

down in the dirt
unwinding all your
dirty little secrets
067
February '08



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Like a Flame to a Moth

Randall K. Rogers

they say the love flame that burns
brightest

chars darker or is hotter or something

than a mediocre love

I ought to know
my love for the model
who how it happened I don't know
fell for me
my love for her
the sex experienced model
burned hot

when our wave of love crested and
our relationship washed ashore

the aftermath of that Bunsen burner
left me a smoking ruin.

Scars Cover art of a displayed tank photographed in Wisconsin.

Parallel

Kelley Jean White MD

He was at Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and now he's leaning against the window sill at Borders while kids are making paper witch's hats and magic wands. My daughter has made a puppet owl from a brown paper bag. She's old for that, fifteen, but even the kids in college are lined up for Harry Potter 6. No where to sit so I take another piece of window sill beside him. About my age. I turn apologetically. We both blurt out—this is a kind of occupational requirement, I'm a pediatrician. Laugh. Introduce ourselves. Choke. This is the man who almost had my life. My job that is. Who defaulted and left me the only candidate for the position. My children wouldn't be here. My marriage. My failed marriage. But I'd never have married at all. Twenty-two years of this work and it's because of this man's choice. I'd been told he backed out. Failed to pay back his loan with his inner-city time. He tells me no. He had a sick pregnant wife in Chicago. Worked in a tough clinic there then one here in Camden. Didn't get the credit but did the work. We shake hands. He's divorced. Misses his children—23 and 7. Mine are 21, 17 and 15, I introduce him. His are with their mother. We exchange cards. I can't help but think it's another piece of fate. We're both single. We've done the same work, had the same losses, same blessings. Maybe he'll call me. He doesn't. Parallel lines don't cross.

myopic

Devin Wayne Davis

i see you.
wait. wait,
you know how
blind i am.
i believe, for a while
it is you—walking, with kids
running beside you.
she did look
like you. and i mean, it
seemed they were yours ...
ours ...
maybe it's just
i couldn't see that far ahead.

The Black Devil *Gerald E. Sheagren*

Montana – 1907

By 1907, most of the wolves had been slaughtered by both hunters and cattle ranchers; their carcasses either left for the buzzards and bears, or skinned so their fur could be used for rugs or trophies over the mantle, and in some cases for coat collars and glove liners. They were shot, poisoned and trapped without mercy. And the savagery extended as far as the little pups that were often thrown into fires for the sheer sport of it. It wasn't only for the preservation of cattle and sheep, but it was to bring closure; to assuage man's fear of the wolf that was thought of as a heinous killer and the stalker of children. It was all a myth of course, for there wasn't a solitary case of a wolf ever attacking a human. Unfortunately, man's fear was never controlled by reports and statistics.

But there was one wolf who managed to beat the odds along with his mate and five pups. The local ranchers had dubbed him the "Black Devil." Tyler Varney knew of him well, for he had been killing cattle on his father's ranch for the past three months. The Black Devil was as black as midnight, as black as a lump of coal, as black as the hearts of his father and uncle. He weighed in the neighborhood of two-hundred and fifty pounds, stood fifty inches at the shoulder and measured a good seven and a half feet from the tip of his snout to the end of his tail, and was rumored to be able to run in the excess of sixty miles an hour. Tyler surmised that most of these so-called facts were due to a fair amount of exaggeration and myth-building. After all, if you lined a dozen men up and whispered "ten pounds" in the first man's ear, by the time it reached the other end of the line that ten pounds would have turned into a hundred. Whatever the case, the Black Devil was - in fact - much larger, stronger and faster than the average wolf.

Clyde Varney had lost at least twenty-three head of cattle to the Devil and his mate by the summer of 1907. He and his brother, Cletus, had hunted the two marauders for days on end, never once getting as much as a glimpse of them. It was like hunting for two needles in a stack of hay, or to be more accurate - twenty square miles of hay stacks. But they knew they'd been watched by the feeling a man gets when the hairs prickle at the nape of his neck, and more so by the uneasy snorting and fidgeting of their horses. They had brought dogs on the first hunting trip, only to have two of them killed and a third seriously mauled when they had taken up the scent and disappeared into the distance. One of the dead had been Rex, Clyde's favorite. If anybody had a score to settle with the Black Devil it was indeed the Varney brothers.

Finally, Clyde had decided to kill one of his old steers, leaving its carcass out in the north pasture, its belly slit open and laced with strychnine. The practice had been used by many of the ranchers to a satisfying effect. Tyler had decried its cruelty, but Clyde, never one to tolerate weakness from his son, had taken off his belt and beaten the boy without mercy, inflicting a good number of bruises and welts.

Both Clyde and Cletus were vicious men who instilled fear in their families,

friends and neighbors alike, and took a great deal pleasure in doing so. There were times when Tyler had harbored wishes that the Devil would pay a visit and haul his father far off into the woods to tear his mangy body asunder. It would spare everyone, especially his wife and children, so much grief and torment. But men like Clyde and Cletus had the tendency to live to be a hundred, inflicting as much pain and suffering as humanly possible. The Lord indeed worked in mysterious ways.

The brothers, along with a reluctant Tyler, rode out to the north pasture early on a morning in mid-July to see if there had been any favorable results with their strychnine ploy. The Devil was as cunning as he was big, and Tyler hoped that he had somehow detected the poison and steered his family away from the area. His biggest concern was the pups. Just the thought of them dying so horribly brought the burning-warmth of tears to his eyes and he was forced to look away so his father wouldn't see. Such a transgression would certainly merit a beating with either belt or fist or toe of boot. Sometimes there would be a combination of all three. After all, the Varney men were super-humans who never, ever displayed the least sign of emotion. God in heaven; the slightest show of weakness would have certainly played hell with their fearsome reputations.

Even at the early hour the air was sultry, portending another scorcher of a day. A fireball of a sun was eager to make its appearance, painting the horizon with shades of pink, rose and golden-red. To the west, the Sawtooth Range was nearly lost in a purplish haze, its highest peaks covered with a stubborn snow. A half dozen deer grazing nearby, perked up their heads at the trio's approach, bounding off to the sanctuary of the nearest woods, followed closely by a pair of spooked rabbits. Tyler watched as a hawk swooped from the slowly brightening sky to buzz the pasture, flying off with a squirming rodent clutched in its talons. But for all of the country's beauty, the boy knew that there was the possibility of a great deal of ugliness ahead.

As they neared the carcass of the steer, it was evident that a number of animals had been at work. Its entrails were hanging out and scattered in bits and pieces along the blood-smeared grass. The heat had also been busy, creating a terrible stench that caused Tyler to gag and cover his nose and mouth with a bandanna. Of course his father and uncle seemed unbothered by the smell, looking as if they could breathe it in and savor it as they would a woman's perfume.

They followed the track of some of the steer's gore and soon came across the body of one of the pups. It was frozen in the midst of a contortion, its mouth pulled back to expose its teeth, as so often was the case of an animal who had suffered a painful death. The pup's muzzle was still bloodied from its feast.

Clyde turned his large bulk in the saddle, smiling at his brother with satisfaction. "Well, there's the first of the little buggers. Good riddance."

"Yup," answered Cletus with his own gap-toothed smile. "The poison works mighty fast on the pups. Their systems aren't fully developed yet."

And little further along they found another one and a short distance more, a third. The brothers were overcome with joy, but Tyler could barely hide his revulsion. It was cruel, darn right cruel, but his father and uncle enjoyed cruelty like pigs enjoyed wallowing in a mud hole.

Clyde eyed his son, noting that he looked uneasy. "Do you have a problem

with this, boy?"

No, sir, I don't. I'm just fine."

"Well, you don't appear to be. Damn, I swear you take after your mother's side of the family - all of a hundred-percent."

"They're not so bad."

"They're a bunch of frigging sissies. They wouldn't last a day in this neck of the woods."

Cletus grunted - his usual reaction to humor. "Shit, they wouldn't last an hour. A half hour tops."

They rode along for perhaps a mile, not seeing the other two pups. Most likely they had crawled into some underbrush or a hollow to die. After another mile, they hit pay dirt. There, a few hundred feet away, was the mother, yelping and whining and thrashing about in her agony. Nearby, was the Black Devil himself, walking in worried circles around his mate, muzzling and pawing her in a vain attempt to ease her suffering. When he spotted the arrivals, his ears stood erect and he displayed his incisors, fur bristling and back arching. Even at a distance, they could hear the deep snarl building and rumbling deep within his chest. A chill shot the course of Tyler's spine.

"There he is!" shouted Clyde, pulling his .351 Winchester from its scabbard. "That black bastard is mine!"

The Devil backed up, took a quick sniff of his nearly dead mate and started to run off, only to have a change of heart. He guiltily returned and stood by her side, releasing the longest and most continuous growl that Tyler had ever heard. Clyde's first shot kicked up some dirt at the wolf's side and the second was much farther off mark.

Cletus snickered. "Dang, Clyde; you should be able to hit a chipmunk at this distance." The snicker turned into an outright laugh as he reached for his own Winchester. "Let me show you how it's done."

Realizing that the odds were against him, the Devil muzzled his mate one last time and started off at a dead run, leaping over a fallen tree and crashing through the brush. Clyde and Cletus started shooting as fast as they could chamber rounds, bullets chipping the bark off trees all around the fleeing wolf.

Cletus cursed, spitting out a glob of tobacco juice. "Damn-it-all, we blew it, big time!"

Tyler turned away, struggling to contain a smile.

"We'll get him soon enough. Don't worry about it." Clyde rode his horse up to the whining female, watching as she weakly flipped over, her muzzle covered with foam. "This one is done for."

Tyler pulled his .22 rifle from its scabbard, chambering a round. "I'll finish her off."

"No, let her suffer to the very end."

"Jeez, Pa; show a little mercy," Tyler snapped, taking aim.

Clyde's backhand sent the boy flying out of the saddle, the hard landing knocking the air from his lungs.

"You had better start listening to me, boy, before I really loose my temper."

And if you remember well, you certainly don't want that to happen."

Cletus watched for a few moments then reined his horse around, heading for the woods. "You two can beef it out, but I'm going after that damn wolf. I'm going to finish it once and for all."

"Not now, Cletus."

"What do you mean 'not now'? I'm not going to wait until the cows come home. And if that wolf's not killed, the cows won't be coming home."

"I'm not going with you. I've got to take this kid home and teach him a lesson. Maybe teach his mother some tough love too, while I'm at it."

"Whatever you say!" called Cletus, as he wound his way amongst the trees. "But you won't be sharing the credit with me."

The phone bells sounded the next morning as Tyler moped over his breakfast and Clyde was haranguing his wife over what he called "shitty" pancakes. Beatrice snatched the receiver off its hook, exchanged a few words with the caller and motioned her husband over.

Clyde placed the receiver to his ear and snapped "yeah?" into the phone's mouthpiece. He listened for a few moments, brows furrowing, before hanging up. Then he started to pace, picking up his coffee cup and draining it.

"There's a problem over at Cletus's, huh?"

"Yeah, Beatrice; there sure seems to be. The sheriff wouldn't tell me what it was. He just wanted me to get over there as fast as I could." Clyde continued to pace, grabbing his Stetson off a wall hook. "I called Cletus three times yesterday, but Agnes said that he hadn't returned home. Christ, I wish I didn't let him go after that wolf by himself." Clyde paced faster, cracking each of his knuckles in turn. "Okay, Tyler, let's go."

