



down in the

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

v. 062

Sept. '08

down

# Table of contents

09/08 **Down in the Dirt** volume 062

Mary Block .....	1
Vickie Clasby .....	2
Lyn Lifshin .....	3
Gary McGee .....	3
William Avett.....	4
James Orman Cannon III .....	6
Ken Dean .....	14
Pat Dixon .....	16
Frank T. Sikora .....	31
Mark Hudson <i>art</i> .....	34
Barbara Johanns .....	35
B W Mayer .....	37
Tony Concannon .....	38
Ashok Niyogi .....	40
Shaun Millard.....	41
Kim Jaxtheimer.....	41
Gerald Zipper .....	42
N. E. Payne .....	43
Grace Curtis .....	44

Scars Cover art of foliage in Naples, Florida.

## Audibility in the Midwest

### **Mary Block**

The still road,  
crows in the variant  
drifts make silenter the ribs'  
rests within breathing,  
between breaths  
as the vastness fails

The blaring sound means it will soon be time for breakfast. The lady hits the button which makes the sound stop, and rolls over in bed. She does this every day, and every day I rise from the warm blanket at the end of the bed and walk carefully up to her pillow. Sometimes she rubs my ears and scratches my chin. Other times she pulls the covers up over her head. That is what she does today. I paw her head and pull at the covers. After just a couple of minutes of pawing and pulling, her hand comes out of the cover and she rubs my head. I purr. Sometimes when I am not happy and she rubs my head, I try not to purr, but it is impossible to stop.

Then the sound blares again and she smacks the small box with blinking lights and utters some word I've heard many times, throws off the covers and stands up. She always goes to the room with the shiny white chair with water inside and closes the door. I wait outside the door. When I hear the swooshing sound inside I know to move out of the way because the door will open. She opens the door and walks out, looks at me with her mouth curved and says something to me in her happy voice. I like her happy voice so I purr again. She walks from the room with the bed into the big room with the rug, then to the room with the food. I follow close behind her and say 'Food.' She must understand what I said because she uses her happy voice again, shows me her curved mouth and puts food in my dish. I purr.

I love my food and I love my lady. But I do not love the small people. The small people are loud and smell bad. They do not use the sandbox like I do. They use their clothes. I do not know why the lady likes them and feeds them. She shows them her curved mouth but they do not purr. They scream. Water leaks from their mouths, noses and eyes, and they have no fur. I am her favorite. That's why she lets me sleep in her bed.

I guess she likes the big man, too, because he sleeps in her bed. Sometimes he moves his feet and kicks me when I'm sleeping. I don't love him like my lady but I like him. He doesn't show me his curved mouth very much but sometimes he rubs my head and I purr. I can't stop it.

I do not like the brute. He chases me and tries to eat my food. The lady likes him, but does not let him sleep in her bed. He makes very loud noises and wakes up the small people and they scream. He is covered in fur and smells and drinks water from the shiny white chair. Even when the lady shows him her curved mouth he does not purr. He is a brute.

The lady and the big man rush around when the sky is light and feed

the small people then leave me alone with the brute until the sky is dark. I sit and look outside at the things that eat from the dishes. They do not walk. They do not have fur. They have something else but it is not what the people wear. They sit on the dishes and eat the food and then they leave. Sometimes a furry thing with a big tail runs and scares them away and eats the food. If the brute sees it, he makes a very loud noise and jumps up and down. He wakes me up when I'm sleeping. I do not like the brute.

Then the people come back. Sometime it takes a long time before my lady shows me her curved mouth or says something to me with her happy voice. I follow her and say "Food," and sometimes I have to say "Food" many times. I stand by my dish, and say "Food," and finally she hears me and puts food in my dish. She picks me up and holds me on her shoulder and I purr in her ear. I can't see her but I know her mouth is curved.

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## Straw Devil

*Gary McGee*

I'm a stick man  
In a child's drawing  
Too thin even to be hollow  
My universe is one-dimensional  
Neither sun nor moon  
Can follow  
Me into the gray, white, black  
But I am Art  
The insurgency  
The dangerous thing  
Here, even straw hands  
Can lift mountains

## On Rapple Drive

*Lyn Lifshin*

I should have gone,  
I finally did.

It was accidental,  
Colorado, a

fellowship. I  
should have locked

away the Kennedy  
silver dollars, never

given him the  
key. I couldn't tell

my husband. The  
sheet, not those

we tangled on,  
how, sweaty

the purple one  
bleached to lavender

# Individualism

William Avett

I've always considered myself a loner. Sure, they taught us to be self-reliant and not to depend on anyone, but I've always been that way.

Ever since I can remember I've had to rely on my own wits and ingenuity. No one ever pulled my chestnuts out of the fire, and I wasn't about to start helping anyone else, either.

So, when I got the contract to eliminate subject Terry Henderson, heir of the Henderson Corporation, I treated it like any other job. I had no idea who wanted her dead, or why, and it was none of my business. A deal was a deal, and I took the five thousand Credits down payment like any other job. After all, I was a professional.

They gave me her complete schedule for the next six months, her normal routine, her habits, her likes and her dislikes. I grew to know Miss Terry Henderson better than I knew myself. And, as I grew to know her, I understood her faults and her foibles. She was an idealist, a rich sentimentalist out to save the galaxy. But, someone found her exploits disturbing, and wanted them terminated, permanently.

So, I booked passage on the first flight to Tenachi, a world of vast oceans and rolling beaches. It was a vacation world, really, newly discovered and just at the early exploitation stage. I found it a beautiful planet, and an ideal place to carry out my contract.

Terry Henderson would spend two fun filled weeks on the planet, free from her worries, and secure in the knowledge that her good works would protect her from the worst of man. I would regretfully change her mind of that assumption.

Thus, after a week of tailing her from afar, and observing her every movement, I decided it was time to make my move. Tonight she would stay at a secluded beach house on Lansen Peninsula. I got there way ahead of time, and dug in.

I scanned her hovercraft as it passed overhead, and read no extra security personnel, not even a rob-guard or two. She set down at the small landing pad, and carried in a bag, and then came back for two more. She was wearing beach clothing, and I decided the data file hadn't done her justice.

The surveillance gear kicked on, and I watched her unpack, and relax for the evening. She fixed a light dinner with her own hands, and ate it quietly while reading an old-fashioned paper book. The data file hadn't mentioned that side of her, either. I guess they didn't consider it relevant to the job at hand.

An hour later she marked her place between the pages, and cleaned up the table. I knew she was heading for bed. Sometime after midnight I would pay her a visit, the last visit she would ever receive.

She took a shower, and crawled into bed. I'm not really a voyeur, and so tried to stay professional. But, with so many people in the universe, I felt it sad that someone had picked her out for termination.

And, I hadn't seen her beat a servant, or even pull a tantrum—not what you



would expect from the typical heiress of a family fortune. She certainly did deserve her reputation of being an angel in an earthly body, and in more ways than one.

I patiently waited till she drifted off to sleep, and then made my move. Deactivating the exterior sensors, I crept across the beach sand to the back door. The lock opened immediately to my override code, and I was inside.

This part I hated the most. Other professionals would complete the contract from a distance, but I felt that was cowardice. If you couldn't face your target, see into the person's soul, then what kind of a person were you? I had long ago decided that society required my personal attention, and I would perform every job with the same individual interest and commitment.

So, I made my way into her bedroom, and approached her sleeping form. She didn't stir as I raised my Neuroncer and pointed it at her face, so calm and serene without a care in the world, a face that smiled upon the universe, and seemed to make it a better place.

"Hello, John," she said, opening her eyes.

I almost fired by reflex even then, but for some reason I didn't. She represented the society that I hated, despite her attempts to make it right. It was my privilege and duty to continue my revenge upon that society and terminate her life. But, for some reason I did not.

"Second thoughts?" she asked.

"How do you know my name?"

"I know all about you, John. I know about your life, about your treatment at the orphanage, about how you survived on the streets of Alpha-9. And, I know, about what you've done."

"What I've done?"

"You're here to kill me, aren't you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Then, perhaps you had better get on with it."

I raised my weapon, pointed it between her eyes, and began to squeeze the trigger. Something wasn't right. I backed off a few feet, reached over, and turned on the light.

Her hair spread across the pillow, lovely face smiling with a twinkle in her eye—she did almost look like an angel. I could understand now how people might see that in her.

"What's going on," I said. Mysteries disturbed me, and never before had a victim asked me to 'get on with it'.

"I had to meet you," she said. "I had meet you on your terms, to understand that which you see."

"Go on."

"You and I are much alike, John Stanton. You have a gift, but do not know it. You have shrouded yourself in hate and vengeance, and have not seen the other side."

"What do you mean?"

"You can see what truly lies within people, their evil and their good, but you

have turned your heart away from the good.”

I raised my weapon in anger. “I’ll kill you,” I said.

“And you can, John. It’s so easy. And, you’ve done it many times before, but not from a distance. No, never from a distance. You must face the evil in each of your victims to justify your actions of revenge. But, you refuse to look at the other side of them.” She smiled. “I am the other side, John. If I were raised as you, and you as me, our roles would be reversed.”

“You would be a murderer?”

“Yes, I would. John, we both have the ability to see the good and the evil in others. It is our curse, and our gift. Few can do this, and fewer still can rise above to see both sides. I believe that you can.”

“And, if you’re wrong?”

“Then I will die, John, and sometime later, another will kill you, and the universe will be a lesser place.”

I didn’t understand what she was saying. It was some kind of moralist garbage. I again raised my weapon. Unlike my other victims of revenge, she showed no fear, seeming to accept whatever fate I would dispense with the pull of my finger, a fate that some day another would dispense to me.

“What can I do?” I asked.

“You have been alone, John. Join me, and a few others like myself. We are the harbingers of the future, John. We do our best to mold society for the better. Without us, the hurt you have experienced would spread across the galaxy. We Guardians protect the future, and we need those who have seen the ugly past.”

She rose up from the bed, the sheet falling to her waist. I looked into her eyes, and threw the Neuroncer across the room. Somehow I knew her. Perhaps I always had.

“You have been alone for so many years,” she said. “Be alone no more.” Then we kissed, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

“You’re still in danger,” I said. “They will hire someone else to kill you, and I don’t know if I can protect you.”

“Don’t worry, John, everything will be fine.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I’m the one who hired you.”

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# The Crusader of the Damned

*James Orman Cannon III*

The barrel of the .357 was well-cleaned and shined. It was a Custom Magnum SP24 Mississippi Army-issued revolver that held eight rounds. The pistol was neatly and securely placed into its black holster; 24 extra rounds were

kept in an outside pocket. The green and black uniform was neatly laid out on the table. An M-24 Assault Rifle was slung over the back of one of the chairs.

Isaac Jacobin splashed some water on his face and looked at himself in the mirror. He saw his own deep, light brown eyes, his slightly crooked nose, and pale, gaunt features. Inhaling deeply, he walked slowly into his kitchen and let out an exaggerated exhale. Opening up his refrigerator his stomach growled with hunger. The fridge was empty, and only a tray of ice cubes occupied the freezer. "Damn..." he said, "I gotta go to the HQ to get more freezer food stamps."

He walked into the living room and glanced at the clock, then picked up the TV remote and turned it on. The announcer came on and a picture of the outer fence came up in the upper left corner of the screen, on the other side of the fence there were distorted and deformed faces encrusted with blood and gore looking in at the camera crew. The anchor's voice came on: "Good morning Possum Lake, This is Susan Chung with EWTN news. It's 5:30a.m. this chilly winter Wednesday. Today's high is in the lower 40s and we expect no sunshine, as usual. The date is December 16, 2036. The situation with these so-called 'zombies' has escalated to an extreme. General Swartz and General Graham have decided it best to put up extended city walls and to close the gates to everyone on the outside. The city guard has been ordered to take down any resistance to the new defensive orders. In other news the resistance group known as The Peoples Order of God or TPOG has made a movement to take the southern part of the slums known to most as the UnderCity. Despite the desperate attempt of the city guard to defend the UnderCity, it was lost..."

