

down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets



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Scars over art of a flag for a hotel in Pennsylvania.

This Way?

Christopher Barnes, UK

All roundabouts light
and tomorrow's look backs
are casual
in themselves.

Telephone Pre-Interview

Michael Schmidt

Mad as Hell and trying to settle down from something or another, the phone rang. "Oh, God, what now?" I said to myself. I picked up the line.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Schmidt?"

"Yes? Who is this?"

"My name is Mina. I'm calling due to the resume you sent us regarding our listing. For the carpet cleaning."

"Oh. Okay. Hi, Mina."

She giggled. "Hello. I have just a few questions for you..."

"Yeah? Okay. Go ahead."

"Are you over the age 21?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Do you have a valid driver's license?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Do you have reliable transport?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Would you have any problems passing a drug screen?"

"No."

"Okay. Do you have a clear driving history?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Do you have a criminal record?"

"No."

"Okay. How are your bowel movements?"

"What?"

"Do you have regular movements, sir?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Okay. Are you willing to work on weekends?"

"Um, yeah. Sure."

"Okay. It says here you were attending college. Will that affect your schedule if we were to employ you?"

"No. I put that one on the shelf."

"Okay. Do you live alone?"

"No. I'm married."

"Okay. How is your sex life?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your sex life, sir, do you have one?"

"From time to time."

"Okay. And what is that like?"

“What kind of questions are these...?”

“Okay. If offered employment, would you be able to start immediately?”

“Yes.”

“So, you’re not working currently?”

“No.”

“Okay. What is your penis size?”

“Alright. This is some sort of bullshit gag, isn’t?”

“No, sir. Just a few preliminary questions, sir.”

“Well...erect or soft?”

“Erect, sir.”

“Maybe seven inches. I don’t know.”

“So you haven’t measured recently?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll pass this along to my boss. Thank you for your time.”

“Okay.”

I hung up and had a regular bowel movement, thought about having sex, and, after some effort, got an erection. But I didn’t have the heart to measure.

Visions from the Ghetto

Mel Waldman

Through the apocalyptic eyes of my patients,
I wear dark, mutilated eyes, traumatized eyes
trapped within horrific visions

and I *see* with brutal, battered horror within the
tortured visions of the ghetto.

Within their traumascapes, I *see* with ghetto eyes
and I weep forever, my soul ripping and dying
each dark day in the wasteland of despair.

The Queen

for K&L

Bryan M. Huizi

A bruised sky whispers sermons of summer storms as he sits in the living room reading about the controversies that linger in the world. Slender syllables of light illuminate the hardwood floors at odd intervals, elegant shadows linger on the royal blue walls. In the large house voices carry, seep around delicate corners. He sits in a large chair, hiding in plain sight, reading and listening to foreign voices. Her feet tap like gentle rain drops upon the polished floor as she searches for him, exhaling questions to vacant hallways. A convoy of wooden toys stream along the rug like absent tears. Slipperyblack words bend on the glistening pages of the magazine, cynicism and criticism polished like the frame of a tiffany’s calendar. Her large blue eyes are capable of deciphering distant transmissions. She enters the room with golden locks constructed in chaos, a bright storybook held in her small hand. She would like him to read to her. Fireflies blink in the fading face of the day as she climbs into the chair with him. He locates the gentle disciples of his voice. Crisp pages turn and her delicate head rests upon his shoulder. She has become the quiet queen in the kingdom of his defenseless heart.

Poem from the Netherworld Notebooks (Soul Mates)

Kenneth DiMaggio

What do you say
to your soul mate
who asks:

“Do you want
to tickle the trigger
before the cashier
at the all night
gas station
or convenience store?”

—and before you can answer
whispers:

*“It’s the only way
we will see
the soul
that brought us together.”*

leaving you both
no choice
but to pursue
your love
in the car
you will both
take turns driving

until you find
the crime

that will forever
commit your souls

together

as one

in Hell

Photo-Op

Gregory Liffick

A gun shop
next to a mortuary
on a busy, suburban
commercial street.
All that is missing
is a big liquor store
to complete the
American hat trick.
We like our crime,
violence and death
local, handy and
boozed up.

The Hawk

Jason Sturner

The sun begins to warm the day. Soft light filters through the fields. The flora awakens to reclaim its place among the ecosystem of our world. A lone red-tailed hawk sits peacefully on the Braeburn Marsh Bird Sanctuary sign, facing the incoming men with their hard-hats and construction maps. Keys to giant yellow machines hang from thick belts around their waists. Steam from a coffee mug rises into the brisk morning air as they huddle together for the day’s instruction. The proud raptor sits quietly upon his perch, anticipating a good day for hunting. Much time will be spent soaring across the wide open sky, far above the mayhem that’s seeping across the earth. And he knows his life here is near its end. Soon he will have to go away. No one will say goodbye and no one will wish him well. Still, he will go away quietly, and he will go without bitterness.

