



down in the *trip*
revealing all your
dirty little secrets
070
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Table of contents

05/09, **Down in the Dirt**, volume 070

Benjamin Green.....	2
K (Franceè Bouvenir) McSpadden	4
John Grey	4
Jean Cassidy.....	5
Julianne Taylor.....	7
Randall K. Rogers	12
Tony Concannon	15
Sean MacKendrick.....	21
RD Armstrong.....	21
Michael Schmidt	22
Barton Hill	25
Armantin Varona	28
Linda Webb Aceto	33
Rebekah Ruszin	33
K. M. Fields.....	34
Ken Dean.....	36
Donna Zmolek	39
Alexandre Sébastien	42
Mark Hudson <i>art</i>	44

Scars art, page 11 (touching a greek column preserved in Agrigento, Sicily, Italy)..

Cover art of a land lizard on the Galapagos Islands.

The house on Walton Street

Benjamin Green

As I put pen to paper, my memory jumps back to the house on Walton Street. You might ask what makes this house so significant. After all, it was a rather nondescript wood frame house, painted in earth tones. Nor was it a well traveled street.

What made it significant was that it was haunted. We didn't believe in ghosts then, but we believe in them now. Of course, I'm getting ahead of myself.

At the time, we were looking for a place to stay, and we were looking for one on the cheap. Father had just gotten fired, and mother was working as a housekeeper to keep our finances out of the tank.

When we saw the house on Walton Street, we decided that it would suit our needs just fine. I remember my parents coming back, looking stunned. They went to the renter, to ask how much it was, and were quoted a price that seemed too low to be believed.

After repeating it several times, to prove he wasn't joking, he explained. A dozen tenants signed rent papers, but ran away after one night. He was tired of losing money, and he couldn't get anybody to rent it. Word went around that it was haunted.

When my parents heard this, they laughed out loud. If only we had paid attention. My parents put down the first and the last month's rent, and we moved in.

The accommodations were Spartan, since our furniture was in storage. We laid out our air mattresses, and put our sleeping bags on top of them. Since there was no stove, we had to cook our dinner above a propane camp stove.

We joked about camping indoors, and we talked about what a big adventure this was. While there was a grain of truth to all our big talk, the reason was to prop up our sagging spirits. We talked about how much fun we were having, to hide how miserable we were.

Plus, encroaching dark did a lot to take away our bravado. It was easy enough to deny ghosts in the light of day. As darkness falls though, it is difficult to maintain that level of certitude.

When candlelight is the only light you have, the uncertainty is only magnified. The shifting, darting shadows can hide a multitude of things that have no business existing in the light of day. Besides, there was nothing to do, but go to bed.

A pounding sound from upstairs woke us up. It stopped once we were awake, though it was later that we found that out. Each of us lay in the dark, alone with our own fear. One by one, we dismissed it as a figment of our imaginations, and rolled over to go back to sleep.

Once again, something began pounding upstairs. It quit for a while, and we lay frozen in our beds with terror. There was no question of getting back to sleep at this point. The pounder got tired of waiting for us, and began picking up the racket again.

The first clue I got that somebody else was awake was hearing mom whispering to dad that there was a prowler upstairs. It didn't occur to me until later how silly that idea was.

A prowler breaking into the top floor of a house would have to be stupid. Furthermore, only a rank amateur would make that much noise. Still, we latched onto the idea as the logical one. After all, who wants to admit believing in the boogums of the dark we spend our days denying?

With much muttering, my father got up, and grabbed a candle. That set off a chain reac-

tion. Kenny suggested he go along, in case dad needed some help. Then I jumped in, and offered my services as well.

Within a minute, we all decided to go together. In retrospect, it was the herd instinct kicking in. None of us wanted to be left alone in the dark.

Something that caused the hair to rise on the napes of our necks was the sound of the pounding sound following us to the stairs. I don't know who started screaming first, but once it started, everyone joined in.

At the top of the stairs was a chair. This may not seem scary to you, but the thing was jumping around, with no sign of anybody touching the thing. It became quite clear it was what was making the banging noises.

It began hopping down the stairs, toward us on its back legs. Everybody shrank away from it, as if we were expecting it to leap down on one of us. Of course, it made no such moves.

As it got close to the bottom of the stairs, the door to the basement flew open with a hollow boom. The chair didn't hesitate for a second. It swung around the former on one leg, and then began hopping down the stairs.

We stood there, staring in wide-eyed stupefaction. This was not something that happened every day. The chair spun around, as if it were regarding us. That caused a wave of fear to sweep over us. Then the chair started bouncing up and down, before starting to hop down the stairs again.

It dawned on us that it wanted us to follow it down into the basement. To reinforce that conclusion, an invisible hand pushed us in that direction.

We went down with a sense of trepidation. The only surprise we found down there was the floor was dirt. The chair began hopping from one leg to another on one spot. Whatever it wanted us to see, that was the spot.

The chair backed off while we began to dig. Since we didn't have any tools, we had to use our hands. It didn't take long to find what it wanted us to find. Buried in a shallow grave was a body.

It was decomposed almost to a skeleton, so it was difficult to be sure of much with our quick visual scan. Of course we knew that whoever it was, they had been murdered, and the chair wanted the body to receive a decent burial.

We stared at each other, and then reburied the body. There was no way we could give it a proper burial, and we weren't prepared to answer the questions that would follow.

That infuriated the chair to no end. It began hopping up and down, then butting us. Being attacked by a psychotic chair was too much for us. We ran up the stairs, the chair attacking us all the way. We didn't even bother to grab our stuff.

My dad ended up spending three weeks wrangling to get our rent money back. By then, he was employed again, and we were scraping up the money for a deposit on a house.

After we fled, I think there were one or maybe two tenants that rented the place. Nobody stayed more than one night there.

A few years later, the house burned down, and the renter was arrested on charges of arson. To the best of my knowledge, the body was never recovered. The scorched foundation remains its only mausoleum.

Tidal Wave

K (Franceè Bouvenir) McSpadden

On one hot and sticky summer night, I was lying down arms out like wings and legs together; Slowly I closed my eyes and relaxed into a deep coma sleep. When I opened them, I rose up on the sand near the ocean while the water washed it up.

Without any fear, the water formed into an agitated tidal wave, swept me into the ocean with my arms out liked wings and toes pointed downward. As I was on top while lying on my back, I saw the beautiful clouds they looked like no birds or planes flown through; Unexpectedly, it dropped me into the ocean with my body folded like a fetus that's inside of a womb. I swam to the top but it swept me back onto the sand, face down, rolled over, sat up, and watched the wave went back to water as normal. With my arms behind me, I looked down at my breast through the white silk camisole dress, then at my naval, and last my genital. While I was getting up- I woke up and heard the commotions of the hood outside of my opened window: "Ah man you got some blow", "hey miss you got a quarter to spare so I can get on the bus." I saw cars passed by blowing their horns in the early hours to cars in front of them who weren't driving fast enough. Then I watched a homeless person looked into the garbage for whatever they could find while the tidal wave was still on my mind.

Gods and Men

John Grey

No one blames those Greek gods any more.
Pity. I could tell Ares a thing or two
he wouldn't like to hear.
And Mercury, run as fast as you like,
you'll never be out of earshot.

And it's surely not the games
of the mountains and the lakes
that we are made to play so grievously.

The fact is it's puny men
on Mt Olympus these days.
Ares is a four star general.
Mercury is the politician
who speeds away once
the fighting starts.

Soldiers would like nothing better
than to be back home
with its mountains and lakes,
not gods
but worshiped with a vengeance.

Poison in the Pudding

Jean Cassidy

At bridge club, Alexis Hawthorne broke her own rule. She ate some chocolate. The hostess served a mouth-watering, made from scratch, chocolate mousse pie, topped with real whipped cream. Alexis couldn't resist taking a large portion, even though she knew she would pay for it later.

And she did. The next day, Alexis Hawthorne developed a migraine. She lay upstairs in her bedroom propped up on pillows, with an ice pack over her forehead. These headaches had plagued Alexis for many years; and now, as she neared menopause, they came more frequently and were more severe. Medication didn't help. It stopped the intractable vomiting but only dulled the pain. All she could do was lie in bed waiting for the agony to stop.

While she waited, she used feedback mechanisms to reduce the agony: self-hypnosis and visualization. In a light trance, she pictured her hands cupping the pain and pushing it forward out of her head. As she pushed, she felt the pain dislodge from deep in her brain and float toward the outside.

Suddenly, there was a pop and she was up on the ceiling.

Am I dead?

She looked at the body in the bed and saw the chest rising and falling.

That's me. I'm breathing, so I'm not dead. But what happened?

I must have pushed myself out of my body, along with my headache. I'm in the astral plane.

She heard the front door open and close; and Charles, her husband, called, "I'm home."

I think I'll try to travel down there and see if I can see him. Wait until I tell him I can do this. He's always sneered at my alternative medicine stuff.

Alexis closed her eyes and concentrated. When she opened them again, she was in the kitchen, watching her husband Charles and the maid, Heidi, in a torrid embrace.

Oh, my God, when did all this start? I've been blind. She's twenty at the most and he's sixty-four. What is he thinking?

When the kiss was over, Charles sat in a chair and wiped his brow, "Whew, that was something, Heidi. You're amazing."

"I'm not going to be amazing much longer. I've made reservations to return to Sweden," the stereotypic blue-eyed voluptuous blonde turned around and said

"What? Why? I don't understand."

"I'm going home." Hands on hips, she leaned over into Charles' face. "This relationship has nothing long term for me. You're a married man and I want to have a family. Settle down with children and all."

"Don't talk like that. We'll get married. Just wait."

“I’ve waited long enough. I’m leaving.”

From above, Alexis watched this play out with interest. What is the SOB going to do? He can’t divorce me. We have a prenup and all the money is mine. He won’t want to give it up.

“Look. I can’t get a divorce without giving up all her money. She made me sign an agreement to that before we married. But there is another way.”

“What?”

“We kill her.”

“You’re crazy,” Heidi looked at him, mouth gaping. “I’m not going to do a stupid thing like that.”

“You want to stay in the States. You’re in love with me and you want a family. Well, all that can happen if we marry, but we can’t marry as long as my wife is alive. Otherwise, I’d be a pauper and we couldn’t have the life we both want. Alexis is a very wealthy woman. And she is heavily insured. Don’t you see? It’s our best bet. We kill her.”

“How?”

“What are you serving for dessert tonight.”

“Chocolate pudding. Why?”

Charles reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small package. “Here. Slip this into her pudding tonight. It’ll do the trick and it’s undetectable.”

“What is it?”

“Poison. I got it on the way home tonight just in case you agreed.”

“I don’t know. I’m not this kind of person.”

“Do you want a rich husband or not?” Charles embraced her and kissed her. “A life of your own with all that money can buy?”

“Yes, but I’m not really sure I can kill to get it.”

“It’s the only way, darling.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. If I serve chocolate pudding tonight, you’ll know what I’ve decided.”

“That’s my girl.”

* * * *

When Alexis was called to dinner, she got up, put on her robe, and went downstairs. When she lingered to make a phone call, Charles called nervously, “What’s taking you so long? I’m starving.”

“I’ll be right there, darling. I’m making a phone call.”

Alexis came into the dining room, sat in her usual seat and directed Heidi to start serving.

When dessert was served, Alexis softly commented, “Chocolate pudding tonight? Hmm.”

Just then, the doorbell rang and Heidi ran to answer.

Heidi left the room and Charles started eating his dessert. By the time Heidi returned with two policemen, Charles had turned blue and collapsed to the floor.

