea would be my preference—a whole pot of it. But I guess you could make us each a cup of instant coffee instead.”

“Why’s that? I’ll be happy to make a whole pot of tea. It’ll only take a minute or two more, using your microwave oven. In fact, licorice tea sounds like a flavor I’d like to sample.”

“Well—I guess, then, you could brew it up in a mixing bowl or something, young lady.”

“Diane,” I said, in case he had already forgotten my name. “You can call me Diane if you want to. Or call me ‘young lady’ if that suits you better. Whatever. So tell me, Patrick: just *why* a mixing bowl instead of a teapot? Did you have a teapot that got broken or something?”

I suspected that this was the case. Roberta Schwarz, my Hospice supervisor,

had said that Patrick Growel would be a special problem for me for a number of reasons. Three days before when I got home from teaching, I found her message on my answering machine and called her back. She'd said she needed a one-time fill-in, because one of the other volunteers had come down with a cold and couldn't go to his current patient on Friday afternoon from 1:00 to 4:00. She said that I was the only other volunteer who was free Friday afternoons and apologized profusely for giving me a male patient, something very rarely done with female volunteers. I'd told her I could take the case and would be happy to do so.

After Roberta gave me the patient's name, address, phone number, illness, and prognosis, she added, "Diane, Patrick's regular fellow—let me paraphrase so that I'm not revealing anything confidential here—the regular fellow seems to think that Patrick is a hostile old coot who is unresponsive—and bitter—angry. You might end up just—mmm—sitting across from him for three hours and never getting word one out of him. It could happen—and probably will. He has no known interests—cards, checkers, chess, Monopoly, or whatever. He doesn't want to watch any daytime TV or want to have a newspaper read to him. He has a mangy old cat of some sort that he sometimes will let up on his lap. So, if it's not going well, just feel free to make up a story about needing to be someplace else and just leave early. Do you have enough copies of the visitation forms, or should I mail you some more?"

I told her I was well supplied with forms—in fact, I added that whenever I run short, I just make extras off the copying machine where I work part time.

She thanked me for taking this assignment and apologized for sticking me with a grouch.

"Growel seems to be an appropriate name for him, Diane. Anyways, I'll try to give you a sweet little old lady next time. Okay?"

"Make her black, Roberta, if you can, or Muslim. That would be my preference to try to increase human understanding in this sad crummy world of ours."

She explained once again that such people seldom chose to become part of the Hospice program here, and I told her it was all the more reason to let me have them if and when they ever did. I know she thinks I weird, but sometimes weird is good.

But I digress. Patrick stared at the far wall towards the back of his little house for half a minute or so before answering me.

"Nope—Diane. The teapot didn't get broken—at least not by me."

"What happened, then?" I asked.

After another longish pause he replied: "I don't want to accuse anybody of anything wrongly—but three weeks ago when that other fella—that Hospice guy who normally comes here, you know, was here—well—it wasn't here after he left. I can't say what's become of it, but I haven't had any tea since that day. Coffee is what I now make for myself—and what he and I have when he comes here—if he's in the mood."

"So you can't make tea just by the cup?"

"Thrift. I'm on a limited income now, and I don't want it to run out before

I go, which they tell me won't be long. I make six cups of tea with every bag. The pot held three cups each time, an' I used each bag twice. But, for guests, I'd use two bags in the pot to make three cups."

"Patrick, do you remember what I said I do—besides teach at Witherspoon part time, I mean?"

"Yes."

"I'm an archaeologist—and you know what we archaeologists do for a living—at least part of the time, when we're not making drawings and measurements and writing up our findings? Huh?"

"Course I do, young lady. I may not've finished high school, but I've had an education—plenty of ways to get that."

"Of course your right. I was just trying to be a little playful—and kittenish. I don't go around treating people with different backgrounds as dumb. But then you and I don't really know much about each other yet, do we, so I can see where you might've thought I was doing that, okay?"

He looked down at Roscoe and suddenly wheezed a bit in a staccato manner for five or six seconds. At first I wondered if Patrick were having some sort of fit or something, but then I realized that this was just his way of laughing. When he looked up at me, he had a small grin on his lips and what might have been a small twinkle in one of his squinty eyes.

"Y' dig stuff up," he said.

"Perfect," I said. "I'm going in there and make us some tea. I'll be back shortly while it's 'baking' in your oven. Would you like me to get anything for Roscoe while I'm in the kitchen?"

"Maybe two of those fish yummys up in the cupboard over the stove—the regular stove," he said. "Would that be okay with my big boy?"

Roscoe made no reply but just watched me get out of the soiled stuffed chair and walk to the kitchen. He seemed to sense his food had been discussed, for he hopped off Patrick's lap and followed me. Or perhaps he really wanted to make sure I didn't steal anything while I was in there. I bent down and gave the top of his head a short scratch with my short nails, and he rubbed the side of his mouth against the knee of my jeans. Patrick seemed to take no notice of this flirtation between us.

In the kitchen, it took me only forty seconds to locate the teapot. It was a tall grayish thing with the spout being a cat's right front leg, the handle being a cat's tail, and the lid being a cat's head. A small knob had been added to the bottom edge a little to the left of the spout, representing the other forepaw, and the whole thing was crudely painted as if by a young child. I looked inside and found a pair of nasty, moldy tea bags in a shallow brownish broth of nasty, moldy liquid.

After I disposed of the fungi and gave the pot a good scrubbing with some cleanser and ammonia that I found under the sink, I rinsed it five times with hot water. Then I dropped two yummys for Roscoe into his little bowl, and, holding the teapot aloft at shoulder height with both hands, I stood in the doorway to Patrick's living room.

"Ta-da!" I said. He turned towards me and looked up, raising an eyebrow.

“Is this what I should make our tea in, Master?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Where did you find that?” he said.

“I could tell you I’m an archaeologist and excavated it from under some old letters and flyers and dish towels that are on your kitchen counter—but you wouldn’t believe me, so I’ll come clean instead, Patrick. I am a witch—or, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, a jinn or genie—but not quite the Barbara Eden type—a little bit weirder, maybe. I used magic, Patrick. This *used* to be Roscoe.”

Instead of playing along with my humor, Patrick said, “I guess that’s just one more sign I’m slipping. My niece has been saying so for the last four months. I guess this is a clear example.”

“Patrick, in some ways from the moment of birth all of us start slipping. That’s why I think it’s important to put out our hands to each other from time to time. I’m not a religious person, Patrick—I’m as secular as they come—but I still believe in the Golden Rule, which, by the way, was independently invented in at least six different ancient cultures as a basis for morality. So is this what we make our tea with—or do you want me to do it in a mixing bowl?”

“Use the pot—Diane—but be careful—please. My son made us that back when he was a kid, and I don’t want it to go before I do—if that’s at all possible.”

Widower. World War II vet. Lost his son in the Vietnam War. Lost his wife to cancer about twenty years ago. Only known relative is a niece that lives in Storrs and visits him about once a month to check his own cancer’s progress. I heaved a sigh and made us a nice pot of tea, noting the brand of licorice tea he used so I could send him a box anonymously in the mail.

“Other than that teapot of mine, what was the biggest find you’ve made so far, Diane?” he asked me after inhaling the vapors of his tea.

“Well, you know I’m not one of those tomb raiders like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft or such. What I do is try to find evidence for how people used to live long, long ago. In my case, I work in southern Mexico now, at a site that was abandoned about a thousand years before Columbus ever landed. My ‘biggest’ discovery was one day, on a level nobody expected it, I found a kind of platform made of mud bricks. Not a golden mask or a crystal skull or an emerald crown—just a plain ol’ platform of mud bricks. We don’t even have a clue what it was used for, but now we know those people were making ‘em—or at least made *one* of ‘em long before we’d previously thought they were. It could be an altar—or a workbench—or breakfast table. But I’m the one that found it, and the project director nearly expired on the spot from excitement. It was chiefly on that basis that he asked me to come back each year afterwards.”

“So—Diane—you’re still working on a doctorate, right? What is your—your topic for your—dissertation—about? Not that platform, is it?”

“No, no—not that platform—or even platforms in general. I’m doing pottery analysis. I get to classify the types of pottery we dig up—long hours of backbreaking work sorting thousands of basically smashed house-ware pieces by type and trying to set up a chronology based on where they were found and what else was near them—

# Anchorage

Tanya Rucosky Noakes

Sometimes... when my baby's sleeping...  
I pretend... I am still just a 'me,'  
free to read, write, beat off, or drink beer;  
free but that I can't walk out my front door.