Afterimages

Daniel Flaherty

The doorbell rang but Mike didn't think anything of it. He was watching *Lost in Space*, his favorite show and one he usually couldn't see because of school. Now that summer vacation was here, he had three months of *Lost in Space* in the mornings and summer air outside.

But then he heard his mother answer the door and say, "Oh, hi there, Randy," and that was Mike's dreams for the summer crushed.

"Is Mike home?"

"Yeah, he's in the living room. Come on in."

Mike listened as Randy walked across the linoleum floor of the kitchen and into the living room. He punched Mike in the arm.

"Hey, what's up, dude?"

"Hi, Randy."

"Watcha watching?"

"*Lost in Space*."

"What?"

"*Lost in Space*," Mike said a little louder. "It's just some program."

Randy crashed down on the couch next to Mike and sat there slumped, staring at the TV. Mike looked at him and saw that there was something in Randy's pocket. The bulge caused Mike to feel a dreaded anticipation for whatever escapade Randy had planned for that afternoon. Randy always had adventures for him and Mike to do whenever they were together. These adventures often left Mike feeling morally sick, and terrified of getting caught. The most frightening thing they did was to dump their sodas down a mailbox because it would have meant juvenile hall for sure if they had gotten caught. But the worst was when they snuck into Ms. Richards' backyard to pull her drying laundry down from the clotheslines and drop them into the muddy lawn. The Richards were close friends with Mike's parents, and Mike kept thinking of the treats that they sometimes brought him as he snapped the laundry from the clothespins.

A few nights after they did this, the Richards had come over for a visit. Mike sat up in his room and listened to the conversations downstairs.

"Do you know what happened the other day?" Ms. Richards said. "Some jack-ass came into our property and pulled all the laundry I had set out to dry, and left them laying on the ground. I mean, why would anybody *do* something like that?"

Why indeed? Mike wondered with his head lying on his desk. And why didn't he ever say anything to Randy, tell him that they shouldn't do these kinds of things?

Because I'm a fraidy-cat. Mike concluded. *Because I'm a coward.*

Randy suddenly gave a short laugh.

"Man, this show blows. Let's go find something to do."

Mike turned off the TV and put on his shoes.

“Bye, guys,” Mike’s mom said.

“Bye, mom.”

When Mike stepped outside and let the door shut behind him, he felt like he was leaving behind his mother and the safe routine of the morning television, and putting up another building block to an adulthood that destiny hadn’t originally intended for him.

* * *

They rode their bikes to a clearing in the forest where new houses were being developed. At first, Mike thought that Randy was going to have them vandalize the incomplete houses. But when Randy got off his bike, he walked around looking for something on the ground. He found it and crouched down. Mike went over to see what it was and saw a group of caterpillars crawling around. He crouched down next to Randy who pulled a magnifying glass from his pocket and held it in a way so the sun’s rays were concentrated in a direct beam. The unfortunate caterpillar tried to wiggle from the intense heat, but was eventually incinerated. Randy fried a second caterpillar and then handed the magnifying glass to Mike.

“Here, you try.”

Mike took the glass and positioned it so it was facing the sun, and held it over a caterpillar. He saw a bright circle of light, an intense spot of white light that hurt Mike’s eyes, a few inches from the caterpillar. He moved the glass so the light was concentrated on the insect’s back. At first it seemed the caterpillar didn’t feel it. But then it began squirming in discomfort, and then trashing in pain.

Randy laughed as smoke drifted from the caterpillar’s hairy back.

“Classic!” he said. “Take that one there!”

Mike blinked his eyes, trying to get rid of the afterimage of circular light, and then held the glass over another caterpillar. He felt bad about doing it, but was still fascinated by how he directed the beam of light like a laser beam, and how it caused a reaction when it hit its target. It hurt to watch because of the brightness, but he couldn’t look away. But then there was a stabbing pain in his eyes and Mike squeezed them shut, looking away. The magnifying glass fell to the ground.

“Ugh!” he moaned, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hurts my eyes.”

Mike opened his eyes, but all he could see were circular afterimages swimming around in darkness.

“I can’t see!”

Mike jumped up and pounded his fists against his thighs in panic.

“Mike, calm down!”