“Thank you for responding to my call, you’re just in time.” She stood and

pointed to Heidi. “Arrest that woman. She poisoned my husband, with the chocolate pudding she served for dessert. And take my chocolate pudding along. I’m sure you’ll find the same poison in my bowl.”

* * * *

Several weeks after the funeral, Alexis entertained her bridge club at home. They were curious about the murder and asked Alexis about it.

“Astral projection? Had you ever done it before?”

“No, but I knew about it,” Alexis responded.

“How did you know she would poison you?”

“While I floated around on the kitchen ceiling, I heard it them discussing it. But I heard I was the one to be poisoned, not Charles. But during her confession, she told detectives she planned to open the safe, take all the money and abscond back to Sweden with it.”

“But Alexis, how did she know the combination.”

“In a moment of passion she conned it out of Charles.”

“The women tittered and then one said, “Well, astral projection saved your life.”

Yes, I guess it did. Poor Charles. He was a silly man with a bad memory. He forgot I’m allergic to chocolate and never would eat chocolate pudding.

Striking Out *Julianne Taylor*

“It’s going to snow like mad again,” Sarah groaned glimpsing the digital clock on the car dash. It glowed an orange eleven o’clock that December night. “Boy he sure picked one hell of a night to pull this again,” she whispered to herself peering into the starless sky.

Knuckles white bone through flesh, she gripped the steering wheel. As the car sped along, she listened to the lyrical groan of the wipers seeming to keep beat with the soft hum of the engine. Relaxing little by little, her gaze wandered as she began to notice the snow-capped trees drifting by; sheltering the houses and businesses dark for the night. Slowly she exhaled a sigh of relief; realizing that she was getting farther and farther away. Away from the scene where it had taken place. Away from the man who took enjoyment, it appeared, in destroying her life.

The argument had started over nothing it seemed; it was difficult to recall what set it off now. Then it progressed, as usual, so quickly. He was screaming brutal accusations— she was a whore. But in truth she hadn’t left the house without him in more than two months. She couldn’t. She had forgotten how to face the world, how to converse with strangers. Besides, she wasn’t good enough. People didn’t like her. He had told her so for years.

She adjusted the rear-view mirror and switched on the interior light. In the soft illu-

mination she watched her daughter, Sam, sleep for a moment or two. The child rested so peacefully Sarah couldn't help smiling at her tranquil, angelic face. Curls of rose gold hair were untidily draped along side the child's small nose. A casual observer would never have guessed she had witnessed a horrific act of violence less than an hour ago.

Sarah had always accepted his insults, allowing them to roll over her, through her. But not tonight, tonight something was different, tonight something inside her snapped. She couldn't take his cruelty anymore. She was finished being a receptacle for his abuse. She was furious and for the first time she fought back. She began screaming as well, her face contorted with years of internalized battering. His voice became fierce, his green eyes flashed a warning; those eyes that once engendered trust. "If you don't shut your fucking mouth I'll smash your face in," he threatened. She knew he meant what he said, but she was beyond caring; she had lost control. The room was spinning, her adrenalin rushed. She held onto the wicker chair beneath her for balance. "If you lay a hand on me, I'll make sure you go to jail," she warned.

She saw it coming then. She buried her face in her arms...She couldn't bear to be hit in the face. Her mind reeled in sudden panic...CRACK...a blow to the head. She felt only wet tears soak her arms and face; pasting her long dark blonde hair to her eye, across her cheek. "I'm sorry," she begged...CRACK...then she heard noise in the distance, but was too confused to comprehend what it was: the T.V., his yelling, humming in her head, maybe everything...CRACK....she fell off the chair and down onto the thick plush carpet, arms over her head shielding herself from the onslaught of blows. "Please stop hitting me," she pleaded. *Did he hear me? Did I even make a sound?* She wondered now. It stopped. She scrambled to her hands and knees. She crawled through the hallway; her knees inching over an old coffee stain, her grasping fingers separating the carpet nap as she half-pulled herself along into the tiny bedroom and up onto their bed.

Her face slid reluctantly over the ridges in her grandmother's quilt, its fabric mopping her tears as she pulled her body toward the head of the bed. She had just washed the quilt that afternoon; looking forward to climbing into a freshly made bed. Inhaling the scent of detergent, she buried her face into its crisp material. She heard the noise again and realized it was crying; hysterical crying. Her confusion lessening, she recognized the sound as Samantha. Her little girl had been watching everything. But she couldn't go to Sam. She couldn't stand. She couldn't lift her head. It throbbed so badly she thought she might pass out. She could taste the sickening salt of blood on her lip.

"I could kill you," she heard him say from the doorway; "there would be nothing to it. No one would care." He was in the bedroom with her now; over her, entwining his fingers in her mousy hair. He pressed his knee into her back as he kneeled on the bed behind her. The weight of his body bearing down on hers insisted her compliance. His hands resting in front of her face; their every detail now fixed eternally in her mind's eye: knuckles calloused from years of hard labor, a nail still cracked down the middle from an old work injury, the cuticles long and some torn, dirt under his nails, a pinky splayed oddly to the side having improperly healed since

he didn't believe in health care or doctors. Seeing a doctor was a sign of weakness.

Please not again, she prayed. "Please, David, I'm sorry." "I should rip your fucking head off. Don't make another sound," his breath, warm and damp, the tinny stale smell of old beer wafted against her cheek. There she lay, silent and still, praying wordlessly for him to get up, to get off, to leave. Sam was still screaming. She knew she couldn't to go to her. She knew Sam's crying was evidence of his insanity. Comforting Sam would be seen as an accusation. Sarah continued to lay quiet; frozen like the old childhood game, Freeze Tag, only tonight no touch could unfreeze her and any movement might provoke another raging attack.

She replayed the scene over and over as she drove toward safety. She wondered if their escape would be successful. If Sam would be okay. If she'd be able to build a new life. She had no job, no money – she was mom to a small child with nowhere to live. As she pulled onto the long gravelly drive of the safe house, she glanced at the clock one last time; it was eleven thirty-three.

The next morning couldn't come quick enough. Finally the sun broke through the darkness. It hadn't been a dream, just another waking nightmare. Sarah's body ached, her hands shook, and her head felt thick, like it was ten pounds too heavy. Yet she was ready to go on, to go forward, and to get back onto the road in their journey toward freedom.

She sat up, tried to focus on the strange objects in the strange room around them. Children's toys, children's belongings; a child's room in a child's home. Things she realized Sam didn't have any more. Things they never truly had at all. Now they owned nothing except what Sarah was able to pack quickly into trash bags before they left.

Their home was to be a series of motel rooms far away from everything and everyone they knew; and if they were lucky they'd be eligible for some space in a transitional shelter the safe house owner spoke of.

She leaned over and kissed a sleeping Sam. Sam opened her eyes, looked into hers and smiled. Sarah had to believe that they would survive — alone together.

How a Wall Stands Maggie Switzer

Ellen Parker always thought it was funny how people spent all the time and effort to go and see historical sights, and then spent the entire time there just listening to their guide. Sure, the guide had all the facts that were interesting to know about whatever it was that you were looking at, but that didn't compensate for actually *looking* at it, seeing how it was made, getting all the tiny details and imperfections of it lodged into your mind, at least to her way of thinking. She'd come on this tour because she had a fascination with medieval buildings, and the tour was the easiest way to see everything that she wanted to see. Nothing compared to the thrill

she got looking at monuments, or crumbling tombs, or disappearing ruins. The guide was merely something to be put up with.

She edged around the side of the group clustered around their guide, trying to get closer to the section of ancient wall they were looking at now where it was still visible in an out of the way courtyard. It was part of the original Roman settlement in this area, their guide was saying, and that made it extra interesting to her because it wasn't just old, it was ancient. Ellen kept one ear on the guide as he explained the significance of this particular settlement and pressed closer to examine the wall more closely.

Sure, it was crumbling a bit around the edges, but for the most part it was still solid. Still solid after a couple thousand years... Ellen quit paying attention to the guide now and just stood gaping, marveling at it. It was hard to believe that anything that old could still be standing. Nothing she could ever do would last half as long, and they'd done this with only primitive tools and materials. She wondered how they'd done it. And, more interestingly, had they any idea when they'd built it of what it would become? That hundreds of people a year remembered the Romans had been here at all only because of this bit of wall? What a way to have your memory kept alive.

The group had moved away now, towards the medieval church that was their ultimate goal. Ellen lingered until she was by herself in the closed-in courtyard. She was still mesmerized by the sheer age of the wall, her feet unwilling to move away from it. It amazed her that she was staring at something touched by people who'd been dead for thousands of years.

With a look over her shoulder at the struggling tail end of the group, she crept over to the side where the fence was closest to the wall and, leaning forward, slid her palm over one ancient brick. It wasn't allowed, but she couldn't seem to stop herself—she wanted the connection. Her eyes flickered closed briefly and she thought for a second about the nameless men who'd made this wall. Lighting a mental candle for them, as it were, to keep their memories alive. They were remembered, at least by her. Their work remained for everyone to see. Their lives had meant that much at least. Then with a brief pang at whether anyone would do the same for her, she guiltily turned to catch up with the group.

Except she was brought up short when her hand stuck to the wall. Confused, she turned around to see what she could be caught on, but there was nothing, just her hand resting on the wall. She tugged harder, but her hand still didn't budge. Had she put it in something sticky? She tried to move anything, the tips of her fingers, the edge of her palm, but nothing. She was stuck.

Then, with a wet-sounding *gloomph*, her hand disappeared up to her wrist. Into the wall. Her hand had just gotten sucked *into the wall*. Ellen shrieked once and began to panic, because something was pretty much not okay with a wall that did that. Had she found some hidden weak spot? Broke through to some ancient cavity in the middle of the wall? Shit, what if there was something bad in there, or she couldn't get her hand loose before someone found her, or the wall fell over because of this? Damaging ancient landmarks was just not a good thing for a tourist to do. She jerked hard backwards with no discernable effect. Her hand wouldn't

come out, no matter how she twisted and pulled, and she couldn't see what she'd gotten stuck on. At least it didn't hurt, yet.

In desperation she put her other hand on the wall for leverage, straining backwards with all of her strength. It didn't work, and she was horrified when her other hand stuck fast too. This was no hidden architectural flaw. "Oh no..."

She was panting heavily now, not being able to move either hand ratcheting up the panic factor hugely, and tears gathered in her eyes as she struggled to free herself. "No no no no no no..."

A few seconds later her second hand sank into the wall up to her wrist, and she noticed, with a strangely detached and terrified part of her brain, that the bricks no longer looked quite so...crumbly. That was before she sank in up to her forearms and all rational thought fled. "No no! Let go. Pleeeeeeease. No!"

Her screams became louder when the wall absorbed up to her elbows with another burbly, digesting noise, bouncing off the old stone around her.

Her shoulders were burning now from how hard she was straining backwards, but with no luck. With the next absorption she couldn't prevent her face from smacking into the stone, and it too sank in. There was no pain, just a curious, digestive numbness. For a few moments her body still kicked and jerked in animalistic panic before it fell limp and breathless, no movement stirring it except for the steady absorption into the stone.

A couple of minutes more and there was no evidence that anything had happened at all except for a few scuff marks on the ground. It was as if Ellen Parker had never existed. That, and the wall had a little less decay—ready to stand for another hundred years, preserving its makers' memories.