Isaac pushed the power button on the remote and stared blankly at the screen. He had been with the City Guard for four years, ever since the virus started to spread. The cell phone in his jacket pocket beeped. He jumped off the couch and ran over to the table and pulled it out. The screen read 12 missed calls. He pressed the OK button and it read 7 new voice messages. He called his voice mail and listened to all seven. The last one was the most important. It was from his commander.

"Jacobin! This is Commander Jackson! 25 men died tonight because they did not have a leader! You have the choice of demotion from Commander to Private, Execution, freedom, or civilianship. You should die for this, but that's against protocol... Good-bye Isaac."

He started putting on the uniform as he looked into the mirror. His pistol fit snugly into its holster. The handle of the gun was shaped perfectly to his hand. The barrel was one inch longer for greater accuracy. He had an eight-shooter instead of the regulation six. After killing so many, Jacobin had earned the nickname "Widowmaker." He picked up his rifle and started doing his ritualistic morning cleaning. His rifle had an extended barrel with a 32 round clip instead of the standard 24. The shoulder strap was fit perfectly to his body length.

Suddenly, there was a knock at his door. As a reflex, he pulled the revolver from its holster. As it swung toward the front door, light from the full moon outside shimmered from the barrel and flashed off the chrome crucifix on the wall.



“Who’s there?” Isaac asked in a raspy voice.

“It’s me Sir,” said a familiar voice on the other side of the door.

He sighed and walked towards the door while sliding the pistol back into its holster. Walking past the entryway, he glanced at the security screen attached to the camera outside his apartment door. He saw about a dozen shadows being cast on the wall just off screen. He had to look again to examine the shape of the shadows. There were outlines of helmets and rifles as well as the picture of his friend in full gear. He thought to himself, “No Mick... not you... please lord not him...” he ran back across the room towards the large sliding window that lead to the balcony.

Just as he slid out the small opening, the door flew in, splintering the wood and sending the alarm screaming. Metal windowpanes slid down over all the windows and nearly took off his hand as he moved around the corner. He looked down at the police cars on the streets far below. In a desperate attempt to escape, his head thrashed from side to side looking for a place to run. The sirens grew louder. When Isaac glanced down to see why, he saw the police crafts driving up the side of the building toward him. Panicking, he jumped from the ledge out into the cold winter air.

It felt as if he were falling for hours. The wind was strong and had blown him twenty or thirty feet off course from his landing spot. He stretched out his arms like a bird and stabilized himself, the pressure from the air making him dizzy. Everything in his view started to turn white. ‘No... I gotta... gotta stay awake... can’t pass out...’ Everything then suddenly went dark.

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He awoke to a disgusting aroma that was like a mix between rotting flesh and formaldehyde. Everything was still dark. His first thought was that he was blind, but he decided to look for a light switch instead of convincing himself that he was. Isaac started to feel the walls around him and felt for a door, keypad, or light switch. The room was large. There were cold patches of ooze that reminded him of coagulated blood from the undead men and women he had felt on his hands when he was fighting in the field. He continued to feel around the room even though these oozy patches brought back terrible memories. Every now and then some would seem warm. He had to convince himself that these were not blood.

After almost an hour of constant hunting, he finally came across a keypad. He pushed the ON button and lights started to flicker all around the large building. It was much bigger then he had thought it was. The hour he had spent trying to find the keypad covered only a small portion of the wall. It looked to be a warehouse of some kind. Blood splotches and bodies were strewn all over the floor. All had been executed or raped and murdered by members of the City Guard. Knowing this brought back memories of an incident with another guard member once in the past. His friend Joe had asked him to help ‘escort’ some of the young female TPOG resistance members. Joe had said, “Hey man, some of these girls are as young as fourteen. Don’t you want a piece of that?” Isaac always

started a fight by calling him a disgusting virus to mankind. They always escalated to physical pain. Even though Isaac always put Joe in the hospital, he kept coming and asking. Eventually, Isaac agreed to go. In the escort truck, one of the other guards started to molest one of the fifteen-year-old girls. She started to cry. Isaac took the butt of his rifle and brought it to the guard's jaw. The sound of shattering bone echoed through the large cargo truck. Blood spewed from the man's nose, mouth, and eyes, splattering the walls and roof. He shot two rounds into the man's back screaming with rage, "You sick bastard! Try to touch her now!"

Isaac turned to Joe and lifted the barrel of his rifle to the man's forehead. Slowly he started to pull the trigger. His finger twitched and he closed his eyes. The sound of the rifle shot rung in his ears for five months. The doctor said it was just his guilt, but Isaac insisted it was the sound of the shot in the truck. He was awarded for stopping a "Menace to Society" and promoted to Commander. The women on the transport that night 'mysteriously' disappeared and Isaac somehow found a 15-year-old girl on the road and adopted her.

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed a well-memorized number. It rang for about five minutes before a sleepy female voice answered. "Hello..." came a voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey sweetie!" said Isaac in a cheerful tone "I need your help, ok Mel?"

"Yea dad... what do you want?"

"You know the warehouse? The one where the guard takes... um... you know..."

"Yep... A couple of the others and I will be there in about fifteen minutes, okay?"

"Ok baby girl!"

The phone clicked and went silent. Isaac closed the phone and slipped it into his pocket. He pulled the revolver from its holster and sat down on one of the steps outside of the building. Waiting gave him time to think. He thought of the days before the virus when he was making love to his fiancée, playing baseball with his workmates, going out for a night of partying and other things like that. Then his mind would drift to a day called V-Day or Virus Day. He watched the zombies maul his future wife and kill her. He saw all of his closest friends die and rise to kill. He always kept a small snub nose revolver in his car. He used it to kill the infected and keep them from suffering. Life at that time was a struggle for him. The pistol would slowly drift to his head, then he would change his mind, deciding to help more souls rest in peace.

A crashing sound came from an alley across the street. The gun was again lifted to the direction of the noise by instinct. Some sort of creature came from behind a dumpster; long hair matted with rotting flesh and blood covered her face. She was partly nude with ribs protruding from her torn nightdress. Her feet had barely any skin left on them. She had bright red glowing eyes. Fresh blood was dripping from her face, meaning he was not dumped here alone. He pulled a silencer out from the side of the holster and screwed it on to the end of the barrel. He lifted the pistol in her direction, and without hesitation pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, the hammer came down but there was no bang. He

pushed a button on the side of the revolver and the chamber rolled out. There were no bullets in it. He started to panic and reached into the front pocket of his holster for extra rounds. There was only one bullet left. He pulled it out and loaded it into the chamber. He flicked his wrist and the chamber snapped closed.

He carefully aimed the pistol for a head shot and pulled the trigger. A silent puff emerged from the end of the silencer and the bullet moved toward the undead woman. The bullet struck her where the bridge of her nose met her forehead. An explosion of coagulated blood and decaying brain tissue erupted from the back of her head. There was a thud as her cold white body hit the ground. Isaac unscrewed the silencer and put both the revolver and the silencer back in their appropriate places. He pulled a bar from the elevated metal staircase to defend himself against the undead. A groan came from the same alley from which the woman came.

“Oh no...” Isaac whispered, “This can’t happen... no!”

About five gruesome male figures poured from the alley. They looked at the body of the dead female zombie. One of them grunted with what seemed like anger. They started to charge for him. As he swung the bar to hit the leader of the undead attack party, the sound of a gunshot came from a rooftop nearby. The head of the leader exploded in a disgusting red and gray mass of ooze. Four more gunshots sounded and the others dropped simultaneously. A black Jeep with red and blue trim pulled around the corner with four people in it. The flag hanging from the radio antenna proudly flew a cross with the letters TPOG above it.

“Thank you God and Lord Jesus Christ!” he exclaimed while pulling the crucifix from his necklace to his lips to kiss it.

“Get in Dad!” said Mel. “Get in here before more of those ugly bastards come out here!”

He jumped in the back of the truck and kissed his adopted daughter on the forehead. The jeep sped off toward the city.

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The building was grass green, covered with camouflage nets. There were bunkers and underground entrances to the fortress hidden in the brush. In the four years TPOG existed, the guard had not found it. The whole journey there, Isaac explained what had happened to him and to his house. She has always been a kind understanding Christian virgin girl. She was one of those good people who wanted to wait until marriage for sex. Isaac had always loved that about her. That’s what made her so special to him.

She gave him all the bullets he wanted and an exact replica of his rifle. This was his first time in the base. Mel had been trying to get him to leave the guard for a long time to join the TPOG. He walked into the main office and dropped his city guard badge on the table.

“Sir,” Isaac said “I’m here to request that you accept me into your order. Christ is my king, my savior, and my guide”

“Name please,” said the TPOG General.

“Isaac Jacobin.”

“Isaac... Widowmaker!”

“Sir! I’ve changed!”

The TPOG guards moved towards him and the general waved a hand to stop them. “Let him explain,” said the general with an emotionless tone. “Call me Father Jacob.”

“Father I am sorry... Please,” he said.

“Let him live.”

“Thank you so much Father... Thank you...”

“These men will guide you to the equipment room. There you will find your badge, ID card, Stealth Generator, and uniform,” he said as three men in black and dark green uniforms walked in. “Welcome to The People’s Order of God, Brother Isaac.”

Isaac walked toward the three men. One opened the door at the back of the chamber, one walked through to lead, and one followed behind Isaac to ensure his safety. The underground hallway’s floor was uneven and the walls and the ceiling were falling apart. There were large cracks and potholes in the ground, roots coming through the roof, and the walls were falling in at some places. The hall was more like a wide and tall tunnel. Ahead of them was a checkpoint. When they were close enough to make out the shapes at the checkpoint, he took a photo in his mind.

There were three guards, each of them had an M-16 and were in full armor. The scene reminded him of something from a video game. There was a large metallic object that looked similar to a metal detector. He recognized it as a Bio-Scanner. Bio-Scanners were metal objects that scanned one’s body for dead tissues. It was meant to keep infection out of a populated area. Isaac passed through without any hesitation. He was followed by two of his escorts. The third escort hesitated and seemed unsure of himself. When he finally moved through the scanner, a loud alarm emerged from the machine. The first of the full-armored checkpoint guards immediately raised his rifle to the man’s head. He then pulled the trigger and a small burst of fire erupted from the barrel of the rifle. The man’s head exploded in a mess of red and black, partly coagulated, blood. Isaac felt sick to his stomach. The two remaining escorts grabbed his arms and dragged him along the path.

“We’re very sorry about that sir,” the first escort said “He was what we call...”

“Infected...” Isaac cut him off. “I used to be a member of the City Guard... remember?”

“Sorry sir,” said the second escort, “Just follow us.”

The group continued along the path. Isaac pulled his rifle close to him. It gave him comfort.

---

The black jacket and armor fit him like a glove. Its gold-embroidered cross was stunning. Above the cross there were four letters: T P O G. He turned and looked

at his reflection in the mirror and pictured himself as a Catholic Crusader. The only thing he was missing was a large sword to hang across his back. At this moment that sword was a rifle. It was similar to an M-16 assault rifle except that there was a slightly longer barrel and a larger magazine. The door opened and the priest's voice pulled him from his fantasy. "I hear that you're a good shot with a revolver."

"Yeah... pretty good with a rifle too."

"Yes... Mel has told me all about you, thanks for not showing up to that battle last night."

"It's no problem, just a favor for my lovely little girl."