"What do I have to go for?"

Clyde walloped his son alongside the head. "Because I said so, that's why. Move it!"

They saddled up and rode at a breakneck speed to Cletus's home, three miles away. When they arrived, they saw Sheriff Crowley's Pierce Arrow parked next to a dozen tethered horses. The sheriff and a number of neighbors were gathered near the front porch of the house. As they dismounted, Crowley broke from away from the group and met them, dressed in a snap-brim cap and white linen duster, a pair of goggles dangling from around his neck. The sheriff owned the first automobile in a fifty mile radius and he was damned proud of the fact.

"What's going on, Crowley? Damn, what did you do; alert the whole county?"

"We've got a big problem, here, Clyde, and we're going to need the manpower."

"Did - Did something happen to my brother?"

Crowley hung his head, wishing that he wouldn't have to supply an answer.

"Tell me, for Christ-sake!" Clyde shouted, shaking the sheriff by his shoulders. "Did something happen to Cletus?"

Crowley headed back toward the porch, motioning for Clyde to follow. As they approached, the men split to make them a path. They all looked somber and more than a bit nervous. Lying on the top stair of the porch was what appeared to be a large piece of liver. Next to it was a bloody wallet.

Clyde could only stare, squinting in wonderment. "What in the hell is that?"
"It's - It's a heart."

"From what kind of animal?" Clyde mounted the bottom stair, bending over to make a closer examination. "A deer, maybe."

"It's a human heart. A human heart marked with canine teeth." Crowley rested a consoling hand on Clyde's shoulder. "And right there alongside, where Agnes found it, is Cletus's wallet."

Clyde whirled, his eyes growing as big as saucers, noticing that Tyler was rushing toward some bushes with vomit spewing from his mouth. Clyde tried to speak, but nothing came out. When he tried again, his incredulous voice sounded hoarse and raspy.

"What - What in the blue blazes are you trying to tell me, sheriff? You're saying that the Black Devil tore out my brother's heart and carried it, along with his wallet, down here to this porch?"

Crawford looked up to the heavens, wishing that it wasn't true; that there was a saner, more rational explanation. "As crazy as it may seem, that's exactly what I'm saying. The wolf brought the heart here. And he brought the wallet along to identify whose heart it was."

Clyde spun in a complete circle and ran his fingers through his hair, knocking his Stetson off in the process. He looked at the faces around him then off to the bushes where Tyler was still on his hands and knees. Damn sissy kid! What the hell is everybody going to think? A Varney, upchucking!

"That's the craziest, most far-fetched thing I ever heard, Tom!" Clyde shouted, his nose nearly touching that of the sheriff.

"Like I said; there are teeth marks on the heart. Also on the wallet. And this Black Devil is smart, right? Smarter, by far, than any other wolf we've ever seen."

Clyde let out a long, weary breath. "Where's Agnes?"

"She's in the house in a state of shock. Some of the neighborhood women are seeing to her."

"Cletus was my only brother. Six frigging sisters, one brother! Damn it; I shouldn't have let him go up there alone!"

"What's done is done, Clyde. There's fifteen of us all together. Everybody has a rifle. I suggest that we split into groups and try to nail this wolf before it kills someone else."

"It's not going to kill anyone else. He's after just me and Cletus." Clyde sighed, correcting himself. "He's just after me."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"Cletus and I laced a dead steer with strychnine. It killed the Black Devil's mate and their five pups."

"Well, there's no law against strychnine, unless you use it on another person."

Clyde thought that Tyler would be a good start. What a spineless little shit he had for a son.

"Okay, everybody; let's mount up!" shouted Crawford, as he walked to get a rifle from his Pierce Arrow. "I'll take one of Cletus's horses. Someone saddle a likely one up for me."

Clyde rushed over and grabbed Tyler by the collar of his shirt, hauling him to his feet.

"I'm sick, Pa. I – I've never seen anything like that."

"You gutless little turd. I'll teach you to be a man 'fore this day is over, even if it kills you. Now get into the saddle. We're going to hunt this murdering wolf down once and for all. We should have done it yesterday morning with your uncle Cletus."

The men split into groups and headed in different directions. There was a lot of ground to cover and very little time in which to do it. Clyde refused Crawford's company, selecting Tyler as his sole hunting mate. If the kid didn't shape up, he would leave him horseless in the woods to hoof it home on his own. He had that prickle at the back of his neck again, warning him that even as they left the ranch, the Black Devil was keeping them under surveillance from afar. He was the wolf's next target and although he hated to admit it, his hands and legs were shaking beyond his control.

They entered the woods, its thick canopy of leaves turning day into dusk. It was eerily quiet excepting for the occasional scuttle of a rabbit or a squirrel. Neither of them talked; each buried deep in his own thoughts. Clyde mourned his brother the best way he could, by cursing to himself and slamming the pommel of his saddle over and over again. Tyler wasn't mourning his uncle in the least. He had gotten what he deserved, pure and simple. He'd give anything to take a pee on the old buzzard's grave. If his father was next, so be it. He and his brother, Homer, could run the ranch well enough without him.

They had traveled perhaps two miles when Clyde reined in his horse, straining to hear a repetition of a sound he had heard in the distance. Easing his Winchester from his scabbard, he cocked a round into the chamber, holding the weapon at the ready. His eyes darted to the right then to the left then warily over his shoulder. The hairs on the nape of his neck were standing on end and saluting. The Black Devil was near; nearer than he would ever want him to be.

Tyler bit his lower lip so hard he nearly drew blood. "What, did you hear something?"

"Shut up and get your rifle out." Clyde flashed his son a thoroughly disgusted look. "Not that it's going to make a bit of difference."

"If you don't want me here, just say so."

"Oh, I want you here, all right. I want to show you how a true Varney handles himself."

You're a bigger wolf than the Black Devil, thought Tyler; a mangy, old, remorseless wolf. But your pack thinned out a little with the death of uncle Cletus. Maybe your so-called friends in the other groups will bite the dust and leave you the Lone Wolf.

And, then, there he was; standing atop a small rise with his fangs barred and the fur standing tall on his arched back! Panicked, Clyde took aim with his Winchester, but his horse reared, placing the bullet on a harmless path into the tree tops. The horse reared once again and when Clyde reached to secure the reins, his Winchester fell to the ground. And that's when the Black Devil made his move, running full tilt straight for him, a thick tendril of saliva dangling from his muzzle.

“Shoot, Tyler! Shoot him for Christ-sake!”

But the boy could only watch, frozen and fascinated, as the black killing machine bore down on his father. Clyde swung his horse around and started off at a gallop, negotiating around trees in a frantic effort to escape. The wolf changed direction, speeding along a rise that paralleled Clyde's course, jumping over fallen trees and tearing through the briars and the brambles. He mounted a ledge and jumped for Clyde, missing him by the matter of a few inches. Without missing a bit, the animal continued its pursuit, now along a parallel route to Clyde's right.

Tyler followed at a distance without the slightest clue as to what he would do if the mighty wolf started for him. He thought of turning around and heading in the opposite direction to put as many miles as he could between them. His old man would have to get out of this on his own, the best way that he could. Oh, but it felt so good to see his father riding for his life, fleeing in fear, probably shaking and sweating and praying to the Lord for mercy. He wished he had one of those moving picture cameras. No sound, but maybe he could play the William Tell Overture while watching it.

And then it happened! As his father glanced to his right, he failed to see the branch, the branch that slammed him in the head and swept him from his saddle. Before he could realize or react to what was happening - if he was still conscious at all - the wolf launched itself through the air and landed atop him, its powerful fangs ripping his neck to shreds. He never had enough time to even scream. A small geyser of blood shot up and his father's body shook spasmodically for a few moments, feet thrashing wildly, before growing still.

Tyler could only watch, his heart pounding a mile a minute. This was it! He would be the wolf's next victim. Dismounting, he pulled the Winchester from his scabbard and cocked its lever, sending a round into the chamber. And, indeed, the wolf headed for him; slowly, more cautiously, a growl gurgling deep in his throat. Tyler aimed his weapon, but was shaking so badly that its front sight danced crazily around, heading everywhere but where it was supposed to. Then with a cry of exasperation, he flung the weapon aside, deciding to call it quits, to take his medicine like a man. The Devil snapped his attention to the rifle, watching it land in the bushes then returned his gaze to Tyler, tilting his head and releasing a long, high-pitched whine.

“I'm sorry that my father and uncle killed your mate and pups. It was them, not me. I didn't want anything to do with it, honest.”

A tear trickled down Tyler's cheek and the wolf took notice, tilting his head further and letting loose with another whine.

“I'm sorry! I really am. I don't know if wolves can forgive, but I wish you would.”

And in one crazy, unbelievable moment, Tyler thought that the wolf actually understood. The animal trotted a few steps forward, paused, and took another few steps. Then he passed so closely by that Tyler could have reached out and stroked his fur. And on the wolf trotted until it broke into a run, disappearing

into the dark confines of the forest.

And that's when Tyler dropped to the ground and started to release a week's worth, a month's worth, a year's worth, a lifetime's worth of tears. There was no one to yell at him or degrade him now; no one to beat him with a belt or a fist. He was only half aware of Crawford and two other riders approaching from the south. He didn't pay any attention to them as they dismounted and stared in horror at the bloody body of his father. He didn't even care as Crawford placed a consoling hand on his shoulder and helped him to his feet.

And still he cried.

The Suzhou Boat Girl

Richard Vaughn

Longley gazed in rapturous curiosity as the sampan poled past their excursion boat. The shock of the hauntingly familiar face shook him from a tourist stupor, sending shivers across his humidity-sheened skin. They were in Suzhou on the optional closing side trip of the three week visit to China. He felt numb with excess novelty—too many multi-course Chinese dinners reeking of peanut oil, ginger, sesame, noodles and green tea. But—there she stared again—*the girl!* This time in dun pants and a thin jacket, the bamboo pole clenched in her fists as she eased the sampan in the canal. Her black hair was pulled into a beaver tail on her neck.

Their eyes met for no more than an instant. It undid him even more than the face he'd seen along the Daning River earlier, or the ethereal passenger aboard the Li River cruise. On both occasions his memory sank into paralysis trying to connect present and past—without closure. This lasted only five or ten seconds before the vessels passed. He turned to glimpse her again but got only an oblique look at the sinewy body.

What the hell obsessed him? About her—that face with soy brown eyes piercing his soul? He detected a mournful throbbing in his brain as the tour guide explained that boat girls took such drudgery jobs because they were what uneducated girls could get. It reminded Longley that leisure travel in exotic lands always revealed comely and sluttish girls enduring endless, hopeless, struggle.

"Look at me," their eyes appeared to suggest, especially the young girl no more than twelve or so along the Daning River. She hustled along the pebbled shore with an infant bundled on her frail back as she offered glistening stones polished by the river to indolent tourists aboard the tour launch. "Look-look, plitty stone," she gasped trying to keep pace without losing her balance. "You likee, much likee!"

He thought at the time, was it only last week, or the week before? Yes, two weeks behind this resonant now: *God, what a goddamned life to have with nothing in it but each day harder than the day before!* Her face, youthful with pending age, tor-

mented him the rest of that day, along with the vacuous gaze of the babe on her back. He drifted between guilt in having so much more, and irresistible thrill that he did. Traveling in less opulent and affluent places was not an unalloyed pleasure but, rather, one of vast emptiness and deprivation. It wasn't just abject poverty, but the despair veiled behind surfaces.