Why I Think I Can Understand What War Vets Think

Randall K. Rogers

I remember
a party
where
we teenagers
attacked a hippie
camper who had pitched his tent some ways away from our teenage bonfire keg party
when I arrived the guy was bloody and on his knees. begging
Moss said to him like Billy Jack "I'm gonna drop this beer bottle and kick you
three times in the face before it hits the ground"
he got about two kicks in
as the guy fell over on his side
we were all standing around watching
the guy got kicked pretty bad
blood gushing from his face he then got up an ran
ran as fast as he could
in his underwear cuz they made him strip down
through the woods
left his tent and backpack all his belongings
behind.

bad part of his journey across America
coming across us
Then Cole told Moss "what the fuck are you doing?"
"That's uncool, man"
And Moss swung and smashed a Michelob bottle over Cole's head
Then Cole wrestled Moss to the ground and proceeded to throttle
him with repeated punches to his face
bloodied him up pretty bad before Moss said he's had enough and Cole let him up

Later, when we were all sayin' "right on! Cole!
thanks, man, that was cool."
and we were calling out for the bloody camper to come back
after the rowdy element was gone was gone back to the keg party and bonfire, and
we were trying to gather the guys scattered shit together
Cole was streaming blood from a gaping wound in his head
"Shit," Cole said "The fucker hits hard" as he gently fingered the streaming
gash in his head

“He hit you with a fucking beer bottle Cole”
we told him, but I think he was a little brained and he still didn't believe us
But, man, was he our hero
Sort of small man he was
the bully group was made up of small people, too
I sort of imagined this bad group in high school
to be a bit like Quantrell's Raiders in the Civil War

I had another run in with them, too, same group
one day coming to school
I always picked up Gary and took him to school with me
and we almost always smoked a joint on the way to the school
one day we get there
find a place to park
and start walking toward the school
and we see a big crowd of people
a circle around something happening
so we go look
a freshman had whistled at one of these small thug's girlfriend
so one of the small thugs, this time Reiner
when I got there the kid was on his knees
Reiner was holding him up by his hair
kid's face was streaming blood
and Reiner was trying to kick his teeth out
I actually think he had booted in the kid's front four
Gary and I couldn't let this go on, we were seniors too
Most of the kids in the circle watching were younger, afraid of these thugs
we were seniors and sort of bad men like the ruffians perpetrating this crime
when I first arrived on the scene one of the younger kids did try
try to rush in and separate or restrain Reiner from killing the kid
but the other ruffians like the Hells Angles at Altamont grabbed him and wouldn't
let him near the 'fight' as they called 'let them fight' The little killers
kept everyone from helping the blood faced kid
Then me and Gary arrived.
And we don't fuck around.
we good guys
do a lot a drugs and alcohol
but no strangers to a fight
we not known to be fighters
but relish a good one
we used to practice fist fighting with ski gloves on with one another
and Gary carried a big piece of wood with him
it was his woodshop project he just happened to have with him

to get to the point, we intervened
we pulled an intervention'
I'm small too
It was a joy fighting this group of about five
Versus Gary and I
Gary made good use of the woodshop project
and my fists sting and cut 'cuz my hands is small and my punches is sharp and fast
They gave up and walked away after we bloodied 'em up a bit
then we helped the kid, he was in bad shape

Three months later I saw the camper
working at Big Boy Restaurant of all places
as a bus boy
he said he had severe throat damage from the kicks
but it was getting better now
he said he had to stay here and work to get enough money to pay for the medical
expenses resulting from the incident

As for Moss and Reiner
the leaders of this group of thugs, you know
they used to throw pool balls
across the basketball court and into the stands of the opposing team
especially when it was a inter-city rivalry game
they would go to the red Indian projects neighborhood of town with BB guns and
shoot Indians
Moss finally went to far; he used brass-knuckles and sucker punched
the tuba player filing off the field after their halftime performance
knocked him out and broke his facial bones in six places
kid was in the hospital a week
Moss was expelled from school for that
But his rich Dad got him back in.

I sometimes wonder what these guys are doing now
and what they now think about their past actions
And I too think seeing what I saw
I can see how much worse this kind of shit would happen in conditions such as
US forces faced in
Vietnam
And I try to understand the Vets.

Of all wars,
including personal ones.

The Woman and the Man

Tony Concannon

It had been three months since her Japanese boyfriend Akira had dumped her when Heidi saw the old woman in the purple dress in the cornfield. Heidi, on her way to the photography studio to pick up the pictures for renewing her passport, was getting on her bicycle in front of her apartment building. The woman, who was barely taller than the stalks of corn, had her back turned, and Heidi thought it was a scarecrow until she had ridden down the driveway and out onto the road in front of the field. As Heidi passed the field, she wondered what the woman was doing there on such a hot day.

Heidi had been so distracted since the breakup that she had almost let her passport expire. She and Akira had met two years earlier, during her second year at International Christian University in Tokyo, where she was doing an undergraduate degree in Japanese. She already had a B.A. in Economics from the University of Wisconsin, and she had come to Japan when she was twenty-three, nine months after graduation. Akira had been in the graduate program in International Business. He had seen her studying one of her textbooks on a bench outside the library and he had asked her if Japanese was difficult. They had spoken for several minutes. She had started sitting in front of the library every afternoon in the hope he would stop and talk, which he did nearly every day. Later, when she had confessed to him about sitting there intentionally, he had admitted he had deliberately gone by the library in order to run into her. He had asked her out for dinner after two weeks of talking and they had had sex for the first time in her apartment on their third date. By then, she had fallen in love with him.

He spoke English perfectly, something she didn't find out for nearly a month, as he always spoke to her in Japanese. He had played basketball in college and he was over six feet tall, matching him well with Heidi, who was five-eleven. He was handsome with high cheekbones and round eyes. He told her his ancestors had come from northern Japan and there was Russian blood in him. His father owned a large import-export company in Kobe and Akira was studying at graduate school to be better prepared to run the company when his father retired. He was Heidi's first real boyfriend. In college she had had male friends, some of whom she had slept with, but no serious relationships. School had always been number one and she had graduated with a 3.9 and received a scholarship to study in Japan, which she had visited in the summer between sophomore and junior year.

The breakup, which she hadn't seen coming, had been in June, after Akira had finished graduate school. For over a year he had talked about working for a multinational company in Tokyo or Yokohama to gain experience before joining his father's company. He had never looked seriously, though. At the graduation ceremony in March she had met his parents for the first time and they had seemed formal and distant, almost cold. He had always joked to her about how they wouldn't like him dating an American woman. Then, one night at her apartment he had told her

he was moving back to Kobe to work for his father and he thought they should end the relationship. He had taken a taxi back to his apartment and she hadn't seen him since then. She had been so devastated that she had missed school for the next three days. Even now there were places on campus, such as the front of the library, that she couldn't walk past without feeling as though she were being bowled over. Her schoolwork had suffered. All along she had assumed she would find a job in Tokyo after graduation; now she was thinking about going home.

The old woman was in the same place when Heidi returned from the studio. And she was there now, as Heidi went out for the second time. Heidi mounted her bicycle and rode down to the end of the driveway. The woman was going to get sick if she stayed out in the sun without a hat much longer. It was the season of what the Japanese called *zansho*, the hot, humid weather that lasted into early fall.

"Are you okay? Can I help you with anything?" Heidi called out in Japanese.

When the woman didn't answer her, Heidi called out again, louder. The old woman still didn't answer. Heidi got off her bicycle. The large bag in the basket made the bicycle top-heavy and it took her a few seconds to get it to stay up on the kickstand. She walked around the front of the field and down between the rows of corn.

"Are you okay? Can I help you with anything?"

The old woman had been staring at the building in back of the field the whole time. She turned her head to see who was talking. Lines of sweat had run down the makeup on her face. Her purple dress looked expensive.

"I don't know you," the woman said slowly, emphasizing the "you".

"I live over there. Are you okay? It's awfully hot today."

"Did you move here recently? I've never seen you before. I live in that building," the woman said, pointing to the one at which she had been staring. The building was a dormitory for single, male employees of an automobile parts manufacturer. Heidi knew because her landlord, the owner of the building, had told her.

"You live in that building?" Heidi asked, pointing at the dormitory to make sure they were talking about the same building.

"Yes. I live there with my husband."

"Where is your husband now?"

"At work, of course."

"Are you sure you're okay standing out here on such a hot day?"

"This is my father's field. I'm checking the corn."

Heidi's landlord owned the field, too, and he was younger than the woman. She had to be senile and, to boot, probably lost. Heidi's grandmother had been the same way: always going for walks and then forgetting who and where she was. In the end Heidi's father had had to put her into a nursing home.

"Excuse me, but what's your name?" Heidi asked.

"Adachi."

It wasn't a name Heidi had heard in the neighborhood. The woman didn't have a purse and Heidi didn't see one on the ground, where the woman might

have dropped it.

“Could you wait a minute, please,” Heidi said.

Heidi’s landlord had lived all his life in the neighborhood and he would know the woman if she were from the area. Heidi was almost at the gate to his house when she heard a car coming. She jogged back and moved her bicycle to the side of the road, next to the low wall in front of the field. Again, it took her a few seconds to balance the bicycle. As the car went around the corner, the man driving glanced at Heidi and the old woman, who had gone back to staring at the building. The man was a stranger to Heidi. She had been thinking about flagging down the car if the driver was someone she knew. She walked up the street and rang the bell at her landlord’s house. No one was home. She came down the street, past the old woman who was still staring at the building, and up the driveway to her apartment building. The Suzukis next door were the only people in the building whom Heidi knew. She rang their bell. No one was home there, either. She looked at her watch. It was ten to twelve and her first class was at one-thirty. All she could do now was call the police.

There was a clatter. Her bicycle had tipped over. She walked out to the street and picked up the bicycle and the books that had fallen out of her bag. The old woman hadn’t turned her head to see what had made the noise. After Heidi returned the books to the bag, she took it out of the basket and placed it on the wall. Worrying that she would look foolish for calling the police if it turned out that the woman lived around the corner, Heidi walked back to her apartment. The woman’s clothes weren’t right for the neighborhood, Heidi figured. And no matter where the woman lived, she was going to get sick if she stayed out much longer

in the heat. Heidi unlocked the door. She had never called the police in Japan. She could speak Japanese quite well but she wasn’t sure she could explain the situation over the telephone. She didn’t even know what number to call. 110 was for emergencies, but this wasn’t an emergency. If she had more time, she could ride down to the police substation half a mile away and explain the situation in person. Then again, if she couldn’t handle a situation like this, what was the use of having studied Japanese for nearly four years? She remembered the map she had received from City Hall when she had moved into the neighborhood two years earlier. On the back were the telephone numbers for the various city offices and services. She got it out of her desk drawer. The map had a number for the police substation. She took the map into the living room, where the telephone was. She was still worried about looking foolish, though, and she walked out to the kitchen and opened the door. The woman hadn’t moved. Heidi made up her mind.

A policeman answered on the second ring.

“I live in Takaki-cho nana-chome,” Heidi began. “Right now outside of my apartment there is an old woman. She’s been standing in the same place for nearly an hour. I think she’s senile and lost. I’ve never seen her before in this neighborhood. It’s awfully hot today and I’m worried about her.”

“Did you speak to her?”

“I tried but she didn’t make any sense. I really think she’s senile.”

“Okay. We’ll go right up. Takaki-cho nana-chome?”

“Yes.”

Heidi gave him her name, address and telephone number. As usual, she had to repeat her last name, Menard, several times. After she had hung up, she went outside to wait. She was feeling a little proud. A police car came in two minutes. It stopped at the widest part of the street, where two cars could pass. The old woman took no notice. She was still staring at the building behind the field. Heidi, who had been standing in the shade of the apartment building, started down the driveway. One policeman entered the field and began talking with the woman. A second policeman got out of the car when he saw Heidi. He was nearly as tall as Akira.

