



down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets

059

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Scars Cover art of cactus in Florida

Untitled Haiku

Shaun Millard

The hand of power
strikes with cold, unyielding force;
like gentle, grown storms.

Good Health Care Robert Mitchell

Mr. Martinez had worked as a gardener at the Tansen Cancer Research Center ever since it had opened over five years ago. It was a good job, and he was employed directly by the hospital, instead of a landscaping firm.

Therefore, he received an excellent retirement plan, two weeks of vacation a year, and even a good health care plan, though Tony Martinez rarely needed it, except for that time he hurt his back lifting a sack of fertilizer. In fact, he and his whole family seemed to have prospered, along with the general finances of the hospital.

Almost since it was built, the hospital had vaulted into worldwide notoriety for their unusual success in treating a variety of different cancers. Their percentage of remissions was way above normal, and they had remarkable success treating many degenerative diseases as well. In fact, they hardly advertised at all, and by word of mouth people flocked to the facility, often after giving up hope at other institutions.

And, with this success came the problems that all businesses experience when they reach capacity—they ran out of parking. So, one morning Dr. Donald Grady, Administrator of the Tansen Cancer Research Center called Mr. Martinez into his office to discuss the problem.

"It's very simple," explained Doctor Grady, pointing to a map of the clinic grounds laid out on his desk. "We have a parking problem. Now, if we remove this tree here, it would free up four parking spots, all within easy walking distance of the lobby," and the gardener leaned forward, noting where the doctor pointed.

Tony Martinez frowned, realizing which tree the doctor indicated. "Doctor, are you sure you want to remove that tree?" he asked.

"Of course. It's the only one left that can give us any space. See?" and he swept his hand across the map with a flourish, indicating what seemed completely obvious to him. "Is there a problem?"

"Well, no Sir," replied Mr. Martinez. "But the people, the sick people, they enjoy the shade of the tree, especially during the hot summers. I think, I think it is a good tree."

"Of course it's a good tree. It's a pecan tree, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir, and very old. I heard from the neighbor it was the favorite tree of Father Benito, planted by his own hand."

"Who was this Father Benito?" asked Dr. Grady, now showing some interest. The doctor had moved to El Paso only a few years ago to take over administration of the facility, and was not familiar with the local history.

"Some say he was a saint, healing the sick and tending to those who had little. He lived a very long life, and this tree is all that remains of what has touched his hand."

"Does the Church recognize him?"

"No Doctor, and I do not know why. It is a great mystery."

"What finally happened to him?"

"It is said he was recalled by the Church, and left abruptly. But, there were

uprisings at the time—some say he never survived his journey home.”

“An interesting story,” said the doctor. “But, I’m afraid I really can’t do anything about it. I’ve already called the contractor, and he’ll be in next week to take out the tree, and lay the concrete and curbing.”

“Yes, doctor. But, I hate to see it go. I have often rested in its shade myself. I will miss it.”

The doctor patted Mr. Martinez on the back, herding him to the door. “I understand. But, we all have to make sacrifices for the good of the facility, and we simply must have that extra parking space.”

“Yes, Dr. Grady.”

Tony finished his work that afternoon, and wandered over to the huge pecan tree. He gazed up at the leafy boughs. The limbs spread out above him, so green and full of life. It made him happy just to look at it. And, its shade protected at least a dozen cars in the parking lot from the heat of the blazing sun.

Ever since he began tending the grounds, Mr. Martinez noticed that people preferred parking within its shade. It was hot in El Paso most of the year, and he was sure the customers would miss it.

He leaned against the tree, noticing the width of the bole—it must be at least three feet across, he concluded. Yes, it would take many years for another tree to give the shade this one provided for the customers of the Tansen Cancer Research Center.

That evening he told his wife about the tree they would cut down. She was not pleased. She also had heard the history of the tree and the man who planted it.

“Must they?” she asked her husband.

“Doctor Grady has decided,” he replied. “There is nothing I can do.”

His wife had lived in El Paso all her life. “I understand the previous owner wanted the tree left alone, or else he would not sell the land to the hospital.”

“Really?” Her husband had not heard of this.

“Yes. That is why it has a spot all its own.”

Mr. Martinez said nothing, thinking of the tree, and its grateful shade.

“Can they do that, just chop it down?” she asked.

“I guess they can,” he replied.

“It is not right,” concluded his wife. Then, their children entered the dining room, and the tree was not mentioned again.

The week passed as normal for Tony Martinez, and each day he ate his lunch under the shade of the big pecan tree. He would lean back against the bole of the tree, and shut his eyes, and the hot breeze of the Texas desert somehow seemed cooler, and the air sweeter. He would miss the tree.

Finally the day came, and a crew arrived with chainsaws that bit into the ancient wood. Tony Martinez watched from a distance, with a sense of depression upon his soul. Soon it was done, the tree was gone, its wood likely sold to make furniture, though this thought did not comfort Mr. Martinez.

Next day he noticed the barriers, and the drying curb and sidewalk. The hospital had been able to get four large parking spaces out of the area. No doubt

Dr. Grady would be pleased. But, Mr. Martinez noticed the frowns of the customers who came to park. No longer was there any significant shade to be had. They would return from their treatments to the hot and stifling heat of their cars.

The weeks continued on, and the customers came and went, though some never came back again. Others were driven away in dark vehicles with highly tinted windows. Mr. Martinez knew where they were headed, and crossed himself.

And, the mortuaries did do a good business for a while. But then, Tony Martinez noticed the clinic had fewer people to see the doctors and staff of the Tansen Cancer Research Center.

Business was down. The hospital reduced its staff, and Dr. Grady lost his position, replaced by a wiser man, more in tune with modern treatments, the clinic staff had said.

Though Tony Martinez kept his job as gardener, the clinic never again experienced the popularity it once possessed. However, Dr Grady would have been pleased of one thing, for the hospital now had plenty of parking spaces for all its patients.

And each day Mr. Martinez, who once basked in the blessed shade of the Holy Tree, reverently touched the leaves of a small pecan tree in his front yard, planted there by himself, from a little sapling he had transferred some five years earlier.

The Spelling Bee

Melissa Sihan Mütlu

I stood on the stage next to Johnny Rybacki. We were the remaining two contestants left standing in the Spelling Bee. I could feel the sweat on my palms. I was sweating more than I thought was humanly possible. Even my pigtails were soaked. Every year, The Group got together for the Spelling Bee. When a child from the members of The Group turned ten, he or she was forced to compete. I'm an only child, so I never had a sibling forced into the Spelling Bee. I don't even know that much about the event. The only thing I do know is that my parents are part of The Group, but what exactly The Group is, I still am unsure of. My parents just kept telling me I had to win the Spelling Bee. They kept repeating the fact that I'm an only child and they can't afford to lose me. What they meant by *lose*, I still don't know, though for some reason it makes me uneasy. I can recall the hushed whispers between them as they discussed the event. I would sit out in the hallway and listen in on their bedroom conversations.

"I can't believe that Rebecca lost," my mom had said.

"Her poor parents. She was their only child," was my dad's response.

"Our Jessie turns ten next year. Ten already, I can't believe it," my mom

concluded.

I went back to my bedroom after that, knowing that I would be in the Spelling Bee. Now, I stood here, on the stage. I could hear my heart beating, or maybe it was Johnny's. It was probably both of ours. I glanced over at him. He had beads of perspiration on his forehead, which reminded me of small, clear pearls. His parents must have told him how important it was to win. I looked out into the audience. Only members of The Group were allowed to attend. Since the auditorium was dark, I could only make out silhouettes. The bright lights all shone down on Johnny and myself. I felt like we were the prey, and The Group was joined together as one monstrous predator. All I could do now was wait until the moderator, who was also The Group's leader, announced the next word. My parents always told me to smile when he spoke to me. They said if I did win, they wouldn't want him to think that a winner was also a "sour child." I could never figure out exactly what they meant by "sour child," but my intuition told me it had nothing to do with lemons or any other citrus fruit. I

heard the moderator clear his throat, and knew he was ready to announce the next word. It was my word. I looked over at him and grinned from ear-to-ear. I was grinning so hard my facial muscles were beginning to strain. At least he couldn't say I was "sour."

"Jessie," he said as he looked at me, adjusting his reading glasses. "Your word is intercourse."

I knew that word! I looked straight-ahead and spelled. "Intercourse," I said confidently enough to make Johnny nervous. "I-N-T-E-R-C-O-U-R-S-E, intercourse." I glanced over at the moderator in his dark blue blazer with the initials "TG" just below the left shoulder.

"Correct," he said, showing no emotion what-so-ever.

I felt relief from head to toe. The audience clapped solemnly. Their hands looked like shadows moving in slow motion in the darkness. As much as I hated to admit it, I

hoped Johnny would get a hard word. I wanted nothing more than for the Spelling Bee to reach a conclusion.

"Johnny," the moderator spoke in his monotone, which seemed incapable of any emotions. "Your word is vagina."

I watched as Johnny's face contorted into an oversized grin. I knew he knew the word.

"Vagina," he said loudly, acting as if the audience was deaf. "V-A-G-I-N-A, vagina."

"Correct," the moderator replied, almost seeming bored at this point.

My relief was soon replaced with shaking knees when I realized it was my turn again. Why this stupid Spelling Bee was so important to my parents was beyond my comprehension. All I could think about was them telling me, "You have to win. We can't lose you." I was always too afraid to ask what *lose* meant,

but even if I had garnered the courage to do so, I probably would have received an answer which was too vague to even fathom a guess. I heard another cough coming from the moderator.

"Jessie," he said, pushing his glasses up again. "Your word is penis."

I could feel my heart beat faster. I was only ten, but felt as if my heart was going to stop. I used all my strength to smile, took a deep breath, and said the word out loud.

"Penis. P-E-N-I-S, PENIS."

"Jessie," he said. "You are correct."

When I heard the word "correct," I wanted to shriek, but I just looked at him and grinned. Now it was Johnny's turn.

"Johnny," he said. "Your word is terminal."

I could see Johnny's cheeks flush a deep shade of pink. I hoped that this would be the word to end all words in this idiocy called the Spelling Bee.

"Terminal," he spoke, sounding like he was ready to cry. "T-E-R-M-Y-N-A-L, terminal."

There was a long pause. "Johnny," the moderator said, actually sounding excited this time. "I'm sorry, but you spelled the word incorrectly. It's T-E-R-M-I-N-A-L, not T-E-R-M-Y-N-A-L. Maybe you should have T-R-I-E-D a little harder."

I couldn't believe it. I had won the Spelling Bee! Finally, this torture was over. I looked over at Johnny, who had fallen on his knees crying. Hushed whispers came from the audience. I couldn't hear what it was they were saying. I didn't know what was going to happen to Johnny or myself. I just made sure to keep smiling. Before I could make a sound, the lights above the stage went off. I heard Johnny crying at my feet, and then there was silence. I waited in the dark until I felt a heavy hand on my

shoulder. My heart was ready to beat out of my chest. Then, just as the lights had been turned off without warning, they were turned back on. Johnny was no where to be seen, and it was the moderator who had placed his hand on my shoulder. He began to clap his hands. The audience followed his lead, and soon they were giving me a standing ovation.

"How do you feel to be the winner?" he asked me.

"G-good," I stuttered. Even though I could barely put my words together, I made sure to smile. I could feel his grip on my shoulder. He just stood behind me, and looked out into the audience. As he raised his hand into the air, the clapping stopped abruptly.

"Now Jessie," he said smiling, an action I had assumed he was incapable of. "Come backstage to collect your prize."

There was more. Not only did I win, but I received a prize as well. I dared not to ask what it was. He guided me backstage, where there was the complete absence of light and I had to run my hands along the wall to guide myself.

"Stop," he commanded, which caught me off guard. "I'll get the light."