That thin, almost gaunt young woman on the Li River cruise, in her flowing silk flower-print dress and patent leather pumps. She kept stroking fashion-bobbed hair while admiring the classic peaks that reminded him of floating mountain Chinese paintings. He loitered at the rail to sneak looks. She caught him staring with her black agate eyes. But, there was no hauteur, only a well-groomed complexion that betrayed deep, worldly-wise wariness. "What you see," her gaze conveyed, "is the beauty masking grim reality."

When the Suzhou Canal excursion reached the end of its outward journey and reversed, Longley realized he might have another opportunity to view the sampan girl, perhaps get a better look if they passed slow while she poled her life away. He leaned forward in his seat, pressed against the rail as the boat surged back along the fetid canal past mildewed mortar and crumbling docks. He saw women washing clothes using rank water, girls scampering on ledges by the hovels, and a boy peeing into the opaque flood. Sampans with boat girls passed, but none with the girl he needed to view.

Peering ahead he noticed what must be the one he hungered to see. It sluggishly churned the surface like a torpid beast. Longley searched for the girl, hoping she wasn't on the side behind the bamboo-slatted cabin. He held his breath as she came into view, poling deftly to keep the boat in mid-canal. Loose strands of hair undulated around each ear like black silk. As his tour eased alongside, she walked forward to drop her bamboo pole into the water three arm-lengths from him. He started to speak when she looked his way, but waited till he could only wave, as if to say: "My heart goes out to you!"

What he received instead of a friendly smile was a grimace as tourist cameras all around him snapped and popped, causing her to shrug away their trivial lives as she went on with the rough business of surviving another day. He wasn't disappointed so much as thrust back onto another waterway, in a fearful time when he was no older than the girl—who up close now looked like a worn-out adolescent.

He was undone by a Korean girl clinging in icy water to the steel remnants of a blasted Han River bridge. Chinese artillery shells blasted geysers of shrapnel, mud and ice, shuddering the embankment where Longley and scared soldiers fired a machine gun covering a retreat from fanatical Asian hordes. The girl clung for an hour, wailing as the current tugged at her padded clothing. Two GIs tried to get her ashore by tossing a rope, but Chinese snipers kept everybody pinned down as her cries faded. Every time Longley looked, her fear-wracked eyes pierced him, so close and beyond help. At dusk her voice diminished to the futile squeal of a dying bird. To end her ordeal, he aimed his M-1 with great care and shot her in the head.

The Suzhou boat girl poled away; he could not save her either.

Five and Counting

Domenica Martinello

"Should we put the top back on, let the carbon monoxide end things quick... or would you rather us put on our best poker faces and wait it out?"

Jason looked down at his watch and smiled sadly.

"Only five more minutes now."

They sat in Jason's red convertible, parked at the edge of a high cliff overlooking Washington D.C. The sun was just beginning to set over the gray skyscrapers, casting a soft pink and orange glow over the dull giants below. It had always been their spot, their observation deck, viewing Heaven, Hell and world in between. Now they sat in silence, knowing that this sunset, so like and unlike any other they'd ever witnessed, would signify the dawn of a frightening new age.

To those that knew them, they were Jason Taylor and Emma Wolfe. To those that didn't, he was the President's son and she, being an average citizen, wasn't significant enough to matter. But now, sitting up on the cliff, they were simply two lost souls out of countless others, overlooking the trial and tribulations of a nation killing themselves to live.

Emma laughed nervously, and laid a shaky hand on Jason's stiff arm.

"If you think about it, both endings are as simple as pushing a button. Forget the 'nuclear age', this is really the age of convenience."

They were silent once more, each word adding extra weight to the air, making it harder to breathe. Finally, never one to hold her tongue, Emma's lips quivered.

"I'm scared."

Jason released his bone-crushing grip on the steering wheel and let his arms fall helplessly to his sides.

"So am I."

"I love you Jason..."

"I've always loved you.... I'm sorry you had to get involved with me."

"Please don't say that. There is no where I'd rather be than here in these last few moments of peace with you. The world would still be facing the same crisis in a couple of minutes, if I had met you or not. The only difference is that I would only know about it until everyone else does... and you know I've never been one for ignorance."

She tried to smile at this, but it came out as a grimace.

"Sometimes ignorance is the best thing," he replied sadly.

"Oh c'mon, you're sounding just like your father, Mr. President. I know

you don't believe in that mentality."

Jason grew frustrated with himself.

"Well how do you explain two teenagers, sitting on a cliff and knowing that an atomic bomb will be dropped in approximately," he glanced down feverishly at his watch, "four minutes in some undisclosed country across the Atlantic, while the rest of the world is eating dinner or watching TV?"

He was shaking now. He inhaled quickly and deeply, almost gasping for breath before he continued.

"I was born into this curse. The curse of knowing the true extent humanity's thirst for power and control. Do you know how much of a burden it is to grow up knowing that everyone on the planet besides your family and your associates are born into a world of lies? That the history books you read in class and the bibles you read in church have been rewritten by your ancestors to adhere to their deceptions? That everyday, by blood association, by a generation of genes, you are carrying on a legacy of power obtained through death and a blindfold that has been tied again and again over a world of blinded eyes. I was born with hands stained by the blood of millions."

He was breathing heavily now. The weight on his conscious had not lifted, and he knew that he'd eventually have to die with it.

Emma stared distantly towards the skyline, perhaps to somewhere over the North Atlantic ocean, where in a few minutes some country would be reduced to nothing more than an nonexistent colored shape on a map. She had a feeling that it was what would soon become of everything. A pile of ashes, pieces of desolate wasteland labeled with obscure names on pretty colored blobs.

"Wherever the bomb hits... is there any hope that, you know... there will be any survivors?" Emma stammered.

"This bomb is a hundred times worse than Hiroshima. The whole country will be obliterated. The surrounding ones, though not even specifically targeted, will get the worst of it. They'll be the ones slowly suffering the aftereffects, radiation and whatnot. This is what will cause the chain reaction... nuclear retaliation powerful enough to destroy the world a thousand times over--" Jason stopped short.

"I'm sorry... what am I thinking, I'm scaring you even more."

"It's okay. We're both scared," she said simply. She grasped his hand.

"You can't always take everything on your shoulders... I know you didn't choose this life just because your father did."

"I know, but I can't help it. It's hard enough to live with yourself without knowing all of this."

Jason sighed, tilted his head back and ran his fingers through his hair.

"What kind of man reveals his plans but not his motives? Like it's some

glorified game of battleship and not the fate of the rest of the world, it's sick."

Emma squeezed his hand hard, and he got goosebumps.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," she said quietly.

The sun had seemingly taken a great plunge in the deepening purple of the sky, and shadows had already begun to creep up around them, shooting out of the ether like doomed flower blossoms. The stillness and silenced crept forward like the passage of time.

Two minutes.

Jason shifted closer to Emma, and when she turned he looked into her eyes.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked.

"That I haven't done everything I've wished to do in life."

"Neither have I."

"I've always wanted to go backpacking around Europe," she sighed and put her head on his shoulder.

"I wanted to write a book some day, use some of my influence to do some good..."

"I've always wanted to make love on top of the Eiffel Tower."

He couldn't help but burst out laughing. Her cheeks flushed.

"What!?"

"Didn't it used to be on top of the Rockefeller Center in Time Square?"

"I've changed my mind, the Eiffel Tower seems more... romantic. I don't want much to do with this country anymore, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

He looked down at his watch.

"Less than a minute."

"And to think... we're the fortunate ones..." she said absently, sounding very far away. "I wonder what my folks are doing right now."

"Something entirely more innocent than what mine are doing," Jason laughed bitterly.

She looked at him humorlessly, and ran her hand along his tense face. She brought it to her own and kissed his lips with subtle urgency, like their movement could justify both of their existences. When she moved away, he looked to his watch with a quickening pulse.

"Only a few more seconds now..."

Emma, eye's squeezed shut, clutched onto Jason as if he would suddenly be ripped away from her.

"When this is all over, I'll be seeing you in Heaven..." she whispered.

The alarm on his watch began to beep, ringing hollow into the dead-weight air, getting lost within the shadows of the last rays of light, like hope, disappearing over the Washington skyline.

"I'm already going to Hell."

Beacon Courts

Michael Wade

This happened at the turn of the century.

I hurt my back working construction, and when the compensation checks started I moved to a crack motel out on Highway 80. Eight stone cottages horse-shoed around an office built to look like a lighthouse. Bonnie and Clyde hid out there once. Now it was rockheads and whores, a registered sex offender and me.

Thirty dollars a night, one sixty a week. No soap, no pillow case, one towel. Roaches you could hear stampede up the walls.

Anna, the Asian woman in the office, was pretty but mean as a shark on the rag. She had a German Shepherd that stuck its snout through a hole in the chain link fence and snapped at your legs.

That dog could've been a stuffed toy, I'd still been paranoid around it.

Fucked up.

I quit reporting to probation. No pee tests for me.

In the cottage next door was a Mexican girl about fifteen with skinny legs and a potbelly. She had runny sores on her neck.

"You want a blowjob, I can wear a towel on my neck. Or toilet paper."

I made her wear both but she wasn't very good. She said thank you after. I never had anybody say that.

Couple days later she beat on my door. My heart seized up—I was in bad shape for noises. She had an orange dress on a hanger and some stuff in a Wal-Mart sack. Kicked out.

The Holy in the Sky had already written me out of the will. If I turned away a sick kid, he'd put me down sooner not later.

I told her she had to score her own crack.

Gloria started using my mattress for business. She didn't have many customers but a ten dollar whore fills chronic needs. Once or twice a night I had to exit the honeymoon suite.

Skitzing outside at night, that's a whole new kind of terror, noises especially. Fatal impacts on Anna's bug light. Owls in deep space. Car doors slamming like ambush fire.

Imagined or not, that German Shepherd back-hoeing under the fence.

With a bottle of Mad Dog I could sit at the picnic table beside the lighthouse maybe fifteen minutes. All Gloria needed usually.

Sometimes she'd start hollering, I'd run in and pull a trick off of her. A psychobilly with razor blades. A wheelchair veteran off his meds. A guy dead set on anal, wagging a foot long dick. Nothing pretty.

The worst was Sondra, a cycle-dyke Gloria put up with because she paid

extra. To explain this little bitch I assumed Hannibal Lector and the monster in *Alien* had a love child.

First time I ran in on her, Gloria's head was pinned in a dresser drawer and Sondra was carving into Gloria's back with a screwdriver. When I chunked Sondra on the bed, swear to God, she coiled and hissed like a snake. I beat her flat with the lamp.

Cleaning up Gloria's back I could make out something like a G-clef. Might have been a dollar sign backward. I couldn't figure out how Sondra got so much done.

Next time the little bitch roared up on that shitty Sportster, I told Gloria to run her off. Not unless I had fifty bucks, Gloria said. That night Sondra chased my roomie outside with a pair of vise grips. They ran into the woods behind the motel.

I went in my room, locked my door. Smoked a rock and watched porn.

I didn't see Gloria for two days.

She got back, she asked me did I know where she could sell Sondra's bike.

"You got a title?"

"No."

"Check with Dennis."