“I can’t see! I can’t see anything!”

Mike started running, not thinking straight.

"Mike, come back!" Randy shouted.

Mike tripped on something and crashed to the ground. The impact caused his jaws to snap shut, biting into his tongue. Mike began sobbing.

He cried, but no tears came out.

* * *

Mike's parents sat in the waiting room of the Maine Pediatric Children's Hospital. The doctor came out to tell them the situation.

"His eyes are seriously damaged. There's acute dilation of the pupils."

"Will he ever see again?" the father asked.

"There's a chance. I don't want to get your hopes up too much. There's a seventy percent chance of failure, and even if we succeed with the operation, there'll still be permanent damage."

The mother turned to weep and the father held her. The doctor watched, but felt no sympathy. When he had asked Mike how he had hurt his eyes, he learned that the kid had done it while frying bugs with a magnifying glass. The doctor clocked Mike as a bullying, snot-nosed brat. The schools were full of them. When he wasn't hurting small animals, he was probably the terror of the playground. And the parents? An entitlement couple who spoiled their kid and raised him to expect to get everything he wanted, never to understand the consequences of his actions. Well, he knew the consequences now. The doctor's only concern was that if the operation failed they'd probably sue the hell out of him and the hospital.

In order for surgery to have any chance of success, the operation had to be done immediately. But the doctor opted instead to perform an appendectomy on a girl who was kind and a pleasure to have around.

After the appendectomy, the next task would be to try and save Mike's eyes. But it was almost three and the doctor hadn't had lunch yet. He sat down in the cafeteria with his lunch and a *Time* magazine. He sat holding the magazine in one hand and a sandwich in the other. He sniffed and began eating.

* * *

Mike sat on the couch listening to *Lost in Space*. From the kitchen he heard his mother on the phone, setting Mike up to be enrolled in a school for children with special needs.

Something exciting was happening on the TV. The music grew sharp and

Nothing But Dust

Chris Butler

I am nothing but dust,
contributing to the dump
that is existence.

Mounds of molted skin
cells mixed with plucked
graying follicles make
me a rolling tumbleweed,
briefly bouncing across
the barren furniture, before
collecting myself when
the gusts settle as stale air.

But I am nothing,
just dust.

intense. Mike heard a roar and then somebody scream. What was going on?

Mike put his face in his hands and began crying.

* * *

BOOM BOOM BOOM

The base coming from the suped-up Mitsubishi stereo pounded. Whenever the car drove near a house, the windows would whine as they vibrated in their frames.

The driver was Randy, now 31 and a managing consultant living in LA. He was in Maine with his girl Becky to visit his family and some old friends. They drove to Portland where they were going to meet up with a couple of Randy's high school buddies at a club.

Randy hit the accelerator and cut off a panel truck loaded with pumpkins. The driver blared his horn, but Randy just turned the stereo up. The music was too loud to make out the lyrics, but Randy knew them by heart anyway:

Hells yeah!

Me and my crew, ready for some humpin'.

Cruisin' for the honeys

Stereo thumpin'.

"Girl, come over here and sit on my lap."

Bitches come cuz they knows I'm where it's at. Ugh!

Randy found a place to park, and they got out and walked in the direction of the club.

Randy didn't recognize his old school friend, but up ahead, Mike sat behind a cart that held some apples. Mike heard the couple approaching and said: "Excuse me folks. Care to buy an apple?"

"No, thanks," Randy said, and then reached out and grabbed an apple off the cart.

Becky looked at him agape.

"Oh my god, that was *so* cheap!" she said when they turned a corner.

She tried to sound angry, but Randy heard the amusement in her voice and knew the danger of the theft excited her.

"He won't miss it. I mean, he's selling them for a dollar each. A buck for an apple! Talk about a rip-off!"

He tossed the apple to Becky.

"And how much of our tax dollars do you think it costs to take care of him?"

Becky took a bite of the apple and grimaced.

"Oh god, it's all soft!"

Randy took the apple and bit off a piece, immediately spitting it out in the gutter.

"Christ. Guess these aren't in season any more."

Randy looked around for a trash can. When he spotted one, he tossed in the apple. On the side of the trashcan was a sign that read: PLEASE KEEP OUR STREETS CLEAN. DON'T LITTER.

It could be argued that Randy wasn't a complete asshole.