Isaac walked across the room and looked into Father Jacob's eyes. They exchanged a look of understanding. Isaac continued past the priest and was handed his pistol at the entrance into the underground. He adjusted his badge and smiled at the door guard. He opened the door and the priest walked up behind Isaac.

"I take it you know what to do?"

"Yes, Father."

Isaac walked out into the ratty slum and followed a well-known route he took as a member of the City Guard. When he reached the large entrance into the main city he removed the pistol from its holster. The doors opened when he slid his old ID card and shortly afterwards an alarm sounded.

"Code Red! Code Red! There is an undead breach in sector one!"

Isaac looked at the pistol and ran into the city. He followed Central Drive and when he turned onto Main Street he pushed himself into a full sprint. M Corp's ominous office building loomed over the largest street in Possum Creek. A guard in the checkpoint station squinted at Isaac before pulling his rifle up to his right eye, but before he could turn the safety off, Isaac raised his revolver and shot off two rounds into the guard's skull. Isaac cleared the gate with one leap and rolled. When he stopped he looked back down Main Street and saw deformed bodies surging into the street like a tidal wave. He turned back and sprinted into the building. The clerk stood and started to say something, but Isaac already pulled the trigger before the first word could leave her lips.

"No more damn alarms! I'm so sick of the damn alarms!"

He ran up the escalator and dove into the elevator just before it closed. He pressed the button for the thirty-fifth floor. The elevator bolted upward and Isaac fell to the floor. The cranking elevator motors reminded him of all of the times he had been here to report to Commander Jackson. The elevator bell dinged and the doors slowly slid open. Two guards at the end of the hall both looked shocked as Isaac let another two rounds fly into their heads. Isaac swung around the corner leading to the commander's lobby. When he reached the open door there were three guards with Mac-10's sitting around a table playing cards. One of the guards lifted his Mac and shot off a few bursts in Isaac's direction. The bullets all hit the door-frame just inches from his face. Isaac quickly lifted his pistol and shot off his remaining three rounds. Two of the shots were headshots and one struck a guard in the chest. The guard's raspy breathing and loud coughing followed the loud thud. Isaac

slid the pistol into its holster as he shifted his waist to pull the rifle around to his front. He then lifted the rifle to his right eye and pulled the trigger. There was no gunshot, only a ping. He pulled the trigger and it was again followed by a ping.

Isaac shifted the rifle and saw it was jammed. He dropped the rifle and pulled a knife out of his boot. He threw the knife at the guard and it struck him in-between his eyes.

Isaac scanned the room carefully and then stepped out into the large, elegant lobby. There was a single office door on the other side of the room. He started moving towards it and jumped over the bodies on the floor. When he reached the door he tried to look in through the clouded office window, but it was useless. He could see that there was one single light on the desk and he could hear the clacking of keys from a keyboard or some ancient typewriter.

Isaac decided to kick in the door. It might shock Jackson and give Isaac the advantage. Isaac kicked the wooden door and it flew inward. The door was lighter than Isaac had expected. When he turned to the commander he looked into red eyes. There was blood dripping from his mouth and neck. Isaac lifted the pistol and pulled the trigger... but there again was no bang. He flipped open the chamber and saw that the gun was empty. No ammo. He reached down to his holster pouch and pulled out a bullet, but before the chamber was snapped closed the zombie was already in a full sprint in Isaac's direction. It lunged its blood-soaked lips and jagged teeth at Isaac's arms and he dropped to dodge the attack. He reached down to his boot and felt for the knife he had left in the guard's face. He cursed and brought a steel-toed boot to the zombie's jaw and sent the creature's head flying off like a golf ball. The rotting corpse of the commander fell to its knees then toppled onto its side. Isaac stood and slowly backed out of the office.

"There is a chopper on the roof!"

He ran back to the commander and pulled a set of keys from the corpse's belt loop. He looked down at the blood-stained keys and sprinted for a staircase on the opposite side of the lobby. When he reached the top of the staircase he jumped up onto the helipad and ran to the helicopter and got in. He was surprised to find that the chopper was unlocked. He put the key into the ignition and turned it. The starter roared and the blades of the helicopter started to turn. The door to the roof swung open and Mel came sprinting out followed by ten or eleven of the undead murderers. Mel jumped up onto the helipad and ran to the passenger side door. The door opened and she scrambled in. The zombies started to surround the helicopter and Isaac pulled up on the steering rod. The gust from the blades sucked one of the zombies into the blades and chopped its body into hundreds of small chunks.

The helicopter lifted from the ground and drifted into mid-air in between M Corp and another large building. Isaac steered the craft towards the rear wall and moved forward. They rode off together and started to make plans to return with more powerful weapons. Then the undead wouldn't stand a chance. Isaac said one last thing before they were over the city wall, "Mel... I've learned something from this..."

"What's that dad?"

"Seeing is believing... but in order to see you need to believe..."

# Fortunate Prodigy

Ken Dean

He woke up shivering, with the kind of cold pressing against his body that was numbing. Opening his eyes revealed white. Sitting up, he scanned the horizon and saw more of the same as far as his eyes could see. The wind was howling and blowing numbing snow against his face. Looking down he discovered that he was dressed in plainclothes which did nothing to keep the extreme cold out. Try as he might to force his memory into action, he couldn't recall past events. The cold and numbness were getting urgent. He wished there was some way to get warm. Suddenly, there was a twenty meter circle of green grass surrounding him. The temperature had climbed dramatically also. The clothing he was wearing was perfectly adequate now. Holding his hand outside the circle he could still feel the wind howling and biting. Inside the circle was springtime. He sat down cross-legged on the grass. It felt warm and natural. Apparently nature was at his mercy. But why didn't that surprise him? It seemed very natural. He wished there was something to eat; he was starving. There in front of him appeared a small buffet consisting of bread, meats, fruit, and iced tea. He consumed most of the food and iced tea until he was full. He had been famished.

Now that he was warm and fed, his mind drifted off to other questions. How had he wound up here? And why couldn't he remember anything? He wished he knew the answers. He was suddenly standing in a dining room. There was a family eating what he presumed was dinner, judging by the smell. The man glanced up and saw him. He jumped to his feet, startled, his chair crashing to the floor.

"What are you doing here, Charlie?" The man blurted out. The woman, young boy and girl were sitting there dumbfounded as to the appearance of the strange man.

"Daniel, who is this man and how did he get into our house?" The woman asked urgently.

"His name is Charlie Keen, and he is extremely dangerous," Daniel said nervously.

Daniel pulled an automatic from the waistband at the small of his back and pointed it at Charlie.

"You should have died somewhere else, but since you're here, this will have to do."

Daniel pulled the trigger. Time seemed to slow down for Charlie. He could see the bullets emerging from the pistol in slow motion. He thought to himself, 'I am invincible'.

Time sped back up to normal, the bullets bouncing off Charlie's head and chest. Luckily the ricochets struck the floor and the far wall, digging out splintered holes and missing the family still sitting at the dining table.

"Daniel, what are you doing? You're scaring the hell out of me and the children," she exclaimed.



“Angela, I’m doing whatever I can to stop this monster. You have no idea what he is capable of,” Daniel said excitedly.

The children were crying.

“What did he do?” Angela asked.

“Go ahead and tell her, Daniel,” he taunted. His memory was beginning to return.

“And children, be quiet.”

The children stopped crying.

“Charlie was one of the voluntary test subjects we were using at the DOD research facility. We were trying different types of brain function enhancing drugs to gauge the effects.”

Charlie held his hand out and began to raise Daniel telekinetically up the far wall. Daniel began to gasp for breath.

“Finish, Daniel. We’re dying to hear all about it,” Charlie said sarcastically.

“Mommy, the man is scaring me. Make him stop!” the little girl screamed.

Charlie was getting tired of the interruptions. He yelled “Enough,” directed at the rest of the family. Angela and the children became as statues, frozen in time.

“Fill me in on the rest, Daniel, before I squash you like an insect.”

Daniel gasped out answers. “One subject died, two others went insane, and then there was you. You were showing some amazing abilities, causing items to appear or disappear at will. We realized how dangerous you had become and we had to stop you.”

“We?” Charlie screamed. “I want to see the others.”

Instantly, four other individuals appeared in the room. Two males and two females.

“Oh God,” one of the females exclaimed, “I had a feeling this would happen.”

“Shut up,” Charlie yelled, “how did you people manage to get rid of me?”

One of the females spoke up. “We slipped you a drug to keep you unconscious, along with something to affect your memory. Then we managed to get you on a flight to a part of Alaska that was uninhabited for miles. We had to pay off certain people to make it happen. You were left there to die.”

“But lucky for me I came to just in time. Not so lucky for you, though.”

“What are you going to do to us?” Daniel pleaded. He was still hanging from the wall.

“First, since they were all innocent of this, I’m going to implant a memory into your family’s minds that you’ve all been dead for at least two years. Died in a tragic laboratory accident. Next, I’m going to send you all to the surface of Mars. Take a quick look around when you get there, because you won’t last for long. Oh, I almost forgot, thanks for the gift.” He tapped his temple.

With that, Charlie snapped his fingers and sent them on their way to oblivion. He glanced at Daniels family. They returned to normal but were oblivious to him. Charlie smiled to himself. He had a world to conquer.

## Part one of the story

# Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-aged Caterpillar

Pat Dixon

1

*Bloody stools*, thought Lester Moore, his moist lips puckering each time as he whispered the second word to himself. *Bloody stool—the Bloody Stool. The Bloody Stool. Ye Olde Bloody Stool.*

Lester glanced furtively at the bartender and was relieved to see that she was busy taking the order of another customer. Sipping his beer while his insteps pressed on the rungs of his barstool, he glanced over the poster-sized price list behind the bar, stared again at the words “Bloody Mary,” and slowly pulled a small vinyl covered notebook and felt-tip pen from his jacket pocket.

Adjusting his reading glasses, he flipped past dozens of sheets covered with words and sketches to one that was blank and wrote “The Bloody Stool—Ye Olde Bloody Stool” in small neat letters. Around these words he added slowly, with pauses as he thought, sketches of two 18th-century pub signs. Below these he rapidly sketched a dozen cobblestones and a three-corner hat. Below these he wrote “cartoon? or joke?—old London pub/Dublin pub/N.Y. gay bar?” After a long pause he added the words “Ye Olde Bloody Piles?” Closing and repocketing his notebook and pen, Lester took another sip of his beer, made eye contact with his reflection, winked at himself, and smiled mirthlessly at the reflection of his wink.

He rubbed the short gray stubble on his chin and plump cheeks. A faint twinge of heartburn reminded him why he’d given up beer thirteen years ago, two years after his divorce. He surveyed his double critically in the bar mirror—twenty to thirty pounds overweight, grayish thinning hair, old corduroy jacket, blue plaid flannel shirt, short stubby fingers, and—when their gazes met—an unblinking brown-eyed stare over the top of his gold-rimmed half glasses. He looked at the puffy circles below his eyes and thought, *Sleepless in Seattle*, with a faint smile as he recalled the past night, adding, *Forty-six years old but looks sixty-four—at this rate I won’t make it to seventy-four like dad.*

He studied his own face again, trying to pick out the features of it which to some degree resembled those of his recently deceased father—the nose, the hair-line, the ears, the jawline with the plump and sagging cheeks, and, to a lesser extent, the expression in the eyes. He recalled that, starting in his teens, his voice had often been mistaken for his father’s when he had answered the phone. Lester sighed, glanced at the bar’s clock, compared the time shown on his wrist-watch, and then paged through his packet of plane tickets for the sixth time.

“Thirty-five minutes till that birdshit they call ‘preboarding,’” he whispered. He glanced twice more at his take-off and arrival times, folded the packet, and crammed it deep inside his breast pocket. “Hop, hop, hop,” he whispered. “Like a big sparrow. Seattle to St. Louis to Baltimore to Charlottesville. A big, fat sparrow.”