Dennis the sex offender had a straight job and two cars that ran. I figured him for some cash.

I didn't ask about Sondra.

Dennis gave Gloria two hundred for the bike. I wanted to throw a party, but Gloria bought four roses dipped in real gold from Anna and a bag of weed from a trick. It was sad, the trick not letting Gloria trade out.

Spring slipped off. Summer bore down. I hadn't reported in seven months. Even if my probation officer had bothered to come around, he wouldn't have recognized the aboriginal me.

The comp checks were still coming. Staying high now was like diving repeatedly over an empty pool and not landing. Something had to change. The only way I could see that happening was to run out of money and go to jail. Which was okay. I mean, I knew a crackivore who traded a kidney for it.

Fucked up.

Every few days I could sleep. During one of these spells the cottage caught on fire. I woke up to flames like living wallpaper. My heart stopped—I thought for good. In that split second I saw all the inaccuracies of my life.

At the hospital Dennis told me they found her body. The cops, firemen, whoever.

My burns were mostly second degree, which the doctor said are the painful kind but don't scar. I still felt like that guy in *English Patient*. Without the friendly nurse. Mine, I think they knew the story and figured I got what was coming to me.

Anyway, Dennis said they found Gloria's body in the cottage. I asked him how he knew and he said he took off work to watch them sort through the debris. He saw them scraping the thing into a bag. She was black and came apart. You

know, crumbly. Like bacon in the microwave too long.

Dennis said it was arson, you know, somebody set the fire, but they couldn't figure out why.

Anna came to the hospital, too. She brought her lawyer and yelled at me.

My P. O. found me. He said I was going to jail soon as the blisters dried up.

First day of the millennium, she called. I'd been out of jail a week, living with my mother.

"Hey, Curtis. You know who this is?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How you doin'?"

"All right."

"Me, too. My neck's all better."

There was this long silence, me trying to be mad at her. Hoping she at least felt bad. But I had thought a lot about that already and decided she didn't feel much of anything.

I just hung up.

It turned out okay. Nobody's going to miss Sondra.

And I kept my kidney.

...and for a little levity after President Bush leaves office...

To Be or Not

Pat Dixon

For ten minutes the gray-haired man stared at the contents of the envelope marked IMPORTANT—OPEN IMMEDIATELY. Finally he turned to his wife and said, "What's . . . this? Can't . . . figure it out."

Smiling with pleasure at his uncharacteristic curiosity, the brown-haired woman looked at the envelope and then its contents for a few seconds.

"It's just a special offer from *Reader's Digest*, Hon. They're offering you a trial subscription to their magazine—for less than half the cover price."

"But they've got . . . my name printed in there . . . with graphs I . . . don't . . . understand."

"Computers nowadays will do that for everybody's name, Hon. The graphs merely show what it would cost for the full price—this tall bar here—in contrast to what it would cost for the special sale price—this shorter bar here. See—it's only about half the height of the tall bar. That means it would be a lot cheaper

to buy the magazine on sale, that's all. Fifty-two percent off, they say—a little more than half."

The man scowled for a minute and then stared blankly up at her.

"That's why this one bar is tall while this other one is short, Honey Love."

She patted his forearm as his brows twitched.

"But we can save a hundred percent, Hon—just by not getting the magazine at all. You'd never read it anyways, so we don't really need to get it at all, right?"

The man's brows stopped twitching, and he stared at her face expectantly.

"So—I'm going to save us one hundred percent by just throwing this away. Would that be fine with you, Hon? I think it's fine—don't you think it's fine?"

After a long pause he looked down at his shoes and replied, "That . . . would be fine."

Twenty minutes later his elder daughter came into the room, and the man said with a frown, "I want you to put some . . . something in the . . . thing . . . now."

The young woman pointed to various objects and asked fifteen questions about where the second thing was. Finally she determined that he meant a humidifier that was on a low table against a side wall.

"Daddy, would it be fine with you if I put some *water* into this *humidifier*? It would be very fine with me. Would it also be fine with you—Daddy?"

After a pause her father turned to look at two well-dressed men walking outside the far window and replied, "That . . . would be . . . fine."

One hour later his other daughter came into the room and told him that the choices for lunch were hamburgers, fish sandwiches, and hot dogs with chili. When he did not respond, she repeated the list, adding, "You always like those hot dogs, Daddy."

He stared at her blankly.

"They come with fries, and you like fries," she said.

Still his stare was blank.

"Daddy, would it be fine with you if I put you down for two chili dogs and some nice warm fries? Would that be fine with you—Daddy?"

Again, after a long pause he replied, "That . . . would be fine."

While lunch was being cleared away, a younger man whom he dimly recalled seeing yesterday came in and spoke to him.

"Sir, your first appointment is here to see you."

The gray-haired man looked blankly back at him.

"Sir, it's one of those important men—from overseas," the younger man added.

Again the stare.

"Sir, he's going to want you to authorize a two-million-dollar-a-day increase in aid to his—folks. And he's also going to want you to agree that lots more sanctions should be put in place against those people he's against."

Still the blank stare.

"Sir, I think those are both very fine ideas. Would they also be fine with you—Mr. President?"

What You Wish For... Farha Hasan

Let me start with the night Layla Mir made her fateful decision. A decision made not out of love but desperation. Now, you may not know much about Layla and in fact you may decide you don't even like her. Heck, I don't like her at times either, but before I begin let me ask you, do you know what it's like to be in love...*desperately in love*? Well Layla Mir did and it was this desperation that drove her to make that foolhardy decision one stormy evening.

It was almost midnight on a Thursday night and Layla Mir had found herself somewhere she should not be, sitting in the living room of a decrepit old hag staring into a face buried in loose skin and wrinkles. The old woman hunched forward, her back protruding slightly as she sat down to face Layla. The few scraps of hair that remained were pulled back into a bun exposing several bald patches on her scalp. Layla shuddered. The room was dimly lit and looking down upon her was the haunting gaze of saints she didn't recognize. Why would she? She wasn't anywhere near being Catholic. Thinking about what she was about to do, Layla felt a twinge of guilt. Nervously, she wound the silver chain of her *Allah-pendant* around her finger. This type of thing was at best frowned upon in her faith and Layla had, had a religious upbringing - but that didn't mean it never happened. She looked again at the pendant that had been a gift from her Pakistani grandmother and took a deep breath. "I have to have him," she said cheeks flushed eyes full of determination.

Layla closed her eyes for a brief second. She was soaked in every sense of the word. Her dark hair clung to her caramel colored skin. Yet, the smell of incense calmed her, soothed her like a warm blanket. Layla took another sip of her tea as she waited for the woman to answer. When the woman spoke her eyes reflected a fire not apparent in her dull appearance. Her voice came out in whispers, hoarse from years of smoking - and after all this time still revealing traces of her Armenian heritage.

"Did you bring the picture?"

"I did," said Layla taking a photograph out from her purse.

"Are you sure you want to go through with it," asked the woman letting each word fall slowly and purposefully.

"You could think about it... *there's still time*."

"I know what I want," said Layla

There was a long pause before the woman answered, "He's not your soul mate."

"I don't care," hissed Layla.

Reluctantly, the old woman picked up the photograph and gazed at its image - as if penetrating a crystal ball.

At this point you may look at our girl and think ...a little extreme...maybe even a little cliché and what about the picture she brought?... An ordinary man with an ordinary smile. Well at least to the casual observer. But, if you looked a little closer your might notice that the smile though broad and friendly con-

cealed an element of self-satisfaction; and the man's posture, though firm and upright bore the confidence of one who's used to getting what he wants; and his attire, though rugged and outdoorsy has been aged not by camping or hiking in the wild, but in the air conditioned factory of some of the world's top designers. That is what the old woman saw that night and what Layla never did.

As Layla drove home in the middle of the night to an apartment full of bills and a roommate fast asleep on the couch, she thought about the time she had spent with Kamran Shaikh. In truth they had not known each other very long, perhaps a couple months at best but she saw in Kamran all that her life wasn't. Like all romances the beginning was great, the middle was ripe and sickeningly sweet and now as her lover's affection had begun to wane that ripeness had started to bear the faintest tinges of rot as Layla had begun to sense the aroma of his disinterest. Layla could feel him slipping like sand through her fingers - the tighter her grip the less she was able to contain. Maybe, if Layla had not felt so poor and so miserable and so outside of society's expectations that she might not have been so desperate. In a clan full of social climbers her parents remedial occupations was something family and friends could never look beyond. As the daughter of a Pakistani cab driver Layla was used to people looking not at her but over her. They had written her off. She could hear it in their condescending tones, their proud demeanor not to mention the outrageous flattery they used when they suspected someone of being wealthy or well accomplished. Just watching them made Layla want to chew her eyes out. God she wanted to be rich! She wanted to be so rich that she would leave them seething with envy.

Layla's last chance to hang on to her dream was Sarah Jafry's engagement party. In truth Layla had always resented Sarah, her perfect looks, her sweet demeanor, her father's large wallet. But Layla was glad to attend knowing of course that Kamran would be there. Layla could think of nothing else. This was going to her night. She could feel it. She was envisioning her victory when she was startled by the voice of an intruder.

"You've been nursing that drink an awfully long time," he said stepping into Layla's line of vision. Layla jumped back spilling some of her punch on the hardwood floor. Standing before her was a man with shaggy hair wearing a nice sweater and scruffy jeans - leaning against the staircase. Layla gave him a cold look.

"Oh, I get it your meditating," he continued. "That's why you have that blissful out of the world look on your face. Well don't let me interrupt you."

"No, problem," said Layla starting to walk away but he caught up with her.

"Hey, where are you going? Are you waiting for somebody?" he asked.

"Noo...not exactly."

"Well in that case let me introduce myself. My name is Samir Saed."

"So how did you know the happy couple?" asked Layla, wondering how to get rid of him.

"They're relatives. Great relatives in fact, perfect for crashing at night, a hot meal or a captive audience."

"Are you a bum?" she asked.

Samir just grinned and said indulgently "No I'm a musician - mostly jazz and blues and a comedian. I guess you could say I'm a musical comic. I take my sax with me on stage at comedy clubs. You should see my act sometime."

"Maybe I will," said Layla, her icy façade starting to melt.

"Do you mean that?" asked Samir

"Well...sure, always willing to support a fellow creative," she replied.

"I guessed you were a kindred spirit and what is it that you play?"

"I don't play...I write," said Layla. "Mainly advertising jingles for the suits that I work for but, at night I work on my own pieces."

"I'm intrigued," said Samir with an arch of an eyebrow, "tell me more."

As Layla attempted to describe her pieces she found that simply talking about her interests with someone who really wanted to listen was almost enough to make her feel human again. She was even starting to become receptive to the man's charming banter, so much so, that she did not see Kamran come in or the girl on his arm until it was too late. Layla gasped as she saw the two of them together. She was young, pretty, wearing all the 'right stuff' and looking up at Kamran adoringly. Layla could feel an unsettling feeling coming over her stomach like she was going to throw-up or commit a felony.

"You don't look so good," said Samir noticing the expression on her face. "Let's go for a walk," he said pulling her out the door. As they strolled around the neighborhood Samir kept on chatting not commenting on her sudden quietness. Before they stepped back into the party Samir looked at the expression on her face which resembled someone trying to pass a kidney stone and spoke in his gentle mocking way.