I waited in the darkness. I guess the lack of my vision was made up for by my auditory sense, because I noticed a strange sound. It sounded like breathing, and whining. I couldn't tell what exactly was making the sound, but it was unlike anything I had heard before. It became raspier, and all I wanted to do was run back onto the stage where I felt safer. I thought the moderator had said he was going to turn the lights on. Where had he gone? Why was I still standing in the dark with this horrible sound all around me? Then, I heard footsteps approaching, and as soon as I heard the footsteps, the raspy breathing-whining ceased.

"Jessie," I heard him say. "Look what you've won."

He flipped on the lights and what I saw made my head hurt. The other nineteen Spelling Bee contestants, including Johnny, had been bound by rope, with their mouths taped shut. As the moderator approached them, they began to breathe hard again. That was the sound I had heard in the dark. Each one of the former contestants had fear in his or her eyes. Some were even crying, and I thought I was going to cry, too. I didn't understand what the moderator had meant by "look what you've won." Did he mean I was going to end up the same way? There was no sign of

him anywhere, and I thought about running but my legs wouldn't move. The sound of footsteps began again. One after the other, after the other, after the other, the footsteps echoed along the hardwood floor. I couldn't even scream. As I heard the footsteps get closer, all I could do was smile. It was not because I wanted to, but because I didn't want him to think I was "sour." I saw him emerge out of the shadows. He held a blue blazer in one hand, and a hatchet in the other. As he approached me, he began to move the hatchet back and forth like the pendulum of a grandfather clock.

"Spell this," he said, holding up the hatchet.

I didn't understand. I thought I had already won the Spelling Bee. I could hear the former contestants try to scream through their tape covered mouths.

"Hatchet," I said. "H-A-T-C-H-E-T, hatchet."

The moderator looked at me, and his green eyes made him look like a monster. "Correct," he said. "And what does one do with a hatchet?"

I could barely speak at this point, so how I was able to even get words out of my mouth amazed me. "Chop wood," I said, hoping that was what he wanted to hear.

"Almost Jessie, almost," he replied, now standing only a foot away from me. I couldn't take my eyes off of the hatchet. "Chop, yes. Wood, no," he explained. "You see Jessie, The Group can only have winners, not losers. You are a winner. Everyone else is a loser."

I looked at Johnny, who's face and eyes were red. "What exactly did I win?" I asked, still looking at Johnny.

The moderator handed me the hatchet and laughed. It was a sinister, high-pitched laugh. "You have won the right to be in The Group."

He put the blue blazer on me. I saw the initials "TG" just below the left

shoulder. I can't explain it, but once I had that blazer on, I felt a surge of energy run through my body. I felt victorious. I felt like I could conquer the world. Finally, I understood what "TG" stood for. It simply stood for "The Group."

"The Group only honours survival of the fittest," he continued to explain. "Losers are unfit. This is the way The Group has operated for hundreds of years. You still have to do one more thing though."

"What's that?" I asked with confidence in my voice.

He looked at the hatchet in my hands and then he looked at me. I'll never forget his next words. "You must choose who stays, and who goes."

The hatchet felt like an extension of my hand. It just seemed so natural to be holding it. I balanced myself, and used all my strength to lift it over my head and bring it back down. I heard Johnny scream. The boy seated next to him, I believe his name was Arnold, had his foot severed and was bleeding profusely. I could feel his blood on the side of my face and it felt good. I couldn't stop. I just kept raising and lowering the hatchet like this was what I was meant to do since birth. I was in The Group now, and The Group didn't accept losers. I didn't except losers. As I brought the hatchet down one last time, it entered the head of Annabella, the girl who was the first to be eliminated in the Spelling Bee.

"Leave it," the moderator told me, pointing to the hatchet.

I readjusted my blazer, tracing the letters "TG" with my index finger. I had allowed Johnny to live, he had put up a good fight on the stage, along with Sophia, she had spelled asphyxia correctly, and Daniel whom I just liked to look at, but everyone else in my opinion was unfit. I

admired the carnage, which lay at my feet. In my opinion, it was better to be dead than to be a loser. Next year, I would get to sit in the audience and watch the Spelling Bee. The moderator took me by the hand and began to walk me back to the other members. I am now part of them. I am part of The Group.

What He Wished For

Boyd Lemon

Ron was fidgety from his second cappuccino, as he sat on the edge of his chair looking across the street at the art deco hotel he and his niece were staying in. The cappuccino was the richest he had ever tasted and the aroma inside the café almost made him salivate each morning, while his niece, Christine, slept. He had brought her to Rome as a high school graduation present.

Christine had asked for a day to herself, so he was free. He paid, and strode out the door, maintaining a fast pace toward no consciously planned destination.

Deep in thought about his niece, he was adding up numbers in his head,

which he excelled at, trying to figure out how he could help Christine go to Julliard. Mandatory retirement from his job as an air traffic controller was looming, which pleased him. His life had been frantic—a high pressure job, two divorces and three children. He just wanted a peaceful, uncomplicated life, for a change—reading, the theater, a little golf, travel when he wanted to—things he loved but rarely had time for. But, he sighed heavily. The numbers didn't add up. To be of much help to Christine he'd have to win the lottery.

He stopped abruptly, realizing he was at the Trevi Fountain. Without thinking, he reached in his pocket, made a wish, and tossed a Euro in the center section. It splashed and disappeared. Funny, he thought, he didn't believe in such things.

Later, he left a message at the hotel for Christine, suggesting they meet in the lobby at eight to go to dinner. She sat in the corner of the lobby reading a novel. She looked more like Ron than her father or mother—tall, thin, dark hair she kept short, a round face with a thin nose, long for her face. She had prominent dimples on both cheeks which she displayed when she saw Ron and smiled.

She ran up to him. "There's a famous Italian pianist playing down the street tomorrow night. Can we go Uncle Ron? Please."

Ron pretended to be thinking and then smiled. "Yes, of course, dear."

"Awesome," she said, giving Ron a hug.

At dinner, Ron was quiet. Finally, he said, "You really want to go to Julliard, don't you?"

"Yeah, they're the best, and they accepted me. There are cheaper schools, but I don't want to compromise when it comes to my music." I'll go into debt and worry about paying it back later."

"I just hate to see you run up so much debt you can't pay it back." Ron grimaced and shook his head. "I want to help, but I have to retire next year, so I can't help much."

"I know Ron. I will appreciate whatever you can do, and you are so generous to take me on this trip. Thank you. Thank you."

"You're very welcome," Ron said.

"I wish my parents could help, but I guess that just isn't going to happen," she said.

"No, I don't think so. They're barely making ends meet, as it is. I keep hoping your dad's auto parts store will take off, but I don't think he can compete with the Napa's of the world."

They finished their desserts, and Ron asked for the bill.

"What are you grinning about, Ron?" Christine asked.

"Well, I made a wish for you this morning at the Trevi fountain."

"You did? For me? How can you make a wish for me? What was it?"

"I can't tell you what it was, or it won't come true," he said.

"Yeah, right. Well, thanks, Uncle Ron. Remember what they say, though, 'be careful what you wish for.' I hope you were."

Back home, Ron handed the Seven Eleven clerk a dollar and asked for a lot-

tery ticket. He glanced at the sign behind the counter, "\$68 million."

A week later, he pulled out his wallet to buy a latte at Starbucks and saw the lottery ticket. He had forgotten about it. When he got home he rummaged through the newspapers that had accumulated and found Sunday's paper, turning to the page that displayed the winning numbers, "6, 23, 35, 37, 38, 42, 48." His ticket read "37, 38, 6, 23, 48, 35, 42." Wait a minute, he thought, I have a lot of them. He compared his ticket to the first three in the paper. Yeah, I have them. He looked at the next three. I have them, he thought. His hand began to shake. His chest tightened. He compared the numbers again. He ran into the kitchen and picked up a pen. He wrote down the numbers in the newspaper. On another piece of paper he wrote down the numbers on the ticket. His hand was shaking so much he could barely read them, but they matched.

He dialed Christine's cell number. She answered. "Christine, come over right away. I have something to show you."

"Ron, I can't. I'm working. I only answered because I saw it was you and thought it might be urgent."

"It is urgent. I'll be there in ten minutes," said Ron. "See if you can arrange to take a break. It won't take long."

He grabbed the paper and put the ticket in his wallet.

"Christine," he said when they got to the employees' lounge of the music store where Christine worked, "look at those numbers." He handed her the lottery ticket. "Now compare it with those numbers." He handed her the newspaper and pointed out the numbers. "Are they the same?"

Christine looked back and forth several times. "Oh, my God!" She screamed. "Is this your ticket?"

"Yes, you..."

"No way! Ron!" It can't be true." She smiled with her whole face, dimples in full splendor. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Remember, I told you I tossed a coin in the Trevi fountain and made a wish for you."

"Yeah," she said.

"Well, I wished that I would win the lottery so I could put you through Julliard. When we came home, I bought a ticket."

"Every scam peddler in the world, and there are tens of thousands, will contact you to persuade you to invest in their scams as soon as this is public," said John, a lawyer who specialized in advising lottery winners. You'll also hear from every more or less legitimate investment advisor, stock broker and insurance salesman, explaining why you should invest a sizable portion of your winnings in whatever will give them the biggest commission. Everyone you've ever met will now consider you a dear friend, and will desperately need financial help or have some scheme they want you to loan them money for. And you'll never know who your real friends are; so be careful. You have to protect the money you've won. Otherwise, it'll all be gone in a year or two. That's what happens to most lottery winners."

The next two days were a blur of meetings with John, a tax lawyer, a tax accountant, another accountant and three investment advisors. John advised him to have his phone disconnected, have his cell phone number changed, quit his job, sell his house and move to a rental in a different city.

Over dinner John told him, "It's a full time job to manage this much money safely and properly so that it doesn't get eaten away in taxes and bad investments. You either have to manage it yourself, or you have to pay somebody you trust to do it, but you still have to monitor the manager, because with that much money, in the end, you can't trust anyone."

Despite the new cell phone number and new address, Ron was pummeled by dozens of calls and emails every day. He quit answering his phone and reading his emails. He hired a 24 hour service to guard his front door to keep people from pounding on it. His days were filled meeting with lawyers, accountants and investment advisors. His nights were spent reading legal documents and worrying about the money.

He thought a celebratory dinner with Christine would be fun, but there were so many well wishers at the restaurant in the small city he had lived in for 20 years, they couldn't eat their dinner. As they sat in his car in McDonald's parking lot eating their dinner, he told her he was setting up a million dollar trust to support her and pay for her college expenses at Julliard, with the principal to go to her when she graduated.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said. "'Thank you' seems inadequate, but it's all I can think to say."

A cousin he hadn't heard from in 15 years called. She said her husband had Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, but they had no insurance and no money to pay for the treatment. She had heard Ron won the lottery, and wanted to know if he could give or loan them the money for the treatments. Countless former friends and acquaintances left voice mail messages or wrote with similar tales asking for money to solve their problems.

"When will all of this intrusion into my life settle down?" He asked John during one of their almost daily meetings. "Never," said John. "The nature of the intrusion will slowly change, but you'll still have the money to manage."

At a family dinner at his daughter Amy's house with his three children, Amy, Jolene and Tom, and Amy's husband, Brad, when everyone had finished their strawberries and Ben and Jerry's French vanilla ice cream, Ron cleared his throat. "I want to tell you what I'm going to do for each of you, as a result of my winning the lottery," he said. "I think you should all hear it at the same time."

"Thanks, Dad," said Amy, the oldest. "What are you going to do for Christine?"

He told them. "Wow," said Amy. Everyone else was silent.

"Amy, for you and Brad, I'm going to pay off the mortgage on your house and the loans on your cars and set up a trust fund for my granddaughter's college education."

"Ah, okay," said Amy.

"Thank you," said Brad.

"Jolene, I'll buy you a condo and pay off your student and car loans and cred-

it cards. Then I'll set up a trust fund of \$250,000 to supplement your income."

"Thanks, Dad," she said, smiling.