“Care for another, sir?”

The bartender was standing before him in her white shirt and black bow tie, cheerful and perky and large-breasted and blonde and overly made-up.

Lester was not sure whether this was a hint to drink up and leave or pay rent on his stool by ordering another beer. He glanced up into her expectant blue eyes for five seconds before replying.

“I’d like a glass of skim milk if you have any,” he said.

“I’m sorry, sir. Perhaps one of the snack bars near gate—gate 42 or something might have some.”

*She doesn’t have a clue, thought Lester. Comes to work and doesn’t know where anything else in this effing place is—except the ladies’ room.*

“Thanks,” he said with a brief smile.

He stood up and put three quarters on the bar for a tip.

2

Take-off had been delayed for forty minutes for some reason, but the pilot assured them that twenty of those minutes would be made up by strong tail winds. *Whoopee-shit!* thought Lester. As people began to queue up for the rest-room, he wondered what he might name an airline in a cartoon or joke. Clarke and Kubrick had invented the name HAL for the super-computer in their sci-fi movie, he recalled, by choosing letters one notch down from those of IBM. *Could this be done with TWA?* he wondered. He pulled out his little notebook and wrote “SUZ” and then corrected it by darkly writing a V over the U. *Sleep deprivation,* he thought. *Emergency! Emergency! Get up, Will Robinson. Get your ass out of the sack—get your dick out of Bonnie—get on the phone for tickets to Virginia!*

He tried letters that were one notch higher and wrote “UXB” and smiled at this result. He tucked the notebook and pen back in his pocket. *UXB—code letters for Unexploded Bomb during the London blitz—great name for an airline—perhaps too subtle for most readers—like most of my humor.* Lester gently chewed on his lower lip for a minute and smiled ironically.

“Don’t give up y’ur day job,” he whispered to himself, quoting what Bonnie Coleman had told him three years ago, the day he had first spent the night with her. She had come into his second-hand bookstore in Providence one Sunday afternoon while visiting an old college roommate who was getting divorced. She had asked him if he would buy three boxes of used romance paperbacks, and he had said he could pay her a nickel apiece for those that were in good shape. He would not put them on the shelves, he said, but out front in a fifty-cent bin he filled with paperbacks and shabby hardbacks to attract customers. She told him that she did something similar in her own bookstore back in Seattle and accepted his price. These belonged to a friend, she added, and weren’t worth shipping out west to herself.

Gazing down at the sun-lit clouds beneath the wing, Lester recalled their meeting. Bonnie and he had brought the boxes in from her friend's car on his hand-truck, and, while he looked over the books and counted them, she had glanced over the stock on nearby shelves. Then she had met Queenie and fallen in love.

Queenie was an elderly all-black female cat with three fangs and one badly torn ear. She was also a slut who rolled around on her back and begged customers to rub her round belly. Bonnie, who had three cats in her own store, was hooked at once.

"What's its name?" she had asked.

"I call her Queenie," Lester had replied. "It's short for Queen of the Night." Then he had pointed to a large cartoon poster he had drawn two years earlier. On it were five cats with their names penned in large block letters beneath each: Queen of the Night, Figero, Don Giovanni, Papageno, and Donna Anna.

"I was going to call her Astrifiammente, but it turned out to be too much of a mouthful and didn't shorten very well," he had added.

"Astrifiammente," Bonnie had repeated. "Definitely. Queen of the Night. What about the others?"

Lester pointed up above her.

"There are Figero, the fat tabby, and Papageno, the chirpy little Abyssinian, on that high shelf. Queenie has an attitude problem—and it's not a small one—so in defense they have an *altitude problem*." Here Lester had attempted to imitate the voice of Sylvester Stallone, and Bonnie had smiled. Encouraged, he had continued.

"I was tempted to give the name Highly Amusing or Highly Intelligent to the Abyssinian—spelled, of course, like the first name of Haile Selassie, the emperor. Of course, he was Ethiopian, not Abyssinian. But it seemed close enough for a joke."

"Ethiopia is actually just another name for Abyssinia, so the pun is practically flawless—which is *highly* appropriate," Bonnie had said. "And Haile Appropriate was, as you probably know already, Haile Selassie's Minister of Etiquette—and Haile Intelligent was—was the Ethiopian Minister of Education. He was a civilian, of course, and he had to deal with two members of the military—General Education, who was in charge, and Private Education, who really did all the work. Well, actually, he also had to deal with another officer as well—Major Funding, who handled the Finance Corps for the whole Ethiopian government."

Lester had grinned broadly throughout this performance.

"Really? Seriously—right—'seriously'—the pun works even better than I knew?" he had said, resolving to check a reference book as soon as she left. He added with a shrug, "Anyway, I decided to stick with Mozart names for them all."

"My three all have Klingon names: Kang, Kor, and Worf."

"Those are great names. My other two are in the back somewhere. I can take you on a mini-tiger hunt, if you'd care to meet them."

"Yes. Yes, I would." And she had soon been introduced to Don Giovanni and Donna Anna, a neutered pair of red tabbies—brother and sister—who were grooming each other in the Philosophy section.

Nearby, under a sign labeling the Natural History aisle, Bonnie saw a large hand-drawn cartoon with the heads of two saber-toothed tigers. The one on the left was saying, “Canine teeth, my ass! These are *feline* teeth!” She smiled.

As they walked past Mysteries and Spy-Thrillers, she glanced at another cartoon. A flag with a hammer and sickle was on the wall of a prison cell, and a soldier wearing a fur pile cap with a red star on its front was telling a bound prisoner, “You have the right to remain silent, but it’s my duty to warn you—everything I attribute to you can and will be used against you.” At Sci-Fi and Fantasy, a third cartoon portrayed *Star Trek’s* Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk on the bridge of the *Enterprise*: on their view-screen, against a totally black sky, two dozen stars formed a constellation in the shape of the symbol for infinity, and Mr. Spock, one eyebrow raised, was saying, “Frankly, Captain, it is my professional judgment that we have boldly gone as far as we *can* go.”

“Did you do these cartoons?” Bonnie had asked.

“Yes, and many others.”

“You have a good sense of line and form,” she said.

“I got a Master’s in art, long ago and far away—as the world turns. I even taught art for three years at a small college you’ve never heard of—in the wilds of—of Inner Oklahoma.”

“I minored in art myself. In high school I spent half my days in the art room doing elves and trolls and such.”

Lester had glanced down at Bonnie’s attractive chest for a second and then back up at her friendly smile and her large horn-rimmed glasses. In the background, his CD player sent the opening notes of Mozart’s 24th symphony to the far corners of his store.

“In high school,” he had replied, “I did the same. I was hoping to become the next Frank Frazetta. There’s a guy who can really convey motion! Just about everyone else working in the sci-fi and fantasy field paints figures that look like department store mannequins—absolutely no sense of movement. If I’d had a better sense of color, I’d have focused on doing oils. Pencils and inks are what I can do—though it’s just a pastime now. I suppose I could be a lightweight Charles Addams or Gary Larson. I’ve sold a dozen of my cartoons to nothing magazines, and a few folks have bought some of my caricatures. And some of my caricatures got me into trouble—them and this big fat mouth, that is.” He had frowned for a few seconds, then shook off a distasteful memory and smiled at Bonnie and shrugged. “Done is done.”

While Lester spent six or seven minutes assessing the books she had brought, Bonnie had browsed through the aisles looking for more of his cartoons. Out of a dozen others, three had amused her. At Archaeology, a humorously drawn old man in a pith helmet was telling a group of young colleagues, “Clearly *this* is just a *forgery* of an Inca temple—since I *am* able to insert my knife blade between these two 15-ton stones.” (Below this caption, Lester had typed a footnote quoting four different texts, all claiming that Incas had fitted their massive stones so

closely that a knife blade could *not* be inserted between them.) At True Crime, a prison guard with a small round mirror and a dental drill was forcing a man in a striped suit to open his mouth and was saying to another guard, “Mind your own business! Warden Jenkins insisted I do a full cavity search on this guy!” And in Lester’s Anthropology section, Bonnie had chuckled at seeing a small Cro-Magnon girl and boy painting beautiful bison, horses, and hunters on a cave wall as a huge Cro-Magnon man with a torch appeared behind them and shouted, “You little brats! Defacing a public cave! Just wait till I tell your parents!”

There had been seventy-one paperbacks in the three boxes, some of them badly damaged. Lester dug a five-dollar bill from his billfold, handed it to Bonnie, deliberately overpaying her, and wrote her an invoice “for used books.” She had shrugged, saying that her friend trusted her. Lester then had offered her a cup of tea, and she had accepted. Before she left two and a half hours later, they knew that they were both divorced and both enjoyed elaborate puns, natural history, Japanese art, science fiction, cats, tent camping, opera, and long walks. Lester had also been given the phone number of Bonnie’s roommate and had made a date with Bonnie for Chinese take-out on Tuesday night. Thereafter they had visited each other four or five times a year and were in almost daily contact via E-mail.

Now, thirty-nine months later, he was flying from Bonnie’s home turf—the land of pale people, coffee bars, Mount Rainier, the Space Needle, and restaurants with fresh-caught salmon—to help arrange his father’s funeral and help his mother get her feet on the ground. His mother had phoned him last night while he and Bonnie were engaged in what they jokingly called “friendly friction” and had started to leave the news on her answering machine. Bonnie had handed Lester the phone, and he had agreed to drop everything and help his mother for at least a week. The next four hours were spent arranging connecting flights and reserving a rental car in Virginia. Bonnie had helped further by taking the phone number of his cat sitter to inform her about his change in plans while Lester drove to the airport.

The remaining legs of his trip were uneventful. When he arrived in Baltimore, Lester learned that the St. Louis airport had closed down shortly after his plane had flown out of it, thanks to a small snowstorm. If his flight into St. Louis had been any later, he might have been stranded there overnight.

In Baltimore, Lester boarded a small commuter prop plane with his single piece of carry-on luggage, and in Charlottesville he found the car rental people had stayed late to accommodate him. With a local map and some special instructions, he drove to a nearby mall where he bought an inexpensive dark suit, black shoes and socks, and a white dress shirt. With these purchases he headed west forty miles across the Blue Ridge Mountains, and then drove north thirty more to the small town where his parents had bought a condo after retiring nine years ago. The eastern slope of the mountains had been socked in with heavy fog or low clouds, but he had clear and easy driving on the downhill slope. Heavy, huge flakes of snow began to fall five minutes before he reached his destination.

“The fire rescue people were here within ten minutes—they must’ve worked on him for half an hour,” said Beth Moore before Lester had taken off his coat. “They thought they got a heartbeat for a minute, but then they lost him. I just looked down at your father and told him, ‘Michael, you can’t *do* this to me!’ I don’t know how I’m goin’ to manage now! I don’t know what stocks we own or what payments are due. I haven’t even written a check myself for the past seven years. When I needed cash, he handed it to me. Other things I just put on charge cards. I’m so mad I could spit.”

Lester put his arm around his mother and softly bit his lower lip.

“We’ll figure it out, mom. Step by step we’ll get stuff taken care of for you. You’re a survivor!”

“He wanted to be cremated, you know. I’ve had our minister check on that for me, and he’ll hold the service day after tomorrow, and your father’ll be cremated right after that. I don’t know *what* it’s all goin’ to cost. I’m just glad, Lester, that you told me where I could reach you.” Beth paused briefly to think. “I’m so glad, too, that you were able to get down here to see us just before you went out to Seattle. Your father—I think you know it—he was so glad that you came here to spend Christmas with us. We both were. It’s just a damn’ shame that he’ll never read those books you brought him. Maybe you could take them back with you.”

“Sure, mom. We’ll take care of whatever you want. How are *you* doing?”