"Don't be so mad - he's not your soul mate," and just like that the spell was broken. Layla despite her dread went back inside. The music felt too loud and the bright décor hurt her eyes. Surreptitiously she would sneak glances at Kamran from across the room. How happy they looked, *the charmed couple*. They should get engaged, she thought. Samir was right, Kamran was not *her* soul mate. Sarah Jafry's pretentious party was a lot of things but it wasn't the right time for a confrontation. It was sheer will power that kept Layla at the other end of the gathering. Indeed, it was much later in the evening that Layla bumped into Kamran on her way to the dessert buffet. He had a drink in one hand and his cell in the other. His tie hung loose around his neck and his skin glistened as if he had just come off the dance floor.

"I've been trying to catch you all evening," he said giving her his dream boat smile. Layla forced herself to look Kamran in the eye - even though in her heart she knew it was over. Layla, not winning Kamran back but in time, she did find release from the prison she had created for herself. As for Samir, he eventually moved out of his relative's home and joined the peace corp., taking with him of course his sax and Layla's phone number. Kamran on the other hand, went on to make a lot more money and date many more women.

Were you expecting something more dramatic? Let me assure you that drama is as over rated and tacky as last year's prom dress. As for the old woman, the decrepit old woman - she chooses her spells wisely!

Red Business

Christian Knöbel

The walls of the dimly-lit room sweat incessantly while cockroaches scurried on the floor. A lonely moth disturbed the only source of light, a light bulb that flickered constantly, giving the room an eerie ambiance. Two dark figures sat facing each other across a small rectangular table in the room's center, faces obscured by the gloom. One of the shapes held a small photograph in his hand and studied it fixedly. He looked up from the picture with an annoyed frown. "Are you sure it was him?"

"Yes. You know our sources are always correct, Benito," the other man replied matter-of-factly. He was quite handsome, apparently in his early twenties and his face was yet unmarked by the numerous wrinkles that covered Benito's face. A well trimmed black beard grew on his angular features. "You think he poses a threat to our organization?"

"I wouldn't go that far, my good Romero." He gave a mirthless laugh. "Still, I believe he needs to be removed, lest he goes and draws too much attention from the government. We want to keep all this strictly legal, right?" There was a slight hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"He might prove useful for us though. You know, his popularity with the people is considerable."

"Yes, but we can't let the puppy get out of control now, can we? Besides, you know those guerillas cause nothing but trouble for us."

"Khrushchev wouldn't approve of his elimination. You, of all people, should know that."

"My good Romero, there's no need to bring the Soviets into the game. They won't even know of our involvement. A quick poisoning or maybe a shot to the head and it's all over."

"Khrushchev wouldn't approve," Romero reiterated in a firm tone. "Besides, he's already receiving supplies from the Russians. They think this Guevara might be their trump card against the Americans."

Benito's smile slipped. *He thinks he knows what this is about. Stupid youth, so full of confidence but no brains. No brains at all.* He shrugged off the thought. The creases on Benito's forehead deepened as he resumed his studying of the photograph. *I might have to dispose of him...*

"You know, Romero, I really don't want to be doing this but..." Benito quickly reached into his coat and pulled out a pistol. Before he could fire a shot, Romero already had a gun pointed at his head.

"Now, now, my good Romero, put that gun down. Have you lost your mind? What do you think you're doing?"

"I could ask you the same question, Benito." Romero's voice was calm and

steady and his face betrayed no emotion. A cold bead of sweat formed on Benito's forehead. "Remember, we're in the middle of the jungle ... no one will hear you die."

"Romero, I didn't mean it like that. Look, we'll forget this ever happened, alright? Here, I'll pay you the money I promised. Take it, take it. We'll go out and have a drink after this, won't we?" He talked fast and his voice was the squeal of a cornered pig.

"I don't think you'll be going anywhere." Romero pulled the trigger with a jerk of his finger. The light on the ceiling swung wildly, back and forth and back and forth. For a long moment the dripping water was the only sound in the room.

Romero stepped over to Benito's corpse and felt for his pulse. Satisfied, he turned away and pulled out his walkie-talkie. "Is he dead?" a voice asked from the device.

"Yes, Your Excellency. He has been...taken care of."

"Good. Did you find out the code?"

"Yes. Apparently it's 'Red Business.'"

"Good, good. You have done well indeed, Romero. I will miss your services. You are a good man, Romero. A good man! I will see you in heaven."

"What? What's the meaning of this? This isn't what you promised! This isn't what you promised!" Even as the questions formed on Romero's lips, the door to the room burst open with a loud CRACK!, followed by sudden bursts of gunfire.

A *spetsnaz* officer entered cautiously, crouching low. He moved over to the two corpses and gave Romero's head a kick. *Dead*. That seemed to suit the officer. He picked up the walkie-talkie and studied the blood-stained photo for a second. Gingerly picking it up in his hands, he turned off the light with a quick squeeze of his trigger, then turned to leave, closing the door behind him.

Texture

Bryan M. Huizi

She dances with the shadows cast by a cage of her own creation.

Musculature hints at the beauty of a ballerina as well as something forbidden.

Her graceful eyes offer passion and prayers,

but don't be fooled.

Sirens have sung for years and there is always a common denominator, a tripwire, called sympathy.

A tear spilled upon a cheetah's cheek.

So be aware and be fearful of just how far affection is extended,

because she has a history of crushing hearts in an attempt to avoid being captured.

Sign on the Dotted Line

Michael R. Young

“Pa! Come quick, the Comanche done gone lit the barn on fire!”

Grandpa was having another episode. Everyone in the church turned to face us. Mom’s face glowed red as dad unsuccessfully attempted to calm Grandpa. Chrissy began crying — her seven-year-old eyes hadn’t yet witnessed Grandpa this way. I just laughed.

It would be one thing if Grandpa had some traumatic experience in his life. Or perhaps if he saw action in World War II. But no. He lived a calm life, painting houses for fifty years. Not once did he leave the country for vacation, let alone a war.

His latest surge of schizophrenia was due to the fact that he had recently watched some terrible movie called *The Searchers*, in which John Wayne’s attempts to be close to a secret love are ruined by a Comanche raid. He has since been rubbing his forehead, in fear of being scalped.

Yes, it was bad. But nothing compared to a post-*Saving Private Ryan* fit, which involved him throwing cans of soup at a shopping cart that, to him, resembled a German tank. Or, after *The Matrix*, pouring cups of water on a running vacuum so that it wouldn’t steal his brain. Don’t even ask about *Jurassic Park*.

After the incident in God’s house, mom and dad decided to take him to Allentown’s New-Age Assisted Living, or ANAAL. Yes, ANAAL. I disagreed with their decision. For one, they could have at least picked one without an uncomfortable acronym. Secondly, it’s just not right to just dump (no pun intended) a sick family member off somewhere.

So what if Grandpa had fantasies about what he saw on television? Just pop in some feel-good classics. *It’s A Wonderful Life*, or *Field of Dreams* would suffice.

Instead, mom and dad just signed on a dotted line and we didn’t have to worry about Grandpa anymore.

What I Have Learned from Quiet Americans and Incensed Brits

Creighton Blinn

Embrace doubt.
Revel in questions,
While being wary of answers --
Avoiding catch-all prescriptions
& most essentially:
Ignore idealistic preachers with simple answers
(for their visions always ring hollow in the end).

Miss Disease

Micah Arroyo

She's got the face of a corpse
wakes you up with black holes for eyes
maggots in her hair
rusty nails in your back
Miss Disease why do you smile so
Miss Disease look what you did to me
How I bleed, how I bleed
Stained in silence, stained in beautiful pain

She's got a body made of scabs,
cold skin of death
yellow teeth chew their way down
Miss Disease why do you moan
Miss Disease look what you did to me
How I cry, how I cry
Stained with my tears of gasoline, stained

She's got the laugh of hell
smell of your blood
splattered on her dress
dirty white, dirty death
Miss Disease why do you weep
Miss Disease look what you did to me
All the scars, all the scars
Stained with your razor blade tongue, cut your
 name on my chest
Stained, stained
I love your pain, I love your hate

You make me live, you make me breathe
You make me bleed, you make me scream
You're my disease
Please, please stay, never go away
I'll burn you in,
where my heart used to be

Want What I Cannot Have

William F. John

two eyes meet from corners of the room.
let go such unnerving breaths—
tic-toc-ticks our hearts in dramatic harmony.
only your fingertips on your hand,
holding as i would also hold;
your lips open, slight, unnoticeable
but to my longing eyes—

such skin i'd have pressed into mine,
color against this transparent shadow—
a desire i have need for obtaining,
to burn up inside of me
and leave me helpless and ashen,
your masochistic knight in
pins-and-needed armor—
what a sensation to stay me at my place,
and prevent me from ever whispering
my pledges into your screaming voice;
to take over you with the smallest of gestures—

and lie with you in silence,
but for your gasping
and my insecurities—
to hold you again
and taste you,
with moans
and laughter—

but you turn and all thoughts therefore nullified;
into the void where the rest of my fears hide.
the dim lights rise up with glaring symphony
to show me all of the people ahead of me.

Blackout

Chad Newbill

A different day; same old hangover.
I debated over opening my eyes, or
throwing up over the side of the bed.
My morality hurt.
I always got up very early after my forgetful,
drunken adventures.
I suppose I needed the extra time to
try and recall the day before.
I was a drunk trying to put together a blank jigsaw puzzle.
What had I done last night?
Insults?
Acts of humiliation?
I would know soon enough.
My editor, who went by the pen name of, “my wife”, would show her commen-
tary through her angry glances.
Or grin and offer me pancakes.
I was hoping for pancakes that morning.

I changed my clothes that reeked from excessive compulsive sweat and half
regret.
But first things first-
I needed to vomit.
I hit my knees in front of the toilet and assumed the position to drown.
I would iron myself and evaluate my condition in the mirror-
not too bad for a case of beer and “some” vodka.
My fake, quivering smile would lift up my black circles and crusted eyes.

Still wobbling a bit, I grabbed the handrail.
The drunk mans crutch.
It creaked as I quietly moaned, while making my descent downstairs to the living.
I tried to look nonchalant-
just another day.
If I looked and acted sober, it would continue to perpetuate my image of
“Joe Six Pack”-
a part-time drunk.
I never hid my drinking because it seemed
too seedy and revealing.

I ran across my wife in the kitchen and said,
“Good Morning!”
I never said good morning to anyone when I was sober.
Traditional salutations are always awkward to me.

“Morning,” she said.
What- no “GOOD MORNING!”-
No kiss on the cheek!
She seemed neutral,
so I studied her movements and waited for the eye contact that would
give her thoughts away.

I strutted with purpose to the refrigerator and
grabbed a beer.
I CRACKED open the first canned beer!
To my wife, the cracking sound was like a
gun shot into peace.
But to a drunk man,
it is a gun shot to begin the race.

I guzzled the beer despite the after taste of vomit.
Three breakfast beers are the equivalent of Tylenol, Pepto-Bismol, and
Valium all rolled into one.
One down, two to go!
The first beer was barely staying in my rotten gut.
But with many years of practice, and a trite prayer,
I kept it down.
Things were going well-
no scowling faces.
No whipping remarks.
Soon my hangover would end and another alcoholic fit would begin!

I was still feeling awful, but I was optimistic.
Walking past my wife, I slapped her on the behind.
She hastily twirled around and said, “Do you remember what you said
last night?”
I CRACKED open the second beer and replied, “No- what did I say?”