"Tom, I'll buy you a condo and a decent car and pay off your student loans and credit cards. When you get your PhD, I'll set up a trust fund for you."

"That's great, Dad. Thanks so much," said Tom.

About a week later Tom came over to Ron's house and delivered the paperwork that Ron would need to implement his promises. "Dad," he said, "I wanna give you a heads up on a problem that's brewing. First, I want you to know that I'm happy with what you're doing for me, more than happy, thrilled, and very grateful. Thank you."

"You're very welcome, Tom," said Ron.

"The problem is Amy and Jolene are really upset about what you're giving to Christine, which they point out is more than you're giving to any of your children," said Tom. "And I don't really care. As I said, I'm grateful for what you're doing for me, but they have a point. A million dollar trust is a lot more than what you're giving any of us."

"That's true, Tom, but I have already paid for four years of college for each of you. Christine is just starting college and has no help from her parents. Her circumstances are different."

"I understand, Dad. I just wanted to let you know what's going on."

Jolene called. "I got a call from Amy. She said she's really pissed at how much money you're giving Christine. And then she said you were being unfair to her, because what you're giving to Tom and me is more than what you're giving to her. When I defended your decision, she hung up on me."

"Jolene, what I'm giving each of you differs depending on your individual circumstances. Amy already has a beautiful home and a husband who earns a good salary that will increase as he advances in his career. You don't have that, so in dollars, yes, I am giving you more."

"I understand, but Jolene doesn't. Actually, Dad, of all the children, you're giving the most to Tom."

"Yes, Jolene, and that's because he has continuing college expenses for his PhD, his car is falling apart and he has more in school loans than you have. He can only work part time until he has his degree. You have a full time job."

"I think it would have been fairer if you had given us each the same amount," said Jolene.

The last call came from Tom. "Well, Dad. I hate to tell you this, but now none of your children are speaking to each other or Christine. I don't know what to say, but I wanted to keep you informed."

"I'm deeply distressed, Tom," said Ron. "I don't know what to do."

"I can't tell you what to do, Dad."

"I know, Tom," said Ron. Well thanks for letting me know. 'Bye."

Maybe I didn't think through the effect of treating them differently, he thought. His phone rang, displaying John's number. He didn't answer. Moments later the tax

attorney called. He turned his phone off. Opening the top cabinet in the kitchen, he pulled down a bottle of Jack Daniels that had been there for months, uncorked it and took a swig. "Yuck." He scrunched up his face. This is not the answer, he thought.

He put the bottle back, went out to his car and drove down to the beach. After a long walk, he felt more relaxed and knew he had to do something to change things, but he didn't know how or who to ask. Maybe John would have some ideas, he thought.

The next morning he looked at his mail for the first time in a week. At the top in large green letters a form letter from Green Peace headlined, "GIVE AND HAVE INCOME FOR LIFE." It explained that a donor could give a lump sum of money as an irrevocable charitable donation, and Green Peace would hold it in trust and pay the donor five percent of the amount donated per year for the rest of the donor's life. When the donor died, the money in the trust would belong to Green Peace. Ron had regularly donated small sums to Green Peace years ago.

He called John and asked if this was legitimate. "Yeah, it's legitimate," said John. "But you have to realize, once you do it, the money is gone forever, and your heirs get nothing. You get only that five percent interest a year." Well, thought Ron, the five percent is more than enough and he honestly could tell everybody he had given his lottery winnings to charity. He would have more than he needed to retire and put Christine through Julliard.

Ron and John met with an attorney for Green Peace, told him what Ron wanted to do, and afterwards the documentation was prepared. A week later Ron and John met with the attorney and an official from Green Peace. Ron handed the official the signed documents and a check for all his lottery winnings, except for a million and a half dollars. He gave Ron an advance on the first year's interest.

When he got home, he mailed each of his children \$500,000 to do with as they pleased and explained what he had done. As he strolled out of the post office, his chest loosened and his muscles relaxed. The smile on his face was the first since he had received the lottery money. He felt like he used to feel when he walked out of his last final in college, multiplied by ten.

Ron and Christine met at their favorite restaurant. When he told her what he had done, and that he would give her the support she needed to go to Julliard, she smiled and hugged him.

"I know the children won't understand why I gave all that money away," he said, "but I hope, in time, they'll accept my decision."

"I think they will eventually," said Christine, "and you truly will have what you wished for."

The Question

Joseph Reich

one wonders if the night
before christ got crucified
he simply committed suicide
and returned to god his father
up in heaven would he still have
been considered our savior or does
man simply need the drama the exact
same followers who probably would have...

I really didn't hear that

Benjamin Green

"You gotta do it because it's part of the initiation rite. Unless you're *scaaaared*."

Annie glowered at the three boys standing in a semi-circle around her. She challenged, "You gotta let me in!"

Billy, the leader, shot back, "Why?"

That buffaloes Annie. At last she managed lamely, "Because you hafta do it, that's why."

The trio huddled, and began to have an animated discussion. Almost as soon as the meeting was called, it broke up. Billy walked up to Annie, until he was only six inches away from her. The other two took up their positions to the left and right of Billy.

Their arms were crossed over their chests, and slight smiles creased their lips. Billy hooked his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans, his gesture half mocking, half defiant. He insisted, "We don't hafta because we don't allow no chickens."

Annie got ready to blow up again. She thundered, "I am *not* a chicken!"

Billy sneered. "Oh yeah? Why don't you *prove* it?"

Annie saw her opportunity. She asked, "Prove it? Did any of them have to prove it?"

The boys exchanged a look. Each of them had to pass an initiation rite to get in, but they weren't asked to prove their courage. That was accepted as a given, but they weren't going to say that. Not to a *girl*, at any rate.

Finally, Billy managed, "You've been accused of being a chicken. If you can prove that you ain't, we'll let you join our club."

Jill mulled this over for a quick minute. She realized this was probably the only real chance she had of getting into the club. However, a part of her shivered at what the boys would think up to make her prove her courage.

Finally, she said, "You're on! What do I have to do?"

The boys huddled for a conference. None of them had foreseen the confrontation going this far. They figured she would fold if presented a united front of opposition. Since she hadn't, then it was time to escalate.

They argued about things to ask that she wouldn't do, like eat worms, or kiss a slug. Finally, Billy said with a wicked twinkle in his eye, "I know! She has to stand on old man Rumplemeyer's grave, and urinate on it."

One of the boys asked, "Do you think it'll be enough to scare her off?"

Billy smiled a bright, shark like smile, and said, "Sure, when we tell her how it's haunted."

The late David Rumplemeyer had a bad reputation as an urban hermit, and misanthrope. He lived on a small farm on the outskirts of town. He had a rusting truck on the front lawn, with a tarpaper shack behind it. The sight of a

A Lonely Beer

Roger G. Singer

A lonely beer
Sits idle
Speaking to thirst
And willing hands
To accept the touch
Of beaded drops
Slipping like
Children sledding.

Blurred moments
Merge chaotically
Like opposing tides
Churning dark,
Rolling without stop,
Forming visual
Discolored bruises,
Failing to heal.

Laughter and moans
Form temporary
Light distraction
Without meaning,
Failing to lift
Reason or concern
From liquid patrons
In weak repose.

scraggly old man relieving himself on the front lawn, and cursing anybody who got too near had greeted many tourists.

Kids liked to play baseball or football on the empty lot next to his property. However, few had the courage to go onto his property if they lost one of their balls on it. A hail of stones and curses almost invariably chased those that did off.

One kid had the bright idea of throwing rocks back at Rumplemeyer. The kid was rewarded for his bright idea by seeing the old man retreat-and return with a sawed off, double-barreled shotgun.

Few people mourned when he finally died, but a whole mythology quickly grew up around his plot in the cemetery. It was widely whispered that if someone stood on his grave, he would reach up from the grave, and hold them until they died of fright.

Billy said, "Here's what you gotta do. Go into the cemetery at night, and urinate on Old Man Rumplemeyer's grave."

Annie gasped. "R-R-Rumplemeyer's? In the cemetery at night?" She had heard the same stories as the boys had.

One of the boys taunted, "Whassamatta? Scaaaaaared?"

Annie said, "No, I was just confirming the instructions." Then she glowered at them, challenging them to try to rebut her statement. None of the boys picked up the gauntlet.

That night, Annie had a hard time sleeping. She was too keyed up for her midnight caper. When she heard her parents go to bed, she got out of bed. Then she reached under the pillow for the Buck knife residing under it.

Jill waited until she heard the luxuriant snoring of her father before she set out on her big adventure. First, she skinned out of her panties. Then she went into the bathroom, and fortified herself with two glasses of water. Finally, she marched to the cemetery with determined strides.

The fact that a young girl traipsing down the street in the middle of the night, and clutching a pocket knife might be seen as odd never entered Jill's

mind. It would only discourage her from her holy mission of proving the boys wrong, and calling their bluff. Fortunately, a policeman didn't stop her.

She marched into the cemetery, and quickly found David Rumplemeyer's grave. It was off in a neglected corner of the cemetery, as if the living refused him his final dignity.

Jill felt her resolve weakening. Then she saw, in her mind's eye, Billy and his cronies laughing at her. That did it for her. Jill hiked up her nightdress, squatted, and released the yellow flood.

When she finished, she unfolded the Buck knife, and drove it deep into the earth. Then she turned to go, but found that something was holding her back.

An icy finger of fear touched her heart. She had enough time to scream, "Help, help! He's got me!" Then an icy fist grabbed her heart, and squeezed. Annie fell over, her face stamped in a look of fear.

The next morning, her corpse was found on Rumplemeyer's grave, the Buck knife driven through the material of her nightdress. The funeral was three days later. Billy was there because he felt guilty about what he had done, but he wouldn't have admitted it.

He was bored, because the preacher was delivering a long-winded eulogy, and there were a bunch of crying adults standing around. Out of sheer boredom, he began strolling through the cemetery.

Morbid curiosity drew him to Rumplemeyer's grave. Billy had been staring at the grave for several minutes when he noticed a square flap of sod. He lifted it, and was immediately assaulted by the cloying stench of corruption.

Instead of seeing a solid patch of earth, there was a dark tunnel in the dirt. Intrigued, Billy leaned closer. At first, there was only silence. Then, a horrible sound-like a man laughing with a mouth full of graveyard dirt.

Billy slammed down the sod, and said, "I *really* didn't see that." Then he scooted for the safety of the funeral party.

Shark!

Matt Counte

I stick to the cold, emotionless waters because that's where I feed. I hunt at night on the streets, in the clubs, and in the houses of others. The dancing, substances, and swirling lights propel me onward. My food is soft, warm, and affectionate till I render it but a carcass. The first pass is a playful inspection of my prey's capabilities. On my second pass, I unleash my bite on her shoulders of skin and mammary till the final penetration. Then there is only euphoria like a warm, lightless corridor in the ocean. I pass through it not quite appreciating it, till again the currents fight for control over me. These meals are but temporary respites from the disease of my nature. The hunger never subsides or diminishes. I must keep going or I'll die.

Evergreen Inn

Chris Vincent

The trip from the City was uneventful. The weather was lousy, October rainy. I was on my way to the high country to forget about this week, this year—no Toto, this isn't Kansas anymore, this isn't anything anymore. Burying somebody you love can take a lot out of a man and I was fairly dead.

We were married nine years ago, just as the bombs were dropping like confetti over Pearl Harbor. Long enough to appreciate the difference between bean counters and bean lovers. Sallie was one of those country gals who looked anything but. Fashionable blonde, great legs and heels, heels, heels. She was a knock-out and I adored her. Not just because of looks, certainly. And certainly not because I felt sorry for her (MS confined her to a wheel chair the final eighteen months), but because she was so damn *original*. Not an ounce of pretense. Just the opposite of me.

I rolled into Evergreen just before dark. My idea was to check in and drink misery to death—or enough to pass out and start over the next day. I didn't want to see or talk to anybody. Family and well-wishers were miles away and I had every intention of keeping it that way.