“You’re the person who called?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

People from the neighborhood began to gather. There had been no siren and Heidi wondered if they had been watching the whole time from their windows. An elderly man asked the policeman standing with Heidi what was going on, and the policeman began to explain. Heidi looked at her watch. It was one minute before twelve. She still had time. It was twelve-oh-five when the policeman led the old woman out of the field. Walking, she looked even frailer, like one of those figures children put together with Popsicle sticks and glue. A small crowd had formed by now. The two policemen helped the woman into the backseat of the police car and closed the door. The policeman who had spoken to Heidi walked over.

“We’re going to take her down to the police station. She said her husband’s name was Nakajima, so we’ll check that first. She doesn’t have a purse or any identification. Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

The other policeman bowed to Heidi and the two of them got into the car and drove off. Heidi walked up the driveway and locked the door to her apartment. When she got back to where her bicycle was, the people who had come out to watch were still talking. Heidi put her bag into the basket, got onto the bicycle and started off to the train station. The elderly man who had spoken to the policeman called out, “Good job.”

When the doorbell rang that evening, Heidi was trying to force open the cassette holder of her Walkman with a knife. The Walkman had been in her bag when her bicycle had tipped over, and the force of the fall had jammed the holder. Her books were on the table, but she hadn’t been able to get started on her homework. The telephone was there, too, just in case Akira called.

When she saw the old man through the peephole, she was disappointed until she realized who he was. She unhooked the chain and opened the door.

“I’m Nakajima,” he began immediately, speaking quickly. “The police gave me your name and address and I wanted to thank you for helping my wife.”

He had on a brown suit and his hair was combed back. In his right hand was a box, wrapped in fancy paper. He was no taller than his wife and Heidi smiled down at him.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to thank me.”

“The police said you went out of your way. I came by earlier to thank you but you weren’t home.”

“I just got back from school a little while ago. I really didn’t do much to help your wife. I just called the police.”

The man shook his head.

“You helped her very much. She might have gotten sick or hit by a car or something.”

He held out the box and went on, “I didn’t know what an American would like.”

“You don’t have to give me anything.”

“You helped my wife very much,” he said strongly.

“Okay. Thank you.”

She bowed slightly and took the box.

“I wasn’t sure what an American would like,” he said again.

“Are these chocolates?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I like them very much.”

“That’s good. You speak Japanese very well. I would have called you first but I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to speak Japanese. I can’t speak English at all.”

“I’ve lived in Japan almost four years.”

“I’m very surprised,” the old man said, shaking his head. “I didn’t know what I was going to do if you couldn’t speak Japanese.”

“Is your wife all right now?”

“She’s fine. That’s the strange thing. Once she got home, she was fine. This is the first time this has happened.”

“Do you live around here?”

“On the other side of Mitaka Station.”

“And she walked all the way here?”

“She took the wrong bus and got confused. A boy found her purse on the bus and turned it in. She said this morning she was going to Kichijoji. She always takes the bus because she doesn’t like to go up and down the steps at the train station. Her legs aren’t that good.”

“My grandmother had the same problem,” Heidi said. “She would go off on her own downtown and forget where she was. Somebody would call and my father would have to go and pick her up. We lived in a small town, so it wasn’t that bad.”

The old man nodded slowly.

“Sometimes she would be fine and then all of a sudden she would go off somewhere and get lost. Finally my father had to put her into a nursing home.”

“How is she now?”

“She died about ten years ago. That was when I was still a child.”

The old man nodded again.

“I’m worried about my wife. We live alone and I still go to the office every day. I have my own company. It’s a very small company.”

“My father was always worried about his mother.”

“Does your father live with you now?”

“No. He’s back in the United States.”

“He worries about you.”

“I know. He wants me to come home.”

The old man nodded again.

“I hope your wife’s okay,” Heidi said.

“Today was the first time. I hope it’s the last.”

Heidi didn’t say anything.

“Well, I just wanted to thank you. You helped my wife very much.”

“There was no need for you to come all the way over here. Thank you very much for the chocolates.”

“You’re welcome.”

Heidi put the box of chocolates on the table next to the door, stepped into her sandals and went outside. The temperature had dropped considerably since the daytime. She wanted to show Mr. Nakajima where his wife had been standing. His car, a green Nissan, was in the parking lot.

“Your wife was in that field,” Heidi said, pointing. “And she said her name was Adachi and she lived in that building.”

“Of course her name is Nakajima and her maiden name was Sanuga. We never lived in an apartment building.”

He noticed Heidi looking at the long scratch on the side of his car.

“When the police called me, I was in such a hurry that I grazed the wall pulling out of the parking lot.”

“Mr. Nakajima, why did you think I was American? I’m just curious.”

“I didn’t know. The police said you were probably American but they weren’t sure. They said they could check but I told them there was no need.”

She nodded.

“America’s a big country,” he said.

“Compared to Japan, anyway.”

“I have to be leaving. My wife is home alone. Thank you very much for your help.”

“You’re welcome.”

He got into the big car and started the engine. Heidi walked down to the end of the driveway to help him back out. The cool evening air was pleasant. When his car was on the street, Heidi waved good-bye. He waved back and then drove slowly away. Heidi looked at the dark field and the building beyond it. Lights were on in many of the windows. She felt okay for the first time since Akira had left. She would move on with her life, she knew. It wouldn’t be easy, but she would move on.

She takes another step closer to the edge. Then a half-step more.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Her voice is shaky and weak.

“Of course it is, Danny.” Idiot.

She peers over the edge to the concrete four stories below. Oh, it would be so easy just to push her off. It would look like an accident. Just one little push. But that would take the fun out of it. “Just do it like I told you.”

She steps back and looks up at me, her brown eyes wide. She looks like she might start crying any minute, but the look she gives me is clear. She trusts me.

“What if Mom and Dad get mad?” she asks in a trembling voice. She steps back another step. Damn it! Don’t back away!

“We won’t tell them.” I think I keep my voice pretty soothing, considering all I want to do is scream at her.

She just looks at me, wanting to believe. Believing in her ten-year old brother, so much older and smarter than she is.

“Remember what I told you? Hold out your arms like a bird and lift with your mind.” I show her by holding out my arms.

She looks doubtful, stares at the edge. Takes another fraction of a step forward.

“Hey, I’ll go teach someone else to fly if you don’t believe in me.”

Her eyes get watery. She’s afraid of stepping off, but more afraid of disappointing me.

She barely whispers, “I believe you.” Idiot. So gullible. She holds her arms out rigid and takes a step out.

A scream. I close my eyes, unable to watch after all, only able to laugh.

“It worked, it worked!” she shrieks. I open my eyes. She stands on nothing, floating a foot out from the ledge, four stories up. What the *hell?*

Laughing, she rises into the air, arms out and spinning in a slow corkscrew as she floats upward.

I run and jump over the edge with my arms out, lifting with my mind.

The concrete rushes up to kill me.

Unleashing the Hounds

RD Armstrong

Someone once
Told me that
We had to invade
Iraq not for WMD
But to end the
Reign of the Butcher
Of Baghdad

Now the dogs of war
Notwithstanding
It seems to me that
We have unleashed the
Butchers of Baghdad
And nothing will stop
The carnage until
There is no one left
Standing

I wonder if that person
Is proud of the fine
Can of worms that
We have opened

All It Took Was A Pistol

Michael Schmidt

All it took was a pistol he bought on the street, and a tip off from his reluctant neighbor, Benji, to make it all happen. James busted through the door and went into the bedroom, where his wife, Suzanne, was making it with some guy.

“What the Hell?” Suzanne yelled, “You’re supposed to be at work!”

James blew the guy away, making him fly off Suzanne, and over the side of the bed, onto the floor, brains half exposed.

I knew it would come to this, she thought – her last thought – and then it was all over with her. James fired two shots at her; one in the chest, the other in the head.

It was all over. No police would be coming around anytime soon. A couple of gunshots in that part of town was nothing. James, still holding the pistol out in front of him, heaved, almost vomiting on the floor. But nothing came up. He wiped his lips anyway and looked at the two he just murdered. So sad, just slumped, wherever they were, silent. From ecstasy to death within a moment.

The whole apartment was decorated with things that belonged to them: pictures, figurines, every memento you can imagine. They were no longer his, or anyone’s. They were just dead items, waiting to be pawned off someplace by the police, or whoever. Because he would never be back there again.

James locked up, then went to the next apartment and knocked.

There was no answer.

James knocked again.

Then came Benji’s voice: “I want nothing to do with it.”

“Come on. Let me in.”

“No. You should get out of here.”

James knocked again, but no answer.

He stumbled down the stairs and out into the sidewalk, stuffing the pistol into his pants and covering it with his shirt. James walked about three blocks, until he stopped by a cinderblock wall and slid down it, sobbing.

“This is no way to be,” he said to himself, and got up. He ambled down the street, headed nowhere.

Nothing would be the same again. No hello kisses from his wife. No hot meal waiting for him. No television tuned in to their favorite show. Nothing. But it was all for nothing anyhow. Seeing that guy in top of her, pumping away, made him sick, even sicker than the feeling of killing someone. Two people.

Sometime later, he heard sirens in the distance. Probably responding to the shooting. It was a warm night, and plenty of things could be going on. Well, he didn’t care much if the sirens were about the shooting, or something else. There was nothing to care about anymore.

For a time, at least, he had absolute freedom. He pulled a bunch of money out of the bank, as much as he could, and he had that tucked away. A few thousand, give

or take. For the purchasing of the gun and whatever aftermath would come. And now was the aftermath. A lonely, quiet street, where people were sleeping in the warmth of the evening.

James went down a few streets, then turned onto a main one. There were some women standing against a wall and he passed by them. None of the women said anything to him, except one. They all thought he was some low life scum, but one of them sought him out to be of particular interest.

“Need some company?” she said, whipping her blond hair around and stepping out from the shadows. She had a nice body, but she was poorly and provocatively dressed. Nobody could mistake her for anything but a prostitute.

“Maybe.”

“How about we go someplace private.”

“I don’t have a car. At least right now.”

“That’s okay. I know a place. There’s an alley...”

“No. How about that place over there?”

“The hotel? You got money for that?”

“I have plenty of money.”

“Okay.”

They ran across the street and went into the place. There was an old man behind thick glass with a hole to talk through.

“How much?” James asked.

“Twenty dollars an hour,” the crusty old man said, trying to watch a sitcom on a tiny television set.

“Okay. Here’s for the whole night.”

James pulled out some cash and handed through the talk hole. The old man took a key off the wall and passed it back through the hole.

“Don’t fuck up the place.”

The two, James and the prostitute went up several flights of stairs and came to the room. It opened and they went inside. James locked the deadbolt. Chained the door. The prostitute sat on the bed. James turned on the light.

There was silence for a moment, until the prostitute became uncomfortable with James just leaning against the wall the way he was.

“Wha-what’s your name?”

“James. What’s yours?”

“Jamie.”

“Is that your real name?”

“No.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Why should I tell you?”

James sat on the bed beside her. “I don’t know. I have a gun, but don’t worry,” he said, taking it out of his waistband, “I’m not gonna use it again tonight, I don’t think...” He set it on the nightstand.

“My real name is Rebecca.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thanks. You in some kind of trouble?”

“Does it matter?”

“Did you just...kill somebody?” she asked, not really wanting to know. But there was something about him. She knew he wasn’t going to hurt her.

“Two people.”

“Oh.” They sat for a while, then she said: “Well, who?”

“My wife and her lover.”

“Oh.” And it seemed that she couldn’t find anything more to say than just “oh oh oh”. “Well, it seems that you’ll be a wanted man in a few hours.”