The day before chemo, you feel good;  
your lover isn't nurse or housemaid;  
you walk together and eat bean soup,  
but you guess when accident grazes  
his eyes over you, he's seeing what's gone.

and their style, of course. Sometimes a style is copied for generations, diverging in a way like, say, evolution, into other styles. Or a new style may suddenly come in, either by a new potter having a hot idea, maybe, or by trade with outsiders, maybe, or a combination—a potter sees something in other people's pots that he—or she—wants to adapt or adopt. And I've got permission now to use the collections of at least forty museums that have pots from that period and area as well as nearby areas of that period. It's a huge thrill, I can tell you."

Roscoe rubbed his lips against my knee again and then leaped onto my

lap. Patrick smiled his first broad smile.

"Well, he *was* a one-man cat."

"Patrick, Roscoe *still* is a one-man cat—but I know what you're saying."

"So—Diane—what do you want a doctorate for? Will it improve your income to have it?"

"Hmm. Good question. Probably not. It'll probably make it harder for me to find a job, actually—especially as a teacher. I'll be competing with people like me now, who don't have a doctorate—and who are a dime a dozen-dozen. I'll probably price myself out of the market. Most colleges are only hiring adjuncts now—that's all I am at Witherspoon—an adjunct teacher. We're just filling in because a real prof is on leave or out sick—or because they don't have permission to hire a tenure-track person when somebody retires or—otherwise leaves—the slot—vacant."

"Or dies," he said, with a smile and a little snort. "You can say 'dies' around me. I'm not some frail chunk of pottery that's going to crack at the word. Dying is one of the things that all of us do. Some sooner, some later. Some easily, some—not."

"Would you like to talk about—dying—Patrick?" I asked.

"Not really. I just want my money to last till I go. I don't want to be a burden to anyone. Not my niece—not the state of Connecticut—nobody. I've got the pain under control—pretty well. They told you I've got cancer of the liver? And it's spread?"

I nodded.

"Good. The other fellow dances around and tries to be Little Mary Sunshine when he's here. Says, 'Who knows what cure could be discovered tomorrow?' and all that horse hockey. An' never uses the word 'cancer.'"

He paused and looked down at his hands. I watched him and petted Roscoe, who was rumbling with a deep bass purr.

"Ol' Ross likes his shoulders squeezed—gently, 'cause he's gettin' old, too—



an' he likes the fur of his stomach gently tugged at, too. Anyways, getting back to what we were talking about, you know what I think?"

"No, I don't. What?" I asked, expecting him to philosophize about the meaning of life and death.

"I think you should go to native potters down there in Mexico—and show them some of the broken pieces you've got. Can you do that?"

I shivered. What a change of topic. And yet it *was* what we'd been talking about before.

"I—yes, sure—I can do that. I'm in charge of the analysis, and I hang around our site after most of the others have left when our 'digging season' is done. There are four junior grad students I supervise and a couple of trained native helpers—yes, I could do that. But why?"

"Because a potter—a *real* potter that makes a living at something, not just a person with a hobby or who 'took a college course in it'—will know stuff about *how* something was made and why it was done a certain way. Same with stone masons and brick masons—and carpenters—and weavers—and smiths."

He let this sink in and gathered his thoughts and breath for the next statement he aimed at me.

"I quit high school and became a stone mason. I left my mark on five of the buildings there at Witherspoon back in the late '40s an' early '50s, after I got out of the service. I used to be able to point to places on the stone façades that I myself laid down—and places that the head mason on the job did—and places that Jimmy Blount did—an' two or three other fellas whose names I've forgotten. Each of us had a distinctive style, though to the untrained, unknowing layman's eye it all looks the same. I could tell you where each of us 'settled for' something because we just were not able to do any better."

My heart began to race. This sort of idea was news to me. I bit the insides of both my lips—gently, of course—and paid closer attention.

"Diane—have you ever walked around town and looked at the stone masonry? No? Well, if my eyes were still worth anything, and they ain't, I could point out stuff to you that would make you laugh. Some of the older buildings, like that little granite thing beside the public library and the old garage diagonally across the intersection from it, go back to colonial days and are quality work—but not as good as I saw in Italy that the Romans had done two thousand years ago. Or in England during the middle ages! I just wish I'd been to Peru to see Inca work. Been to those places?"

I nodded. Yes, I had, but I hadn't seen what he was now talking about.

"If a good stone mason is with you, he can point out stuff about the style of workmanship *and* can point out how much so-and-so did in a day and how many chief masons were on the job at any given point. The crap that is put up as a façade nowadays would make most real masons puke with disgust. It's like the pie crust black top patches that the road crews lay down on pot holes every February and June—deliberately making something that won't last so's they'll have anoth-

er job to do in a little while. Most buildings nowadays are made to fall down in less than forty years, I think. Their façades are just the thinnest cosmetic things, slopped on with epoxy in some cases and bitumen in others—a lot like some people’s faces or personalities these days. Anyways, as far as nasty masonry is concerned, that was a problem that began during the Victorian age, young lady. And a Victorian guy name of Ruskin was fussing about it then in several of his books. You ever hear of him—John Ruskin?”

I shook my head no.

“Well, way back in my eighth-grade reader, which was probably printed during the dang Victorian age, we had a long essay by John Ruskin about Gothic architecture—an’ a lot more social comment on the side, so to speak. I liked what he said, and I made it my business to read more of him later—on my own. Quite a fella. You might want to look him up one day.”

I nodded, feeling a sudden tightness in my throat, touched by Patrick’s sudden passionate outburst about masonry and its styles and skill levels—things he obviously cared much about. And my mind was racing to the implications for my own field.

Patrick leaned forward suddenly, like some kind of water fowl about to grab a fish, and then stood up. He grinned at me.

“Never seen an old-timer get out of a stuffed sofa the right way before? I bet you thought I was going to pitch over on my head. No, not this time. Not yet. The dang seat cushion has no body to it. The other young lady at the rehab place—back when I had my surgery that disclosed what was what—she taught me five or six good tricks, ol’ dog as I am. Anyways, as Mr. Newton’s wet nurse must’ve told him, ‘What goes in, must come out.’ A fella needs to answer when Nature calls—or suffer the very gross embarrassment of something I can’t discuss in a lady’s company.”

Roscoe hopped off my lap and followed Patrick to his bathroom, perhaps expecting a side trip to the yummy box would be coming soon.

I leaned down and then stood up and stretched my back and arms. The ‘lean forward’ technique did indeed work. Without it, I would have had to press down on the arms of the chair to raise myself out of it—something I would have done without even thinking before Patrick educated me in the physics of standing.

I looked around his living room. Behind my chair was an old, scarred bookcase with an old set of books in red bindings. The works of John Ruskin, I saw. There must have been over thirty volumes in it. I was reading their titles when Patrick returned.

“Ruskin was a crazy duck in some respects, sorry to say, but a powerful genius in some others. Had what you might call a ‘quality-control problem’—like most of us.”

I nodded and sat down again, smiling with genuine interest.

“I’ve got—besides that old set of his writings—a couple of—of scholarly books about him and his times—I could let you have them, if you think you’d get to them. I know my own eyes will never get through them again.”

I started to speak, but he interrupted me.

“Diane—I know the other fella will be coming back again when he’s over his cold or whatever, an’ he’ll be my regular till he—till he finds out I’m gone—into a hospital or whatever. I’ll probably never see you again, nor you, me. I truly cannot read anymore. My niece knows the value of that set of Ruskin books and has her claws ready to scoop ‘em up—no, I mean it—she’s already asked if she could take ‘em now, before I’m gone, not even lying on the floor, cooling off.”

He coughed and laughed simultaneously so that I could not tell where one sound began and the other left off.

“Sorry. It amused me just now to think how she’d feel to find just one volume was missing from the set. If I can find that essay about ‘The Nature of Gothic,’ would you do me the favor—the courtesy—of taking that with you when you leave today?”

We’d been told it was all right to accept a beverage or a little snack from a patient, but we’d been strictly forbidden to accept any gifts from any. It could cause the Hospice program to be distrusted by patients’ relatives. Patients were often not in a “normal” frame of mind, either knowing they were dying very soon or just from experiencing, as a side effect of their approaching deaths, a decline in their abilities to make “sound” judgments. Much as I trusted that Patrick Growel was of sound mind, I knew that I would be doing the wrong thing to accept a book as a gift.

“No? I thought not. I’m still a pretty fair judge of people’s character, though I would have truly been glad for you to take it. Well, I know the rules as well as you. I don’t want to give it to that other fella on principle—even though I’m almost sure he would take it—just to oblige me—and would probably pitch it in the first trash bin he passed down the street. No, it’s a valuable book—valuable for what it has inside, I mean, though it’s a very costly set now. My niece looked it up on the Internet once, and her son told me what she’d learned—quite a few thousand—quite a few.”

“Maybe you should give the whole set to the library—the public library—or to the library at Witherspoon,” I suggested.

“Library—yes. I like that—Diane.”