The inn was tucked amid a stand of (you guessed it) evergreen trees. You had to slow down and look for it as you passed Old Creek Road. Sal had mentioned the place a few times over the years, but somehow I kept coming up with lame excuses not to go. (Too touchy-feely if you know what I mean). But then after the funeral I thought, what the hell. Sal would be pleased.

As I trudged up to the door I noticed the parking lot was empty. Except for a rusty bike lying against the porch, it appeared the place would be mine.

I knocked, glanced through a side window. Well, well. A nice log fire to greet the weary traveler. The door unlocked—then creaked open.

"Come in, come in. My, you'll catch your death," a warm and cheery voice called from *where*, the kitchen?

My rain soaked feet strayed inside. I looked around, heard a faint ticking of a clock—the kind that says this place ain't so bad after all. The room was cozy and filled with cheery light like one of those Peter Thatcher paintings. I set my overnight bag down and called out. "Hello?"

The friendly voice materialized from around the corner. "Well, hellooooo. You must be Mr. Jerome," she sang. "I'm Penny Goodpaster. How do you do?"

Now this was a bit of a surprise. Granny looked like one of those old English nannies right out of a Dickens novel. Plumpish frame, white hair, specs, the whole package. But she was gracious, I'll give you that.

"You may call me Miss Goodpaster," she said sweetly. "What shall I call you?"

I moved forward and held out my hand. "Call me Jim," I said and smiled.

"Jimmy Jerome. I like that," she said in a curious accent. I could not place. "Let's go upstairs and I'll show you to your room. Then we can sit down to a lovely dinner. I've got a nice chicken pot pie in the oven—"

"I really wasn't planning on eating," I said apologetically. "Truth is, ma'am, I'm beat from the drive and just want a good night's rest if that's okay with you." *Liar, you just want a good night's worth of the old Jim Beam, that's what you want, Jimmy boy!*

"Oh, gracious, of course. You must be wearied to no end."

She doddered to the window, drew back a lace curtain. "It looks so miserable outside." Then turning directly to me. "Is it miserable outside, Jimmy Jerome?"

What an odd question. Of course it was miserable. It was damn nasty—42 degrees and raining. Anybody could see that. But the way she addressed me, as if she was asking me if I were miserable. How could she know?

"Yes, it's very unpleasant," I said.

"Well then, after you unpack, how about a nice glass of sherry to get you in the perfect mood for bed? I'll throw on another log."

She looked so eager for companionship, how could I object. "Sure," I said. "Are you expecting any more guests this evening?"

"No," she said. "Is there a problem?"

"No problem at all," I said.

She blinked her particularly clear blue eyes, nodded. "Follow me then, Jimmy Jerome."

The room was small but cozy. Bear country chic. Brass double bed, knotty pine dresser, mirror and a round window overlooking Mill Street. Across the hall, the privy.

I quickly unpacked my things and bottle of Mr. Beam. On top of the dresser were two glasses. I selected one and poured. The delicious scent of malted corn lifted my spirits at once. Here's to Sallie, I thought. To Sallie and Jim, the greatest damn couple who ever lived. I slowly brought the glass to my lips, swallowed. Re-loaded and drank again. Anything to forget the last few days and everything else in my miserable life before I met *her*.

Sallie Ferguson. I hadn't really known her as anyone more than that new girl from Chattanooga, who talked funny. Both of us worked at Barney's Bail, a two-bit bond dealer along the river. Truth be told, we were nothing but a small time outfit changing money for the big boys up north.

Anyway, one night after a particularly sweltering day, a bunch of us mush heads headed over to a little place on West Broadway. Shanghai Sam's, I think it was, a Chinese-ee little dive just this side of the tunnel. I thought about the subway but decided to walk. The air was spongy wet, every inch of my shirt soaked with sweat. Taking the subway would be like taking a steam bath. No thanks, Charlie, I think I'll pass.

As I approached the joint some saggy-faced old lady asked me for my

umbrella. I looked up at the sky and thought what the hell as the first drops of rain plopped onto her dirty, fat forehead. Guess I could afford another two-bits.

Inside was cool bliss, thanks to the rickety bamboo fans that wobbled freely overhead. I bee-lined it to the men's room to wash up and splash on a little bay rum before ordering my first cut of bourbon.

Two hours later I was pretty tight, when some slender cutie slid up beside me and started saying profundities like I like your tie and you smell good. I remember thinking I had better ditch this dame quick or regret it big time the next morning, when somebody yanked the back of my shirt (no longer sticking to my skin) and drilled me with the greenest eyes this side of summer. It was Sallie.

Right then and there, I knew there was something special about her unlike all the other dames I ever dated. I made up my mind I was going to win her. The question was how?

Long story short, it was Sal who provided the answer. She told me I had better straighten up if she was going to let somebody like the likes of me walk her home. Amused, I asked her how she could be so sure I wanted to take that stroll. That's when she nailed me. Good. She told me even though I was a slicked up popinjay who drank too much, I was a gentleman. And gentleman prefer ladies of which she was one. I told her I bought the lady part, but come on, me a gentleman? That's when she asked me for my umbrella. Sal knew, she wanted me, too.

I repaired downstairs to find Granny rocking in front of the radio, drinking a hearty glass of Warre's Sherry—the pricey kind. The fire was blazing.

"There you are," she said. "I took the liberty of pouring you a pinch in the kitchen. Why don't you grab the bottle and sit right here," she said pointing to a sofa chair opposite the fire.

After returning from the kitchen and settling into my chair, sherry in hand, I sat back and sipped. Not exactly my cup of tea but the stuff wasn't bad. "This is very nice," I said.

"Tell me, Jimmy. Tell me why you did it?"

"Excuse me?"

"We both know why you're here, but you need to admit it, come clean with yourself, as it were." She smiled serenely.

This old broad has gone cracker-jack, I thought. I set my glass down.

"Lady—"

"Miss Goodpaster," she corrected.

"Miss Goodpaster, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, but you do," she said.

I got up and walked to the window. Damn, it was black outside. I couldn't see a thing.

"You killed her, didn't you?" she said, as if asking me for another glass of wine.

"What the hell—killed who?"

"Why your wife, Jimmy Jerome. You don't have to pretend with me."

I returned to my chair. Gulped the rest of the sherry down. “That’s the craziest thing I ever heard of,” I said.

“At least you might have been a little more gentle. Throwing her down the basement stairs—in her wheelchair no less—was thoughtless and cruel, even by your standards.”

I abruptly stood up. “That’s enough,” I said. “I’m getting the hell out of here. You’re crazy as a loon, lady. Hear me? Crazy as a puss on a hot tin roof.”

I ran upstairs to get my things. Except the head of the stairs was blocked. More like sealed. No hallway. Just a wall, flat, plastered. What the hell’s this, I thought.

I raced back down and toward the front door. I yanked at the brass knob but it wouldn’t open. Yanked again but not even a budge. Outside I could still see it was black—black as pitch. I began to laugh.

“You’re not going anywhere tonight, Jimmy Jerome,” Granny informed me. “Why don’t you sit down and have another glass of sherry.”

I picked up the bottle and took a slug. Still laughing, I drank again, wiped my mouth with the sleeve of my shirt.

“This is just dream, isn’t it? Keep calm, Jimmy boy, you’ll wake up in a sec,” I said out loud. I caught my breath, took in the surroundings again. Fire blazing. Granny smiling. Clock ticking. “Just a bad dream.”

I woke up just before dawn. Sal was still asleep next to me—a crease mark across her one cheek. I crept out of bed and padded to the bathroom.

When I entered the kitchen a few minutes later, I was surprised to see Sal’s wheelchair by the kitchen table, a few feet away from the basement door. She usually kept it beside her bed in case she wanted to get up in the middle of the night. I bent down to inspect it. Reinforced hard rubber tubing, steel rims and a wooden seat, cushioned with a worn corduroy pillow now fairly frayed from months of use.

I despised it. Hated the very sight of it. Clunky, ugly, despicable *thing*. What it was doing to my Sal just wasn’t right.

I stood up and grabbed the back handles, moved it away from the table. Then I made breakfast.

Twenty minutes later, I heard Sal calling. I put down the paper, finished my coffee and got up from the table. I stretched and yawned, eyeballed the basement door, then rolled Sal’s wheelchair out of the kitchen and down the hallway.

untitled

Nathan Hahs

Beautiful Stride,
a woman weaving herself
in and out of your life.
the thread on your sweater that
doesn’t belong.
but if you pull on it,
the entire thing unravels.

Chains and Pains

Randy Delp and Nikki Noble

Doctor Roloff's eyes peered over his bifocals at the man in shackles. The prisoner picked at his fingernails as he sat at the other side of the table. "We can wait all day if you like," the doctor said. "You're just hurting yourself."

"Story of my life," the other man answered, not bothering to glance up from his cuticles.

"I know. I understand you, but the police, they're a little less understanding."

"You don't know me. You sure as hell wouldn't understand me." The prisoner's dark eyes flashed with anger as his gaze locked with the doctor's.

Roloff felt the tension compress the air in the little interrogation room. He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look, I apologize. I'm just trying to help you, Mr. Gerard."

Gerard bit his lip and looked away. He *knew* his life was over; he had known since the night he met the First. And part of him really wanted to help. He hadn't wanted to do any of it and he hated the idea of those women's families wondering what had happened to their daughters, wives, moms, and sisters forever. But what if *they* found out he was spilling his guts to the cops? Gerard looked at the chains that held him to the uncomfortable metal chair, his eyes following the links down to his waist. He hated the chains, feared them, but there were worse things than prison. He had seen what *they* were capable of...

"Mr. Gerard?"

Gerard shook his head. "I'm sorry, doctor. What was the question again?"

"How many bodies should the authorities be looking for?"

Something inside of Gerard screamed to keep his mouth shut, but, God, he'd been in this chair in this room for too long for too many days being endlessly questioned. He was so desperate for it to end, even if whatever came next was worse. He stared down at his fingers, horrified to feel burning behind his eyes and tightening in his throat. *Damn it.* "I don't know," he said at last, looking into the doctor's earnest face for just a second. "I lost count at nineteen."

He watched as the doctor wrote 19 on his memo pad. From Gerard's vantage point, it looked like 61, which might be closer to the truth, all told. "Then there could be more?" Roloff asked.

Gerard nodded, feeling guilty and pissed at the doctor for breaking him down and at himself for being so fucking weak. "They all kind of ran together after a while."

The doctor set his pad aside. "You haven't cooperated at all up until right now. Why should I believe you're on the level?"

Gerard looked at him with disgust. It was a lot easier to be mad at the doctor than focusing on what he'd done. He embraced that anger, pointing it at the doc-

tor like a knife. "I'm not a liar. I'm a—a lot of things, but a liar isn't one of them."

"Alright. But you're going to have to provide us with something."

"Like what? You're working for the cops."

"I thought we were going to help each other," Roloff answered, sensing Gerard's anger. "You help me write up a nice clean report and solve some of the city's hundreds of missing person's cases, and I help you stay off of death row."

The two men sat in silence for a couple of minutes, Gerard getting more and more agitated. "What the fuck do you want? What's it going to take to get me out of these goddamn chains and back in my cell for a few hours?"

"Tell me where the bodies are."

Gerard threw his head back and stared at the florescent light above his head with an exasperated sigh. "I can't do that."

"Why? I thought we were helping each other here."

"I can't tell you where they are because I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know where the bodies are."

"That's not possible. You've admitted that you abducted them. You say you know they're dead. But you don't know where the bodies are? Be serious."

"Go to my apartment," Gerard mumbled.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Just go to my apartment. Tonight. Be there at eleven p.m. and be alone."

"Mr. Gerard, that apartment has been empty since they arraigned you."

"Trust me, doctor. You go there tonight and wait and you'll get all the answers you can handle."