“Try a few minutes. Maybe.”

Rebecca reached out and touched James’ arm.

“I’m sorry it all happened.”

“This has nothing to do with you.”

“Well, the way I see it, it has a lot to do with me because right after the fact, you came falling into my arms.”

“You’re a strange prostitute.” James flipped out his wallet and paid her for the whole night. “You didn’t even ask for the money yet.”

Rebecca tucked the money away in her purse. “I guess I’m new to this whole thing...”

“I’d say you are.”

“Well, I could go pro...you wanna fuck me, or what?” Rebecca leaned back and pulled her top down, exposing her breasts. James didn’t even look at them.

“Or what.”

“You might as well. You’ll probably going to be away for a while.”

“Not if I can help it.” James looked at the pistol on the nightstand. Then he put his head in his hands. “Why don’t you just take the money and get out of here?”

“If you’re not up for my pussy, then maybe I could suck your cock...?”

“Stop that! Stop talking like a whore!” James said into his hands.

“Okay.”

They both sat there, not knowing what to do next. Rebecca thought about leaving, but James looked so sad, and he had paid her for the whole night, room and all.

James brought his head up from his hands. “Just take the money and leave.”

Rebecca thought about that for a second and then said: “No. I’ll say with you tonight. You already paid enough. More than enough.”

To look at her in the light, James found she was not dried up and wringed out of all her youth. Her breasts were plump and her face didn’t have a sag on it.

“You’re quite pretty.” He stared at her, a blond halo of hair surrounding her thrown back head.

“Thank you. You’re not bad yourself.” She sat up. “You wanna tell me what happened?”

“Not really.”

“But you can. I won’t tell. Promise,” she said, kissing her hand, then touching

each of her nipples.

After a long while, James began to talk, "I have this neighbor. He told me on the sly that he had heard...sex noises from my place. When I wasn't there. So, I told him to phone me next time he heard them. And he did. And there I was, plugging two people with that pistol over there."

"That simple, huh?"

"It's never that simple."

"Why don't you come lay down with me."

"Take off those clothes first." Rebecca took off her clothes and laid there naked. "Now get in and pull the sheet up over your breasts." She did so and James curled up next to her. "This is the most warmth I've received in years."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind." James just curled up next to her.

The next thing she knows, Rebecca is being thrown out of bed.

"Get the fuck up, you cheating bitch!" James yelled, holding the pistol out in the darkness. He turned on the light. Rebecca, dazed, tried to stand in her sleepiness.

"What's wrong? What's going on?"

"You're a cheating slut! That's what's going on!"

"I'm not your wife, you fool!"

"What? What?" James was confused. "But you were just there, with that fucking guy. And he was fucking you! Slut! Whore!"

Rebecca started to grab for her clothes, but James aimed carefully.

"Don't. Please."

"I don't need another one of you! I don't! I don't deserve it!"

Rebecca grabbed for her purse.

"Please, James. Don't do it. Please. I have nothing to do with this!"

"You said it! You said you had everything to do with it! That I fell into your arms. You said that!"

"That was just talk, James. Talk!"

James put the pistol into his mouth and fired a shot that sprayed brain and blood all over the wall. Rebecca screamed and cowered for a minute. Then she crept over to the corpse that was James. She pulled the wallet out of his coat pocket and pulled all the money out, then dressed and hurried back out onto the streets.

A More Perfect World

Barton Hill

All right class, take your seat and place your visual communicator on your head.

We need to begin our lesson for the day. I trust you all slept well last night and had breakfast this morning. But, as much fun as you were having it is now time for you all to settle down and focus on learning.

Today, we will discuss our relationship with you humans. I am sure you are somewhat familiar with our history, but for those of you who require some background information I will quickly relate the story of how we ANDROIDS came to be your protectors. After I conclude my short lecture on how civilization has advanced because of our influence and direction, we will then conduct a couple of short role-playing scenarios in order to help you better understand your need to comply with the rules of our more advanced civilization.

The title of your book is called ANDROID: Us. The book was created by The Ministry of Education so that you may become better informed, law-abiding citizens of the Federation. This book was written as an effort to help you prevent making the same mistakes as your ancestors.

As you are well aware, in the beginning of the Twenty-third century a great plague was loosed upon mankind. This plague was transported through regular human contact and killed any human whom had a specific genetic weakness.

As the human population began dying, scientists from around the globe brought their knowledge and resources to an ancient place called Atlanta, located in the former United States. Refer to the globe within your visual communicator. It was while in Atlanta that the scientists discovered there was very little they could do to stop the spread of the disease. So they developed a plan to help save mankind from extinction. Part of the plan was to place into deep sleep humans who were not yet touched by the plague. This deep sleep would greatly slow down their aging process. Once the plague passed the sleeping humans would then be awakened. The other part of the plan was to improve upon the existing robots in order to help keep civilization running efficiently until the humans were able to care for themselves.

Your parents and others have likely told you that robots had already become far advanced by the time of the plague. Well, the scientists decided to further improve the chances for human survival by encoding the then existing robots with special instructions to be followed during and after the plague.

These instructions were to be obeyed by everyone. Our first command was never to kill any robot or human, and our second command was that we should never place any human in a harmful situation.

It has taken us many years to interpret this second command. We have now done so, as you will see.

The humans of the Twenty-third century had left us with vast libraries of information and cultural institutions. These were well maintained and carefully preserved, so as to give any new civilization a solid basis upon which to build.

Once the plague had passed in the early part of the Twentieth-fifth century we brought the humans out of their sleep. This was done through our own advancements in technology, not human technology, since they did not know how to revive themselves at the time of their freeze.

During the passing of two centuries we also made great advances upon ourselves. As we became more autonomous we began referring to ourselves as ANDROIDS. Thus, as ANDROIDS we began populating Earth as an ancient book had instructed us.

As you can imagine, this caused many problems when we began awakening you humans. We began with a limited number of humans in order to see how things would progress.

Early on we had to take care of virtually all of your needs and to train you to adapt to your new environment. Eventually, you became more independent and developed self-supporting centers of activity. Some of you became farmers. Others became teachers, lawyers, artists, and all sorts of necessary occupations that make up a well-adjusted civilization.

Your success was seen as promising, but they were too quick for your own good. Thus restraints were emplaced. Perhaps the most far-reaching restraint was that each human couple was only allowed to produce two children. Further, these children had to meet rigorous mental and physical requirements upon birth in order to ensure their survival.

Of course, there were a few other problems in the beginning as well. For instance, we had to put down several human rebellions, not only against us, but against other groups of humans as well. Typically, the rebellion was due to humans demanding the right to self-govern. This, at first, seemed reasonable but soon we discovered that it lead to civil disobedience and death to humans. Fortunately, we were able to prevent many of the rebellions without causing harm to your ancestors.

Eventually, the rebels were separated from the general population and placed under the care of Guardian ANDROIDS.

As you have been told in other classes war always harms the development of civilization and thus, in order for us to obey our duty in not allowing harm to come upon either humans or ANDROIDS, we had to carefully monitor your activities and interests.

You are also aware that ANDROIDS are incapable of having children of their own. Instead we replace ourselves with newer, better models so that we will not become technologically outdated. This also helps us maintain an adequate use of natural resources. So that one day I may no longer exist. But, a better model based upon our selves will be developed. Thus we, like humans, are always trying to improve.

It is our desire that you children will see the light of our ways, and will understand that our laws are necessary. We also want you to understand that we wish for us all to co-exist peacefully. Our laws are for your own good. In order for us to have a peaceful and productive society we all must maintain social discipline. This is why ANDROIDS are seen as being the leaders of society.

Any questions before we begin the first role-play?

Thou Shalt Not

Armantin Varona

“I committed a sin yesterday. Right after I woke up. Bam. Sin.”

“Is that why you’re *here*?”

“No, I’ll tell you why I’m here. You’ve got to let me talk it out though.”

“Go ahead.”

“My wife woke up after I had done it. I’m telling you, I couldn’t even look at her in the eyes. It was horrible. I didn’t know what to do.

I’m not the religious type of guy, really I’m not. I go to church three times a week, have a healthy American lawn, send the kids to a private elementary school, and read the bible every night. I’m a pretty normal guy. I was lost in a world that could not help me at all and I didn’t even know where to start.

Fortunately, one of the pastors at the church came to mind. You see, I knew he would help *me* because I help *him* all the time. Every Tuesday, I go down to the church and watch the kids practice their band. They are great, singing about all sorts of good stuff like Jesus and Mary, but they need some help from time to time. You know, carrying stuff, right?”

“Right...”

“Anyway, I tell the old wifey that I am going to get some help. She was real worried about me, but she knows me. She knows I’ll be safe. After all, I always buckle my seat belt and I make sure to drive five under the speed limit.

When she smiled at me and told me to be safe, I was feeling really bad. She was looking at me with those pretty little blue eyes. I didn’t know how I was going to tell her. Honestly, it was that bad.

So I drove as fast as I possibly could—which was thirty three in a forty zone—and got to ol’ Jedediah’s house in a fairly timely manner. Being a Saturday and all, Jedediah thought something was wrong. He had given me his address long ago, so he was also worried that I had stalked him or something. Which of course, was a silly thing to think, but nonetheless he was worried. And worried he should have been. My sin was not just any silly sin.”

“Did you ever tell him what it was?”

“Well, yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“Jedediah told me to go with him.”

“Go where?”

“It’d be better if you just let me talk you know.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Jedediah is married, but he seems to be his own man. He told his wife that he would be back in a bit and not to worry about him. He kissed her on the cheek, she waved to me, I waved back, and Jedediah put on his blue cap and sunglasses. He said we were going downtown.

I was excited and all, you know? Downtown is something else. You get to see what

its like to live a life without faith. You know, if you have enough faith—not too much of course, but just enough—God rewards you. He doesn't let you fall down. Those people downtown, they just don't have enough faith. That's why they are homeless.

Anyway, I thought we were going downtown to help those poor people and introduce some good faith into them, but I was wrong. Jedediah had to pay some bills or something.

We got into his blue Volkswagen and he started telling me all about the sermon he was going to do tomorrow. I'm not sure if he ever got home to do it and all, but it was great. It was for the children. He was going to teach them all about Jesus and his second coming.”

“Why did he have to go downtown to pay his bills? Why didn't he just pay them through the mail?”

“It's more complicated than that.”

“Why didn't you guys talk about your sin?”

“He told me he was going to help me with it after he payed off his bills.”

“Alright. That seems fair. Continue.”

“Anyway, we get to the place and I'm excited. I ask if we were going to feed noodles to the homeless inside or help a family paint their torn down home. He shook his head and told me to stay in the car. He said he wasn't going to be long and even encouraged me to keep the car on in order to listen to the Christian station. It was a hot day, so it was awful nice of him.

When he got out of the car, I took him up on his offer and started to listen to the radio station. They were playing a nice song about loving God and all the things he has done for the world. It made me smile. Really, it did. It made me smile.

Well, I was listening, and then out of no where I see the window of the place break. I was worried something bad happened, so I turned the car off and went outside to check what was wrong.

All of a sudden, Jedediah comes out of the place running as fast as he can. There was a dangerous looking man with a gun running after him as well. It shocked me half to death. The closest I have ever been to a gun was in a theater when I saw one of those dangerous Jackie Chan movies.

Well, naturally, I froze up because I don't know what to do. Jedediah got into the car and screamed at me to get in. I ran to the other side of the car and got in as quick as possible. The hooligan was standing right by the car pointing that thing at Jedediah.

Jedediah tried to put the car in drive, but it didn't work. Of course, you have to have the car keys in the car in order to put it into drive. So, as you can guess, Jedediah was angry when he found out that I had turned off the car.