He bent down and stroked the fat tri-color long-haired cat which was rubbing the corners of her mouth against the shin of his jeans.

“You see her?” said his mother. “She’s been so upset since he died. She really misses him. He’d get up at four a.m. when she wanted to be fed. And he’d clean out her cat pan every time she’d do a little business in it. I can’t do that, by the way. She has to wait till I get myself up for breakfast, and that pan gets scooped once a day. She just wanders around looking lost, And some times she’ll hiss at me or nip my foot. Other times she’ll want me to hold her, but she slept in his bed on his pillow all last night. She just freaked out—is that the phrase? When they put him into the body bag, she freaked out and ran all over the apartment, jumping up on tables and shelves, knocking things over.”

Lester picked up the fat cat, Daisy, and cradled her in one arm. As he stroked her belly, Daisy began to purr loudly. He plucked at her long white fur and nodded sympathetically to his mother.

“Animals know,” he said. “They can grieve, too.” Daisy began to lick his hand.

“Did they feed you on the plane?” his mother asked.

“Some pretzels and orange juice. I had a fish sandwich in the Baltimore airport between flights, but I’m O.K. I also had a slice of pizza in the St. Louis airport, which, by the way, closed down just after my flight took off. I was really lucky to make it here. It went like clockwork, but I was lucky.”

“There’s some lemon cookies in the cookie jar, if you want ‘em. I know you like lemon. Help yourself to whatever you see in the fridge. I didn’t sleep at all last night, and I was worried about you coming over the mountains. The weath-



er report said they had fog there and there'd been a pile up somewhere.”

“Not bad where I drove through. Just a little fog on the uphill side. There’s a little snow coming down now, did you know?”

“Snow? Oh, it-shay. What’s that goin’ to do to the funeral plans? Jesus H. Christ.”

“We’ll manage somehow, mom. I was in the Artillery over twenty years ago and was a real take-charge kind of guy. Do you want to talk, or would you rather try to get a little sleep?”

“I’m glad you’re here, Lester. We can talk things over tomorrow. You probably need to get some sleep, too. Look, you know where everything is. I may try to read the paper for a few minutes, but let’s call it a day. I—did I tell you I’ve never been so *furious* at your father as when he was lying there dead? I said to him, ‘You can’t do this to me! How am I going to cope?’ He left me completely unprepared.”

After his mother went into her room, Lester changed Daisy’s cat litter and phoned Bonnie Coleman to reassure her and tell her briefly about his journey. Bonnie asked him if he were all right, and he replied that everything was fine, that he and his father had not had any unfinished business. He did not mention that he felt tired and somewhat numb.

As he lay on the hide-a-bed in the living room, Lester recalled his father’s living will with its “do not resuscitate” instruction. He felt glad that the Fire Medics had not been able to revive his father. If they had, he was certain, his father would have been just a human vegetable the way his own father, following a major stroke, had been for three years. He then thought about Bonnie and the first time they had made love.

He had flown to Seattle three months after their first meeting and, arriving after one a.m., had spent the first night on her futon in her living room. They had spent the next day at her shop where he sketched a large poster of her cats, taking special care to render Worf, a large Maine Coon whose huge pink tongue often protruded from the front of his mouth for half an hour at a time. During short breaks, Lester observed Bonnie’s hippy-looking customers, and mentally compared her stock and price ranges to his own.

Throughout the day, Bonnie had played an assortment of classical, rock, R & B, and gospel on her CD player. Taped to the side of her large box of CDs were old photos of herself wearing pointed Vulcan ears and a long shining blue dress while attending various Star Trek conventions.

Atop the glass display case which served as a customer counter, Bonnie had a huge viney plant in a large brass teapot. A hand-lettered sign taped to the counter beside it read: “WARNING: The Botanist General has determined that too much H<sub>2</sub>O can cause Mr. and Mrs. O’Dendron’s son Phil to sicken and die.”

Lester had smiled as he read this.

“Mr. and Mrs. Rexia and their tiny daughter Anna,” he whispered to Bonnie. “Mr. and Mrs. Raphone and their noisy son Mike.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Peerior and their snooty daughter Sue,” she whispered back.

“What’s the name of Darth Vader’s sister?” Lester asked.

“Ella!” replied Bonnie within three seconds. Lester nodded and made a mental note to write this last pun down and use it somehow in a cartoon.

Early in the afternoon a well-dressed woman in her mid-sixties had come in and asked Lester if he had *Willy Wonka* for her grandson. Bonnie had smiled and fetched her a copy of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl. When the woman had protested that it was the wrong book, Bonnie patiently explained that the film’s title was different and showed her that Willy Wonka indeed owned the factory Charlie visited. When she had left, Bonnie convulsed with laughter.

“Do you—have—Willy—Wonka—for my—grandson?” she asked Lester.

“I don’t get it, Bon,” he replied, smiling uncertainly.

“Roald Dahl—who had a warped sense of humor—was playing an in-joke on the publishers and readers of juvies! And those twits who made the movie were even more in the dark, I think, than the publishers! What does ‘willy’ mean to you?”

“Nickname for a boy named William?”

“It’s British slang for *penis*—like our slang word *dick*—or *peter*. And what does ‘wonka’ mean?”

Lester had shrugged and asked with his eyes.

“I thought you guys were either born with this knowledge or picked it up just after you were born through some male-thing network. W-h-a-n-k-e-r and w-a-n-k-e-r are Brit words, too—slang for *masturbator*. Dahl, as a joke, named this main character Penis Masturbator—and his publisher and Hollywood and most readers in the U.S. haven’t a clue! Probably if he’d named someone Richard Liqueur and had other characters call him ‘Dick’ but never ‘Dick Liqueur,’ not one person in ten million would be swift enough to notice. Here—look ‘em up in any of these unabridged dictionaries!”

Lester smiled. “I believe you. How did you come across this *arcane* knowledge, if I may ask?”

“I spent my junior year in Wales and made it my business to learn some English-English while I was there,” she grinned. “I’ll bet three-fourths of *them* got it.”

“So much for subtle, sophisticated British humor. What about ‘Wee Willie Winkie’?”

“I’ve no idea. I actually asked a Cambridge undergrad about it, and he just laughed and said that only his literature prof would suggest such a thing. Here—try some American trivia. If Robert Bloch wrote a prequel to *Psycho*, how would an ultra-proper butler have addressed little Norman?”

“He’d call—him—he’d have to call him ‘Master Bates,’ of course.”

“Of course,” Bonnie had said. “Sophisticated *American* humor!” And they laughed easily, like a pair of happy five-year-olds playing in a sandbox.

After closing her store at 6:15, Lester and Bonnie had eaten dutch to a Greek restaurant where he had shown her two dozen of his recent cartoons, and they had discussed the fact that no magazine had been interested in them. When he had mentioned having a large file of original one-liners and spoke of becoming a stand-up comic, she had laughed brightly and warned him against giving up his day job.

He did not mention that he had tried selling off-color jokes and cartoons to sexist, homophobic “adult” magazines and had been, in a five instances, successful. A Frazetta parody captioned “The Layer of the White Worm” was his most recent sale.

Back in her third-floor apartment, Bonnie had poured them each a large glass of white wine, and, while she sat on the sofa watching local ten p.m. news, Lester had sat on the floor between her knees, had taken off her shoes and socks, and had given her a twenty-five-minute foot rub.

His thumb nails had gently scratched the calluses of her heels and the balls of her feet. With his index fingers, he had scratched the tips of her toes and between her toes and up and down the tendons on the insteps of her feet. With both hands, he squeezed and massaged Bonnie’s soles; with his knuckles he pressed firmly against the arches of her feet. His nails traced little circles around her ankles and up and down her Achilles tendons. She was, she told him, in heaven, and this activity became one of their rituals whenever they spent an evening together.

At 2:30 a.m., while he lay awake on her futon listening to street and building sounds and trying to acclimate to a pillow that differed from his accustomed one, Bonnie had come in with an extra blanket for him. By the reflected light of a couple of street lamps Lester could see that Bonnie, like himself, was wearing just a tee-shirt and a bikini brief.

“Hi, babes,” he had whispered.

“Are you warm enough, Les?” Her charming breasts were less than a foot from his face.

“Fine—I think.”

“You think?”

“Perhaps I’m—if anything—feeling a little too warm right this minute.” He sat up on one elbow and kissed her on the mouth. Caught off guard, Bonnie pulled back suddenly, paused six inches from his face, and then grasped his head with both hands and planted her own hard kiss on his mouth. In two seconds, they were in each other’s arms, discovering after nearly a dozen years what a sexual embrace felt like. In two minutes, they were exploring the bare flesh beneath each other’s clothing. In five minutes, they had removed each other’s bikinis. In a move which they would refer to as “lickety split” during breakfast the next morning—and many mornings thereafter—Lester began to tongue the inside of Bonnie’s upper thighs, moving upward and continuing for ten minutes until, trembling and husky-voiced, she begged him to stop. Then, tracing little circles around her erect nipples, he mounted her and experienced what he would later call “the joys of Bonnie.”

Lester had added “lickety split” to the small notebook he had brought with him, thinking that he might use the phrase later in some cartoon or joke that he might sell someday to a magazine.

At four a.m., Lester awoke with Daisy on his chest, purring and licking his nose. He went to the kitchenette and put half a can of catfood into a sauce dish

for her. Then he went to urinate before crawling back into bed.

After breakfast, Lester scooped out Daisy's litter box, completed the arrangements for the funeral, and phoned a capsule biography of his father to two regional newspapers. His mother phoned a dozen relatives, giving them all a full description of the circumstances, including an increasingly elaborate account of what she had said to Michael after his death.

After lunch, Lester borrowed a broom and snow shovel from the building super and cleared three inches of snow away from the rental car. Then, although the parking lot had not been plowed at all and the town's streets were poorly plowed, he drove his mother to her bank to open the safe-deposit box. With many expressions of sympathy to Beth, the local branch manager personally carried the box to a cubicle for them. Inside it they found three life insurance policies for varying amounts, a copy of his father's will making Beth his sole beneficiary, and four large envelopes filled with stock certificates—more than half of which were solely in Beth's name.

On the way home the roads were somewhat clearer, and Lester and his mother stopped at a supermarket where they bought an assortment of "gourmet" cat food and a large box of chocolate cream candies.

One of the women in the market reminded Lester, from the back, of Bonnie. Her hair, like Bonnie's, was long and dark with auburn highlights. Her face, however, when he saw the woman again in the check-out line, was quite different and was hard looking, and he observed that this woman had a bottle of hair coloring in her shopping cart.

When they got home, Beth told her son that she was exhausted and needed to nap. While she did so, Lester scooped out the litter box again and then browsed through the six hundred books on his father's shelves, noting, as he had not done on earlier visits, that at least half of them were ones he had brought down for Christmases or had mailed down for birthdays. In several of the books he could see slips of paper, and he pulled these books down and discovered that his father had made notes about passages which had interested him. In no cases had his father actually written in a book itself.

Lester was sitting beside the shelves reading slips of paper when Beth got up.

"I have no interest in any of those," she said. "You can take whatever you'd like. Most of 'em are ones you gave him, anyway." She laughed wheezily. "My son the book dealer."

"Maybe I'll pack up a few of them and mail 'em back to myself," he said.

"They're all just taking up space. We'll need to go through his clothes, too, and see what you might use and what can be given to a charity—and what should just go down the trash chute. He never threw away a thing. If he'd had his way, he'd still have every piece of string he ever owned. I used to sneak some of his old shoes out to the chute when he was shopping—probably for more shoes. And we need to get rid of his prosthesises—you know—his artificial legs. Who else but your father would have *three* left legs? And also that god-damn' computer he bought two

years ago. He used to spend hours sitting with that, typing with two fingers. That stuff can be sold or given to the church—unless you want it. Christ knows what he needed that thing for! It's one more dust catcher I'd like cleared out."