The doctor collected his things and stood up. "Mr. Gerard, I'll be getting in touch." The doctor went to the heavy steel door and the guard let him out. The doctor was a few steps down the jail's hallway. He heard the door slam and the guards hurried steps on the concrete floor as the guard caught up with him. "So, Dr. Roloff, is he still certifiably bat-shit crazy?"

Dr Roloff shook his head. "Well, that's an eloquent way of putting it.

"This guy sits in his cell all day and doesn't cause any trouble. It's hard to believe he's a psycho murderer."

Dr. Roloff didn't break his stride. "That's fairly common for people in his mental state. But don't get me wrong. He's still a very dangerous individual and should be handled with extreme caution."

Dr. Roloff left the prisoner holding area of the police station. He listened to his footfalls echo through the emptiness of the main lobby until he stopped at the locked door to the offices and scanned his identification badge, unlocking the door with a click. He walked through the hallway to Detective Craig's office. The detective had paper spread all over his large metal desk. "Detective Craig?"

Craig looked up from his papers. "Doctor, how did it go today?"

"More of the same until the last minute, but we may have had a break-

through. He said he lost count at nineteen victims but that there may be more. Then he insisted that he doesn't know where the bodies are and told me to go to his apartment for answers."

"Do you think it's a trap?"

Roloff shook his head. "Even if I thought Gerard could plan something from prison, I don't think he's smart enough."

"The place has been completely stripped. There's no way you'll find anything we haven't already found."

"I know that, but at the same time I feel he at least believes he's telling the truth. I need to check it out."

"Alright. Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. It's just an empty apartment. I'll be fine."

The guards followed Gerard back to his holding cell. It was a tiny cell, empty except for a cold, seat-less toilet and a narrow cot with a thin mattress. Gerard insisted he wanted nothing else in the room. The guard removed the shackles and chains and unlocked the door. Gerard walked past him into the room, the guard closed and locked the door, and Gerard stuck his handcuffed wrists through an opening in the door so the guard could unlock the cuffs. Once Gerard was secured, the guard walked away, the chains draped over his arm like an expensive jacket, rattling with each step. This was a routine they did daily, a well-choreographed dance between prisoner and jailer.

Gerard shuddered at the sound of the chains and was glad to be rid of them for a while. He sat down on the cot that was suspended by bolts in the concrete wall. Gerard sat there; his only company now was his thoughts.

Dr. Roloff opened the door to the apartment on the forth floor, the apartment once occupied by Alex Gerard. The apartment was dark. The doctor brushed his hand along the wall until he found the light switch. He flicked it, but the room remained dark. He flipped it again with no effect. "Guess it's kind of hard to keep caught up on the light bill when your ass is sitting in jail," Roloff said to himself as he walked to the windows.

Roloff opened the blinds and yellow light from the street lamps spilled into the apartment. He pulled a small, silver tape recorder from an inside pocket of his tweed jacket and pushed record. "July 26," he said into the microphone, holding the recorder about a foot from his mouth. Mr. Gerard's apartment is completely empty. I'm assuming the crime scene lab is now in possession of all of Mr. Gerard's belongings." He clicked Pause and started to look around.

The bare wood floor echoed under the thump of each of the doctor's steps as he walked to the middle of what had probably been a living room and looked at the stark white walls. He hit Record and said, "Investigators believe Mr. Gerard brought the victims here before murdering them and disposing of their bodies. Strangely enough, there was no blood or hair evidence found at this location.

They can't even find the bodies. The only thing they found that was strange was one hundred three pairs of underwear, *women's* underwear. Authorities are afraid that the underwear isn't allowed to convict."

Dr. Roloff looked at his watch. It was a quarter past ten. He began talking into the recorder again. "I've been brought in use psychological questioning to crack Mr. Gerard, but he has been a rock. After weeks of questioning, this is the first lead he's provided, telling me to come here and wait."

Pause. Dr. Roloff took a deep breath. The room was humid and musty, the air thick. The street below the window was quiet. Though cars lined the streets, there were surprisingly few people in sight, especially for the inner city.

Radloff sat on the floor, his back to the open windows and waited, bored as he'd ever been and not knowing what he was waiting for. A breeze smacked the blinds and Roloff felt sleep creeping over him. He glanced at his watch. It was after three a.m. *Geeze*. He tried to talk himself into leaving, but his inner psychiatrist told him to wait it out. Gerard had told him to wait. But for what? His legs and lower back hurt, and as he stood to stretch the wooden floor started to vibrate.

Roloff didn't have time to think. The earthquake was vicious; the entire floor felt as though it were shaking back and forth. The doctor staggered to the bedroom doorway and braced himself in the frame, his eyes closed, praying that the old building wouldn't fall down around him.

As suddenly as it started, the shaking stopped. Through his still closed eyelids, the doctor saw a brilliant flash of light. He opened his eyes to find the light shooting up between the boards of the wooden floor in a square of illumination that was almost blinding. The fall of light was between him and the way out. He shielded his eyes with his hands. Record. "Something is happening."

No shit! His mind screamed.

The brightness faded, but light still peeked up through the boards. Roloff started to walk toward the exit, wanting to get out before the building decided to come down. The strange light winked out and the doctor, wanting to reassure himself that he wasn't hallucinating, walked directly over the place the light had been coming from. Then he stumbled over something sticking out of what had been a completely empty floor. The doctor bent close to examine the little object. In the gloom of the streetlights it was impossible to tell what it was. He wrapped his hand around it. Round. Small. Cold. Hard.

Even as he realized it was a door handle, Roloff's mind rebelled at the idea. There *couldn't* be a cellar door in a fourth-floor apartment. Either he'd suffered a head injury during the earthquake or there had been some weird structural damage done to the building. He pulled the handle and the door popped open. Expecting to see down into the apartment below, Roloff was shocked to find that the door revealed a set of rough-hewn wooden steps.

The doctor took his glasses off and rubbed his face, feeling as crazy as his most delusional patients. He slipped the glasses back on. Even as part of him, probably the *sane* part, screamed at him to get the hell out of there, he knew he

had to go on from there, had to see what was going on for himself.

The wooden steps creaked under the doctor's feet. If it was a hallucination, it was certainly bordering on reality. The sight, sound, even the smell, was so real. At the bottom of the stairs was a musty dirt floor. The air was cool, amazingly cool considering how warm the apartment had been. And, even compared to the darkness upstairs, this place was gloomy. There were no windows or light bulbs or—hell—even torches. Where the strange light had been coming from, the doctor couldn't tell. He raised his hand to speak into his tape recorder.

The recorder wasn't there. Roloff knew he hadn't put it down. He knew it. He stared stupidly at his empty hand, even opened and closed it to make sure the machine really wasn't there. He glanced around the floor around him to make sure he hadn't dropped it and rubbed his palms together. The Sound of his dry palms scraping together seemed as loud as a wire brush scraping a sidewalk in this otherworldly silence.

In the middle of the wall opposite the stairs was a wooden door with a strange character written on it in shimmering red paint. The sight of the symbol filled him with foreboding and an increasing sense of unreality. Other than the hieroglyph, the door was like any other, wood, obviously old, with a black porcelain handle. Roloff twisted the handle and pushed the door open with care. The rusty hinges screeched, piercing his overwrote nerves like a hot needle.

Roloff cringed as the door howled its way open, and he stood still in the doorway and looked in. The room behind this door could not have been more unlike the room he had just come from. The space was unbelievably huge, so large that he couldn't see any of the other walls or the ceiling and lit by candles burning in gilded chandeliers that seemed suspended in midair twenty feet above the ground. The light was low, but the doctor could tell the wall that he could see was beautifully covered in green and gold fabric, and the floor was ebony marble so perfectly polished that Roloff could see his reflection. Somewhere in that cavernous place, the doctor could hear something. *Bells?*

He stepped into the hall and the door shut behind him with an explosive bang. Roloff jumped at the noise. It had been so loud in the silence that he wondered if his hearing had somehow been heightened. If so, perhaps his sense of smell had been heightened as well, for as amazing as that place was, it reeked. He had only gone a few paces into the room when he had to stifle a gag. He put a trembling hand over his mouth and nose, and even as he did so he saw a figure materialize in the semi-darkness and start walking toward him.

As it approached Roloff thought it was a man, but as it came closer he knew it couldn't be. This thing was an abomination of the human form. Its body was naked, male, totally hairless, and the sickening pallor of a creature that had never seen the light of day. Its skin hung like that of a geriatric bodybuilder, loose and wrinkled. The twisted form disgusted the doctor.

"You have returned," the thing rasped as it continued toward him. Even its voice was awful, like nails being swirled in a mason jar. Even in his terror, the

doctor was dumbfounded. He had no idea what the monster was talking about. The creature sniffed the air. "But you are empty-handed," it said.

"I'm sorry?" the doctor responded.

"Do not feign ignorance," the thing said, "Your obligation, Gerard."

"You're...you're mistaken," Roloff said, his voice high pitched in his fear. "I'm not Gerard."

The monster turned back into a shadow and sped at Dr. Roloff. It changed back into the hideous man inches from the doctor's face and Roloff shuddered backward away from the man-thing as it smelled him. In the close proximity, Roloff saw that it had pointed ears and a nose that was so flat it could hardly be called a nose at all. It had two rows of filthy, shark-like teeth, and its breath was like death. The worst of all was its eyes. They were huge in comparison with those of a human, strange and colorless with absolutely no pupils. The thing was blind. "Who are you, then?" it asked.

"I'm Dr. James Roloff. Gerard sent me here. He's in jail for murder."

The twisted thing laughed wheezing, mirthless chuckle. "I knew that fool would fail. Are you a pawn in his game of deceit?"

"No, I'm a psychiatrist. I was trying to help Mr. Gerard. He's a very sick man."

"The human Gerard is incapacitated. Well, his slate must be wiped clean. We shall find him and deal with it ourselves."

"What—eh—who are you?"

"So many questions you monkeys always ask." The monster clapped its spider-thin hands and the noise of bells which Gerard thought he had heard when he entered the room was suddenly loud, coming from everywhere. Only it wasn't bells. The steady clink-clink-clinking, slinking along the ground was chains and the chains were climbing Roloff's legs, wrapping themselves around him like so many snakes, squeezing his chest tight, locking his arms to his sides and with a hand motion from the doctor, the chains hoisted Roloff into the air, suspending him four feet above the floor.

A wrinkled smile cracked the creature's face. "I am one of many, the beings that inhabit the Realm Between, and we are hungry. There is no food here, and though we can kill creatures on your side of the divide, we can not bring our prey through to us. So we need Feeders."

"Feeders?"

"Humans that are willing to bring us meat."

"Gerard was a Feeder?"

The thing clenched its fist and another chain wound its way around the doctor's throat, squeezing just tight enough to let him know he shouldn't talk. "Gerard was a fool, a slave to his lust. He sought his own prey, giving it to us only once he was finished with it. Nevertheless, he did bring us succulent feasts. Meat from human females is the tastiest, and once he had finished tormenting them, death was a blessing, really. However, now we are out of food."

The monster snapped its fingers and harsh light flooded down from above.

Now Roloff could see rows of steel chains hanging down from the ceiling miles above, and he could see the others. The saggy-skinned beasts were hunched over piles of bloodstained bones, gnawing on the remains of the poor women Gerard had brought for them. As he watched one of the monsters sucked the marrow out of a cracked rib bone. “Now,” the monster said, “the question is whether you will bring us food or whether you will be food.”

The doctor pictured himself being devoured by those pale outrages. “I’ll help you. Please, let me help you.” The doctor was hysterical, close to tears, when he felt the chains loosen and he fell, fell into blackness.

Detective Craig was in his office compiling notes on the Gerard case when the black office phone rang. Craig picked it up. The voice on the other end was that of a panicked guard. “Detective, you’re going to want to get here now.”

The detective rushed through the halls of the precinct and down to the holding cells. A nervous guard sat at his post actually trembling with fear. “What the hell is going on?” he asked.