“I can look up the phone numbers now and dial them for you, if you’d like.”

“I would. Yes. But first, let me give you two more things—besides that licorice tea and my other comments.”

I started to open my mouth, but he shook his head and said, “Be polite when your elders are speaking—Diane. If you do remember to confer with modern-day potters down south in Mexico, do me this favor. Confer with a cross section of four or five or six or ‘em. With everything, there’s a quality-control problem, and some know stuff another doesn’t, and vice versa. And you have no way of judging which one or two of ‘em is really first-rate—or what gaps each of ‘em might have—at least till you get to be a sharp-eyed judge of workmanship—which may or may not ever happen in your lifetime. That’s one. I thought of it while I was having my pee.”

He held up two fingers now.

## The Bus 2.0

Raud Kennedy

Waiting for the bus,  
the retired man sits  
on the overturned shopping cart.  
He gave up his car  
after he plowed his garage.  
His kids were going  
to take it away anyway.  
It doesn't matter,  
he's no longer in a hurry,  
and the bus is like being inside  
one of his grandson's video games.  
Slang he doesn't understand,  
spoken by people he wouldn't meet otherwise,  
smells he worries might be his own.

"The other is to remember that education and schooling are usually two different things. Don't confuse the two, especially where your own life is concerned. Don't ever let your schooling get in the way of your real education—Diane."

I stood and looked down at him, sitting on his tattered brown sofa, stroking his old cat. Then I took a blank Hospice Report form from my old canvas knapsack and began to write these bits of advice on the back of it. I told him what I was doing.

"You'll remember them—Diane—without taking notes."

"Yes, Patrick, but I want you to sign your name at the bottom of it when I'm done—I want to keep it as a treasure to remember you by. Can you see well enough to sign your name legibly for me?"

"I can do that. Then, when we're done with that, you'll help me find a new home for Mr. Ruskin's works. Some place where people will really use them as books are meant to be used."

I finished writing, and he looked it over with the aid of a large reading glass, nodded approvingly, and carefully signed it. Then, plopping Roscoe onto the floor, Patrick did his standup trick again.

"Nearest phone's in the kitchen," he said. "Know anyone who likes pussy cats? My niece is the kind of gal who'd think it a kindness to have him—put down—put to sleep, as they say—but I don't think ol' Ross is quite ready for that just yet."

"Hmm," I said. "Seems to me Roscoe doesn't hate me too much. My landlord would have no objection, 'cause other folks in my building have pets, and if my Hospice supervisor, Ms. Schwarz, approves it, we'll do it on the up-and-up—as a 'bequest,' so to speak. And if she won't, well, maybe I'll just have to pay you a private-citizen type of visit some evening next week. I could give you a dollar for him, and once the sale is made, I could lend my great cat to you for the duration—if you like."

Again Patrick Growel grinned broadly.

As for boxing trainers, J.J. Curry was the man in St. Louis. His counterpart from Kansas City called himself T. Ray Foster. Ray talked too smooth to trust him, and J.J. had no idea what his *T* stood for, but he had a few good fighters. Ray could be a real fight-man if he didn't spend so much time with the radio/tv folks. J.J. asked him, "Why does she need to speak with me?"

"Like I said, last week a dude named *Hay-Zooz* comes in, say he threw down with your boy back in the *ochentas*. A woman with him asked did I know Bobby Moore."

"Jesus Pineda fought Bobby back in the eighties?" J.J. kept his eyes on his young fighter in the ring. "I guess he was fighting then, he only lasted a few years. I ain't seen him since '94."

A bell clanged to end the round. "He wrote a song and it got on the charts," Ray said. "It's called *The Ring's a Hard Hustle*. That's her back there, been asking about Bobby and his song."

J.J. was spreading Vaseline over his fighter's eye. He held his left fist up high and tucked his chin under his shoulder, to show his pupil how not to get hit. "How does the song go?"

Ray jabbed his right forefinger at the floor to give a beat, singing deep and low:

*You tell me the ring's a hard hustle  
Say it ain't worth the fuss, I'll  
Tell you 'bout the rest o' the world  
That's a story you ain't heard*

Ray cleared his throat and held up a hand to apologize for the interruption. J.J. said, "Go ahead, I think I've heard it."

*Uncle Tom, yeah he try to fit in  
They beat him down, took all his kin  
Boss say you humble, take a bow  
You end up fightin' anyhow  
Spend yo' life runnin' fo' the man  
Or else off up in the can*

Ray shrugged sheepishly, embarrassed by his singing voice. "The rest go, "Ba-deep, ba-deep the ring's a hard hustle..."

"That's it?"

"Like that, I don't know it all. But they be spinnin' it on the radio every day, and Bobby got some money coming to him."

"And you get a cut."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"All right then." J.J. waved to the woman at the back of the gym, where five boxers were jumping rope. A bell clanged to end another round and J.J. called

out, "Miss, do you need to speak with me?"

She put her note pad in her hand bag and patted a welterweight on the shoulder to thank him for his comments that she had written down. J.J. could tell from her body and the way she walked toward him that she spent a lot of time working out, looked like a dancer or maybe a stripper.

"Are you looking for Bobby Moore?" J.J. had his arms folded across his chest. He really didn't like anyone to come snooping around his gym. Usually it was somebody trying to see how to beat one of his fighters.

She extended her hand. "Yes, I'm Dorothy Adams."

"I'm J. J." He put out a leathery hand and she gave it a feline caress of a shake. "I haven't seen Bobby in years."

The bell clanged again. J.J. put the head guard on a heavyweight. "Didn't Bobby Moore used to run with your older brother?"

"They both left town, running from the law," the truck-sized man mumbled.

"Law? Bobby stayed away from trouble, is how I remember it."

"Wasn't nothing but a gang rumble, really just yelling and throwing a few punches. They gave 'em all probation."

J.J. took out his heavyweight's mouth piece so he could speak freely. "So why are they running from the law?"

"On account of the way they shake 'em down. You gotta pay yo' probation fee to stay outta jail, see, and 'lot o' times they just steal the money, then they say, 'You got yo' receipt?' You don't, you go to jail. I guess Bobby lost his receipt."

"This lady wants to *help* Bobby," Ray said, smiling at her. "You say you're with the record company?"

"No, I'm Bobby Moore's wife."

J.J. said, "Then why ain't you Dorothy Moore?"

"We have been estranged, it's a long story. And I don't want it to take up too much of your time."

"Me neither." J.J. was putting the gloves on another heavyweight as he talked to Dorothy. "So, Anything else I can tell you?"

Ray said, "You been down to Texas? Bobby got people there."

"I know that. I called his sister in Houston, she hasn't seen him."

"You told the cops? Put out a missing-persons alert?"

She had a look on her face that was almost a smile, watching the heavyweights throw bombs at each other in the ring above her. "No, but I dropped a dime to all the radio stations."

"He'll show up then. Bobby used to skip out of training, be gone for several weeks. He always made it to his fight, though, and he'll be front-and-center to get his money." After three more weeks, Bobby had not shown up. But his song had shot to number one with a bullet. Rumors spread that he was down in Mexico, turned to smoking crack full-time, killed in a knife fight or a gang shooting. His life had been a real hard hustle, they would say before playing his song.

Several months passed. Ray was saying it was no big thing, a man staying away from St. Louis, with its bad-assed reputation.

“But he is *from* St. Louis— used to run with the Spinks boys.”

“East side?”

“Umm, hmm. “

“It’s a rough place.” Ray made a world-weary face.

“He’s probably doing time somewhere. Sho’ could fight, though. Another woman came looking for him, said they were married.”

“Now he’s got two wives.” Ray laughed.

“And a number-one hit.”

J.J. kept the books and fight schedules in an old broom closet where he had put a desk and a telephone. Robbie Tate at the radio station said, “I know the woman. Dorothy used to come around checking how many times I played the songs, collecting royalties for ASCAP, is what she said. They’re a group collects for the song owners.”

“Used to be a fighter around here named Bobby Moore, sometimes called himself Cool Cat.”

“I remember the dude, but I heard he was dead.”

“S’posedly he wrote a hit song, called *The Ring’s a Hard Hustle*”

“Yeah, I know. But I heard he’s dead.”

The season turned and Ray went all around asking everybody about Cool Cat, asking had they bought his record. “Lotta boys can fight, but can’t stay off the pipe. Like that one there.” Ray pointed to the ring where a black lightweight was making blood soup out of the face of a white middleweight. The lightweight’s entire body was corded with muscle and he pushed the larger man around the ring easily. “He’s done two stints in county for holding crack.”

“Bobby was straight when I knew him, J.J. said. “He got a little imaginative sometimes, but took good care of himself mostly.”