"We have plenty of time, mom, to take care of that. First thing tomorrow I'll call the lawyer who made up his will and find out what the next step should be. If you'll locate his Social Security number for me, we can also try to find out what you'll be getting from the government. And I'll call the retirement office in Philadelphia and find out what percentage of his pension you'll get. He worked for the state of P-A for at least thirty years, I think, but I don't know what plan he retired under, do you?"

Beth shrugged and opened the box of chocolates.

"I took care of the cooking and the cleaning. The car and yard and money were always *his* responsibilities. I've got no idea."

They were interrupted by the phone. A neighbor in the building asked if Beth was all right and whether she wanted any company. Beth told her that she was feeling fine and went on to describe Michael's death and her anger in considerable detail. Lester walked into the kitchen and picked up Daisy who was waiting beside her empty dish. He plucked at her belly fur again and received a nip on the webbing between his thumb in index finger. He set Daisy down gently and refilled her bowl with wet food. Then he went into the living room and turned on the local 5:30 news.

When Beth got off the phone, Lester offered to take her out to dinner. She accepted, and they had third-rate lobster at a nearby restaurant. Afterwards, while Beth ate half a pound of chocolates and watched a situation comedy on television, Lester took a load of his father's medicines and toilet items to the trash chute, keeping only the old man's shaving brush as a memento. Then he sorted his father's books into three categories—keep, donate, and dispose of. The last included his father's old college accounting texts and a vast array of old books with tips on filing tax returns. Lester vaguely wished that there was some way the paper might be recycled as he carried thirty-two heavy books to the trash chute and dropped them down, two or three at a time.

*Sic transit*, he thought as he gently closed the door to the chute.

When he was finished, Lester sat down on the sofa beside Beth and watched a re-run of an old Lawrence Welk program. She offered him the box of chocolates, and he took two.

Bonnie phoned him at nine p.m.

"Seattle to Virginia. Over. Come in, Virginia."

"Virginia here, where Les is still Moore. I'd *like* to come in, Seattle. Wish you were here. Over."

"How's it going, babes? You sound tired."

"Lots done. The service is for one p.m. tomorrow. We have some appointments lined up for the day after. The prosthesis people can't use the socket parts of my dad's three left feet, but they said they'd be glad to recycle the hardware."

How be with you, little sweetie?"

"It be lonely. We all miss y'ur sweetness—especially my sweetness misses y'ur sweetness. Can you talk?"

"Not really." He glanced at his mother, who seemed absorbed in the program.

"I'm *touching* myself," said Bonnie playfully. "Oh—oh—oh. I'm thinking about y'ur manly member. Manly Member—you know who *he* was, don't you?"

"Who *was* he?" said Lester quietly.

"He was the person in charge of—recruitment—at the Y.M.C.A.!"

Lester chuckled softly.

"I know that's a bit of a stretch," continued Bonnie. "But it wasn't as bad as some of my other jokes—or some of y'urs."

"Humph! What's *that* supposed to mean? Love me, love my jokes."

"Don't get cranky-wanky."

"Cranky Wanky? Who is *he*?"

"He was—he was the—the manufacturer of—the inventor—of late 19th-century wind-up dildos that had—that had giant steel springs inside them. Am I correct?"

"Correct as always, your majesty." He glanced again at his mother. An image of Bonnie's naked breasts briefly flashed into his mind.

"So," he continued, "what are the Seattle Areoles doing this evening? I think the game was canceled due to snow or something, wasn't it? Wish I could see them now."

"They are waiting for you, big guy, to come here and play nine innings with 'em. And also nine outings, too, between the nine innings. Right now they're standing up and craning their necks to hear the sound of y'ur voice better. If they get any higher, they'll rip open the front of my blouse. Ooops, there go two buttons. Can you stand up now?"

"Frankly no. I hope that won't—become a problem."

"Well, in that case, maybe you'd better call me back tomorrow night when it's more convenient. I'll be here, same Bat-time, same Bat-channel."

"That would be a good idea—very good idea."

Bonnie and Lester each made a couple of kissing sounds into the phone and then hung up. Beth glanced over at her son.

"Still in the mushy-lovey-dovey stage, I see."

"It's been a long time for me," he said softly.

"It's been a longer time for me, you can bet," she replied.

5

Lester awoke at 2:20 a.m. He had dreamt that he was back in college taking an economics final exam and had not read one word in the text or attended a single lecture. Beside him in the auditorium was his ex-wife, breezing through the final with ease, humming off-key and grinning to herself. As the professor came toward him to take his examination booklet, Lester had jerked his legs and sat up.

Nearby, Daisy sat in the dimly lit living room, grooming herself. Outside it was quiet. Lester went to the bathroom and then drank a glass of warm tap water. As he

lay back down, he recalled coming home from a hard day at the loading dock and finding his house in Oklahoma empty. It was not merely that Linda, his wife, was not there. The car, the furniture, the appliances, the rugs, the pictures, the books, the dishes, the tools, the kitchen clock, all his clothes—everything—were missing.

A note in Linda's handwriting had been taped to the glass door of the built-in oven: "Am moving to Lincoln to be near my folks. My attorney, Mr. Darrel Sweet, will fill you in if you care to call him."

He had looked up "Sweet, Darrel" in the local phone book and learned that Linda wanted the house sold. He, Lester, could keep his beat-up motorcycle but nothing else. In a way, it had come as a great relief to him to hear that Linda wanted a divorce. *Let the flaying cease*, he had thought.

Four months earlier he had not been renewed to teach art at the local college. He had been unable, despite sending out over three hundred copies of his C.V., to find any other teaching position. He was untrained in and unfit for commercial art, as several greeting card companies and department store chains pointed out to him.

Linda, he now recalled for the first time in seven years, had hotly blamed him repeatedly during his final year of teaching for not being more cautious and solicitous—even sycophantic—as far as G. Arthur Peterson was concerned, and Lester felt his stomach tensing up as he remembered half a dozen incidents which must have led directly or indirectly to his non-renewal.

Before one department meeting began, several members had been chatting about the meanings of their given names, and G. Arthur had proudly asserted that he had once looked up his own first name—George—and learned that it meant "spear carrier" or "spear thrower." Lester, who had taken two years of Greek in high school, had been tactless and foolish enough to point out that the name instead meant "farmer."

A few months later, their department head—Dr. Wilton—had expressed indignation to Lester when forty of G. Arthur's recent collages were displayed in both the campus library and the administration building (with price tags affixed) and their significances were explained in a two-page interview in the campus newspaper. Lester had wryly replied that this was "merely one more example of Art for Art's sake."

And when it became known that G. Arthur and the newly hired Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences were playing racquetball every afternoon, Lester doomed his own career. Dr. Wilton angrily remarked one afternoon that G. Arthur was in the gym "giving Dean Thomas a blow job for favors," and Lester had smiled mildly and quipped, "It's a real-life Fellatio Alger story." His department head had nearly expired on the spot from laughter and had clapped Lester on the shoulder, dubbing him "a true wit." Predictably, however, after Dr. W. had repeated Lester's comment at a cocktail party, it made its way to the dean, and Dr. W. found it politic to dissociate himself from Lester and his "unconscionable, totally unprofessional crudity."



Linda was not amused by Lester's cartoon captioned "Expulsion from Paradise" showing her and Lester, nude, trudging away from caricatures of three irate, curly-haired campus divinities—G. Arthur Peterson, Dr. Wilton, and Dean Thomas.

At the settlement conference, Linda's lawyer had demanded that Linda be given half the value of Lester's cumulative social security payments, half of whatever his current and future earnings might be, and half of whatever retirement he might someday receive. Lester's lawyer countered that Linda was a healthy woman with a teaching certificate and a Master's degree in education, had no children to care for, and should therefore "not expect to get blood from a stone." Linda, who had been staring fixedly at the opposite wall throughout, suddenly leaped up, startling both lawyers, and screamed that Lester's lawyer had just called her "a bloody mess." Darrel Sweet tried to calm her, and Lester's lawyer vigorously pleaded his innocence. Negotiations were postponed for two months but proceeded without incident at the second conference where she was awarded the house, its furnishings, the car, and nothing else. Two months after that, Lester moved from a one-room apartment in Oklahoma to a one-room apartment in Connecticut and began working in a bookstore owned by a college friend.

After reflecting on his past for over an hour, Lester got himself another glass of water. When he came back to bed, Daisy was there wanting to keep him company. At dawn he awoke himself again, kicking at the blanket and sheet that were tangled around his legs. This time he had dreamt that he had been teaching art to an auditorium full of laughing students and that he had suddenly realized that some were pointing to a four-inch-wide wet spot on the front of his pale gray slacks. He had tried to walk behind a lectern, but his feet would not move for some reason.

6

The funeral service went smoothly. Eight people who lived in Beth and Michael's condo attended it, and the minister gave a short, cheerful sermon. Beth repeated her tale about her anger to six of these people as they greeted and hugged her and wished her well. The minister agreed to find a home for Michael's computer if Lester would bring it over to him the next day. Lester and Beth then had soup, salad, vegetables, fried chicken, and pecan pie at a local restaurant. On the way home, they dropped off his father's used prostheses and then filled out forms at the local Social Security office.

That afternoon, before Lester packed his father's computer and printer for the minister, he looked up the directory on the hard drive. There he found the first eight chapters of an unfinished autobiographical novel and twenty-four autobiographical short stories of various lengths, most of them written in the first person and many of them dealing with some kind of learning experience Michael had undergone as, step by step, he had evolved or blossomed into whatever he was when he was cut short by an unexpected death. There were no "hard" copies of this writing anywhere to be found, and Lester asked his mother if she wanted him to make copies for her. She said no.

Lester made two copies of these works on disks for himself, cleared the hard

drive of everything, and packed the printer and computer into their original boxes, which his father had saved in the back of a clothing closet. While his mother took a nap, Lester drove to local thrift shops and bought a dozen cheap books which he thought he could resell when he got back to his store. At a supermarket he got twelve large cardboard boxes and bought two rolls of reinforced adhesive tape. Before his mother awoke, he had wrapped and labeled four box-fuls of books to mail to himself and filled seven and a half others to donate to the church or to local thrift shops.

After his mother had gone to bed, Lester phoned Bonnie, charging the call to his Providence number. He described the service and mentioned the fiction he had discovered.

“Had you ever known y’ur dad had literary ambitions?” Bonnie asked.

“Not at all. My mom had no idea either. And she was right in the same room with him most of the time.”

“How bad is it?”

“Quality? Pretty mediocre to bad, I guess. I haven’t read most of it, but I sampled sentences here and there, and there didn’t seem to be much difference as he went along. It was folksy, a lot like the six- or ten-page letters his own dad used to mail him—or all of us—when I was a kid. Kind of a folksy diary style with a few attempts at epigraphs from *Bartlett’s*, most of ‘em drawn from Shakespeare.”

“You’ll let me see them, won’t you?”

“Of course. There were fifty or sixty letters, too, indicating he had mailed copies of his stories out to magazines. He kept a log about this, and though I haven’t found any rejection slips or letters anywhere, he must have got plenty of them.”

“How do you feel about y’ur dad? And y’ur mom. Are you all right, hon?”

“Not a problem. As I told you when I left, there’s no unfinished business. My dad thought I’d effed up my teaching career and wasted five years of college back when Linda and I split and I went to work as a bookstore clerk—but he got used to it after I got back on my feet again. He couldn’t help but notice how the economy and job market worsened during the ‘greed is good’ decade—and after. In a way, he was proud of me for being able to readjust. He’d grown up during the ‘thirties and knew that this was something like that. And a lot of his neighbors had their kids still living at home at age thirty or forty, and he was probably proud I was different from their kids in *that* way, too.”