The guard pointed down the row of cells. “Gerard, he’s dead,” the guard said.

“How?” asked Craig, not wanting to believe the shaken guard.

“Go look for yourself,” the guard said. “I’m not going back there.”

Craig walked down to the last cell on the left. On the cold concrete floor lay Gerard, his eyes and tongue bulging from his purple head, the same shackles and chains he had been forced to wear in the interrogation room wrapped terribly around a neck that seemed twice as long as it should be.

“How the *hell* did this happen?” Craig yelled as he hustled back to the guard’s station.

“Watch,” the guard said, pushing rewind and then play on the bank of video recorder screens.

The screen flashed into black and white, revealing the hallway. “Is there any sound on this thing?” asked Craig.

The guard turned it up. Amid the back noise of the other prisoners’ cells a rattle of chains could be heard. As the guard and detective watched, the chains—seemingly of their own accord—clink-clinked-clinked their way across the floor and between the bars into Gerard’s cell.

The Sky Color

John Ragusa

It was two o’clock in the afternoon on a summer day in New Orleans. The clouds promised rain. The humidity was low, which accounted for the comfortable temperature. The sky was gradually assuming an extremely pleasant appear-

ance. This was not your ordinary sky. It resembled a blend of many hues. Two boys, Sam and Ralph, looked up from their fishing poles at Lake Pontchartrain and found serenity in the air's atmosphere. Suddenly, more people stepped outside and discovered a sky that had only cool colors, like green and violet. The effect was soothing.

The neighbors had never seen anything this handsome. The sky should have been captured by a camera, but witnessing it was more rewarding.

The people saw the sky as mesmerizing. They all agreed it was the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen.

"Did you see anything as awesome as this before?" Ralph asked.

Sam shook his head. "Not until now."

"It looks different than it usually does."

"I agree. It's weird."

"But it sure is lovely."

"You're right about that."

Mrs. Barry told her husband, "Do you recall the time we visited Paris? We were dazzled at how gorgeous it was. The sky is even lovelier than that city."

"You can say that again," Mr. Barry said. "I'm seeing perfection right now."

"Words can't describe its beauty."

The sky was a natural masterpiece. It wasn't blue, and it wasn't quite gray, either. It looked hazy. It seemed to swirl, like a Van Gogh painting. Stunning, hypnotic, it brightened the dull, ordinary day. Once seen, the sky could not be forgotten. It would be etched in the memory. It was elegant and fancy. It was something that could be looked at for years, without ever becoming boring. It was a source of gratification for eyes, mind, and soul.

The people's curiosity was aroused. "How did it get this way?" Sam asked his friend.

Ralph shrugged. "Beats me. Maybe it's supernatural."

Soon the folks stopped talking and just savored it. A thousand treasures could not measure up to this sky. The people enjoyed it, they cherished it, they wished it would never go away.

Van Colvin was the only person in the neighborhood who hadn't gone outdoors to see the sky, because he was in bed with a bad cold. But after hearing a report on TV, he ran outside with some alarming news: A tornado was heading their way. The weatherman predicted a direct hit, and authorities advised residents to seek shelter from the storm. Everyone heard Colvin relate this news, but they did not budge from the spot. They were so transfixed at the sky, that they remained standing there. When the tornado finally arrived, not one person survived.

The following week, the sky turned a beautiful color in Chicago, Illinois. . . .

Failing Grace

Stephen Sansom

Henry stopped, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and looked around at what he had accomplished. The attic was about half-cleaned, and he decided he had done enough to take a break with minimal chance of incurring his mother's wrath. He was thirsty, so he went to find the canteen he had brought up with him. The water inside was still cold, and he gulped it down quickly without pausing for breath. He sat on an old chest tucked away in the corner, wishing it were not so hot in the dusty room. He looked for something to hold his attention while he rested. He noticed a stack of books just opposite his position and walked over to see if any of them might be worth reading. He was disappointed with his find. Most of them were books on computer software, relics left behind after his father's disappearance. He continued his search and was rewarded by a book on the bottom of the stack.

It was bound by thick leather and, as far as Henry could tell, was quite old. The front bore odd markings, eight total, which seemed to be etched into the book rather than printed. There was no title that Henry could see, so he flipped it over looking for the description of its contents. The back was even stranger than the front. He found no text or markings of any kind on the back, and it was smoother than a book fresh off the press. This was quite a contrast to the front, which bore nicks and small cuts from years of use and storage. His fingers seemed to tingle as he held the book, and he had just begun to flip through its strange pages when his mother's voice called to him from down the stairs.

He rushed down to see what she wanted, knowing that to call back would be to cause him pain. He was still sweating when he found her sitting at the kitchen table, the newspaper scattered in front of her. It was times like this, in brief moments of peace, that he noticed how much they were alike. They were both thin with hawkish faces and deep brown hair, and they both possessed deep green eyes. They were tall people, though Henry's frame did not extend as far as his mother's; he had inherited her height, but he did not share her specifics such as long arms and long fingers. There were other differences that reflected their personalities rather than any physical characteristics. For instance, his mother's countenance bore many wrinkles and markings reminiscent of a life of constant frowns and anger. Henry possessed a happy, shining face, and he had been told on several occasions that his smile had been donated to him from a cherub. His mother glared up from her paper. He realized he was smiling at her and hastily rearranged his expression to one of respect.

"Yes, mother," he said politely, holding his head down.

"Your nasty little friend just called here, the fat one," she said, daring him to defend his friend. When he did not, she continued, "He asked if you could go

over to his house and play.”

Henry didn't dare look hopeful; there was as good a chance as not that he would be allowed to go, but if he seemed too excited to go out, his mother would surely force him to stay home. He was careful to avoid her eyes as he asked, “Can I go?”

Rage covered his mother's face, and she stood, knocking the table back as she rose. “Don't you dare ask me that, you ungrateful whelp!” she yelled, “I'll let you know whether or not you can go, but I tell you; you have a larger chance of going if you show a little respect. I was going to let you, but now, I think your time might be better spent cleaning out the garage as well. Tell me, have you even finished cleaning out the attic, or have you been up there day dreaming again? Don't lie to me boy; you know I'll go look.”

Henry had no thoughts of lying to his mother; he knew that would only make his situation worse. “No, ma'am,” he replied, his voice meek, “but I've got all weekend and I'm almost done. I could finish it tomorrow.”

He regretted saying it as soon as he finished talking. His mother turned red and swelled with fury as she bellowed, “You'll finish it now, you lazy shit. Go on, get your ass upstairs and get back to work.” Henry started to walk away, but his mother wasn't finished with him yet. “Where are you going? You get back here and listen to me when I speak to you.”

His mother continued to rain abuse on him, but Henry was too concerned with controlling the tears that were threatening to fall. His mother seemed both offended and delighted when she made him cry, and he did not want to give her the satisfaction. Finally, the crash of her wooden spoon on his head brought him back into the conversation. “Well,” his mother was saying, “answer me! What do you have there?”

Henry looked down and was surprised to find that he had carried the book downstairs with him. He held it out to his mother as he said, “It's just an old book I found with some of dad's things.” His mother said nothing, and Henry looked up to see if she had heard him.

His mother's face was changing, the anger receding from it like a beaten dog from its master. The red covering her countenance was slowly dwindling away and being replaced by supernatural paleness. Her mouth opened as she tried to form words but found none. After a moment, she smiled. It looked so unnatural on her face that Henry was convinced she had finally gone crazy. When she spoke, he knew something was wrong.

“I guess there's no harm in letting you off this once,” her voice dripped with insincerity. “Go on. Put that book back where you found it, and forget about it. Go play with your friend, but be sure to be home before dark.”

Henry nodded and thanked his mother, already moving toward the stairs. However, when he got to the second floor, he headed toward his room and stuffed the book into his backpack. He rushed down the stairs and out the door before his mother could question why he had his bag with him on a Friday night.

A couple of hours later, Henry and his best friend, David, were sitting in the tree house in the woods behind David's home. It swayed with the wind, but the boys had been here often enough to know it would not fall down around them. Henry held the book out and explained how he had found it and his mother's weird aversion to it. David stared at it, his eyes growing more panic-stricken with each passing moment.

"You're not seriously planning on reading that old thing are you?" David asked, sounding genuinely worried.

"Why? You're not scared are you?" Henry taunted playfully. "It's just a book."

"Yeah, well, you can say what you want about it, but if it scared your mom so bad, I don't think we should mess with it. It scares me too," he shuddered as he spoke.

"Don't be such a whimp. Who do you know who's been hurt by a book?"

"It's not the book that scares me. It's what might come out of it. I've seen those ghost-hunter shows on TV, and they seem real enough. How do you know this isn't like those shows?"

Henry laughed to himself at this display of cowardice, but when he spoke, his voice was gentle. "David, come on," he began, "you've watched special features on DVDs, right? The ones with the special effects?" David nodded as Henry continued. "Well, that's the same way they do those shows. They aren't real, and neither is this book."

"I dunno, Henry. It looks real enough to me," David said, unconvinced.

"Well, it's not. I tell you what; we can wait to read it until tomorrow. I'll go home and put a cross on it, and then we'll know for sure."

"Okay," David agreed. He knew as well as anyone that a cross would destroy anything evil. "I'll see you tomorrow." He got up and headed toward the ladder, trying to put as much space as possible between himself and the book. His head had just disappeared through the trap door when he heard his name called. "Yeah?" he answered.

"Bring all the candles you can find."

The sound of David's feet on the dirt trail beneath the tree brought Henry out of a trance. He smiled to himself, savoring the anticipation that had consumed him since finding the book. A sigh much too heavy for a boy of fifteen escaped his lips as he reached for the worn book.

Henry thought he had done well convincing David the book was harmless, especially since he was not entirely sure of the fact. The truth was, every time he placed his hand upon it, he felt a tingle of power. It seemed to converge on him, filling him until it became one with his very essence. Henry hesitated as his hand moved once more to the cover. He could sense the power building within him and believed that it could only be harvested by the reading of the book's dusty pages. The cover had just begun to separate from the thick parchment when the red-orange glare of the setting sun crossed Henry's eyes. He slammed the book shut and crammed it hastily into his bag. As soon as he hit the dirt he began to

run, desperately hoping his mother had lost track of time.

It was a stupid thought, a voice inside his head told him. He approached the house to find his mother standing before it, arms crossed with the dreaded wooden spoon held in one hand. Her face was contorted with fury, and she shook from it.

"Where on earth have you been?" she asked her voice full of malice, "I don't know when I've been more worried."

Henry did not know why, but he looked into his mother's menacing eyes and said, "Seems to me that you don't know a lot."

The reaction was immediate and predictable. His mother swung the spoon down onto the top of his head, the wood making a dull crack as it struck. Henry pushed past her, desperate to get away from the cursing, flailing thing that was his mother. He made for the stairs and the solace of his bedroom, but she cornered him at the top of the landing.

"Where the hell do you think you're going, you little shit?" she bellowed in rage, hitting him repeatedly with her spoon, "You just stand there and take it like the worthless bastard you are."

Again, Henry didn't know what happened. One second, he was standing there fighting back the inevitable tears and trying to ignore the pain, and the next he found himself pushing out, watching as his mother sought to maintain her balance. She lost the fight and toppled down the stairs. Henry continued to stare; she fell with a resounding snap as the base of her neck separated from her spine. Her body was limp as she tumbled down the staircase to land, broken, at its base, her eyes glazed over.

"M-m-mom?" the word came out of his mouth as a beg. He hoped for an answer despite the angles in which she lay. He stared at his hands and then at his mother's body and back again. Tears began to well up in his eyes and he sat down heavily, letting them cascade down his cheeks.