In December 1955 black teenager Emmett Till was brutally murdered in Money, Mississippi. The spectacular cruelty of his murder combined with the callousness of the perpetrators and their defenders led to a coalescence of forces which drove the Civil Rights Movement. Unknown to most, eye witnesses placed a black man in the company of the murderers on the night they came for Emmett.

This is that man's story.

The Man From Money Mississippi, September 1955

Barry Davis

I have always prided myself in being useful and good. They know they can count on me and they call on me often. That makes me feel good to be liked and wanted. Niggas like me have been around for a long time. Good thing, too, since we uplift the race. We make up for the troublemakers, them with the bad blood, those shift, good for nothing coloreds.

Once, they asked me to help with that smart mouthed boy. Folks ask me bout it, tell me I done wrong by him. I ain't done no wrong.

The way that Northern boy had talked to poor Missus Bryant just wasn't right. I heard that colored boy just abuse that poor little woman. Why, she ain't come up to my elbow if'n I stood close by her. 'Cept I never have stood close by her cause that ain't a colored's place. That be the place of her husband, good old Mister Roy Bryant and Mister Roy was crossing that hard Mississippi soil in his truck, going over ta Texas, doing some hauling to help make ends meet. He was out there trying to feed his family, his poor young bride and their two small chillens.

That colored boy, high up as he was, must have known Mister Bryant weren't around or else he wouldn't have spoken to poor Missus Bryant such as he done. Coloreds like me respect Missus Bryant. We keep our eyes down when we enter her store, ask peacefully for what we be after and slide the money quietly across the counter before she hands over them goods. I could describe Missus Bryant to you from afar, but dang it if I knows what she looks like close up. That just ain't my place and in my nigh fifty years, I know'd how to keep ta my place. Black boy from Chicago and all, he don't know.

I didn't see him, I just heard him from the outside. Talking fresh like they do up north. He showed Missus Bryant his picture of some white girl he claimed to be his girlfriend. On top of that o'fense he whistled at her on his way out the door with that chicken fried grin on his face. You don't do that sort of thing down here. Stirring up trouble is what it is. Coloreds don't need no more trou-

ble. God gives us all the trouble we need just from making our'n skin black.

Couple days later, soon as I know'd Mister Bryant came back from his hauling, I hot skipped over to the store and told what I know'd. I could tell that he was angry and for a minute I thought he'd take it out on me. Then I volunteered a name and description of the o'fending colored and tole him where to find him – over to old Preacher Moses Wright's place.

Now theys call him a preacher when he ain't really a preacher. I knows what he talks about in that old white shack he speaks in and it ain't the word of God. The devil comes out of Moses Wright's mouth and some of that devil done got into his grandson.

I was feeling mighty good about what I had done when Mister Bryant made me feel even better.

"Uncle, I shure would like if'n you came with us to pick up that boy. Seeing y'all in the back of J.W.'s truck would calm him a bit. Thet's what I figure. You do me thet favor, Uncle?"

I nearly burst wit pride then.

I tucked my head down to hide my smile. Never smile in a white man's face lest he think you smiling about him. That could be trouble.

"Yessa," I said.

"Be out front here in the early morning, round about two," he said. "I'm counting on you Uncle."

Counting on me – he was counting on me! It made my head swell as I left that store. Why, I forgot to pick up the beans my woman ax'd me ta get.

I didn't risk it, going to sleep that is. I was in front of Mister Bryant's store as Mister Milam pulled up in his truck. I stood up soon as I seen the headlights, lowered my head and doffed my hat.

He pulled the truck to a stop and kept the engine a running. He got out and he seemed real angry like. I looked at him and grinned my best darky grin then ducked my head back down like it should be around my betters.

"What ya'll doin' here Uncle?" he says to me.

"Mister Bryant says fa me ta be here. Says I might calm the boy, seeing me in the back of this here truck and all."

I felt him looking me over.

"That so," he said as he walked by me into the store.

A minute later we was all in the truck, Mister Bryant and Mister Milam in the front, me piled in the back, the cool night air running over top my ole brown skull cap.

Didn't take long to get to Moses Wright's place. I ain't gonna call him reverend no more cause I won't call a man what he ain't. I watched from the back of the truck as Mister Bryant pulled his pistol and banged on the door. Moses hisself opened the door and Mister Bryant let himself in. I ain't heard much of what theys said but a might later, out come the boy. He looked scared and that's the first thing he done since coming down here that made sense. He looked at his granddaddy and his granddaddy looked away from him. He saw me loung-

ing out in the back of the truck and I smiled at him. I waved him on into the truck, put my hand out and helped him in. He had on his shoes and some coveralls with what looked to be his pajamas underneath.

I put my arms around him as he sat down. He seemed to relax a bit as I done so. I didn't want him trying to run off and my hugging him made him less likely to do so. He looked up at me, hope in his evil brown eyes. I looked back at him, telling him with no words that ev'ry thing would be all right. And I knew it would.

I held him that way till we's got to Mister Milam's place. Mister Milam parked near a building separate from his house, by the looks of it, a work shed of some kind. I let the boy go and Mister Bryant and Mister Milam pulled him rough like from the truck.

We all went into the shed. Theys sat the boy down on an ole flat backed chair with cotton coming out from where the cloth was ripped. They started in on the boy, trying to school him, telling him what he did was wrong. They tried to scare him too, telling him what would happen to him if'n he did it again. I swears, they didn't lay so much as a puff of air on that boy. And you knows what he did? He just looked back at them men like theys was talking to someone else. Just looked at 'em, like he was too high and mighty to listen to such. I felt good when fine ole Mister Milam gave him a punch to the side of his head. Mister Bryant nodded at me which I took as my cue to leave the premises.

For the next hour or two, I stood just outside, in case they needed me. The sounds I heard, well, they wasn't for me and that was good. Those sounds, like a man beating a butchered piece of meat trying to make it tender, they was for that boy. They beat him and beat him, still he don't cry out. I give it to that no good colored, he was tough. But, it ain't no credit to him really, that bad blood makes them all tough.

After a while, they brought him outta that shed. They held him up by both arms and dragged him to the truck. That bad blood was all over, running off his face and head, down into his pajamas. I hoped that Mister Milam and Mister Bryant didn't get none on themselves but I figure that it couldn't rightly be avoided.

I peeked back into that room – that old chair's stuffing now had that bad blood too. Mister Milam would most surely have to throw it out.

Theys tossed him into the back of the truck. Theys didn't tell me so but I climbed in behind him. I looked at him and he looked back at me the best he could. One of his eyes was alright, with a dark ring of black and purple, but working just the same. The other eye, well that was bad. It hang there, just half catching the lip of the socket. He kinda kept his head back and wheter done on purpose or not, this kept the eye from falling out all the way. He was bleeding from his head and I moved backa aways from him so's I don't get none of that bad blood on me. I just looked back at him. I didn't move to touch him this time, there was no need to. They fixed him good so's he warn't running anyplace.

Mister Milam went back into the tool shed for a bit then came out struggling with an old stand up fan. T'were so heavy, the back end of the truck complained

loudly once he set it down. The fan was rusted and weren't gonna work cause most of the things that make the air – the prop'r name escapes me – they weren't there no more. Just a broken down old fan that wasn't good for nothing. I rolled thoughts around this woolly sack that passes for my head but I couldn't figure why they hauled that fan outta the shed.

Mister Milam and Mister Bryant got in the truck and started her up. I knew where we was heading before they even got the truck in gear: the Tallahatchie River. That was the place for a colored like this.

Wasn't long fore we reached the river. They drug that colored boy outta the truck and he didn't say a word. They stood him by the truck then Mister Bryant ordered him to pick up that fan. He was a big boy, a little loose in places from the beating them gave him but tight enough to pick up that fan. The boy picked it up and theys started him a walking.

Toward the river we walked – I could smell the dawn water running. Early morning water surely has a fine smell to it. We reached the river bank and the smell of the water was powerful strong. Theys told the boy to set down the fan. Then theys told him to take off his clothes. The boy done looked at them and didn't move, just looked. Cain't follow simple instructions – gots bad blood and stupid ta boot.

They looked back at him, looked at each other a spell and then Mister Milam pulled his pistol. The boy looked at the pistol and started unbuttoning his coveralls. He took those off then worked on the pajamas. Theys was good pajamas. I wished my boys had pajamas like those - theys was home sleeping in theys draws covered by some old potato sacks. I looked at the pajamas real close – theys had mens on horses on them. White men on fine brown mounts. I wanted those pajamas and I would have them after all this was said and done.

Pretty soon the Chicago boy was standing there buck naked to God. Mister Milam got really worked up, talking about how theys was tired of all them North coloreds coming down here stirring up trouble. I made sure I nodded my head when he spoke. Not that I didn't already agree, I just wanted to make it known to all, including the no good buck in question, that I agreed. I always found it hep'ful to let white folks knows we be of a like mine on just bout everything.

Mister Bryant ax'ed the colored if he had relations with a white girl up in Chicago.

"You ever have relations with a white woman?" is how Mister Milam put it to him.

Now here theys was, good Christian men, trying to give him a way outta this here mess. Just mit that it was all made up, which it was. Just mit they ain't no white girl gonna lay wit some colored without him making her. Just mit it – that's all he had to do.

He just couldn't do it, not even to save his own skin could he tell the truth. I heard him – past his swollen lips and broke teeth, he says one word.

"Yes," he say. I heard him and I would swear to Jesus I did. He said it.

Mister Milam couldn't take no more and I couldn't blame him. He walked

up to that colored and put the pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. A chunk of his head came away but he still stood there. He looked ahead – he happened to be looking near my direction – with one good eye and one bad. Now the bad eye was hanging down, well out of the socket. Slow like and I swear this took a minute or two, his legs give way and he fall over.

Mister Bryant drug the fan over and tied its thick cloth covered 'lectrical cord round and round his neck. Then theys call me over and we all grabbed an armful of colored or fan and tossed the whole kitten caboodle into the river. Likes I said, just where he belongs. He didn't float none, the weight of the fan snatching him down quick.

Fore I gots back in the truck, I grabbed them pajamas and the coveralls and his shoes. No sense having good clothes go to waste. Might as well that something good come from someone so bad.

"Poor Emmett Till," all the coloreds are crying. "Poor Emmett Till," I cry back as I reach into the pockets of Emmett's coveralls to pull out some bitter root snuf. Then I smile inside, thinking bout my boy in his new pajamas. And my other boy with the shoes he's still got a ways to grow into.

Poor Emmett Till. I feel for him like I feel for a rabid dog. Less even, if'n I ponder over it. I mean, a rabid dog ain't done nothing to get rabid but run across the wrong critter that was in the wrong way. Now this colored chile Emmett, theys send him down here filled with the wrong ideas and 'spect white folks to just nod their heads and move on. While both the rabid dog and Emmett have to be put down, on'ly the dog is innocent from blame.

Them Emmetts make the world harder for coloreds like me and I don't need harder. Good riddance – may God, Jesus and the Holy Sperit hisself help the white man rid the colored race of bad blood once and for all.

That's what I pray and tonight – wrapped in his new pajamas – I'll make my boy pray the same. Amen.