“No shit? Proud of you for *that*? Are you kidding me about that last part?”

“A little. I’m feeling a little smart-assy, I think, and I’m sorry if I misled you. On the phone you can’t see me winking or feel my elbow nudging you as a clue. Sorry.”

Lester did not add that he had his own secrets about his creative efforts and had never told his father about any of the jokes or cartoons that he had sold to men’s magazines. As before, Bonnie and he ended with a little love-talk and some kissing sounds. Lester then hand-washed his socks, underwear, and flannel shirts, changed the cat litter and put out food for Daisy, and unfolded the hide-a-bed and climbed in.

# A drive along the 47<sup>th</sup> parallel

Frank T. Sikora

"You're a cruel woman," he said as he brought the Honda to a stop. The tires squealed as they grappled with the dirt. He took a deep breath, released the steering wheel, and drained the last of his water bottle. He couldn't drink enough to keep his lips moist. The air conditioner had died more than a thousand miles before: For two days nothing but clear skies and temperatures between 97 and 103. He felt as if he had driven across a grill. "I accept everything about you: your moral detours, your boyish tits, and those three kids; two of whom are category five monsters. And now you're leaving? One bad weekend and you're gone?"

She looked past him and down the road. No traffic had passed or approached for an hour. "I'm sorry," she said. "But, you broke your promise."

He unlocked her door. The electronics of the car pleased him. Next, he lowered her window, teasingly, like a slow grind. "Get out."

"Out?"

"Yes. You want out of the relationship. You're out."

"Now? We're a..."

"...long way from home." He unlocked her seat belt, and tossed the belts aside. "Bye bye my sweetie pie," he added in baby talk, knowing how much she hated it. He watched her turn away from him. She smoothed her dress—a 300-dollar dress. She makes \$16,000 a year. Lord.

"You're being unreasonable," she said, looking over her shoulder. "You've gone too far."

He laughed and gave her the 'look,' the glimpse into the rage he harbored. He often joked he kept his basement empty of furniture because he needed the space to store his rage. In the beginning, she found this amusing. It's still a damn good line. He thought.

"How am I going to get home?" She asked.

"And how am I going to get along without you? Two problems. Which appears more problematic?"

She looked to the north—brown parched hills for more than 500 miles. "If I get out, I may..." She opened the door.

"Yes," he said, watching her exit, always drawn to her legs—thin and shapely. She wore black heels. They sunk deep into the dirt—the kind where things slither. He smiled.

She closed the door and crossed her arms.

He drew the window to a close and shifted into first gear. He left as swiftly as he had stopped, oil fumes spilling out behind him. He wanted to but he didn't look back. To distract himself, he cranked the volume on the radio—backwoods hillbilly hits—loud enough to drown out the doubts.

After around 40 miles, he felt better. He stopped only for water and for gas. He loved driving—it was un-American not to.

# Charlie and Marcie along the 47<sup>th</sup> parallel

Frank T. Sikora

She stood in the soft dirt buttoning her blouse. He stood against the door of his truck watching her: A familiar chill building within; knowing with morning clarity he should never have brought this young, perhaps illegally young, girl to his favorite parking spot. As expected, he felt nothing when he fucked her. He had barely managed to stay hard during the ordeal.

She was a redhead, top to bottom. He always preferred reds. Only reds moved him. Still, this girl was way too young, way too thin, and way too sober.

“Be a dear, Chucky, and hand me my sweater,” she said. “It’s on the front seat. And close your mouth when you breathe. You look like a fish at the aquarium.”

And she had a mouth on her. “It’s Charles or Charlie,” he said. “It’s not Chuck, and it is never Chucky.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, “This is from a man who likes to fuck in the mud.”

Christ. This could get complicated. He thought and gazed passed her and out over the parched plains. Nothing but scrub brush and withered Silver Maples for miles. They were at the forgotten end of an unmarked utility road.

“The sweater, Chucky. I know we’re disappointed with your performance, but try to stay focused.”

He opened the door, grabbed the sweater, and tossed it at her feet.

“Chucky, think. That’s a \$30 dollar sweater. Don’t piss on me just because your dick isn’t Ford tough. It’s not my fault.”

“True,” Charlie said softly.

She smiled, somehow managing to convey sweetness and contempt. “Good, Chucky, very good. Admitting the problem is the first step toward recovering.” She stepped into her jeans and slipped on her sneakers. “Sexual recovery, Chucky, it’s all the rage today. It’s for those with fuck issues. And unless you want to pop a pill every time you want to get laid, you should check into it. Face it Chucky. If you can’t fuck a woman like me, you’re in for a long and not so hard life.”

Charlie silently admitted the little witch was right. With her full red lips and long legs, she was, by any standards, especially those of the northern plains, a knockout. “An off day, that’s all,” he said. “Nobody’s perfect.”

She cast another look at Charlie; one suggesting his worthlessness could only be measured in large prime numbers.

Yeah. Complicated.

As she tied the pink laces of her shoes, his thoughts drifted to another red head—Aunt Marcie. Each New Year’s Eve good ol’ Auntie Marcie would sneak away from the basement gathering of parents and relatives and into Charlie’s room and deliver long, sloppy kisses. Aunt Marcie’s holiday gifts began when Charlie was

seven and ended six years later. One February night, Aunt Marcie went out for a drive and never came back, vanishing as if she had never existed. Fifteen years later, the taste of her rough tongue and wine soaked, soft lips lingered; just thinking of those kisses and the agonizing slow days building up to those evenings caused Charlie's head to pound and his dick to harden like a god-damn canon.

When finished with her shoes, she picked up the sweater and brushed the dirt off it. "I'm not asking for perfection, Chucky, just competency. How old did you say you were?"

"29."

"Well, you fuck like you're 59."

"That's right, keep grinding it in."

"Someone has too," she said and laughed, a girlish laugh. "And the next time, consider springing for a hotel room. I know you like it all dirty and natural and in middle of nowhere, but I prefer clean sheets and HBO."

"Next time?"

"Sure Chucky. I'm a generous, gal. You may fuck like shit, but you're awfully pretty. Pretty, pretty Chucky. Oh so pretty like a girl. Chucky from Minot got eyes like a fashion model. You'd make one pretty girl, Chucky. Something to consider if the guy thing doesn't work out." She tied the sweater around her waist. "Come Chucky, let's go throw a penny in the river for luck. We'll ask the fuck gods to grant you a decent hard on."

"It's Charlie, and we really should head home."

"Until you do me right," she replied, "it's Chuck." She turned and sprinted towards the bluff. She ran gracefully. Her long, quick strides easily navigated the rolling terrain. When she reached the end of the bluff, she climbed onto a rocky outcropping, straddling the edge with the confidence of an Olympic diver. "What a view, Chucky," she yelled. "There's not a soul on the river or anywhere." She turned her back to the precipice and took out a handful of change. "Let's make a load of wishes, Chucky."

Charlie followed tentatively. He did not like heights. He stopped a half dozen of steps short of her. To the west, a line of low gray clouds smothered the horizon. To the east, he heard the steady grind of a single engine plane. He listened closely. It was heading away from them.

"Chuck, you got the fish look going again. Come on up."

Charlie sighed. He should have stayed north, away from Bismarck and its coffee houses. She was sitting alone reading *The North American Review* while he pretended to read from a book of Tolstoy short stories. He kept a bookmark on page 272, five pages into *The Death of Ivan Illych*. Charlie didn't understand why the story was considered great. The main character spent the whole time bitching about his shitty life. The idiot should try living in Minot where cattle fucking is more than a hobby. Still, Tolstoy always impressed. "Come, Marcie. Let's leave before things become complicated."

She tossed the coins behind her. "Christ. Weak dick and a weak mind. My

name's not Marcie. That's the fifth fucking time you got my name wrong. My name is Lucy. Lucy. Lucy. Lucy. Lucy."

Charlie's head began to pound. "I know your name," he said and stepped onto the rocks.



Wierd Monster

art by Mark Hudson

# Country Garden

Barbara Carroll

Come in. Come in, Dearie. Don't be afraid. What's that? Speak up, Sweetie. I'm a little hard of hearing. You need my help? What's that? Speak up! If you're a medical student, I'm out of cadavers. Maybe you can come back tomorrow. Say again? You need a lotion? A potion?

Come sit a moment and have a cup of tea. Then we'll have a talk. I keep the water hot for visitors. Here's a chair for you. Just sit right here. Don't mind Fido. He's rather large, but he won't hurt you. Back! Back Fido! Get down! Let the lady have some tea.

Now then, one sugar or two, Dear? Here, have a cookie. I made them an hour ago. They're a lovely snack. Oh yes, and you *must* have some of these cakes. They're my specialty. That's right. See how good it tastes? Some for me? Oh no, I'm fasting today. There now, drink your tea. Bitter? It must be your imagination, Dear. Try a little more sugar.

Now, Dearie, let's talk. What would you like today? You're a pretty little thing. I'll wager you need a love potion. No? What's that? I can't quite hear you. Say again. You need a death potion? My, my! That's a tall order for such a little thing! No Dear, I don't need to know who it's for, only how big is your—ah—victim. About two hundred pounds? Well, well, a large fellow. Hmmm. Now let me think.

Perhaps a lovely plant potion would do the trick. The nightshades are blooming in the garden. I could make a root extract. No? Well then, the curare vines are growing on the trellis. You passed them as you came through the jimsonweed. What? The Jimson? You didn't like the smell? It is a bit fragrant! You'll have to come back during the growing season. It smells nice then.

If curare's not your fancy, did you see the lily of the valley out by the cemetery? The leaves make a lovely extract. I could brew it for you in about an hour. Oh yes, there's monkshood, too. It's very nice for keeping a body quiet.

What's that? I see that nothing pleases you. Well, let me think. How about the bite of a beautiful little asp, or a brown recluse spider? Hmmm. I have some hairy scorpions, and a lovely pair of pale yellow ones from the desert.

No? Say again? Speak up, now! What is it? Blooms? Brooms? Mushrooms! So that's it! Well then, we'll have to go down a few levels for those. I have some lovely ones!

Right over here, Dear. You'll need a candle. I'll light it for you. There, step down, now. Hold the railing. Don't be afraid. What's that? Jonathan? Oh no, he won't hurt you. Just step over him. He often lies on the floor like that.

They're here, in the back. Yes, it is a little musty down here. What kind of mushrooms was it that you wanted? A fast acting one? Hmmm. Now let me think. Step down. Be careful of that trap door.

What's that? How will the victim die? Well, Dearie, here's how it goes. First your victim gets a mite queasy after he eats the mushrooms, then dizzy and weak. Now the rest depends on what you use. The death caps will give him a powerful thirst. The fly agaric will make him see and hear things that aren't there. The galerinas will give him powerful back pain. The fiber heads will give him a pretty blue face and swollen lips, and the turbantops will give him fits. You can have your choice. Step right along here. I'll show you my little beauties!

Watch out! Here Kitty, Kitty! Yes, she is a little large. Pretty Kitty! There's a good girl! No, she's not hissing at you. She must have seen a rat. She hunts them down here. Look out! Kitty will get it! Watch out! Step out of the way! There! Kitty caught it! My, my! He was a big fellow!

What's the matter, Dear? Oh, that's just Blackie. Let him perch on your shoulder. He won't hurt you. Pretty bird! Pretty bird! See there, he likes you.

It's just a little farther. Step down, now. Here are the death caps, a lovely batch. See how pearly white they are! Angels of death, my lovely little ones! See! Some of the bigger ones have a pretty little skirt beneath the cap. I grow them in half sand and half soil from the woods. Back in that corner are some light green ones. Very pretty! Very deadly!