By the time the Gammy awards rolled around Bobby had become a cult hero of sorts. One scholarly television program used his song as a point of departure in their series on Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Three state legislatures listened carefully to the lyrics while deliberating on bills to improve boxing regulations. *The Ring’s a Hard Hustle* won song of the year and royalties of over two million dollars had accrued for the song writer thought to be dead.

Bobby’s song fell from the top-twenty charts after a five-month run. After it won a Grammy, it enjoyed another brief stint on the charts. “You ever hear from Bobby?” Ray had his new El Dorado parked outside the gym and was wearing a Rolex. He scanned the dilapidated facilities with a disapproving visage.

J.J. said, “No.”

Ray smiled broadly. “I got a feeling he’ll show up.”

It was almost a year to the day from when J.J. had first heard *Hard Hustle* when Bobby Moore and his wife Dorothy, and their three kids showed up at a St Louis Cardinals baseball game. Once his record was off the charts, being dead had lost its appeal. After taking care of some legalities Bobby had cleared almost \$2 million for *Hard Hustle*. “I only had one song in me,” he said. “I had to make the most of it.”

# DEATH BY BARBEQUE

*Dawn Miller*

In Pigwell, time is not measured by days or weeks but by the number of eighteen wheelers that drive past my house. Three or four go by every hour on their way to Bob's Big Beefy Barbeque. Bob mixes up the best sauce south of the Mason Dixon Line. Word is he spices it up with a little bit of Jack Daniels and a splash of beer. Probably more than "a little bit," I've gotten quite a buzz off of a plate of ribs on many occasions.

Giving alcohol to people who drive for a living may not be the best idea in the world but it does have its benefits when you and your wife own the only motel in town too. Bob and Peggy Sue Mitchell had quite a cash cow going for the past five years or so. That was until people started dying. Death tends to have an adverse effect on your business especially if it's your patrons that are pushing up daisies.

The first causality was about two weeks ago. Johnnie Hewitt had been running freight for Trans Atlantic Trucking for twenty years before he met his maker after a heaping plateful of Bob's beauties. Peggy Sue found him face down on the floor of his room the next day. It didn't take long for word about his demise to make its way around town. Given the fact that Johnnie weighed about three hundred pounds and smoked like a chimney, most folks felt his time had just come. That is until fellow truckers Davie Stewart and Mark Cummings died five days later. Those passings weren't so easy to dismiss. Both were in their early thirties with no obvious signs of ill health. So after Mark was found sprawled beside his truck bed, our local family physician took a closer look.

Poor Doc McCoy was beside himself when the blood tests showed arsenic. He'd been taking care of the good citizens of Pigwell for nearly four decades and had never seen any thing like it. People round here died of old age or the odd hunting accident. They didn't drop dead from poison which is where I come in.

I am Mary Kate Gracen. Pigwell's first female sheriff. It was a job which was highly coveted around this neck of the woods since the position came with a lot of perks. First and foremost was the three bedroom Colonial complete with a jail in the back, not that one was needed though. Crime around this bend in the south was pretty much non-existent which is why the job competition was so stiff. However when the battle for the badge ended, I was on top. I had one thing the other appointees didn't, large breasts.

Pete Marley, our esteemed Mayor, was also the town pervert. So it didn't hurt that I showed up for my interview in a blouse so tight it made my breasts look like they were standing at attention. Just in case Pete was a leg man, I completed the look with a form fitting red mini and matching spiked heels.

I'll admit my tactics were a bit underhanded and though it was my looks that



got me the job, it was my brains that was going to keep it, that and solving Pigwell's first homicide in over fifty years. Trouble was I didn't have a clue. Besides being male and a trucker, the three men didn't seem to have a thing in common. Each one worked for a different company and all were well known family guys from the immediate area. The arsenic trail wasn't any help either. There wasn't a farm or ranch within a hundred miles that didn't use the stuff to kill unwanted vermin.

So here I sat, a week after the last murder, watching the eighteen wheelers roll by my beautiful yellow and white wrap around porch. Oh the trucks still kept coming through Pigwell like always. You could still tell how much time had passed. They just didn't stop any more. Word about the poisoned specials had quickly drifted around the tight knit group of truckers that worked the nearby interstate. Bob's Big Beefy Barbeque was fading fast. Even the mice had taken up residence elsewhere. To the untrained eye that may have seemed like a motive and a good one at that if Beefy Barbeque wasn't the only descent restaurant for miles.

Bob didn't have any competition or enemies as far as I could tell. He was one of Pigwell's favorite sons. When his daddy had died ten years ago, Bob and his childhood sweetheart Peggy Sue took over the family's general store and turned it into one of the area's biggest attractions though it really wasn't until he started spiking the sauce that things started taking off.

The jealousy angle was going nowhere so I was currently concentrating on the events leading up to the death of the three men. Unfortunately, they were so mundanely ordinary my eye lids were starting to droop. So I decided to cross Pigwell's one road and pay Bob's another visit. Perhaps I had missed something the other twenty times, I'd been through the place. My mama said an answer was like a rattlesnake, always around if you knew where to look.

It was high noon and another scorcher. The dirt was so hot you could grill a steak. It made the soles of my feet burn as I walked down the main drag. Pigwell was one small section of a larger county. It consisted of one street and that one street housed all the essentials-post office, food, house of worship and jail.

Normally, at this time of the day, the Beefy Barbeque would be bursting at the seams with customers. Most of them truckers looking to relax and fill their bellies after a morning full of driving. When I opened up the heavy oak door, the main dining room was empty. Instead of spicy sauce, there was a strong aroma of bleach. The hairs on my nose itched from the smell.

The bar where Bob normally stood almost twenty-four seven was vacant too. The stools were lined up in neat rows along with the chairs and tables. From the kitchen came the sweet sounds of Elvis vacationing at Heartbreak Hotel. The swinging door squeaked like a scared mouse when I pushed it open, in search of Bob.

It was empty too except for Peggy Sue who sat on a counter next to the sink filing her nails. Her stringy blond hair was pulled up into a loose bun. Some of the fallen strands framed her thick face. At her feet, lay Bob. She was using his large form to rest her boots on.

"Bout time you showed up, Mary Kate," she hissed without looking up.

“You are a little slow on the uptake aren’t you but then brains ain’t why you’re wearing that uniform is it?”

Instinctively I took a couple of steps toward Bob but then stopped. His big lumpy chest wasn’t moving and his pallor was blue. I didn’t need a medical degree to tell me he was dead as a doornail. My hands nervously pulled at my sweaty uniform top and my eyes glanced down at the vacant holster on my hip. Like my TV hero Sheriff Andy, I didn’t carry a gun.

“What are you babbling about Peggy Sue? I got this job because I earned it.”

“On your back maybe,” she said with a smile. “Whole town knows why you got that appointment out of Pete and it sure wasn’t on merit.”

“Now you hold on a minute, I did not sleep with Pete Marley!”

Peggy Sue met my gaze head on. “Didn’t have to, all you had to do was show him those,” she said, pointing at my chest. “Are you gonna deny you did that?”

I smiled. “No, what’s wrong with flaunting what you got? What do you call what you do behind the bar? You might as well put yours on a platter the way you offer them up to the customers.”

Peggy Sue blew on her nails and glared. “Perhaps but I don’t sleep with other people’s husbands to get what I want. What I do is for the business.”

“I didn’t sleep with Pete Marley.” My cheeks were getting a bit hot. This visit was not going the way I’d expected. Peggy Sue was attacking my moral fiber which I’ll admit was a little questionable even on my best day but it hardly warranted the verbal attack.

“No, but you slept with Bob and Bob’s word is law round Pigwell. You know that.” We both glanced at the heaping body on the floor. Well, it used to be. “Don’t bother denying it,” she continued, unmoved by her dead husband’s profile. “He told me everything, poor slob. He never could keep a secret.”

Beads of sweat were running down my back. My mind was racing. This was my big chance to make a name for myself standing up. I was in the same room with the killer and I didn’t even have to solve the crimes. She flat out admitted it. All I had to do now was arrest her.

“Yeah, I slept with Bob,” I challenged, hoping to knock her off guard. “A little extra insurance is a good thing. You ought to know that. I’m sure you’ve been around more than one penis in your day.”

Peggy Sue slid off the counter and straightened her tight denim skirt. Her dusty boots clicked on the linoleum as she callously stepped over Bob’s body. The tight red t-shirt barely fit over her double d-cups. “How many penises I’ve mounted is not the issue here, have a seat,” she said, motioning to the sparkling clean counter. “Lunch is ready.” On the Big Barbecue’s trademark red and white checkered placemat was a small plate of ribs, dripping with sticky sauce. “Sit down,” she prompted again when I didn’t move. “It’s not a request.” Peggy Sue reached into a nearby drawer and pulled out a gun. “I said sit down.”