Turning

Meg Parker

She turned her face to the other side
it was the Christian thing to do
the blow that came knocked her down and
everything she felt
came true

lost love was regained
broken heart no longer pained
no barriers remained

forgiveness was the answer after all
turning the cheek and taking
the fall
made dreams worth hoping

then she came to
and the puddle of dreams dripped from her nose
onto her blouse
a reminder not to believe every silly thing
that's red.

If You Discover Me 100 Years From Now

Mel Waldman

If you discover me 100 years from now hidden in some dusty ancient books
in a sub-basement of an antediluvian library, try to comprehend the lost words

of an obscure writer who dreamed that G-d and every human too would struggle
to see the labyrinthine words and secret soul of a man few knew 100 years ago-

buried underground for a century-waiting for you to resurrect him (me) and perhaps,
granting immortality to this ordinary human obsessed and possessed by

visions of beauty, love, and peace.

Raise the dead with every word you drink! And remember-within your magical eyes,
Infinity dances to the rhythm-in-blue beats of your soul.



Chinese Man, art by Mark Hudson

A Ghost of a Chance

John Ragusa

The dark, dilapidated den was in total silence; one could hear a spider crawl.

Joel Piarra sat motionless in a chair, surrounded by cobwebs and shadows. Although the atmosphere could not have been spookier, he was not the least bit afraid. He was waiting for someone with anticipation. His heart beat with excitement, not fear.

Suddenly, Piarra heard fiendish laughter echo in the walls. He smiled. This abandoned house was haunted, as he had hoped for.

All the weeks of searching had been worthwhile. He wanted to meet a ghost, and now he would get his wish.

During the past month, he'd read books on spirits. He'd discovered that ghosts reside in secluded places. They prefer dark, quiet houses. They never stray far from where they died.

Piarra had read that specters aren't often homicidal. However, some of them are mischievous and commit practical jokes. They're also hyperactive, throwing cups and saucers over kitchens and rings and sewing needles to the floor. Of course, they like to scare people, too.

The house he was in had all the attributes of a haunted residence: It was vacant, it was dim and silent, and someone had died in it.

Soon Piarra would confront a real, genuine ghost! It would be wonderful.

"Come on out; don't be frightened," he said. Though it was a stupid thing to say to a ghost, it worked.

A figure stepped out from the hallway and into the den.

Piarra wondered if what he was seeing really was a ghost. The fellow didn't resemble an apparition at all. He wore a black leather jacket, sunglasses, and cowboy boots, a far cry from the rags and chains of traditional ghosts.

The figure appeared surprised at Piarra's calmness. "What do I have to do to scare you?" he said.

He didn't sound ghostly, either. In fact, he sounded remarkably human. "Boo," the figure said lamely. "Boo on you."

Piarra grunted. "You call yourself a spook? You couldn't scare a toddler." "You really know how to hurt a guy."

"Well, you could do a better job of haunting a house."

The figure looked embarrassed. "I tried my best."

"You sure don't seem spectral to me."

"Ghosts aren't always as scary as they want to be."

"Have you been dead long?"

"No. I died only five months ago."

"Did you ever think of leaving this house?"

"It's my home. I'll never leave it."

"Are you an evil spirit?"

The figure shook his head. "I'm just bored."

"How do you pass the time?"

"I think about how happy I was when I was alive."

"How did you become a ghost?"

"I exerted a great deal of psychic energy."

"Could I do that?"

"If you try hard enough, you could."

"Tell me," Piarra asked, "how did you die?"

"I choked on a sandwich in this den," the figure replied. "I was rushing through lunch to get to a friend's funeral. Three days later, I had my funeral."

"Gee, that's tragic."

"You're telling me."

"Being a ghost sure must beat being dead."

"Yeah, I'll admit it's better than staying deceased."

"Say, will you do me a favor? I'd greatly appreciate it."

"I suppose so."

"I'd like for you to disappear for me."

"Why?"

"You'll find out later. But first, disappear."

"All right. Here I go." He concentrated and then he vanished.

"You did it!" Piarra cried. "You're a real ghost! This is great!"

After reappearing, the figure said, "You seem to be thrilled. What gives?"

"I want to believe in ghosts. You see, I yearn to become a ghost when I die, so I can live forever. Now that I know ghosts are real, I'm happy."

"I hate to disappoint you, but I'm not a ghost," the figure said.

Piarra frowned. "Of course you're a ghost! You acted exactly like one!"

"It was just an imitation."

"But you disappeared! How did you do that?"

"It's a trick I learned a long time ago."

"If you aren't a ghost, who are you?"

"I'm a hobo who has stayed in this deserted house for a week now. When I heard you come in here a little while ago, I decided it would be fun to pretend to be a ghost and scare you." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm really ashamed of myself."

"I guess it was foolish of me to believe in a ghost."

"And it was cruel of me to trick you. Will you forgive me?"

"Sure. What's the use of being angry?"

"You know, you said you wanted to live forever by becoming a ghost. So why are you afraid of death? You're a young man; you should have many more years of life ahead of you."

"You're wrong," Piarra said morosely. "I have terminal cancer. The doctor said half a year is all I have. I'm afraid it's over for me."

Weeping, he walked slowly out the house. He got in his car, started the motor, and drove off the edge of the cliff. The car crashed onto the rocks below and erupted in a fiery explosion.

Watching the scene unfold from the window, the ghost said, "That sure was a funny trick I pulled on that guy."

He laughed wickedly as he walked through the wall.

Foul Ball

Dudley Laufman

Kid hits one foul into the neighbor's yard. The man is mowing the front lawn smoking a cigar. His wife is snapping beans on the back porch. Kid goes through the gate, finds the ball in the flowers at the foot of the porch. He looks up from getting the ball, sees she doesn't have any underpants on. Sees the smooth white of her legs. She says Would you like to see it closer? He would. Like to feel it? He would but not sure what to do with the bat in his hand. The lawn mower is coming around the house, saving the day, and she says You be a good boy now run along home.

I remember sixty-four. It was like yesterday. I woke up, rolled over, and my wife of eighteen years was staring at me. Finally she said, "You still here?" I laugh out loud when I think about that morning. For years, I told everyone who cared to listen, that I would die at sixty-four just as my father, grandfather, two uncles and two first cousins had. When I brushed passed that fateful year, I breathed a sigh of relief. I don't remember why, but I did. My wife's humor still lingers with me; always at the forefront of my musings.

I met my wife after having a first marriage dissolve over irreconcilable differences. Scarred from that relationship, I didn't want to meet anyone that I might fall in love with and replicate my misery, so I generally dated women who were safe. By safe, I mean, the chance of my asking them out on a second date were slim-to-none.

What could be safer than a chance meeting with a nineteen year old girl, and me, packing forty-six years on a burgeoning frame? Safe; indeed. The minute we were alone I realized that this diamond-in-the-rough required only a minimum of polishing to become a rare sparkling gem. Her intelligence quotient was ridiculously high, as she absorbed everything within her periphery as easily as a duck to water. She simply blew me away. Before I realized it, this old guy was in love.

Now, twenty-four years later, the budding feelings I had, matured into a lifelong love story that transcended all marital bumps. Bumps that often occurred because my intransigence overtook my rational thoughts. In other words, I generally acted like an ass. She always forgave me and let me know that she really loved me, in spite of my being an ass.

One day she returned from a routine doctor's visit and told me that her pap smear was positive; that she needed to start a regimen of chemotherapy. Immediately. When I finished consoling her and telling her that "everything was going to be all right," I went outside, hid myself, and cried unmercifully. "Please God. Don't do this to me."

After weathering the indignities the medical profession foists on its cancer patients, her frail body finally had enough. She died in my arms, tears streaming down my cheeks, and an emptiness that would never subside, was now firmly ensconced in my belly. Dame Fate is a vicious bitch. I was supposed to die long before her. That's how all the medical journals read. The priest's words at the funeral were designed to comfort the bereaved, but I took nothing but resentment from that service. Resentment against God for doing this to me. Me of all people.

Friends called, and I was generally relieved when they either hung up or left my house on their rare visit. When I was alone, I was in pain and when I was with others, the pain was only exacerbated. Better off alone, was my ultimate conclusion.

Now, five years later, I have begun emerging from my shell. I am an old man of seventy-one. I sometimes spend a day with either of my children from the first marriage, and watch, as my grandchildren sprout up like unchecked weeds.

I keep a dog, because it's company for me.

"Why didn't you take me at sixty-four, God, like you were supposed to? You took the wrong one. Don't you know that?"

The ceiling was full of bullet holes; bodies of innocent people were lying on the ground throughout the bank, and the only thing that was left to do was to blow the safe.

"Do you know how crazy this is, man?"

"Yup."

"And you're just going to sit here and wait for the cops to show up so you can blow them sky high with all the bombs that are outside waiting for them?"

"Yup."

"Dude, you're out of your mind! All of this could go wrong in no time. What if the timers get reset, or if they decide to react to the call earlier than we expected? What then, Baron?"

"I guess we'll have to use these things called guns we have in our hands and pump those pigs full of lead before they get the chance to do the same to us," Baron snapped. "Look, Diego, I didn't ask you to do this job with me because I knew you would be the one to piss out on me and decide to piss your pants when it all came down to it. I asked you to do this job with me because I thought you would be the one who stuck it out with me until we're either filthy rich, in the back of a police car, or lying on the ground with smoke rolling out of the fresh holes in our chests and skulls."

"Well..."

"Well what? Diego you're already here, you've killed two people, and you helped set the bombs. What are you going to do besides go through with this?"

"You're right," Diego released with a strong sigh. "Let's finish what we started, dead or alive. "

"Now that's the Diego I know!"

Here's the situation: Baron and I decided to rob a bank; well, he talked me into it. We set up small explosives in a ten square block radius, arranged two get-away cars, and three snipers up to two hundred yards away in different directions are watching all the immediate roads to the bank in case cops show up early. We're all set to take on a small police force, but this is New York City, so there is no such thing as a small police force around here; we've got out work cut out for us.

"Diego, help me get these explosives on the vault. The quicker we get it done and over with the quicker we can get out of here to watch the show instead of being a part of it," Baron shouted.

Diego ran to the vault with a small pouch. "Here you go, Baron."

"Thanks. Now let's blow this steel beauty down and see what we kind of government treasure we can find behind it."

They set up three blocks of small plastic explosives, one in the center and two halfway towards the top corners. They stepped back twenty feet and set the bombs off; the vault blew right open.

"Mother of Christ, look at this! Look at all of this!" Baron shouted with delight. "There is absolutely nothing green in here!"

"It's all gold? Every bit of it is gold?"

"That's right. Everything that we came for is solid gold and is going home with us to Amsterdam."

"But how is our plan going to work correctly in five minutes?" Diego asked cowardly.

"Five minutes is all we have left."

"Yeah the cops will be here any minute, Baron. We need to get moving before they get within our snipers' range of fire."

"Then let's get to it then."

Baron and Diego began stuffing duffle bags full of the solid gold pieces stacked in two separate piles.

"Sniper one to Baron, we have four patrol vehicles heading your way with two S.W.A.T vans behind them. Estimated time lapse before they get to you is less than five minutes."

"Do you have a shot?"

"Yes sir, but..."

"Take it."

"But sir..."

"I said take the shot!"

"Yes sir, sniper one out."

"Now, Diego, let's finish what we came here to do and get the hell out of here."

"Yes, sir!"