Maggie's Choice

Pat Lotito

It was an accident. Her parents named her Margaret . Somewhere along the line she became Maggie and then Mag. Her own daughter she named Maureen and Maureen, against all Mag's wishes, bypassing her hopes, became Moe. Moe's daughter Molly Ann became - God forbid - Mol. Her own husband, Billie, the child's grandfather, was responsible. Thinking that the young Molly Ann was wonderfully aggressive and sometimes sly, he started bouncing her on his knee and calling her his little Mol.

So there it was, Mag, Moe and Mol. Her hatred of this was so intense that she thought sometimes she ought to die on the early side to carve it down to two. Sometimes she caught herself with a clutch of horror thinking that an early death for one of the others was possible. At any rate two would be better than three but her unplanned daydreams came, of course, to naught.

Her daughter Moe looked like a carbon copy, though a little smaller, of herself. Not much smaller, though, because she herself was five nine and Moe was almost five eight. The little gangster looked a bit more on the normal, girly side with her bright inquisitive face and her long dark hair brushed back into a ponytail. Actually, Mag didn't give her much thought and was certainly not what one might call invested in her. Her thoughts of both Moe and Mol were contemplative and distant rather than anchored in the moment. She cared, to some degree, when something good happened to them and when something bad happened. When it was good she knew how to express herself with "what a good thing, good work, so glad to see it and isn't that wonderful." On bad things she commiserated and then was silent.

Silence was not a mark of sensitivity though she hoped it seemed so. Actually, silence was her natural reaction to everything. When she was younger she often fell silent in the company of others, unsure of what she thought or felt. As she grew older she realized she just didn't care.

One morning she woke with the pleasant sense that something new, different, was about to happen. And happen to her, not just happen around her. Patience was always at the ready for her so it was no chore to let thought go and simply allow the feeling to stay. She ate her usual breakfast, crunchy cereal and skim milk and made a cup of instant coffee. By ten o'clock she had already listened to the woes of others, two phone calls from her circle of friends. The mornings' topics were the removed gall bladder of a mutual acquaintance and a rebellious teenage daughter. She acknowledged the concerns of both callers, kept the conversation going with little murmurs of empathetic understanding. The feeling of something in the air persisted and she found, to her astonishment, that she was almost interested in the lives of others. "Grist for my mill" she thought. "My God, that's it. I'm going to be a writer. There was no nay saying in her head, no automatic shut down which happened if she came upon a thought or a circumstance which disturbed her.

Instead, a calm steadiness of purpose, an unfamiliar feeling of pleasure. I have a mission she thought, a mission. Surely that's what has been missing. Only now was she able to think that something might have been missing. She tidied up the kitchen, ran the vacuum cleaner over the rug in the living room, went to the mailbox and brought the mail inside. There were two bills, a page of grocery store bargains and a request from Alley Cat Allies for a contribution.

She checked the laundry hamper in the bathroom and decided there was not enough to warrant a tubful, better wait until tomorrow. She filed the bills, wrote a ten dollar check to Alley Cats and got it ready for posting. Then she sat down in her favorite living room chair and let the mornings' astounding revelation creep over her, take body and soul. Little interstices in her comprehension of herself seemed to be filling even as she sat.

A writer is a quiet person, a writer observes, a writer remembers and understands the activities of others. Even antipodal existences were, again, grist for her mill. Grist for her mill. The years of listening became a bank of remembered knowledge of the lives of others, the writer's well, grist for the writer's mill. Grist. She could taste the word in her mouth. It had the substance of something one actually ate. As she sat, the years slipped away, only the mission remained. Thank God she was in good shape. At fifty seven her face was hardly wrinkled at all. She was the right weight, she slept well, she walked a mile or two every day. She had developed a comfortable relationship with Moe and Mol and Moe's husband Danny. They saw each other about once every three or four weeks, spoke to each other about once every two or three weeks. Her writer's life, the only life she could now envision, would fit quite well into that scheme.

She felt she could even handle book signing events, could organize her wardrobe, buy what was needed to make a fine impression. Everything was right, nothing was wrong.

Call number three came at ten thirty.

"I just don't know what he's thinking" gasped her friend Sally. She spoke through bouts of weeping.

"He says he doesn't want a divorce, just a little room. Room for what for God's sake. What room? And he says there definitely isn't anyone else."

Maggie was silent.

"I believe him about that part. He never could tell a lie, even a little one." said Sally, her voice a little stronger.

Maggie's silence grew.

"You don't think I should?" said Sally, "Believe him I mean. You think there might be someone else?"

Silence.

"Is there something you know and just don't want to tell me?" A little sympathetic murmur from Maggie, a little ambiguous sigh.

"If there is you have to tell me. You have to."

"No" said Maggie softly.,

“But you think there might be, don't you?”