Slowly, I moved farther into the kitchen and sat down on the bar stool which was placed in front of the place setting.

“Eat it,” she instructed firmly.

“No,” I said, pushing the plate away.

Peggy Sue aimed the pistol at my head and walked closer. “It ain’t like you have a choice here Mary Kate. Your time is up, might as well accept it with the common decency you lacked in life.”

I glanced around the room, hoping to find something to save me. My heart was racing and the perspiration was trickling down my sides. Peggy Sue was already referring to me in the past tense and it was as frightening as the unfeeling look in her eyes. I strained my ears for some sound of motion in the place besides ours. The answering silence was sobering. “Why?”

Peggy Sue stared at me like I was an annoying child. “Why what,” she asked, mimicking my whimpering voice. “Why you or why the others?”

“Both I guess. I haven’t done any thing to you.”

Peggy Sue’s laughter drowned out the king’s voice crooning in the background. “You really have to be kidding me! You mean you didn’t get the connection.” She roared louder. “And you think you deserve to be the sheriff?” Her eyes hardened and she abruptly stopped cackling. “You broke the rule.”

My blood went cold at the sudden change in her eyes. It was pure hatred. “What rule?” I whispered.

“The cardinal rule,” she said laying the gun down on the counter. “You never mess with another woman’s husband.”

She had me there. I had done that, on more than one occasion. Coveting other’s husbands was not one of my finer qualities but it certainly wasn’t something that I deserved to die for. It’s not like I was the only one. When spring’s warmth turned into summer’s roasting, every one was in heat. There wasn’t much else to do around Pigwell.

“Look, I’m sorry but it isn’t like I was the first. You going to kill every woman Bob had sex with.”

Peggy Sue glared harshly. “We’re not just talking about Bob here Mary Kate.”

I knew that too. It was the connection I didn’t want to see but was staring me right in the face. I had slept with all three of the victims at one time or another in the past month or so. It’s been a hot summer. I sat up straight and looked her square in the eye. “What are you going to do? Kill me? How are you going to explain that, huh? Two dead people lying on the floor of your restaurant? You won’t be able to get away with it.”

“You willing to bet your life on that, Mary Kate,” she said grinning. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head bout that darling, there won’t be any bodies to find.”

Peggy Sue’s five five frame was thick and strong but there wasn’t any way she could haul two people away. She’d be lucky to drag Bob to the parking lot. He weighed a ton. “You may be able to get rid of me but not him.”

“Who says I’m on my own.”

The back door swung open with a slam and all the saliva in my mouth dried in

# Falling From the Sky

Janet Kuypers

I'm taking a one-way flight today

And you know, when people say they have a one-way ticket  
You assume the plane

is landing them somewhere

And not flying them back

But lucky me, my only way back  
Is to jump out of the sky

And hope I land on my own two feet

And my flight takes off  
In just a little while  
And I can feel that tension knot  
That knot's rope, being pulled  
By all my nerves

And like it was heartburn  
I want to slam my fist into my chest  
To try to make the pain go away

So I've spent all my life  
Trying to soar so high

But I guess I have to be prepared  
For coming back to earth

an instant as the three grieving widows walked in and silently stood side by side with Peggy Sue. They all had that same hell bent look in their eyes. I was cornered like a deer on the opening day of hunting season.

"Now what's it going to be Mary Kate, the lunch special or a bullet?"

I stared at the stoic faces. There wasn't a sympathetic one in the pack. I glanced down at the plate. I'd read in high school that revenge was a dish best served cold. I never quite knew what that meant. English wasn't my best subject but I guess I was going to find out, the hard way.

The four of them took a step toward me. Peggy Sue raised the gun again and aimed it for my head. Like most of us around here, she could shoot a flea off of a dog. I picked up a rib. The sauce was sticky. It smelled sweet. My lips touched the edge of the meat as my teeth tore off a small piece. It was cold.

# Dead Reds

Clinton Cloud

“That kid’s a soviet; I know it.”

Mr. Tom Upright’s son Jimmy was a precocious eight year old. While he excelled in school he had a tendency to get himself into trouble by slipping out of class without permission. Why he did this was unclear. His father had a theory. The kid was a red.

“A communist eight year old?” Miss Petunia inquired. It was one of the rarer charges she had heard a parent lay against their child. “Mr. Upright, I doubt this has to do with political philosophy.”

“The hell it does. When I take him to the library I see him reading up on Russian history. Why does an eight year old care about Russian history? The only thing you need to know about Russian history is to not invade Russia when winter is approaching.”

“James is a very good student. For the most part he’s an angel, but these unexcused absences have to stop.”

Jimmy’s legs swung back and forth in restlessness. His fair brown hair hung over his lowered head, a veil to hide him from the insanity of the adult world.

When Jimmy got home he ran back to his room and shut the door. His father sighed and walked into the living room to find his wife Mabel waiting for him.

“How was the conference?”

“It was fine.”

“Then why did James just run back to his room?”

“You’ll have to ask him that.”

Tom didn’t have to answer to her. Though he had been married to Mabel since he left the forces ten years prior he was becoming increasingly disenchanted with her. The boy was driving a wedge between them. She couldn’t accept the fact that her son is a communist. As a matter of fact, she didn’t seem willing to accept the fact that communist forces were operating within the United States at all.

The next day at Backwater University after teaching his introduction to political science class Tom headed over to the faculty lounge. He poured a cup of coffee and looked out the window towards the foliage accumulating on the quad. Fall was turning the whole campus red with these damn leaves.

He could feel the death spreading throughout the campus. The change in daylight prepping the campus for a soviet invasion.

“I hate this time of year.”

One of Tom’s colleagues, John Ackron, was preparing a test for his next class. He tried to pretend that he didn’t hear Tom. In general the faculty tended

to think Tom was nuts. His expertise in Russian policy seemed to have little relevance to the students they would be teaching in a post cold war world. Best to ship this anachronistic old crank back to the private sector.

“John?”

“Yes, Tom,” John said, attempting to provide a minimal level of social grace.

“How are your students?”

“They’re fine. Is there any reason they shouldn’t be?”

“I suppose not. My students seem to be different. They’ve changed. It’s not the same as things were before. All these kids are big government liberals. They’ve lost touch with American values. I can’t talk about the concept of self government without some space case balling me out over the ‘need to help our fellow man.’ You’d think they would have taught them in high school the tragedies governments have committed under the guise of compassion.”

“They’re just kids. Don’t be so concerned about their political philosophy, if they even have one, besides what are the odds they vote?”

“It’s not just the kids. All around us people are revising history. After the reds supposedly fell in the early nineties we’ve seen views of the CCCP change. Pre-glasnost Russia is portrayed as some sort of socialist paradise. The media concentrates on current Russians problems, never mentioning the roots of them being the legacy of an overarching command economy.”

“I can’t help you, Tom. I’m sorry. I think you may have a distorted sense of global affairs coming from your background.” John excused himself and slipped out the door.

Tom knew about how his colleagues felt. He had encountered skepticism before, and not just from home. After twenty years in the navy as a submariner he had seen things that these ivory tower types would never believe.

Four years before the iron curtain came down he was on a tour of duty in the arctic. His submarine surfaced from below the ice and came to a full stop. There had been rumors of Russian activity in the region. Though these rumors were so far unsubstantiated there was enough anecdotal evidence to merit an investigation. Peering through a spyglass he surveyed the landscape. There was nothing on the radar. There didn’t appear to be any ships within the vicinity. Unless polar bears were in cahoots with the reds things looked to be in fine condition. Then something caught his attention, in the far distance there was a faint gray object. It hadn’t been there a moment before. He checked the radar and found nothing. When he looked back through his spyglass the object was still there. Alerting the captain, he caused somewhat of a commotion on board. For a few minutes everyone was on edge, but the captain couldn’t find Tom’s phantom ship in the spyglass. “Besides,” the captain said, “the radar would have picked up on it.” Tom looked back through the glass to find nothing but ice and gray skies. He had seen something, no matter what the radar insisted. Three days later another naval vessel was in the same area. It sank without warning.

“If people knew how close we had come to full scale war they wouldn’t take

things so lightly,” Tom muttered to himself.

Every night before bed Tom had the same ritual. He would check the oven to make sure it was off, brush his teeth and then play “the tape”. “The tape” was a collection of news reports including the Berlin wall’s falling and Gorbachev’s dissolution of the Soviet Union. Where had he gone wrong?

Despite his years of study he wasn’t able to predict the Soviet Union’s collapse. His wife didn’t mind his late night film fest. He would be sleeping on the couch anyway. As his marriage continued to deteriorate he withdrew further into his obsession. It might be a good idea to watch “the tape” twice tonight. He was past due for an epiphany.

Little Jimmy appeared in the living room with a blanket in tow.