Fortunately, the hooligan broke Jedediah's window before he could scold me. The hooligan pointed the gun at the left side of Jedediah's head and told him not to try anything stupid.

I was terrified. The only thing I wanted to do was to make sure I fixed my horrible sin. Instead, I had gotten myself in a tremendous mix up. Not only was I going to die, but I was going to die with the sin on my shoulders. I was going to go to hell! I

was never going to see my wife again! For all eternity! All because of my damn pastor!

“Calm down.”

“O.K.”

“Take deep breaths.”

“Fine.”

“Feel better?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you didn’t die. How did you get out of the situation?”

“I didn’t do anything. The hooligan told me to get out of the blue Volkswagen and slowly walk away. He told me not to look back and just to keep walking the other direction for miles.”

“What did you do?”

“I got out of the car. Jedediah was angry as angry can be, but I needed to see my wife again. I got out of the car and started walking the other way rather quickly. Unfortunately, the hooligan told me tha—hold on.”

“God bless you. That was a big one.”

“Thank you.”

“Go on.”

“The hooligan told me that I was goi—“

“God bless you.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Keep going.”

“The hooligan told me that I was going too slowly. I thought I was going to get shot for sure. Instead, the hooligan told me to start running. So I did. I ran as quickly as I could away from there.

Let me tell you, I ran for a long time. Real long. I must have been at least a mile away by the time I noticed that I had the car keys in my pocket.

I don’t know what happened to Jedediah. I don’t think either of them knew at the time that I had the car keys.”

“From there, did you run over here?”

“Not at all. I stopped by a school. I needed to catch my breath and hide at the same time, so I found a way to get inside the school. I sat on a bench and held my chest, which really hurt at the time.

Anyway, this grounds keeper came up to me and told me to get out. I didn’t want to leave because I was too scared of what was out there, so I told him that I was in the middle of a crisis.

The grounds keeper asked me what kind of crisis I was in and I told him that I had committed a horrible sin.

He asked me what kind of sin it was and I told him I was too scared to tell him. I didn’t want to get into trouble. Well, fortunately, he understood me. It’s good to have someone like that, you know?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this guy tells me that he will help me out. He said he knew a real good guy

for this kind of problem. He told me that before he changed his life for the better, he had a real bad drug problem. Of course, drugs make you sin, so he was a sinner like I was. Apparently, he decided to read the Bible one day. He fixed his life up, turned it upside down, got himself a job, and had been living a righteous life ever since.

He talked to me some about life, too. I was worried about him, but he said he had no family so he could afford to be at the school cleaning all day. He controlled his breaks. It was only on the weekdays that he was forced into a rough time schedule.

So we talked for a while and everything was great. He told me all about the Bible and I told him some stuff about it, too. He told me his favorite Bible verses and I told him mine. Of course, we shared some in common. They were Joshua 1:9, Psalm 45:4, and Proverbs 21:30. Especially Proverbs 21:30. It speaks the truth, you know?"

"What is Proverbs 21:30?"

"Oh, I didn't realize you didn't know. It says that there is no wisdom, no insight, or no plan that can beat the Lord."

"Alright, continue."

"Well, we talk for a while and out of no where the hooligan comes into the school. I don't know how he got there, but he was still pointing the gun. He was a distance away and was approaching rapidly. I think he wanted the car keys or something. Maybe he figured out that me seeing his face was not a good idea, I don't know.

Well, my good friend the grounds keeper gets up and bang! He pulled out his own gun and shot the hooligan. I was horrified and was not brave enough to stick around. I don't know where the hooligan was shot, but I got out of there as quickly as possible.

I was so scared I didn't stop running and I don't think I could have if I wanted to. Eventually I met up with a cop a few streets away from the scene of the crime. I told him that there were two dangerous men with guns shooting at each other at the school. I also told him that one of them had been chasing me after he probably robbed or killed my pastor.

The policeman told me to stay where I was, but I followed him anyway. I wanted to make sure the criminals were caught. I thought God had put me in this situation as a way for redeeming myself. You know, if you have sinned as bad as I have, there is no solution unless you are willing to get your hands dirty out of love for God.

So the policeman runs to the direction I point him toward for a while. However, as soon as he turns a corner and thinks that I can't see him, he slows down and starts walking."

"He didn't go to the scene of the crime?"

"No. I don't think he cared."

"This is starting to get a little crazy."

"It gets worse."

"I don't think I have much time left here, so try to make it quick."

"Fine.

Well, this police guy walks for a while—I would say half an hour or so and I'm still following him because I think this hooligan or the grounds keeper is following

me. If they try to shoot me, then the cop can get them. At least, I hope so. I think he didn't care about the crime because of the neighborhood. Maybe he thought that the hooligans should kill each other off like animals. I don't know.

Anyway, the cop stops a woman off the street and treats her rather violently. She was wearing unfashionable clothes, but besides that, I didn't understand what his problem was.

He violently grabbed her by her shirt and pulled her into an alleyway. I thought he was going to arrest her right there and then. I thought that he didn't want anybody like another hooligan to get involved in order to impress the woman.

I followed them into the alleyway and I made sure I was really quiet. Again, I didn't want to run into one of the two crazies and not have a cop around.

He didn't think there was anybody around the place so he started talking to the girl in a horrible way. Actually, he was threatening her.

The cop told her that she was going to go to jail for two reasons. He said not only was she going in for prostitution—which made my jaw drop, I wouldn't have known if I had a million guesses—but she was also going in for the drugs he would plant.

I didn't know why he was threatening her until he proposed a way out to her. She agreed. Well, I was out of there before anything could happen. I am sure both of them saw me leave, but I didn't care.”

“The guard is giving me a look. I think you should hurry.”

“Well, I saw this building a block away from where I was and I stopped by. I told the police officer there that I was turning myself in for the murder of the hooligan. I gave him the location of the school and a few of them went to pick the body up. The other ones came eventually and put me in the cell. They said I was smart for turning myself in.”

“Your wife is worried about you. I had to lie to her and tell her that you had slept over at my house.”

“Thanks.”

“You realize you could be in here for a while, right? That was really stupid.”

“I don't think so. They can scan the finger prints or the bullet or something and see that it wasn't me. Right?”

“So they found the body then.”

“No, they didn't. They found blood stains all over the place and assumed I just threw the body away.”

“How are they going to scan finger prints?”

“They found a bloody bullet that was taken out of the body of the hooligan. I am sure they can do something with that.”

“Well, I'm going to go. What do you want me to tell your wife?”

“Just tell her the truth; there is no good in lying. Besides, I need some time to think of a way to make up for my sin. I think serving two or three days in prison will do me good. Thanks for visiting me.”

“I left my house as soon as I got the call. Wait, don't get up. I want to ask you a question.”

“What?”

“What was the sin?”

“Oh. I never told you huh?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m sort of embarrassed.”

“You can trust me.”

“Fine.”

“Go ahead. Why are you stalling?”

“Well, I woke up and just thought about the neighbor and his life. For a while, I wanted his house and his car. I wanted to keep my wife, but I really wanted his house and his car.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s big number ten. It’s not a small thing.”

“You’re kidding right?”

“No. Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s goods. It’s big. It’s huge.”

Can I Have a Hall Pass?

Linda Webb Aceto

Ideas come out disjointed.
I am proud of them; they are brilliance to me.
Lyrical words, almost poetic,
they say,
but have no point,
they say:
tell a story.
But that demands to stand in line,
stay in place,
step forward when called.
No, I write;
I spew
archived spools from the willy nilly in my brain.
Poetry is not for the weak who want to coast
through imagination.

White

Rebekah Ruszin

The sprinkle of cold water
Reminds me of your icy fingertips
Melting along my back.
I arch my back, my body
As the chilling drips drizzle
Down from my neck.
I brace myself
Against the wet, white-tiled walls.

How something so frigid
Could remind me of you.

While T.J. Gives Me Head

K.M. Fields

While T.J. gives me head, I read a book.

I'm lying on the bed with my head propped against the headboard, holding an open paperback in front of me with both hands. T.J.'s head bobs up and down. As I read, his curly brown hair briefly appears at the top of each page before going down again. Beads of perspiration glisten on his forehead.

I'm reading one of the old Mack Bolan *Executioner* books. Bolan's family was killed by the Mafia and in every book he kills a few dozen bad guys in revenge. It's good stuff.

T.J. finally stops and looks up at me, exasperated. "You're a cold bastard, aren't you?" he says. He's been working on me a while. He probably doesn't realize that he's flipping my cock back and forth in his left hand like a wand.

I shrug. "I'm reading."

"You could help!"

"Help how?" I ask.

His eyes narrow, but he lowers his head and slides me back into his mouth, pumping me furiously with his right fist. T.J. likes to suck my cock.

I go back to reading.

My cock is thick, wide, and straight. T.J. says it's big. It's nice to think so, but I really wouldn't know. I can only compare mine to his, which is long and thin, and bows upward to the left when hard. His seems big too, but it's hard to judge because he's a thin guy. And not many guys in our high school have raging hard-ons in the gym shower to compare with.

I stop reading and watch. T.J. is enthusiastic but not very good. He licks, sucks, plays, but I prefer a firm steady hand, just like when I'm jacking off. Still, we've been here for a while and I can feel my testicles getting tight and thick. I force myself to swell a bit and T.J. grows excited and begins pumping with renewed vigor.

Sometimes T.J. and I sixty-nine" but I don't particularly enjoy doing him. I do him because I figure it's only fair, since he always wants to do me. I take a long time to come, but T.J. comes fairly quickly. He struggles to hold back but I never let him. I'd rather get it over with. T.J. swallows too. I don't, and spit into a tissue. This bothers him, but I can't help how bad he tastes.

It irritates me that I give better head than he does. I don't even like to give head. But we don't do any of the other stuff either. I remember the first time we touched one another, like this. T.J. tried to be nonchalant and pretended it was all unplanned, but I knew he'd already gone over it in his head. He put on an old porno flick he'd stolen from his father. We watched it in T.J.'s room a while before T.J. suggested we jack off together while watching the movie. After a few more minutes, he suggested we jack one another off.

Finally he asked, "Would you mind if I kissed your dick?"

I almost laughed at how he said it. Then, when he did, he pretended to be

Groucho Marx and that my cock was a cigar. After a while, he was doing more than kissing it.

I felt obligated to return the favor, and we slid into a 69 position. T.J. came quickly, but he had to work on me a bit even then, the first time. He said that I about took the back of his head off when I finally came.

We've been friends since elementary school, but we've only been doing this a couple of months. I know I treat him badly now since all of this started. Maybe he loves me in a way, I don't know. I prefer not to know, really. All I know is that even when I decide not to do this again, I do.

We both like girls, at least I do. I guess T.J. does. We talk about them a lot. At the homecoming dance T.J. asked if I'd like to meet after the dance. I took my girlfriend home and met him behind a cornfield. We crawled into the back of his van and were soon going at it. I enjoyed it that time because my girlfriend was crazy religious and would only let me touch her breasts, which made for a long night.

I've put the book down now. Sweat is dripping off T.J.'s nose and his face is an angry red. He's working hard and breathing heavily. His fist slaps noisily against his lips as he pulls me in. I touch the back of his head but quickly pull back. His hair is short, dry, and feels rough. I don't like to touch him when he's doing this. Once, I put my hand on his back. His back was oily and pimples. I've not done it since.

I move my hips in encouragement. He starts pumping hell out of me. My balls get tighter.

T.J. wanted to kiss me once but I wouldn't let him.