What's the matter? You look a little pale, Dearie. I must be tiring you out with my talking. What's that? Stomach a little queasy? We'll sit down here for a minute. There's a rock where we can rest. I understand. You've had a long day. Just rest a little. That's it. Ready to move on? There's a brave soldier!

What's that? How long do the death caps take? Well, they'll polish off a victim in about three or four days.

Step down, now. On this level are the galerinas. I call them my ballerinas. See how pretty they are with the orange and brown caps! I do believe there's a mouse in the back. Watch out for Kitty! Here she comes! Step back! Got it! Nice girl! Go and play on the other side, now!

How long? My little ballerinas are slow acting. They can take up to three months to do in a victim. They'll send your chosen one on a roller coaster ride. Better, worse. Better, worse, until he dies.

My, my! You don't look well, Dear. We'd better hurry. I have so many to show you. The next ones are right through this tunnel. The draft blew your candle out. Here, I'll light it with mine. That's it. Now, here we are.

Dearie, you must look at these turbantops. They're Jonathan's favorites. He thinks they look like a brain from an old cadaver. What do you think? Are you ill, Dear? You're dizzy? Well, we just have a few more to see. Don't fall. Perhaps you'd better lean on my arm. It's just a little farther to the fiber heads. They're not as pretty as the others, but they'll do a job on your victim. I call them my Plain Jane mushrooms. Hello, babies! We have a visitor!

The footing is uneven here. Be careful! Dearie, you don't look well at all! Dearie, don't lay on the muddy floor like that! Dearie! Dearie!

Jonathan! Come down here! There's one for the cooler!



# Conversation on Route 23 North, November 1987

B W Mayer

He leans on me like a rusted bicycle,  
Tires flat against the weathered south wall  
Of a lonesome, abandoned barn  
Slumps into the rear seat of his old Ford  
Station wagon, no longer capable of riding  
Shotgun in the only car he has ever known  
Images reflected in the rear view mirror  
Are not always larger than they may appear  
A small figure, gaunt...thin...weak  
The bluff has lost its long battle against  
A sea that is unrelenting and unforgiving

There is no apprentice program  
No manual with appendix, numbered illustrations  
That touches on the passage of responsibility  
I did not recognize the need for silence  
My feeble attempt to shoot the breeze  
Was more for my own benefit than it was for his  
I understand that now  
I spoke of realty, the acres we had our eyes on  
Now, his eyes were tired and trapped  
Locked in that hollow gaze of regret  
There, in a whisper, close to tears  
I strain to listen

There has been a change of plans

# A Body in the Moat

*Tony Concannon*

Things hadn't been going well for Yamada. The previous winter his cousin had died in a head-on crash into a bridge abutment on the highway. Yamada and the cousin had grown up in the same house in Fukushima after the cousin's father had been killed in Manchuria in the war and they had been more like brothers than cousins. When they had been sixteen, they had come up to Tokyo together to find work. Now Yamada's wife had shingles. They had four children.

"I can't get any use out of her," Yamada said in a loud voice.

The three men at the counter of his restaurant laughed at the lewd remark.

The restaurant was on a side street on the back side of the station. There were no tables, just the nine seats at the counter. Yamada opened the restaurant seven days a week from eleven in the morning to nine at night. He had no helper. Most of his customers lived in the neighborhood or worked in the numerous small factories spreading out from the rear of the station.

Yamada was frying sausages and cabbage for Mr. Inagi. He shook the heavy frying pan. A cloth was wrapped around his wrist.

"Is that wrist any better yet?" Mr. Inagi asked him.

Yamada turned to the counter. He was a short man with a round face. The lack of hair on his forehead made his face seem even rounder.

"The doctor said it wouldn't get any better if I keep using it."

"They found a body in the moat today," Mr. Nakada told the other men.

"What moat?"

"The one around the Imperial Palace. I work across the street, in the Mainichi Shimbun Building."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know. I didn't know about it until it was all over. The kids in the college at the end of the building told me about it. They said it was a man."

"I guess someone saw a hand sticking out of the water and told the Palace guards," Mr. Nakada went on. "Then the police and everyone showed up."

"I'll have to look for it in the paper tomorrow," Mr. Harada, the third man at the counter, said.

"It won't be in the paper," Mr. Nakada told him. "The Palace won't let anything out."

"But you said the police were there."

"The Palace has its own police force."

"They still have to investigate the body," Mr. Harada said.

Yamada slid the sausages and cabbage onto a plate and placed it in front of Mr. Inagi.

"They'll investigate it," Mr. Nakada told Mr. Harada.

"It just won't be in the paper."

“It might be embarrassing,” Mr. Inagi added, “if it was some war veteran killing himself for the Emperor.”

“The kids said it was a middle-aged man.”

“They saw the body?”

“They saw it being pulled out.”

“Some office worker got drunk on Friday night and fell in,” Yamada said.

“Things like that should be in the paper,” Mr. Harada said.

“I’m all set here, Yamada. How much do I owe you?” Yamada told him.

“I want to go fishing,” Yamada said to the other two men when Mr. Harada had left.

“I haven’t been fishing since I was a kid,” Mr. Inagi said. “My older brother used to take me.”

“I go down to Chiba,” Yamada said. “Stay the whole day.”

“You should get someone to help you. Then you could take more days off.”

“Nobody wants to work in a place like this any more. Couldn’t pay them, anyway.”

“I’ll have another beer,” Mr. Nakada said. “Get yourself a glass, too.”

“Do you want some?” he asked Mr. Inagi.

“Why not?”

Yamada put the bottle of beer and two glasses on the counter. He held a third glass in his hand for Mr. Nakada to fill.

“Thank you.” Yamada drank half of the beer and placed the glass next to the stove.

“Harada is right. I wish there was a way to find out about that body in the moat,” Mr. Inagi said.

“Probably just some drunk,” Yamada said.

“Maybe. Could be a suicide. Strange. Happening right in Tokyo.”

“You never hear about missing persons unless it’s a child,” Mr. Inagi added.

“Look at how many husbands take off and disappear,” Mr. Nakada said.

“Wives, too.”

“Quiet night,” Mr. Nakada said to Yamada.

“It’s quiet every night. I’m going to close up early.”

“Kicking us out?”

“Take your time.”

Yamada came around the counter, slid open the door and turned around the curtain.

“It’s starting to rain,” he told the other two men when he shut the door. “There are a couple of umbrellas if you want to borrow them.”

“Bring us one more beer and we’ll call it a night,” Mr. Nakada said.

“Take your time.”

Yamada went back inside the counter. He took out a bottle of beer, opened it and placed it on the counter.

“Have some,” Mr. Nakada said, holding out the bottle.

He filled Yamada’s glass and then Mr. Inagi’s. Mr. Inagi took the bottle from Mr. Nakada and filled his glass.

“The more I think about it, the more I figure it was a suicide,” Mr. Nakada said.

“Why do it at the Imperial Palace?”

“Some small businessman in Kanda or Jimbocho. The way the economy’s been, a lot of little places have been going bankrupt. No one would ever know it was a suicide.”

Yamada was putting the food back into the refrigerator. He had already turned off the gas and swept the floor. When all the food had been put away, he wet a rag and began wiping down the counter. The water was running in the sink and he couldn’t hear what the two men were saying.

“How much do we owe you?” Mr. Nakada asked a few minutes later.

Yamada looked at the plates and bottles on the counter, added everything up in his head and told the two men. When they had paid and left, he washed the dirty dishes under the running water in the sink. He shut the water off, dried the dishes with a clean towel and stacked them on one of the shelves on the back wall. The empty beer bottles went into a crate under the sink. He left twenty thousand yen in the cash register and put the rest into his money purse. He came around the counter, turned off the lights and went out.

The rain was light. He locked the shop and started home. He lived less than a half a mile away, on the other side of the river. It was warm for early spring and he had no jacket. He was thinking about the body that had been found in the moat. Halfway across the bridge Yamada stopped. The previous year the city had shored up the banks of the river and put in walkways with benches. There were no lights and the water below was dark. The more he thought about it, the less likely he felt the man had fallen into the moat. It had to have been a suicide. But Yamada couldn’t imagine throwing himself into the cold water below. There must be easier ways to kill yourself if you really needed to. He heard voices coming toward the river and he continued on.

## Goose Geese Gander

*Ashok Niyogi*

the sun has risen clean and yellow  
birds are up and about  
amidst the California palms

I have brushed away  
yesterday’s nightmare  
of lying on familiar land mines  
cleaned my remaining teeth  
girdled my loins  
to do battle with the law of nature  
that propels

the solitary straggler squawking  
across a blue sky to Elizabeth Lake  
it is so tragic  
this final loss of extended hearth and home

I feel immensely sorry for myself  
because even you  
refuse to join me  
in this pantomime of carrot juice  
broccoli and fresh underwear  
with the smell of lime

today god  
will I do right  
or will I do wrong

Molotov  
Cocktails  
at Noon

Shaun Millard

I'm upset with time  
it always loses track of me  
I just see the back of its neck  
walking out the door  
taking every inch of minutes  
from my four room shack

Cacophony

Kim Faxtheimer

I slip the noose of your words over and around  
your neck while you silently ponder

In your worn burgundy leather chair encompassed  
by pallid pages which temporarily lend their meaning

Surrounded by self-declared splendor and Shostakovich  
you slide deeper into your world which is your abyss

Your chasm created by you for you  
not us your daughters who happened to witness your duplicity

Your composed universe compacts corners cautiously  
constructs words conscripts phrases that supposedly matter

Guarded by your cello and personally annotated sheet notes  
you curl into your bow to orchestrate a cacophony of dissonance

To fit your lies into a discordant meter  
I decode your distant music hum your pitiful solo

# Broke in California

Gerald Zipper

Palms and pools  
dry hills and brazen cars  
so hungry you'll eat worms  
sleep under a tree in the park  
sharp stones bite your back  
wash up in the rear of a gas station  
line up for a cardboard plate at the Center  
line up for yellow cheese sandwich  
everybody smells raw and soup  
I smell too  
look everyday for food and work  
no car no job  
try hanging a Klieg light  
turning a moviola  
making a resume  
line up with the braceros  
beg to pick the strawberries  
land of golden promises  
but you weren't ready for it  
you stole a can of sardines  
the cashier looked away  
Momma would have cried  
you had to keep goig  
up at first light and on the bus  
trucking company hires for two days  
film distributor lets you ship reels  
out there every day  
find a way inside  
keep asking  
become an entity  
a person of substance  
maybe someday even a star.

# For your own good

N. E. Payne

I laughed at you.  
I know, a little cruel,  
But you told me I didn't have to wait for you  
And watch your plane take off.  
You thought I was showing disinterest.  
Why would I want to watch you fly away again?  
I watched you stare at your fingers,  
Trying to melt into the seat next to me,  
Brushing my shoulder every now and then...by accident.  
You're frustrated, I know,  
Or maybe disgusted.  
I will never be the man you so love,  
The one who tempts you and gives you dreams.  
I live here in familiarity.  
The life you will lead is far from the one I have in front of me  
So I carry your coat for you up to the line,  
And really do want you to leave  
(you complicate my life so.)  
I know that as you find your seat  
You will be crying.  
And you'll be correct when you see me strolling to my car  
Not an expression on my face.  
You could be my soul mate  
If life were different  
You could be the one I choose to be with  
But I love you too much  
To let that happen to you.

# Brilliance

*Grace Curtis*

If I weren't so brilliant I'd be dead  
Out of sheer tenacity and ugliness  
I thrive

I feel hostility I cannot even define  
Or locate

I do all the wrong things: eat too much  
Drink too much—scream—want too much  
Talk too much

Wallow

There is no help for me

Hallelujah! I work like a robot  
Hallelujah! Thank God I  
Am brilliant

I am too stupid to quit



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