“Can I watch your movie?”

“No. Go to bed.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“But I can’t sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because someone keeps walking past my window.”

Picking his son up and putting Jimmy down on a chair, Tom rushed to the door. Throwing on his slippers he stepped outside and jogged around to the side of the house. No one was there. He worked his way around the house and then checked once more just to be safe.

When he returned to the living room he found Jimmy asleep. He picked Jimmy up and carried him back to his bedroom. Tucking James in Tom sat on the side of the bed. Shivering from the chill of the autumn air he kept his focus on the boy’s window. After an hour of watching he retired to the living room.

“Mr. Upright, sir?”

Tom’s shook off his listless gazing out the window and turned toward the class. His attention was shot from lack of rest and the misery that this time of year brings. Rolling his head back he turned and began writing on the board.

After class he returned to the faculty lounge to drink coffee and gaze at the students passing by. Out in the hall teachers chatting and walking past the lounge distracted his focus. When he returned to the window he saw a man dressed in black pants, boots and a trench coat standing outside the political science building. On his head was a ushanka, an uncommon piece of headwear among the students and faculty. The man’s listlessness and strange attire caught his attention and Tom continued to keep his eyes on the stranger. The man turned around revealing a hammer and sickle on his ushanka. Tom rushed down the stairs and out the door of the political science building. The man wasn’t present. Tom grabbed the arm of a student passing by.

“Hey man, what gives?”

“Where did that man go?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The guy who was here a moment ago. He had an ushanka on.”

“A what? Dude, there was no one here. Are you a professor?”

Tom released his grasp in frustration and jogged around the side of the political science building. Nothing. It was just him and the dead reds falling from the autumn trees in the brisk autumn air.

At home that night, more frustrated than ever, he began replaying “the tape” over and over. When the tape finished he would check the oven to make sure it was still off. Three AM rolled around and he began to feel drowsy. Checking the oven one last time he moved back to the bedrooms to check on his son.

Slowly opening the door he felt an instant rush of cold. The window curtain moved gently back and forth. Jimmy was not present in his bed.

“Jimmy?”

The boy had probably ran away from his crazy old father, he thought.

Attempting to put aside his feelings of guilt he stuck his head out the window and looked for any sign of his son. Towards the back of the house there was a man in black wearing an ushanka. Tom attempted to climb out the window but found the few pounds he had put on since he left the forces made that an impossibility. The man in black caught sight of Tom and began to shout in Russian.

“Damn it,” Tom muttered, thrusting his body out of the window frame. He ran as quickly as his legs would take him outside and around the house, the silhouette of the stranger disappearing behind the dense forest out back. Tom ran back in the forest jogging blindly. He came to a stop as the small amount of light the distant streetlights could provide him faded from view.

“Jimmy!”

He continued on his vain quest stumbling on the roots of nearby trees. He picked himself up and called out for his son. Behind him he heard the sound of rustling leaves. Before he could react he felt a tremendous force come down upon him and lost consciousness.

When he regained consciousness he found himself lying face down on a red carpet. He picked himself up. The carpet seemed to stretch on forever, a thin strip surrounded by blackness, to his right and left were men marching lockstep. They each wore a black uniform with black leather boots, had long thin noses and in general looked virtually identical.

Their hands swung backward and forward mechanically. Looking behind him he saw that there was nothing but blackness, carpet and more men moving in formation. The light that allowed him to see appeared to be coming from nowhere. There were no windows or overhead lights, He could see nothing around him except the ground and the men moving past him. He began to walk forward in the direction the men were heading. After marching for several minutes what at first seemed a speck on the horizon came into focus and he saw his son sitting on a chair on a dais. The men kept marching past the dais never stopping to so much as glance. Jimmy’s chair was made of dark oak and the dais was covered in the same red carpet that Tom was standing on. To the left and right



of his son were hanging red drapes. He looked up to see that they appeared to be hanging from nothing at all, or at least nothing within his field of vision.

“James?”

“Hello, father.”

“What is going on?”

“They’re in training. They’re quite good aren’t they? At this point, if you were to put a gun to one of their heads they wouldn’t so much as flinch. I suppose you’re wondering how you got here. That’s immaterial.”

“I was looking for you in the forest and then-”

“Why couldn’t you mind your own business? You were more than happy to do that before. It was always work, work, work, then watching your precious tape. Do you want to know where you went wrong, why you couldn’t have predicted the Soviet Union’s collapse? It never collapsed. It’s always been here just bubbling below the surface.”

“None of this makes any sense.”

“It does though, doesn’t it? I know somewhere inside you’ve always suspected this. How could a man like you be wrong? It certainly can’t be pride, perish the thought. Your eight year old has proven difficult? Must be in cahoots with the reds. Everyone around you is either plotting against you or loosing faith in you. Isn’t that how you’ve felt? You were right about one thing, father. I’m working for the ‘Ruskies’. Don’t look so shocked.”

“Is this real?”

“Real as anything in your life.”

“What does it mean? Who brought you here?”

“I’m here of my own accord.”

“We need to go. I’m sorry, son. I’ve failed you, I know. I’ll try to make things right but we need to get out of here.”

“How would we leave? Did you see an exit? Besides, as I said, I’m here by choice.”

“There has to be one somewhere.”

Tom began to approach his son, who looked on in a contemptuous glare. As soon as Tom’s foot fell on the dais he was grabbed from behind. Two soldiers stood to his side, each with a steady grip on one of his shoulders.

“Do you control them?”

There was no answer. The austere expression on Jimmy’s face gave no further acknowledgment of his father’s presence. The boy looked past Tom into the infinite void before him.

A cloth bag was thrown over Tom’s head and he was dragged from the dais back in the direction he came. A few seconds later the guards threw him to the ground. He staggered up and pulled the bag from off his head. He found himself in a stone prison cell with iron bars. Across from him was another empty cell. The lines of marching soldiers and his son were no more.

“Hello?”

Besides a faint echo of his voice there was no response. Tom continued to shout in vain. He shook the iron bars of his cell. In exasperation he sat in the corner of his cell, his legs sprawled out on the floor, his limp body being propped up by the cell walls. Overcome with exhaustion he fell asleep.

“Come on, let’s go.”

Tom was jerked from his slumber by two soldiers lifting him up onto his feet. One of the soldiers placed a bag over Tom’s head and they collectively led him out of his cell and down the corridor. At the end of the hall they made a left and dragged Tom unwillingly up a flight of steps. They took the bag off Tom’s head revealing a wooden platform accompanied with thousands of people watching from bellow. Thousands of faceless individuals standing before him surrounded by blackness. They all wore plain brown clothes and stood motionless with their heads directed toward him. As the guards led him to the center of the platform the audiences’ heads moved to track him.

“Where’s my son? What have you done with him?”

Before him was a tall muscular man wearing a black mask with holes in it for his eyes. Above him was a beam with a noose descending from it. The man took the bag from the guards and placed it back over Tom’s head. He tightened the noose around Tom’s neck while the guards tied Tom’s hands behind his back. Tom felt loosing his footing and then falling down through the platform’s trap door.

Mrs. Upright stared through the small glass window into her husband’s room. He was lying on a cot in a white jacket staring at the ceiling. When she had received a visit from the police informing her that her husband had been found in the woods behind her home she wasn’t surprised. She merely thanked the officers and went to Tom’s hospital to say goodbye. She would be filing for divorce in the morning. The psychiatrist assigned Tom’s case assured Mrs. Upright that they were doing everything they could to help him.

“He keeps insisting that communist are around him. Has he exhibited this sort of behavior at home?”

“All the time.”

When Mabel returned home she tried to break the news to little Jimmy as delicately as possible. James didn’t seem upset. He merely nodded and continued playing with his toy soldiers. His mother came by an hour later and tucked him into bed. She said goodnight and closed the door. When she was gone James hopped out out of bed and opened his closet. On a shelf in his closet was a small steel case. He took the case, placed it on the floor and opened it, from it he withdrew a red cloth blanket, at the center of the blanket was a large yellow hammer and sickle. He jumped onto his bed and pulled the blanket over his body. He drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Untitled

David McLean

memories burden  
drag me down like a sherpa  
drowning in the snow

# obsolescence

© devin wayne davis 07

love,  
is not

an ipod--  
without working  
parts—it's a walkman

that ate  
your music. it quit.

but, you can't  
get a new one.

love,  
is not

satellite tv ...  
not always on,  
like basic cable.

maybe ...  
a black &  
white--paired

with a vcr  
or, worse, betamax  
—you need  
to rewind to play.

love,  
is not

a thumb—it's a zip drive ...  
a 3 1/4-inch floppy disc,  
which was once five and a quarter;

it used to fill a whole  
room.

love,  
is not

a flip phone  
—the one  
that does everything.

love  
is

a quill,  
you'll have to dip.