When he next opened his eyes, he found himself surrounded by fog, the thick mist closing in on him. His breath grew forced and ragged, allowing him only enough air to realize that he was going to die in this unknown place. He pulled in all the oxygen that could fit into his lungs and screamed. Spots swam before his eyes; his head grew lighter than the surrounding mist. "Please," he croaked as he fell to his knees, "Someone. Help." Amazingly, the spots began to clear, and he felt himself being pulled to his feet by some invisible force. He swayed as a shadow swirled through the mist. It walked closer, the fog parting before it like a veil, and stopped before Henry. He pulled back from it slightly, but the creature held his gaze.

"Look," its voice crackled like flame, "Gaze upon me that you might know me, your master."

Henry looked up at the beast, his gaze unhesitant. Its skin was brown in color and consisted of a series of tightly knit scales. Its flesh hung tight to its body, reminding Henry of the anorexic. He knew this to be a trap, for anyone could see this was a being of power. His eyes traveled up its body, taking note of

the vicious claws, and he was amazed to find its otherwise naked body covered by a deep scarlet cape.

Not a cape, thought Henry, wings.

They were folded and reached from the base of its neck to just below the creature's calves. The head of the beast was a work of horrid beauty. Huge, ram-like horns circled down behind its head, curling to a point near its cheekbones. Its mouth protruded slightly, similar to a cat. Catching sight of Henry's gaze, it opened its mouth to show three separate rows of teeth pointed in an endless array of angles. Henry looked the beast in the eyes and saw himself in them. The creature laughed to itself, knowing that the boy saw only his reflection and not the screaming faces of the souls that resided within, forever trapped in its gaze.

"Do you find my form pleasing?" the beast asked its newly acquired servant.

"Yes, my Lord," the boy answered as he bowed before it.

Henry jerked awake but remained, for a time, lying in bed with his eyes closed trying to remember the sweet dream that had left him feeling so refreshed. It had something to do with a voice, pure and majestic. He sat on the side of his bed and smiled as he noticed the book on his table. He dressed quickly, anxious to begin the day. Henry skipped out of the room, grabbing the book off the table as he passed. Thoughts of breakfast crossed his mind as he headed toward the stairs, and he wondered if his mother would be in a good enough humor to actually fix something to eat. He bounded down the stairs, two at a time, and hopped over the dead woman at the base of the stairwell. In a receding part of his mind, he recognized the woman.

"Well," he said to himself, "guess that means cereal." He hummed as he searched the kitchen for a clean bowl. After eating, he ran about the house gathering the materials he would need later that night. He tracked down most of the necessary items and found decent substitutes for those few ingredients that were not available to him. He walked swiftly out the door and headed in the direction of the tree house. When he arrived, he was surprised to find David pacing from wall to wall inside the small building.

"You're not supposed to be here yet," Henry told the larger boy.

"Well, I was tired of waiting around the house," David defended himself, "I had horrible dreams last night." When Henry said nothing, David continued, "I really don't think we should do this."

"You're absolutely right," Henry mocked, "We should stop because the poor little baby had a nightmare. Please! Stop sniveling; it makes me sick. Did you at least bring the candles?"

"I've got them right here," he said holding up a grocery sack filled with objects of various sizes, "You don't have to be such an ass."

Henry said nothing, and silence descended on the pair as Henry opened his bag. He pulled the book from within and set it reverently on the small table under the window. He then began to pull out the remainder of the contents and tossed them onto the table beside the book. David's fear swelled as he looked at

the items: a thick piece of chalk, a large pot, a bulging paper bag, lighter fluid complete with a small lighter, several different herbs carefully wrapped in cellophane, and a large kitchen knife.

David tore his gaze away from the table to look at his friend, terror shaking his voice as he said, "What is it we're gonna be doing exactly?"

"Stop worrying about it. I promise it will be worth it," Henry answered as he reached for the chalk. A vicious glint covered his eyes as he knelt and said, "Just be sure to stay out of my way while I work."

David watched as his friend began to draw on the wooden planks. Henry moved slowly, careful to draw one large, perfect circle. His hand moved unceasingly, the chalk never leaving the floor, and his speed built as he completed a smaller circle inside the large one, six inches separating the two. Henry knelt in the center of his dual circle and began to draw strange symbols between them. David continued to stare dumbstruck as his friend completed the eighth and final symbol. When it was finished, Henry crouched in the center and drew a pentagram inside the smaller circle, making sure that each point touched the ring around it. He stood up and stared down at his work. He nodded to himself and stepped out the circle, careful to make it over the design. In a different time, David would have been impressed by Henry's leap, for the drawing was over six feet in diameter.

David, feeling it was time he got some answers, said, "What is tha . . ."

"Be quiet, you fool!" Henry responded, his eyes furious. He looked up and, seeing David, forced kindness into his expression. "Sorry, just give me a minute, and I'll explain everything."

David looked at his friend, wondering if this was the same person he had left the day before. He moved farther into the corner of his tree house, his eyes glancing about for an escape. He sat down, legs folded against his body, and attempted to control his shaking.

By the time David was able to sit still, Henry had set the pot on the floor a short distance from the strange drawing. He picked up the brown bag and poured out charcoal, arranging it in a pyramid inside the pot. After dousing it with lighter fluid, Henry lit it, crossed over to the table, and opened the book. His lips moved as he read to himself, and by the time he was content with the passage, the flame had died down leaving the coals to burn.

Henry collected the packs of cellophane and knelt by the pot. He took one of the packages and opened it, grabbing a bit between his forefinger and thumb. He tossed it gently onto the coals as he intoned, "Liberate te ex infernis." A thick curl of smoke was carried out of the pot as the plant met the embers. He performed this ritual seven times, once for each herb. After he had finished, he looked up and noticed David. At the sight of his friend, Henry's face grew worried. "You can't be there," he cried desperately, "Quickly, into the circle! It's the only place you'll be safe."

David thought that unlikely, but Henry had never before lied to him. David

made his way, as fast as he could, through the thickening smoke into the circle. He stood there trembling, wishing he could force Henry to stop this madness. He could vaguely see Henry's outline moving around the table. The smoke poured from the pot, and David was beginning to have difficulty drawing breath. He looked back toward the table but was unable to locate Henry. Thinking Henry had abandoned him, David made to escape the circle and the tree house but was stopped by the appearance of Henry's face mere inches in front of his own. A stranger's eyes glared from the familiar countenance. "Mortuus ex vivo," said the face as David felt the knife dance across his throat.

Henry watched with satisfaction as David's body slumped to the floor and began convulsing. "The blood is the pathway," he quoted aloud as he watched the blood spread across the floor. It pooled faster than he had anticipated, and he was forced to step back to prevent it from soaking through his shoes. He stared at the crumpled mass that was his friend, wondering how long it would take to start. Suddenly the smoke thinned and whirled within the circle, a model of a tornado. Henry stared at the center of the circle, waiting.

A moment passed before anything more happened. Without warning, thunder broke the peaceful air, and thick clouds blackened the sky that had been clear. Henry's eyes never left the circle, and his vigilance was rewarded; two horns were beginning to protrude from the floor. Yes, Henry thought, *come to me, my master*. It came.

The demon stood up and looked about him, taking note of the pitiful human boy prostrating at its feet. Its eyes headed directly for the window, and it gazed out to the world beyond. Soon, it would not need this pitiful routine to feed. Soon, it would be able to roam the world at will. First, however, it needed pure souls. The demon glimpsed at the blood-covered floor and laughed to itself. It stepped through the blood, out of the circle, and grabbed the boy by his throat, its claws digging into the soft flesh.

"Master," the boy begged, confused, "Master, I freed you. Master, please."

"You have allowed me a momentary respite in this realm, mortal," the demon growled, "and you've done well. You must not think that I will forsake you; in truth, I have a much greater service that you may perform." It stared into the boy's eyes, searching for the tiny spark of divinity within him. It shone through the demonic taint, and the demon coveted it. The boy's soul screamed as it was wrenched from his body into the boundless void of the demon.

The demon looked longingly, one last time, out the window before sinking into its prison to wait for the day when it would be powerful enough to walk the world alone.

All Intrusive

Lin Johns

Jane lies carefully, anxiously on the hard narrow table. The nurse has already been in, tossing Jane a flimsy paper gown telling her to strip. Now, her legs are properly positioned in the frigid steel stirrups. Her face burns while her hands and feet feel like rough-hewn blocks of ice. She clamps her eyes shut. Her Pap smear has come back abnormal and the doctor requires a more all-inclusive examination. The earlier pronouncement of cervical cancer has made Jane want to apologize to everyone especially Peter. For his sake she takes great care of herself. She eats sensibly, painstakingly exercises three times a week and drinks ten glasses of water a day faithfully. People must view Peter as someone captivatingly handsome and affluent providing Jane with the kind of lifestyle any woman would die for. Now, she finds herself in the examination room of her gynaecologist, Dr. Franklin.

After a bit, she opens her eyes taking stock of the items on an adjacent counter: brittle wooden tongue depressors, pristine cotton swabs and several pairs of sterile forceps- all intrusive. She can hear the nurse talking outside the room in a brisk staccato manner. Doctor Franklin enters. He avoids coming round so she can see his face.

"Good to see you, Jane," he says. A cloud of the doctor's expensive cologne wafts over her. She can't remember the name of it.

"Feeling fine I hope? Good. Today's visit is just to confirm the laboratory findings." He switches on the stainless steel, goose-necked lamp.

"We'll be done in a few minutes." He opens a drawer and snaps on a pair of latex gloves. Still unable to see him fully, she feels him move toward her half-exposed legs and his disembodied voice coaxes, "Now just slide your bottom a little further down toward me."

As she lifts herself the sweat-soaked paper sheet beneath clings to her and tears.

"Relax, dear," Dr. Franklin cautions. Iciness rakes her flesh. Finally, moving into sight the doctor picks up a tube, unscrews the top with one hand and squeezes out the viscous contents with the other. She had forgotten how huge his hands are- his fingers long, fat sausages. Jane presses her eyes closed as he slathers thick lubricant onto his soon-to-be probing fingers.

"I had to laugh the other day," he chuckles. "Our dentist told my wife that the best remedy for chapped lips is KY jelly," he snorts.

Jane says, "Isn't that interesting?" A ticking sound behind her indicates a ventilation fan is engaging.

"I'll keep it in mind," she continues. She opens her eyes and looks at the ceiling. There is an immense National Geographic-type poster- a pod of whales- secured with heavy staples. The whales have large heads and long, narrow lower jaws. Sperm whales, she decides. One whale is off to the side, covered with mas-

sive scars and enormous barnacles. She recalls reading how giant squids attach themselves to whales and suck their life out. Hasn't she also read how seemingly healthy whales intentionally beach themselves, are rescued and turned back toward the open ocean, only to return again to the beach where they ultimately perish? It's a mystery to some why they kill themselves. She wonders if whales mate for life. She feels her heart pounding in the silence.

"How's that highly spirited dog of yours?" inquires Dr. Franklin, his voice as smooth as cough syrup.

"Fine. She's fine," she says. She wills her heart to stop beating so fast. "Peter loves playing fetch with her. He throws the ball way out and she always retrieves it, something for the life of me I just don't understand. I mean you'd think she'd grow tired of the same old game. She brings him a great deal of pleasure."

"And that broken arm of yours," the doctor says. "Healing all right? Fell down the stairs, didn't you?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I did," she answers with a practiced voice. She laughs nervously. "I guess I'm accident-prone. Peter says he just doesn't know what he's going to do with me."

"Speaking about Peter, how is he dealing with all of this?" The doctor moves so she can see his face. Jane stares at the large round face, the blue eyes that look forced open. More waves of his costly cologne envelop her. Peter will know what it's called. Nauseated, Jane feels the bitterness rise in the back of her throat.

"Stress and worry can be hard on the husband," Dr. Franklin says. "It's crucial to make sure Peter's needs are being met."

"Yes, I know. He is fine. His needs are certainly being met. And Dr. Franklin...I really wonder...I'm sure the cancer will spread and..." For one mere short moment, panicky thoughts dance in her brain.