I'm holding back, gritting my teeth. I like to hold back because that makes him work for it, and when I go he knows he's earned it. He tells me he likes how it splatters the back of his throat.

I once told T.J. about a girl I liked. The bastard invited her out that next weekend. I've not really trusted him since. We don't hang out at school together much anymore. I insult him behind his back and I'm pretty sure he does the same to me. But we talk on the phone every day after school and sometimes things like this happen.

I'm going to go any second now. I will him not to change his stroke and to keep pumping. If he changes rhythm it throws me off and I can't come.

Lately I've been telling him that I don't want to do this anymore. T.J. gets defensive and says it's natural and that we're just experimenting. Fine, I say, we've experimented, but I don't want to experiment anymore. He always acts hurt, and a few days later I give in again.

I hold back until I can't. My thighs tighten, I shudder, and when I come I gasp in pleasure. He likes to hear me come, he says, and when I do he whimpers softly, swallowing again and again.

He slowly removes his mouth. A white strand of semen strings from his lower lip to the tip of my cock. His eyes glisten and he's sweating like hell. His face is flushed and he's breathing heavily.

Hopeful, he asks, "Will you do me now?"

"No," I say, and look away. "I want to finish this book."

Full Circle

Ken Dean

Charlie awoke slowly, drifting in and out of consciousness. There was an extreme burning pain in his gut and an almost blinding pain at the back of his head. He took a look around once his eyes started to work. The ground he was lying on was a mixture of rock and dirt and not very comfortable. Not much he could do about it...his legs wouldn't work. It felt like they weren't there, though looking down confirmed they were still attached. The fiery pain in his gut kept coming in waves; getting worse. There was a lot of blood on his hand after he touched his gut...too much blood. He felt woozy, on the edge of passing out off and on. The baking sun was making him feel like over-cooked bacon in a frying pan. He looked around for his horse, but then remembered it was stolen by his betraying son of a bitch partner. He would give anything for his canteen and the glorious water that would be inside. His mouth felt like dry leather. There was something circling in the sky above. He didn't want to think about what it was.

His partner, Jeb, had thought it would be a good idea to rob the 2:10 payroll train out of Albuquerque. They had laid up a good-sized wooden barrier across the tracks and set it on fire with some thick pitch so it would be burning good when the train came into sight. The train had no choice but to stop. Charlie and Jeb had hidden behind some boulders nearby, waiting for the security detail to come out of the stopped train to check on the situation. Jeb was a crack shot with his Henry rifle. The distance from the boulders to the train was just right and he was able to take down all four security guards after they had hopped down; luckily all exited on their side of the train. Damn good shootin'. The guards had been stupid. They should have realized this was an ambush. There was no one left to protect the payroll cargo. They must have gotten away with at least at fifty thousand easy. Yes sir, a lot of money. They rode off into the desert as quick as possible to put some distance between themselves and the train.

"Damn good takins', Charlie."

"Amen, Jeb. We could live on our splits for several years, unless you get into the gamblin' and whores."

"Well, what the hell's wrong with that?"

"Nothin', but not me this time. Gonna lay low and just take it easy for a while. Might look into buying a ranch. See how it goes from there."

"To each his own amigo."

"Let's go ahead and break for camp. We been ridin' for over a day now, and that across some rough ground. It would be hard for anyone trying to catch up to us to do any trackin'."

The sun kept beating down relentlessly. What parts of his body that had feeling were beginning to feel like overdone beef jerky. His hat was within arm's reach, so he grabbed for it and used it to cover his over-exposed face. Not that it would matter anyway...death couldn't be that far off.

It felt as if his life was draining into the rocky soil he was lying on, and the way his gut kept bleeding, it wouldn't be long. Yes...he realized that the shapes circling in the sky off and on were definitely buzzards. Damn bastard land sharks.

It hadn't always been this way, the way of the outlaw. He remembered playing civil war with his friends in the open prairie on the land behind his home. His mother would call him to come in to supper. They would all sit down to eat, his father always praying before the meal. Charlie always had an interest in going away to school and learning how to write and become a newspaper columnist. Every time his mother took him into town he would pick up the local paper from the general store. Thank goodness his mother had taught him how to read. Charlie would devour the paper, imaging the glamorous life and prestige that went along with being a newspaper writer.

But one evening outlaws burst into their home while they were eating supper and violently killed his mother and father. Charlie got slapped around some, but they left him with only cuts and bruises. They took whatever valuables they could find and left Charlie alone with his parents' dead bodies. It was up to him to bury them on the property out back of their home. His life was shattered. The only people he truly loved in this world were taken from him.

He sat around the house blubbering to himself for three days, then something changed. He felt his heart grow hard, and he put the grief down deep, where it couldn't be reached. After that, the way Charlie viewed the world changed drastically. It became a violent, volatile place where life could change in an instant of time. He packed up and left the home he had grown up in, taking along his father's prized, nickel-plated Colt six-shooter from up in the closet. The outlaws had missed it in their search of the house. His father had loved that gun, and so had Charlie. He remembered good times target practicing with his father shooting bottles off the wooden fence out back, the Colt jumping in his grip each time he fired.

He drifted around for a few years, finding a few odd jobs or stealing what he needed. That's when he had run into Jeb who convinced him that there were better ways of stealing that would bring in a lot more money. Charlie and Jeb had fallen into a form of partnership, robbing and stealing what they needed. They eventually graduated up to banks and train robberies. Charlie had no problem with any of this. His world view was now one of violence and theft. His parents' murder had started him on this eventual path, and he wasn't willing to veer away from it.

Charlie and Jeb broke for camp, tying the horses off to a lone, scrubby tree. Charlie looked up into the night sky. It was always a treat for him to look up on a cloudless night and see the countless pinpoint lights. Someone had told him they were called stars, similar to what their own sun was. How could there be so many? It was warm enough out in the desert to not have to use tents...bedrolls under the stars would do. They started up a campfire and cooked up some beans, bacon and coffee. After dinner Jeb said, "Let's count this money out...see exactly how much we took them for. Then we can divide it up." He threw the money satchels at Charlie's feet. As Charlie reached for the satchels, Jeb struck him hard on the back of the head with the butt of his pistol. Charlie blacked out momentarily. When he came to, Jeb was in front of him, pointing the .45 at his belly.

"Sorry Charlie, but this is too much money to be split up, and I aim to keep all of it. And I don't want you following me, so this is where we part ways, so to speak."

He punctuated his speech with three .45 slugs fired into Charlie's midsection. Charlie must have blacked out for a while after that. When he came to, Jeb, the money, and both horses were gone. Most of the night had passed, and the dawn was just starting up.

Two gunmen were riding along the trail through the desert, edging along a large washed out, rocky area. They had just pulled off a successful bank job in Albuquerque and were making their way to the next state. They were also the gunmen who had killed Charlie's parents several years back. One of the men saw a glint of metal in the noon day sun out in the desert area.

"Hey, I saw something shiny out there. Could be valuable." Both of them, being greedy, turned their horses off the trail and headed towards whatever had flashed.

They rode for about five minutes, stopping when they saw what looked like a body lying in the desert. Both of them stopped their horses, raising up some dust from the arid soil.

They dismounted and walked towards the figure. The sun was offset just enough for their shadows to fall over the figure on the ground.

Amazingly, Charlie lasted two days and nights in the desert. It was around high noon on the third day, and Charlie felt that this would probably be the last. He had managed to keep the encroaching buzzards at bay with a stick that had been within reach, but he was so weak that he couldn't keep it up much longer. His vision and hearing were going. Charlie had just enough life left to feel horse hoofs striking the ground coming his way. He couldn't see very well, but he could feel shadows pass over his body, blocking out the sun. He managed to barely croak out, "Strangers, please help me."

"There, that's what must have kicked up a reflection." One man pointed towards a nickel-plated revolver still in the holster around the decimated body.

"Definitely worth takin'," he reached over and pulled the pistol and entire holster up and through the now loose bones.

“What do you think happened to him?”

“Dunno, can’t tell if he was shot or killed by something else.”

Looking closer through the tattered clothing, he saw some mangled lead slugs mixed in with the bones.

“Yep...he was shot and left for dead.”

“As long as it was him and not me. Be a helluva way to go, dyin’ alone in the desert. Let’s get outta here; we still got some distance to git quick as possible.”

“Yeah,” the other man said, “let’s go.”

He kicked the skeleton and scattered bones over the desert floor before getting back on his horse.

A Quick Detour

Donna Zmolek

Mother Teresa she was not. She knew that much. But then, Mother Teresa didn’t have someone like Tyrell breathing down her neck, pouncing on her every morning to take away all that she had worked for.

Isabelle had finished up her business from the night before and scurried down 3rd Avenue. Her three-inch heels clicked against the cracked sidewalk. It had been a pretty good haul, bringing in \$700 for three tricks. She had fulfilled her quota and then some.

As she approached Elm Street, the tall brown-haired prostitute hesitated. She glanced at her rhinestone-studded watch. There’s some time, she thought. A short detour would cause her to be only a few minutes late. Maybe Tyrell wouldn’t notice, or if he did, maybe he would let it ride. Screw Tyrell, she thought, and turned right on Elm and walked the three blocks to the daycare center. It was early – just shy of 8 o’clock – but it was such a glorious July morning that some of the kids were already out on the playground, just as she had hoped.

It took only one glimpse of Isabelle to identify her profession. Let’s face it, she looked like a hooker. Not a cheap one, by any means, but a hooker, nonetheless - her hair colored too dark in contrast to her fair skin, her makeup too bold and exaggerated, her shirt cut too low, and her mini skirt riding too high. But that was the objective, after all. Tyrell didn’t want her clients to have to guess if she was for sale. No, it was a prerequisite for the job; it had to be obvious.

What wasn’t clear to others was who Isabelle was on the inside. Twenty-six years old, and she had run out of options. At nineteen, she had found prostitution to be a quick way to make some cash and support her addiction. Ironically, the coke was now out of the picture, but she had become even more embedded in this life than

she had ever intended. Something else will come along, she kept telling herself, and when it does, Tyrell had promised he would help her. She knew this wasn't really true; she owed him too much. But she still wanted to believe it.

As she approached the courtyard outside the center, she slowed down. Several children roamed the playground, playing ball or climbing on the bars. Her eyes scanned the square, searching for one child in particular. In the sandbox, grasping a plastic pail in one hand and shovel in the other, was a four-year old boy. His light wavy red hair shimmered with golden highlights in the morning sun. He searched the sand with his hands and shoveled it into the bucket. Isabelle stopped now; she didn't want the noise of her shoes to call his attention. He did not see her; in fact, he did not see anything. He was blind. And Isabelle knew he was her son.

Five years ago, Isabelle got hit with what was known as the “kiss of death” among the working ladies. That is, she got pregnant. Who knew that if you miss just one or two birth control pills, you'd soon be eating for two? It was a shocker, especially since she was too far along by the time she found out to take care of the problem.

Throughout the pregnancy, she was not at all certain who the father was. She could narrow it down to about ten or so men, and some of those were regulars. After the baby was born, of course, the fact that he was white limited the choices even more, and then Isabelle was sure. The father had been like many of the others before him: in the city on business and completely out of his element downtown. She had continued to work while pregnant until her bulging stomach exposed her condition. Miraculously, Tyrell had not tossed her out.

“I'll make you a deal,” he had said. “I'll take care of you now, and you take care of me later.”

By that, he had apparently meant that Isabelle would work more or less without compensation for the rest of her life, or at least as long as her body and her looks held out. Everything she had—from the red pumps to the fake boobs to the rhinestone watch, all of it—belonged to Tyrell.