# Cicada Bugs & Carol

Michael Lee Johnson

I walk  
this pain & joy  
like a deity  
with you  
4 life it seems  
inhabits us  
like a run on  
sentence  
4 no assumed  
reason.  
17 years together  
since the last calling  
of the cicadas-  
nothingness  
but for their noise,  
loud buzzing wings,  
no reason to stay  
no reason to part.  
We smell  
Lilacs bushes  
together briefly-  
take down  
an apple or 2-  
ride rusty  
old bicycles together  
to a destination  
neither of us  
have been  
to before.  
Nymphs drop  
to the ground  
& burrow the wood,  
again.  
Will I see  
you in 2024?

## Home

Andrew H. Oerke

It is both repulsive and attractive  
to be going back to where we come from.  
It's as if a revolving matentism  
that swings as away and then swings us back  
dialed the needle of our compassing  
so that it circled round to where it began.  
We throw the first half of our lives away  
and the last half boomerangs us homeward.

We have returned as if we have a choice.  
since eventually we all go home again  
to dream of the hearth and the hollyhock lake  
with pauses for wild blackberries, and the wind  
in the weeds whispers. We seal jam with wax here,  
we pound and dust the dough in our palms,  
and the past is the house we can't get out of  
no matter how hard we pick at the lock.

No matter where the elephant may lie,  
he struggles up, sways like an abandoned barn  
about to blow over, but clomps his cornerstones  
back to his birthplace as the preferred location  
in which to take a last look around  
and see what it took him a lifetime to say, "I am home."

# SOMETHING HAPPENED

*Mel Waldman*

Something happened.

Contraction.

Expansion.

Creation.

Darkness.

Light.

It is the beginning...and therefore, something ended, died.

They wait for the birth of...

Something dark and sad happened many years ago. But it is buried in the catacombs of the past.

Perhaps, a baby died in childbirth or...

A baby was murdered?

Genocide?

The permutations of evil seem infinite.

Something dark and sad happened many years ago. And you know! Don't you? It's our dark little secret. Try to remember... Confess! I won't tell. Will you?

# Symphony of a Suicide

*Justin James White*

I miss my sister  
I whispered  
into the silent  
                                Black  
around me. As it faded  
silence returned,  
pushing on my ears,  
a pressure louder  
than gunfire.  
Silence screamed  
at me for sanity,  
but only destroyed  
it. She hung  
from the rafters  
of our church,  
                                filtered hope  
shining through  
the colored glass  
onto her immobile form.

So I hang my faith  
up in cathedrals,  
letting it burn  
away in the kaleidoscopic  
light.

# Decidedly Fall

Michael R. Jones

I decided to think about things we did. How I feel is quite simple. Or I'm an expert grown bored.

We played with the dogs as equals. We sat all night sometimes in a booth at that one greasy spoon on Western Avenue. We fucked for hours and obsessed over burning buildings and plane crashes. We dismantled the carbon monoxide detector and told our parents and step-parents where to stick it.

I take me nephew Calvin to the Pier. I can't go with anyone else (or by myself) and feel embarrassed by my fear of the ferris wheel. It happened there.

She was the only woman to ever drag me to the batting cages. We both batted medium speed and after 50 swings she was still going full force as I stood aside and wheezed.

I had fallen in with the McSweeneys crowd. There were 10,000 younger writers better than me.

It was a graceless fall. A lithe leap from a ferris wheel is just hopeless. One can't get good footing.

I couldn't go to the services. At least she was reunited with her mom and dad at last.

I floated on the lake in a rowboat, drunk or sober I'm not really sure. My phone died. My beard grew. Gulls gutted my gums toothless.

Sometimes I see her, shopping at Dominick's, while I'm waiting to get my pills filled.

When I see my nephew suffocated with a plastic grocery bag wrapped around his head like a lollipop I decide I've had enough.

We used to wash the dishes gently, as if bathing infants.

Was there anything you were really good at? Were you a great athlete, or a great speller or perhaps a great driver?

I was great once. I was an assassin.

My first assassination, murder actually, occurred while I was in high school. My first victim was Monica.

Monica wasn't your typical girl-next-door type. She had an average body, dark shoulder-length hair, a round face with sharp features, and high cheekbones. She also had a good-nature vibe about her, an easy smile and a bit of a flirtatious attitude.

Things had been going smoothly between Monica and me until the night of her death. We had first met at the beginning of our senior year and, after a couple of months, we became an item on campus. We connected on every level. There was nothing that could stand in our way or keep us from spending the rest of our lives together. We had grand notions and wild dreams.

But, before I explain what happened, I first want to describe a little of what took place shortly before, and on the day of our prom. I had a rented tux, bought Monica a corsage and had rented a limousine. Monica had bought a new dress, had her hair styled, borrowed some of her mother's jewelry and had her nails done. Around 7:30 that night I arrived at her house, greeting her parents at the door. In the foyer I pinned the corsage on her dress and we then posed for a few embarrassing pictures.

We met our friends at the dance and did the usual things kids do at a prom. We danced, ate, laughed, and spent as much time out in the parking lot as we did in the school's decorated gym.

As things were beginning to quiet down, Monica and I went to a hotel to continue the party. Several of our friends were there, including my best friend Chris.

I would say three hours later we were all either drunk or stoned. Perhaps not what our parents were thinking we'd do, but hey, we were kids.

I don't remember much about what happened that night, but I have been able to piece most of the chain of events together.

Apparently I saw Monica kissing Chris in the hotel bedroom. Monica had her back turned to me and I noticed her dress was partly unzipped. Chris was sliding his hand down her back toward her waist.

I freaked. I pulled out the pocketknife my dad had given me and I lunged toward Chris. But since he was stronger than me, and wasn't as drunk, he was able to push me aside. As I stumbled around the room trying to catch my footing I made another stab toward who I thought was Chris, but instead it was Monica. Instead of cutting Chris, I stabbed Monica in her neck.

I was convicted and sentenced as a juvenile. My being convicted as a juvenile had more to do with whom my father is than with my age. My dad



is a very powerful and influential man in this state. Making a fortune constructing highways and bridges.

At least, that's what he tells people he does for a living.

Truth be known, he is a crime boss, a kingpin, or even a Godfather to some. I didn't know about this secret identity prior to prom night, but one learns a lot of nasty things while serving time.

Once released, it didn't take me long to start working for my dad. In the beginning I worked as a messenger and courier. Then, as I got more respect I was given certain opportunities to rise in the ranks. Shortly, these opportunities involved the elimination of certain individuals who did not agree with my dad or with his organization.

I have to admit I became very good at what I did. But, because I was so good I became careless. I even bragged about my assignments. You'd think that the one thing someone ought to learn in this business is how to keep his mouth shut. Oh, well...

Eventually, I was apprehended, prosecuted and tried by a "jury of my peers" for a contract killing that I had carried out against a rival mob family. While the state was trying me for this particular murder, a strange turn of events took place in the trial.

During the trial it was revealed that my old man had orchestrated the death of Monica. My defense team had somehow learned that my dad was the central figure behind Monica's death. My lawyer used this revelation to show the jury that I was a messed-up person, and couldn't be held completely responsible for my killings since I had this horrible incident early on in my life.

The defense argued that the governor had pissed off my dad over a contract. So my dad retaliated against the governor by having his favorite niece, Monica, terminated in order to demonstrate that no one was invulnerable to his cruelty. My old man paid the chauffeur to slip me some psychotropic drugs that would make me lose my ability to think clearly and become violent. I suppose something similar to the PCP that was once given to soldiers.

When I saw Chris with Monica I pulled out the knife my father had given to me earlier that day as a present. I unleashed my anger and jealousy on the cheating couple. I have heard that Chris was also aware of the plan. The rat-bastard.

Now, here I am sitting in a psychiatric hospital being fed more drugs than your local pharmacy has in stock. I am more than sedated -- I have zero willpower. I sit here watching the hands on the clock move from one hour to the next.

Would that be considered time-out-of-mind or is it mind-out-of-time?

+ + + + +

"Doctor, how is my son? Any improvement this past month?"

"No, Sir. He still believes that he was an assassin."

# Handsome and Regretful

*Erin O'Riordan*

It was early in the morning when the boy woke his sister up.

"I want to go exploring in the woods," he said. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Go away," she said. She yawned. "But don't go in those woods, you idiot. You'll get lost."

"I won't get lost," her brother said defiantly. "I'm going to mark my path as I go."

She laughed. Without even lifting her head off her pillow, she said, "With what, bread crumbs? You always want to do dumb things like that, like things you've read in fairy tales. You just graduated from high school, for crying out loud. Grow up."