Turning from her, the doctor says, "Good. That's it." He switches off the lamp. "You're finished." Stripping off the soiled gloves he tosses them carelessly into the garbage. The doctor checks his watch. "Sorry Jane, no time to stay and chat. There will be plenty of time for questions at a later date." He beams and then breezes over to the door. "I'm glad we had this talk. Tell Peter if he has any questions to give me a call. Otherwise I'll see him Saturday at the Fishing Derby." Dr. Franklin opens the door and says: "Take care and good-bye Jane." And he was gone.

Upon retrieving her clothes from the hook, Jane notices an old half-peeled sticker, which reads: 'Save the Whales.' She peels the remainder of the sticker off, rolls it into a little ball and flicks it into the nearby garbage.

Peter is already at home when Jane comes in from her doctor's appointment. As well as a masterly fisherman, Peter is an ardent builder of miniature ships in bottles. He specializes in the wooden ships from an all but forgotten era. He sits at his worktable; his pudgy fingers grasp a pair of tweezers. The little pincers hold a small wooden object he's accurately guiding into an old whiskey bottle placed carefully on a tapered bench. He has positioned a florescent light over his work

area. In the corner an old record player emits scratchy strains of a woman singing. Jane feels flushed as she stands in the doorway, her coat half-open, exposing her bare legs.

"Oh you're here," Peter says. The clock behind his head ticks off the minutes. "I'm just finishing." The room is hot and a trickle of perspiration fingers its way down Jane's back. The smell of Peter's cologne causes her nose to twitch.

Gesturing toward a wall already crowded with his awards, he says: "What do you think of my latest fishing plaque? To make room I took down that stitch thing you made."

"Cross stitch," she says.

"Whatever. Like I said, I needed the space. Anyhow, you sure look crummy. Oh ya, right you had that doctor appointment. How is the good Dr. Franklin? Still using that God-awful cologne? Boy, he's getting on in years. Good Fisherman though. He can be a bit meddlesome. He didn't ask any uncalled-for questions? Good." Peter puts down his tools and sits back in his swivel chair. Jane lets the silence expand between them.

"You look tired. No more bad news I hope? You haven't forgotten the fishing banquet on Sunday? I'm sure you want to look your best. Work for me has been tough, so many pushy people. I'm sure you know what I mean. You'd love to go on a trip somewhere hot, one of those all-inclusive deals where the room, water sports, food and drinks are all included. Just think of the bikinis and booze. Yes, you definitely need a break." She stands and stares at him as if helpless while anger swells in her like a balloon. He turns his chair, and puts his recently shined shoes up on Jane's sewing table. The chair groans.

"Don't look so glum," he continues. "I'm included of course," he guffaws. "I'll book it tomorrow. And hey, when we go away, maybe we could go whale watching. Imagine powering a pontoon boat alongside one of those dim-witted creatures. The threat of being swamped or ensnared by one thrills me. That's something I've always wanted to do."

Peter casts his eye over Jane and says: "You'd like that." And as Peter was always right and got what he wanted, on their vacation their pontoon boat was indeed swamped by a so called dim-witted whale. Peter's body was found beached on the shore. Later, within the pages of the autopsy report, it was recorded that the autopsy performed on Peter revealed a strange inexplicable anomaly. A very surprised coroner noted he'd never seen a whiskey bottle intruding so far into the human anatomy.

To whom it may concern,

John Ferguson

Fear has gripped me once again. I know now that I will not survive the night. It was my own mistake so I must claim full responsibility for what I have

unleashed upon this tiny world. This had all started so innocently last year when I was given a book on pagan rituals as a gift. Being a study of ancient cultures and spiritual practices, the book was still unknown to me. One of the books considered forbidden knowledge; it was only mentioned in underground circles and was never recognized by historians to ever really exist. Even the church took a stand saying that the book was a fantastic story made up by pagans and any copy that did exist had been written as a joke and were not considered real.

I was so enthralled by the book that I had read it twice through in only a couple of days. It took less than a week to set up an altar and gather all the ritual items needed to perform the ceremonies listed on its forbidden pages. It is at this time that my mind was so clouded with the grandeur of what I was about to do that all rational thoughts had left me.

I performed the first ritual that very night, alone. I had already become so selfish that I felt threatened by my colleagues not wanting to share credit. The ritual went without fault, the circle drawn on the floor in sheep's blood, the symbols cast on the walls in the blood of four unclean animals. The circle on the floor had a six pointed star drawn around it in the ashes of the dead so that it was in the center untouched by the star. Upon reading the last sentence of the ritual aloud, I realized all my dreams and hopes. I saw a great future and world fame reach for me through the dark. It was also a time for fear and uncertainty as the circle grew dark as night and "Dagoth" who would later be known as, grew from the dark to fill the circle. Short in stature, he was a hideous abomination to world. He did not speak freely, but only answered questions after listening to me talk to him for over an hour. There was only time to ask a few questions before he began to fade into the dark.

When the circle grew dark once more and "Dagoth" went back to where he had come, I was drunk with the power of what had taken place that night. My mind went wild with the possibilities and dreams of things to come. I dare not write here those things I learned. If this world survives the night, it is better off to be blind sheep in a flock of deceit and lies of mere humans than to again unleash the horrors that I have upon myself.

As my immortal soul was put on the line, I reviewed the information received that night. However, the answers I had been given only created more questions. I vowed not to let one night go by without learning more. Once night had fallen again, I found myself at the altar performing the first ritual. Once again "Dagoth" had come.

Each night for a month I had performed that first ritual. "Dagoth" had come each night, sometimes staying for hours, sometimes for only a few minutes. I had become lost in a sea of information and was starting to turn my back on the world around me. I know now that the greed and power of what I was doing had consumed me fully and was now in control. The rituals had given me a false sense of power and control. As each night passed the thought of power grew in my mind, I didn't see that it was why this information and these books were forbidden. I had become

lost in my own mind. As the year passed I went on to perform six different rituals contained in the book. Each one of the rituals summoned forth a new being into the circle. Some were so horrible that to look upon them flooded you with a sickness that could not be shed throughout the night. Others were as angels.

There was only one ritual left unexploited in the book last night. I had performed them all in the last year, each one many times. As I got to the limit of knowledge with each being, they always told me to speak with “Yewah.” Even in my questioning they would not say more then to speak with “Yewah.”

It was through greed and power that drove me to performing the last ritual in that accursed book. Without consideration, I set forth last night to finish what I had started. When the being appeared in the circle as all the other had many times before, I found myself falling to my knees. I asked the being for forgiveness. I offered it my soul. Then I did the only thing I could do, I broke the circle and set the being free upon this tiny planet.

Before it left the room, it replied only this.

“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. You are the beginning of this journey and when I return you will be the end.”

It was then I realized in my own horror that I had released a terror upon this world like no other. Death will be the final curse upon my ragged body; eternal will I be immortal in the world of death. Forgive me...

Scott by Gerald Zipper

Once I walked on a glacier
looked down into the beginning of time
crawled upon the great mass of compacted ice
not leaping across yawning fissures
not to fall away to frozen hell
Scott refused this knowledge
named after the famed Arctic Explorer
he believed he knew the truth
more civilized than the rest of the world
could see the curvatures of the future
insisted animals were part of the human tribe
he worked his way to Alaska
hiked the rocky pathways north
sat at tribal fires
preached to eagles atop the great pines
made passage through the costal waterway
trembled with excitement at sight of brown bear
massive creatures roaming the shore
leaped overboard into the tumbling surf
startling passengers ship's crew and lumbering bear
“I am your brother!”
ignoring the ship pulling away
leaving Scott to mix with his new brethren
converse with giants and rollicking babes
Rangers found his torn shirt and ripped shoes
scattered beside a pile of picked clean bones
warn all tourists who venture north
“never startle brown bear or people or nations”

The House of Special Purpose

Nicholas Trutenko

It's 2:00 in the morning – and a nation sleeps.
The children are awakened from their beds
And ordered to get dressed.
They are taken with their parents and led through the house
To the cellar, twenty-three steps down.
The Ipatiev House can be a cold place,
When no one comes.

They are lined up against the wall
And told they will be photographed.

There would be no crying, no tears, no questions asked.
Such nobility!

But, what can children know of nobility
As they are about to face the bayonet?

The force of the gunfire blows the father backwards.
The mother and the oldest daughter
Attempt to make the sign of the cross,
For the last time.

The boy, after having been shot,
Is lying on the floor
And reaching for his father.

But, his father is not God –
Neither is he man.
He is something between God and man.
That's what the people thought.
But now they sleep.

The boy is kicked in the head.
He groans.
Several more shots are fired at him.
But, he shows alarming vitality,
Until he is shot twice more –
At point-blank range.

The twelve-man execution squad
Continues to fire, and the room fills with smoke.
They become unnerved / hysterical –
Because the girls would not die.

Not knowing that they wore jewels sewn in their corsets,
Bullets bounce off the girls and ricochet madly in the room.
Perhaps they did rule by the will of God.

The two youngest girls cower on the floor, against the wall,
Trying to shield their heads.

The maid runs back and forth along the wall, screaming,
Wildly swinging her pillow at the men.
They try to stab her with their bayonets.
She grabs hold of one by the blade,
Struggling to prevent it from plunging in to her chest.
The blade is dull, and at first, will not penetrate.

The men become enraged.
They start to spear the girls and the maid with their bayonets –
Ten / twenty / thirty times and more.
Then, smash and club them with their rifle butts.

Twenty minutes later –
They finish.

The room becomes quiet / eerie.
The blood and stench of gunpowder,
And the savagery of their deed,
Cause some of the men to get sick.

They begin to load the bodies on to the truck.
Then, become horrified –
Because the girls, still, would not die.

While being raised on a stretcher,
One of the girls cries out, and covers her face.
The men, acting as one,
Frantically start stabbing and clubbing her –
Until she lay still.

The other girls, now moving on the floor,
Are then set upon.
At some point, they would no longer feel pain.
They would no longer dream the dreams,
That young girls dream.

It's 3:00 in the morning – and a nation is born
Through the blood of the tears
That were not shed
In the cellar of the Ipatiev House.

Let history record the names,
Of those who suffered
Once more, to read:

Alexei Trupp, Valet
Anna Demidova, Maid
Ivan Kharitonov, Cook
Eugene Botkin, Doctor
Olga Romanov, Grand Duchess
Tatiana Romanov, Grand Duchess
Marie Romanov, Grand Duchess
Anastasia Romanov, Grand Duchess
Alexei Romanov, Tsarevich
Alexandra Romanov, Tsarina
Nicholas Romanov II, Tsar

It's 6:00 in the morning – and a nation dies
As the bodies are stripped naked and laid in the grass
In Koptiyaki Forest, in the Ural District.
The mother and her girls, their faces now crushed and un-recognizable,
Are violated by the groping hands of the boastful killers.
There is concern amongst some of the men,
Regarding the sexual intent of others in their detail.

The bodies are thrown down a mine shaft,
And grenades are tossed in after them.

The next evening
The bodies are raised from the shaft.
They are dumped in a freshly dug shallow pit
And drenched with acid.

The boy and one of his sisters are soaked in gasoline
By the heroic murderers.
Then, illuminate the woods –
Where no one may witness
The coming truth.

Hear now the words
Of Alexandra Romanov,
Awaiting their fate:

“The triumph of centuries past
Guards this palace.
Power glorious, imperial,
Shadows incorporeal.
No momentary guest shall drive away
The guests of ages past.
Stop! Never forget too long
Of the crown of the Tsar.
He will rise up soon, rise up terribly.
So, witnesses of the past,
Just as the gloom appears –
The mirrors whisper the word –
The coming truth.”

Cast In Stone

Janet Kuypers

I've searched a millenia for you
and my love for you
 will survive through the ages
And if they cast us in stone
it will only cement my love for you
for all to see and admire
because even if the elements
 chip away our outer façades
the marble will smooth in time
and my soul will still flourish
being frozen by your side.

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

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