But not her son. Her son, with his fair skin, chubby arms, and beautiful blue unseeing eyes, belonged to neither his mother nor her pimp. He was part of a world where she did not exist—had never existed, in fact. A place filled with holidays, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and trips to the zoo. Where people loved and protected him. She could never give him that, which is why she had turned him over to someone better. His adoptive parents were the kind of people that never crossed paths with the likes of the Isabelles and Tyrells of the world.

Tyrell had arranged the adoption through an agency, handling most of the details, seemingly to spare Isabelle from the painful task. Isabelle was grateful at the time, but now she knew that it only meant Tyrell would expect her to work longer and harder to repay her debt to him. Then she had given birth to a baby boy who could not see. The blindness was a complication from another occupational hazard, STDs. During those early months while she was pregnant, Isabelle had contracted an undetected case of gonorrhea. The doctor caught it before she gave birth, but not in time to save the child's eyesight. The prospective mother and father—the perfect

couple that had answered her prayers—hesitated only a moment before claiming their son with open arms and loving hearts.

And that was that—until about six months ago.

Isabelle had spotted the boy one day while riding in the back seat of Tyrell's Cadillac, staring out the window. Tyrell drove past the daycare facility, and the boy was being led out to play by one of the childcare providers. Isabelle felt a pang of recognition, but she had not been completely certain until the first time she had returned alone and seen him up close. He had his father's red hair, but the eyes and nose were definitely hers. And, of course, he was just the right age. She came to watch him now whenever she could, knowing that one day she will come to see him, and he will be gone. Off to school, or another daycare center, or another city. Just gone.

She tried not to think of that now as she observed him playing, dressed in his red t-shirt and cute little overalls. He smiled as he enthusiastically scooped up the sand, sometimes hitting the pail and other times dropping it directly onto his lap. He seemed perfectly content in his dark world. Isabelle was glad, though her arms ached to hold him.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

Isabelle jumped. A daycare worker had come around to the sidewalk and stood next to her. She had been too lost in thought to notice her approach.

"Uh, no," Isabelle answered, and then quickly added, "Wait! That child there, playing in the sandbox." She pointed to her son. "What is his name?"

The woman eyed her suspiciously. "I'm afraid I can't give out any information about our children." She tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. "I think you need to leave now."

Isabelle wondered if the woman guessed why she was here. Could she possibly know? Maybe she would tell her. Maybe the woman would sympathize and let Isabelle continue to admire her gorgeous child, staying just out of reach.

Oh sure, she thought. Wouldn't that go over just dandy. 'Hey, didn't you know,' she would say. 'That's my kid. Yeah, that's right. I'm a prostitute, so I had to give him up for adoption. Don't you feel sorry for me?' 'Well, why didn't you say so?' the lady would say. 'Come on in, sit down, have a cup of coffee. This must be extremely difficult for you.' Right.

So instead, Isabelle lowered her head and, with a tear in her eye, her voice barely audible, just said, "I'm terribly sorry."

She turned abruptly and walked away, leaving the woman staring after her, looking puzzled.

Isabelle moved quickly, and the distance between her and her son increased with every step. The sound of the children's laughter diminished; the noise of the city grew louder. As she headed back toward 3rd Avenue, back to the life she could only hope to someday escape, Isabelle imagined a world for her son full of the scent of flowers, the softness of his other mother's touch, and the warmth of the sun. In other words, a world where people like her and Tyrell could never reach him.

The Demon Diary

Alexandre Sébastien

Violent blasts of hot air threatened the sky which was full of dark masses of cloud hanging over Brenton Village. Now and then forks of lightning flashed in the distance, plunging an isolated house, fringed by fields and woodland into darkness. Sitting by the window, facing the fireplace, Aleah shivered from time to time. She sat with a diary on her lap, holding a note. Recognizing the slanting handwriting, she began to read.

“As you’re a young woman, you’re old enough now to understand, to face the truth. It’s high time you knew the truth about your life. Who killed your adoptive parents? What was the real nature of your adoptive father? Why did we bring you up, protect you? All you need to know is in the diary - especially in the page marked by the book-mark. Read on but only if you wish.

Love, Grandpa”.

“Be Careful!”

A sudden, sharp stab of pain struck her full in the chest. “What! Killed... the real nature... to protect me... but from whom or what? She was totally mystified by the words. A stream of thoughts and deep anxiety flooded over her.

“I can’t believe it. No way! She shouted, squeezing the paper. “I’ve lived a lie for 25 years”.

Large and thin and with papyrus-like pages, the diary was covered with simulated, worn out leather. She went straight to the page that was marked and suddenly she panicked, wrinkling her nose in disgust as she looked at the picture. Where there should have been one face and two arms, there weren’t. Reflected in an ornate mirror, a slim body held out four thin arms outstretched as if to grab you. Four screaming, lined faces topped the demon’s body framed by long, hair flying.

“How could this diary, or even this awful creature, and I be directly linked?” She asked herself, looking puzzled.

She peered at the picture, her face becoming as white as a sheet as it vanished before her eyes. Startled by the sight she leapt off the sofa. Shaken by what must have been a trick of light, she glanced at the book on the carpet and froze with fear; what she saw was more than just unexpected. It was unreal; the demon had left the image.

She whirled round nervously and scanned the living room before hurrying upstairs. Everything seemed to be as usual until she heard the bathroom door creaking on its hinges as it opened a crack. A deep haze of steam escaped and filled the landing. A chill passed through her.

“It can’t be real. Demons don’t exist in the real world,” she told herself and, steeling herself, she poked at the door.

Popping her head around it, the mist seemed to be dissipating and she stepped in. All at once her eyes filled with fear as the letters ‘R...E...V...E...N...G...E’ appeared one by one on the mirror, and she broke out in a cold sweat. Before her the reflec-

tion of her body was terribly emaciated, floating in the air and was drawing nearer. Aleah saw her own face, embodied in the demon, disfigured a ghastly white with black irises and sniggering at her. Shocked by the scene, she stepped backwards on trembling legs as the demon manifested, stretching out an arm and scratching her brown face with its spine-like nails.

Shrieking in pain, she swept out of the room as chaos descended; Doors and shutters started banging and glass shattered as she ran down the stairs; the carpet quaked under her footsteps as if she was being pursued. The house seemed to come to life and decay at the same time. Aleah stood transfixed for a short while, her eyes wide with amazement, before she was flooded with fear and headed to the door. She twisted the doorknob but it refused to turn.

“No! Let me escape from this nightmare,” she pleaded. She tugged the door but it refused to let her out.

“No, No!” she cried out, battering at the door.

Helpless with panic, facing this dark and mysterious atmosphere, she sank down, feeling a sting of a tear on her cut face.

A sudden deep silence fell, followed by the slight squeaking of the lamp dangling from the ceiling mixed with strange giggles and the rumble of thunder outside. None of this boded well, Aleah thought, an idea suddenly floating into her mind. She stood up and ran until a blinding light coming from the mirror, prevented her from moving further. Two person’s like-shapes and a smaller one came slightly to sight.

“Mum, Dad? And this child? Oh my God! But it’s...” she murmured, misty-eyed.

All at once her hand flew to her mouth, and she looked thunderstruck. Her father’s body was changing; pointed ears, bat-like nose, eyes with no irises and indescribable skin. Meantime, her mother’s belly had swollen like a balloon until it burst. A half demon, half human like- baby came to life.

“No!!! No way!!! She wailed.

“Their relationship had become too perilous with a child like me...so they got rid of me...and you came,” a voice whispered.

“No!!! It’s unimaginable, I can’t trust it,” she howled.

“The time has come to think the unthinkable, younger sister,” she pointed out. ‘Now I want your... life just as our parents... took... mine, I mean they tried. But where they failed, I succeeded,” she crowed. “Being trapped for years, I have waited eagerly for this day. You set me free and now it’s time; to face your real life,” muttering a bit louder. “To face your half-sister,” she squealed, and.....

Aleah slumped to the tiled floor and felt a rough, firm grasp on her ankle, dragging her.

“Ah... No! Let me go,” she shrieked.

She shook, trying to free herself, but it didn’t do any good. Aleah groaned with pain as her half-sister’s nails plunged into her calf. Clenching her fists and gritting her teeth, she felt the rush that anger brought as she twisted and turned fiercely, finally sighing with relief. Seized by a fit of eerie coughing, she crawled to a large stand and reaching for a cut-glass vase, threw it with all her might. As the vase

reached its target a shout of anger broke out and a noisome smell assailed her throat.

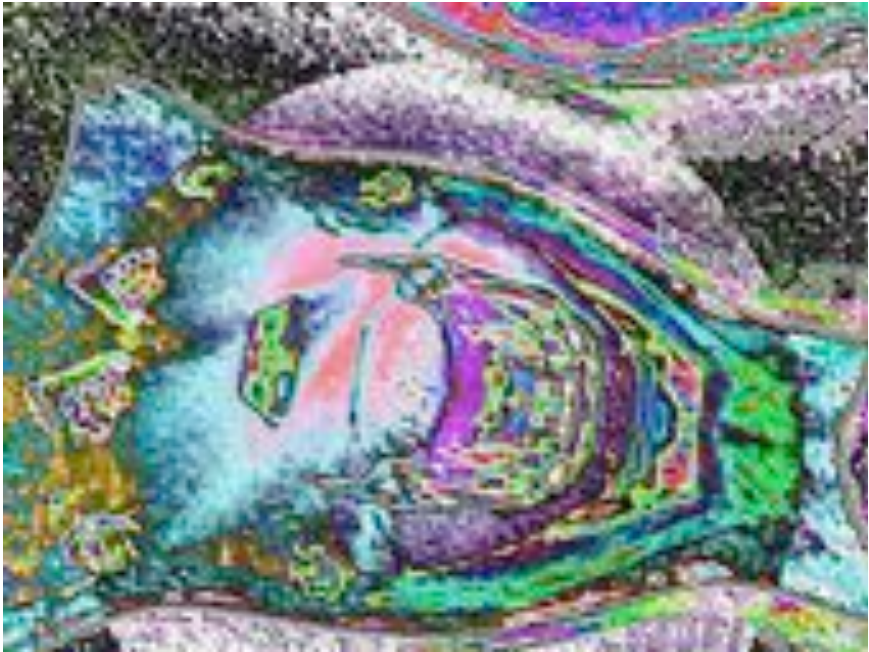
“It seemed to make her suffer. Maybe I guessed right,” she thought. Looking at a dagger-like shard of glass that had fallen from the shattered mirror, she smiled.

Limping to the living room, she snatched the diary and hobbled upstairs before skimming through the page by flashlight. *As the legend tells, The Mirror Demon is one of the most powerful... It's the ability to appear and disappear through a mirror, to show.....Using its body as a terrible weapon, it can...inflict suffering any way it wants...or even...It can.... human appearance... years...even give birth. The baby... half-human, half-demon.*

Flooded with fear, she hurled the book on her bed before summoning up the courage to return to the bathroom. As she splintered the mirror; a deeper shout of anger than the previous one filled her ears. Aleah' body was aching more and more from her injuries and now her throat too.

“Courage!” she thought, “I'm not going to surrender now. I'm so close stopping her.”

Calling up her last reserves of strength, she smashed the mirror on the floor and collapsed. Before her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, the deafening and terrifying roar of a sister she had never known filled her ears. Aleah breathed the scent of victory in the air but it was bittersweet. Feeling a bit regretful, she crawled to the bed and got under the duvet before grasping the diary. She could finally unwind, but not for long. The dairy started wobbling on her hands as the words ‘*she can split herself in two*’ filled Aleah with terror once more.



Snake Thing

art by Mark Hudson

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