They stuffed as many golden bricks as they could into duffle bags and ran for the door, only to find twenty patrol cars, four K-9 units, and two S.W.A.T trucks in front of them.

"Sniper one! I thought you said there were six cars total!" Baron snapped.

"Yes, sir. That's all we saw coming."

"Then why the hell are we surrounded by pigs out here then?"

"Sir, I..."

"No worries," Baron sighed. "Do you remember the back up plan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then follow through with it. Baron out. Diego, are you ready for the back up plan?" Baron asked turning around.

"One step ahead of you!" Diego said dashing back to the vault. He tossed both duffle bags to the back of the vault and ran back to Baron's side. When he got there, Baron had his finger on the detonator, ready to press it at any moment.

"Hey, Baron, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Are you ready for what's going to happen next?" Diego asked with a smile.

"Why, of course I am, Diego," Baron said as he pressed the button.

Several blocks immediately crumbled to the ground, patrol cars blew sky high, and the bank collapsed, covering everything inside. Ambulances, fire trucks, and several more patrol cars arrived on the scene to help any survivors.

"Sniper one to snipers two and three, begin phase two of the heist."

Todd Maxwell unzipped the leather purse. Glancing through the hallway where his lovely wife went to fix her makeup in the bathroom, he took three hundred dollars, in large bills, from the fancy handbag. Before Lisa Maxwell walked back into the room, he stuffed the three crispy bills quickly into his back pocket. Slowly, as not to alarm his wife, he lifted the telephone receiver. He began to dial the number that would welcome his favorite houseguest. Before he could press the first button, he listened to his bride yell for approval. Craning his head, Maxwell nodded slowly.

"If I understand properly," said Todd, "you will not return until midnight." Trying to sound dejected, he said, "How will I spend the time?" Lifting a bushy eyebrow, he said, "I just don't understand. Why Shelly needs you on her trips, I will never know. She will convince you to spend money on Blackjack, like always, and you will feel obligated. Most people can spend money by themselves. As you know, I wasted a lot of money, pointlessly, like Shelly, but I stopped when I met you. I would have no money without you—none at all. I would live without a job, without a house, without you." With a tilted smile, feeling the bills in the jeans, he said, "How would I live without you?" He shook his head. "Your budget saved my job, my house, and my sanity."

Giggling, Lisa said, "Shelly spends wildly, like you, but Shelly spends purposefully, unlike you. She has needs, like you did, to fill an empty void. Whenever she looks at you and me, she yearns, passionately, for a husband." Lisa walked into the hallway. "When she yearns, she yearns like kids do for Christmas Day. The Gold Dust Casino brings that type of happiness. Truly, she looks like a child behind the Blackjack tables. She just looks for men at The Gold Dust Casino, but plays Blackjack to wait for them." Todd told her that men don't just come to women, but flirt at tables. Lisa said, "Men spend money there, and always walk around. Until she finds worthy men, she fills the void with Blackjack. To spend money fills the void of loneliness." She shrugged. "Truthfully, she finds boyfriends rarely, but she makes money. Maybe she just looks forty years old instead of thirty."

Todd agreed that Shelly didn't look young and beautiful, unlike Lisa. That brought Lisa into the hallway, with a makeup brush in her hand, looking starry-eyed at her husband, and then Lisa vanished back into the bathroom. By the look on her face, she saw the light around Todd that he noticed in his bride. "Immediately when I looked at you," he said, "I understood how Romeo felt when he looked at Juliet on the balcony. That play reminds me of you." Still, Todd Maxwell imagined another individual wrapped loosely in silk pajamas and furry slippers.

With his hand just off the telephone, Maxwell yelled toward the bathroom to keep Lisa ignorant, "Gambling can become addictive. Maybe she has the addiction." Todd looked around the first-level of the house, listened briefly to the

near soundlessness. "Nobody wants Shelly to live here, not with you and me. I need privacy." He shook his head sharply. "Maybe she should find men in bar-rooms." He laughed lightly. "She might start another addiction." Laughing curtly, he said, "The addiction that she has currently will waste her money. Alcohol will just kill her liver."

Lisa yelled while she applied lipstick, "Men don't worry about money around women. They want them to blow on dice, hold their drinks, and throw the dice for them. Shelly just wants to blow on dice. When men lose around ladies, they behave nonchalantly, to not offend. Otherwise, the ladies walk away. Everyone hates an addict." He yelled back affirmatively. Lisa said, "Shelly plays nonchalantly, to impress, not to repulse." Quietly, she said to her image in the mirror, "I hope anyhow." She sprayed just a hint of perfume, shook her head, and said to her husband, "Addicts indulge alone. They never need friends to indulge. Besides, she spends just her money. Never has Shelly borrowed from anyone, not from me, not from anyone, just to play Blackjack."

Quickly, Todd dialed the number. He had memorized the ten digits before he had married Lisa. They seemed bright in his brain as his address. His house-guest, who usually stayed just one hour, knew the street by now. Mumbling, he said, "I require Bobbie." Looking back at Lisa, he said quietly, "Exactly—that Bobbie. Whenever I call, I request Bobbie." It took a pause for the telephones to pass information. When they did, Lisa had begun to brush her curly blonde hair. Her snaky locks flowed seductively around her shoulders. Todd said into the telephone, "Bobbie—Todd Maxwell—we spend many hours together." Nodding to the voice, Todd said, "Not fifteen minutes—thirty minutes will work perfectly." With the price arranged, Todd replaced the mouthpiece. Then he rubbed his hands together in anticipation, but stopped when his wife appeared.

In her high-heeled shoes and skirt, Lisa looked as stylish as anyone, with her full breasts that bulged the blouse, narrow hips tied tightly with a leather belt, and shapely thighs and calves below the black nylons. Quickly, she grabbed her handbag, kissed Todd on the forehead, and told him, "I will lock the doors." He nodded and she added, "Nobody should come here until I return. Anybody breaks into the house and you should feel confident to defend the house with the handgun kept on the table." Blowing a kiss back at her husband, Lisa ran to her Ford. Three minutes later, the Mustang vanished loudly, with just a puff of black smoke behind.

Ten minutes later, the bushes rustled behind the house. Bobbie shouldn't arrive for fifteen minutes yet. Pulling the handgun from

Ex-Potential

Alleiah Amabelle
Nuguid

I am a hexagonal peg
in a rhombus room
empty with square holes
where angles that are not right
are not right.

Under geometry-as-sentry
I unravel my circular thought:
a limp pile of color
abandoned against the wall.

the wood table, he walked through the house, peered suspiciously into the backyard, through the moody dusk, and eyeballed a burly male in a black leather jacket, with buzzed hair, and black leather boots. Somehow, the body looked familiar. Maybe a neighbor stood outside. Why would a neighbor arrive by back door, and rustle bushes instead of knock properly? No prowler would break into his house, if Todd could help it, not after Lisa had told him firmly to keep trouble away. One option remained—thus the handgun.

Opening the window quietly, he poked the muzzle into the fluffy bushes that stood by the windowsill. Steely blue eyes looked plainly at him but the body didn't run and made no attempt to leave. Reluctantly, he squeezed three bullets at the body. Immediately, he heard the shriek, and blood splattered like a juice bottle broke. The thud echoed eerily as the well-built body touched the porch. Blood pooled thickly by the head. It looked black in the early nighttime.

Moments later, Todd walked into the backyard, looking through the pallid moonlight, holding tightly to the firearm. Crickets added rhythm to the nighttime. He ignored them easily. Their noises vanished to those accustomed to the repetitiveness. "What brought you to my house?" Todd said, "Did you want to steal, injure, or just kill like a lunatic?" Furrowing his brows, he said, "When I walk back into the house, I will call police. You will spend time in jail. You cannot stop it now." Waving the handgun aggressively, Todd turned to walk back into the house, just before the bloody man yelled.

When the male in the leather jacket responded, just before he died, painfully, his bellow sounded familiar. The thin moon illuminated gloomily. It added shadows that obscured the leathered male. Todd bent to examine the body in the military-style hairdo. Only then did his eyeballs widen. His jaw dropped and his throat parched. With his lover, Todd had bellowed lustfully in bed about thirty times. He recognized the throaty yell. The motorcycle attire had fooled him completely. Usually, Maxwell preferred the stately beauty of shiny silk pajamas. Always, Bobbie had arrived as preferred, until today.

Dropping by his illicit friend, Todd said, "Bobbie, Bobbie, Bobbie," and emptied the handgun into his heart. Maxwell slumped awkwardly, wide-eyed, onto the bloody wood porch, unable to breathe anymore. Then he joined his lover eternally.

A Strand of Pearls

Angel R. Favazza

A strand of pearls
Oval, snowy spheres
Gleaming with pure luster
Against a delicate, ivory neck.

Noise-cold,
Water rushing, a weightless diver
Cracks orb away from nature
And happy darkness.

A lone luminous pearl
Powerless-
Gathered, tagged, priced
One radiant treasure of opulence.

Old Selves

Glenn W. Cooper

*"But from each crime are born bullets
that will one day seek out in you
where the heart lies."*

- Neruda

As in the multitude of dreams
I have where the bodies of my
victims, long buried, are discovered
& the hunt begins for the killer.
Always I panic that I have left
some part of myself at the crime
scene, some tiny fleck of DNA –
a hair, a fibre, a flake of skin –
that will lead the authorities my way,
& I'll be herded up & taken away
to jail, never to see loved ones
again, my dog whimpering at
the gate. I dream this dream over
& over. But just who are the victims
of my crimes & why do I kill them?
Maybe it is evidence of what Adler
called the "will to power", or what
Frued deemed "wish fulfillment" –
the simple desire to be rid of those
who inconvenience us – easy
enough to put a knife in their
chest, a bullet in their head. But
more likely it is Jung's theory
of compensation that explains this
dream, that it is, in fact, aspects of
my own Self that I am murdering
& that every dream is a reminder
of what I once was & am no longer,
except, that is, just under the
surface, where all the old Selves
lie quietly waiting to be rediscovered.

The Past

Kyle Rival

Freedom in abundance is a
Black sky's confining liberty...
One doesn't quite know how to cope.

What angles and trajectories
Plotted by the world and plotted
By you, and plotted by themselves.

The normal want to be different
And the different want normalcy,
And sometimes pain has no rebuke.

There has been room allotted for
Any potentiality
(Regret grows vengeance without roots).

After they land the choices flop
About like fish, thereby placing
No fault but their own mystery.

Untitled Haiku

Lynette Shoup

frozen pond
brings winter's emptiness
lonely and lost

Paradigm

Kenneth DiMaggio

Anonymous atrocity
at the shopping mall

Nobody bothers
to wait
before the slaughter
is tagged wiped
and sterilized

It can only mean
another shift
in the paradigm

One that few of us
are watching

One
that the rest of us
are oblivious to

as we continue
smiling

like the shot-up mannequins

Locked Away

Steve LaVoie

It's all locked away
All stored here
In this clean, orderly box
these feelings, oh these feelings

Of joy you can't begin to see.
Because the box
is opaque.
All white and sterile it is
Not unlike you.

You, you with syringe
Filled with some kind of serum
That makes me oblivious
As you make a withdrawal from my veins.

You store it in little vials
In boxes in the freezer
Next to the fishsticks.

I have these things too,
All in this little box
Feelings, blood,
Those darn fishsticks.

I should take this box
And burn it,
Or take it to the lake and drown it.
But still it sits there

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