"Not bread crumbs," he said. "I'm eighteen, not eight. And I can handle it. Now, are you going to come exploring with me, or are you going to stay in bed all day?"

She pulled the blanket up over her head. "I'm going to stay in bed all day."

"Fine," her brother said. "You know where to find me if you change your mind. All you'll have to do is follow my trail."

He closed the door behind himself, but it sounded to the boy as if his sister was laughing at him.

He went into the kitchen, opened the cupboard, and found a white paper bag. He looked inside; it was full of red, orange, yellow and green jelly candies in the shape of fish. No birds would eat these, he reasoned. He ate a few of them himself. Then he pulled on his warm jacket and headed for the woods.

He walked deep into the woods, leaving a trail of candy fish behind him. He walked until the white paper bag was empty. It then occurred to him that he was very hungry. He turned around to follow his path back out of the woods, so that he could go home and have some brunch.

The bright fish were easy to spot among the gray and brown of the dirt and decayed leaves. Here he saw a green fish. There a yellow one. Another yellow. And here a red one.

After a time, the candies were fewer, and farther in between. He spotted a yellow fish, and then no more.

He looked around in all four directions, but he could not figure out which way to go. He began to panic. This only made it more difficult for him to find his way. Soon he was thoroughly lost.

He ran this way and that, frantically, searching for any sign that he was near the edge of the woods. He hadn't planned on this, so he hadn't brought any food or water with him. By the time he looked up and saw that the sun had begun to set, hunger and exhaustion claimed him. He sank to his knees.

Just then, he caught a glimpse of something red out of the corner of his eye. It was one of his fish. And there was another.

Somehow he managed to struggle to his feet. He began walking, slowly, in the direction of the second fish. A few yards ahead, there was another yellow one. A green one lay beyond that. Relieved, he followed the trail with confidence.

Before too long, he was finding them two at a time. Then they were in small piles. "There must have been a hole in the bag," he said. Just to see, he pulled the crumpled-up white paper bag from his jacket pocket. He unjumbled it, but couldn't find a hole. Very strange, he thought.

As he followed the trail further, the piles grew bigger. He'd found far more candy than he'd started out with. Soon it appeared that the path was paved with jelly candies in the shape of fish.

Just when he was beginning to think that something was terribly wrong with this, he saw a house. He'd never known that there was a house in these woods. As he came closer, he smelled many sweet smells. The most prominent of these was the odor of gingerbread. In fact, it seemed that the house was made of gingerbread, trimmed with pink icing and covered in candies.

"This is a hallucination," he said. "I've smoked too much pot, and now I'm having a hallucination."

The boy's stomach grumbled, telling him to keep moving in the direction of the house, whether it was a hallucination or not. He was desperately hungry. He began to break small pieces off the gingerbread house. They tasted real enough. He began to grab handfuls of gingerbread, lemon drops, hot cinnamon candies, peppermints, and blobs of pink icing.

The door opened. "What are you doing?" a woman's voice said. The boy was so startled, he dropped his handful of sweets.

"Who is it?" a second woman's voice asked, from inside the house.

The first woman, sticking her head out through the door, was a rather pretty little thing. She was thin and blonde, with large blue eyes. "It's a teenage boy," she called inside to the other woman. "A plump little thing, with curly hair. And he's eating up our house."

The other woman appeared in the doorway. They must have been sisters, for their faces were the same. The second sister had dark hair and large brown eyes. As the boy stared dumbly at them, they came nearer.

"He's pretty," the blonde sister said.

The dark-haired sister placed her hand under the boy's chin. Her fingernails were long, sharp, and blood-red. "What a pretty mouth," she said. With the other hand, she touched the boy's lips. He shuddered. "Such full, red lips."

The blonde sister ran her fingers through his curly hair. "Come inside with us," she said.

The boy hesitated. This was all very strange: the path of candy fish, the gingerbread house, and most of all these women. They were so pretty, and so friendly. Why would he be so lucky? He was more convinced than ever that this was

just a hallucination.

Oh well, he said to himself. If he was only dreaming, he might as well enjoy the dream. He went into the house.

The sisters pulled the boy's warm jacket off of him. "Sit down," the dark-haired sister said. "You must be hungry. Let us get you something to eat."

"Okay," he said. He really was hungry.

They fed him blueberry pie, peppermint ice cream, chocolate milkshakes, peanut butter fudge, and devil's food cake. The boy ate until he was stuffed and sleepy. The sisters led him to their bed, a bed which they seemed to share. This didn't seem right, but by then he was too full and sleepy to protest.

This is the part, he said to himself, where the dream becomes a nightmare.

The boy lay on the soft pink blanket of the big bed. The sisters lay beside him, one on either side. They began stroking his hair and kissing his chubby cheeks.

Now the boy was confused. He wanted to stay, but everything inside him was telling him that he should go.

As if they were reading his mind, the sisters said to him, "Don't be afraid, boy. Lie back and relax. Stay here with us tonight. We won't hurt you."

The boy did relax a little. The sisters took turns kissing his mouth. Then they kissed him both at once. Their lips moved down his chin, down his throat. They unbuttoned his shirt and kissed his chest. Their fingers reached down and played with his plump little belly as their lips and tongues sucked and licked at his chest. All of his fear of these two strangers disappeared in a haze of satisfaction.

At last the sisters lay down and fell asleep beside the boy, one on either side of him. They all fell asleep. But soon the boy woke up, shaken gently by the dark-haired sister. She whispered in his ear, "You're not safe in this house, boy. My sister and I are witches, and she is very wicked. She's going to wake up and ask you to have sex with her, but you can't do it."

"Why not?" the boy asked. It seemed to him that he would like that very much.

She beckoned him into the other room, away from her sister. Sitting at the little table on which he'd been served so many good things to eat, she told him her story.

"When my sister and I were very young witches, an old witch got very jealous of us. She put a spell on us. We look young and beautiful to you now, but what you don't see is that we have teeth . . ."

"Everyone has teeth," he started to say.

". . . In our vaginas," she continued. "As part of the curse, we have to stay here in the woods, where we lure young men into our house. We get them to have sex with us, and then the teeth chew them all to pieces, and they die."

He drew in one deep breath, let it out, and drew in another. "Why did you tell me this?" he asked. "You're supposed to kill me, aren't you?"

"I don't like killing," she said, and she started to cry. "You're so pretty, and I really do like you."

"I don't believe you," he said.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she came over to where he stood. She took his hand and slid his fingers up her skirt. He felt some hair, some very smooth skin, and a little bit of wetness. Then, some very sharp teeth. He pulled his hand back with a shout.

"Quickly," the dark-haired sister said in a loud whisper, "you have to leave!"

"I don't know the way!" he whispered back.

"I'll go with you," she said. As they ran, hand-in-hand, out the back door, she said, "I can go to the edge of the woods, and no further."

They ran, following the trail of candy fish. When the trail finally ended, the boy was once again lost. But the dark-haired witch seemed to know the way. They ran as far as they could, and then walked. As the first light of dawn was breaking, the boy saw the edge of the woods.

"You saved my life," the boy said. "Your sister is going to be angry with you."

She nodded. "She'll kill me," she said.

"I can't leave you here," the boy said. "I won't let your sister hurt you. What can I do to help you? How do I break the spell?"

"You have to make a promise," she said.

"Anything."

"You have to promise to break out all of the teeth."

He shook his head. "I can't do that," he said. "That would hurt you. I won't hurt a woman."

She looked back into the woods, desperate. "I can try to hide from her," she said, "but eventually, my sister will find me."

"Okay, okay," he said. "I promise. Somehow, I'll break the teeth out."

They ran from the woods and didn't stop until they reached the boy's sister's house.

The next morning, while the witch was still safely in bed, the boy's sister got up to find him in the kitchen, making breakfast. He held the phone to his ear.

"You were gone for a long time yesterday," she said. "You got lost in the woods, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said. "You were right. I'm never going into those woods again."

"I told you so," she said. "Who are you on the phone with, now?"

"I'm on hold," he said. "But I'm trying to make an emergency appointment with the dentist."

"Is something wrong with your teeth?"

"I guess you could say that," the boy said.

*Inspired by the Ponca-Otoe American Indian legend "Teeth In the Wrong Places," as recorded by Richard Erdoes in American Indian Myths and Legends, edited by Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.*

Down in the Dirt  
Alexandria Rand, editor  
AlexRand@scars.tv  
<http://scars.tv>

Scars Publications and Design  
829 Brian Court  
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA



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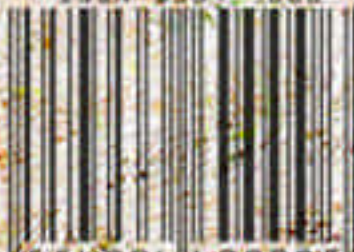
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# Down in the Dirt

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

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