“Um” sighed Maggie.

“Oh God” said Sally. “If there is I just don't know what to do. What would I tell the kids?”

“Oh” offered Maggie.

“Better wait, right? But I'm going to be looking down his Goddamned throat, looking at everything he does, the bastard! I'll keep at him till he tells me the truth.”

“Ah” ventured Maggie.

“At least the kids are okay. They're oblivious. One thing Don and I have been good at is keeping trouble to ourselves. And they're crazy about him. Well. I've gotta run. Will you be home this afternoon?”

“Yes” breathed Maggie.

“I'll call you then. And let's keep this to ourselves.”

Maggie shut her eyes and spoke a few words to herself, then got up and went into the kitchen to make a list. When she was finished the list read like this:

potatoes

oven cleaner

salad greens

divorce on the way

husband unfaithful

lying to wife, children

Wife hysterical

Children hurting

Wife worried about children's suicide

She was doing research. Writers do research. They research their books. She fell into a sort of reverie. Gentle thoughts, happy thoughts filtered through her untroubled mind. They swam almost to the surface then disappeared in a golden glow. At eleven fifteen the phone rang again.

“Mag? Hey listen it's Miriam.”

“Um” offered Mag.

“Sally's phone's been busy all morning. I checked with the operator and they said it's out of order. Have you talked with her?”

“Yes” breathed Maggie.

“And? Any reason she might have taken it off the hook?”

“Hum...” said Maggie.

“You can tell me. She's one of my best friends. What's up?”

“Well...” said Maggie, drawing the word out into three pieces.

“There's trouble isn't there. I can just tell. Did she talk to you about it?”

“Well...” reiterated Maggie.

“Oh c'mon. If she's in the soup she needs all of us.”

“Well, yes” breathed Maggie after a considerable silence.

“Is it Don? He's such a mamby pamby. Can't think what he could do except bore her to death.”

“Oh” offered Maggie. Silence.

“It is Don. Well I’ll be damned. Still water and all that. Does he have somebody else?”

“Oh” said Maggie again.

“Do you know who?”

“No...”, drawn out with a little lift at the end.

“Well she must be in shock. Though it does make him more interesting. How are the children doing?”

“Um...” said Maggie.

“How bad?”

“Oh”.

“Real bad?”

“Um. She’s pretty worried.”

“As in really worried? Oh my God, that’s the worst, anything with children.”

“Yes” agreed Maggie.

“Is she taking them to someone? Did she tell you?”

“Um...”

“She did, didn’t she. How bad do you think it looks?”

“Well...”, said Maggie.

“Do you think they would hospitalize the kids, that bad?”

“Hum..”.

“Oh my good lord.. The nearest possible place is eighty miles away. Has she talked to anyone else?”

“Noooo”

“Well I’m going to call Pam. She’s good in an emergency. Sally has her hands full, Don screwing around and now the kids!. Boy, I wouldn’t wish that on anybody. Poor Sally. Those kids always did seem a little, well, unsettled.”

“Yes” offered Maggie.

“Will you be home this afternoon?”

“Um”

“I’ll get back. Bye.”

In the kitchen Maggie started a new list. This one read:

potatoes

oven cleaner

salad greens

Ingredients for meatloaf

Strawberries

Diet soda

Children hospitalized eighty miles away

Parents distraught.

Finished, she drew a line below the list and decorated it with little scrolls. She tore off the top, ending with diet soda, and got ready for the store.

At the store she bought potatoes and oven cleaner, salad greens and strawberries,

ingredients for meatloaf, diet soda, iced tea, and a package of little cake like short-cakes. At the checkout aisle her checkout person, an older woman, remarked on the strawberries saying we know summer's around the corner when these are for sale, don't we? Maggie agreed and felt a glow of pleasure at the little exchange. She's a pleasant woman and we had a pleasant conversation she thought.

At home she put away the meat, the potatoes, the strawberries and the salad greens, put the oven cleaner under the kitchen sink and the soda and iced tea in a cupboard, reserving one which she drank over ice. Sitting at the kitchen table ideas for the inside back cover of the dust jacket began occurring to her. Widowed seven years ago, Maggie Tallsman has established a rich, interesting, friend filled life which includes her daughter Maureen, son-in-law Danny and granddaughter Molly.

After a bit she rose and went into the living room where she pulled a book from the bookcase. It seemed about the right size, 300 pages. She counted the lines on a few pages and found an average. Then she counted the words in an average line and settled upon the figure of 210 words per page. This gave her a total of 63,000 words.

She figured on one month for research leaving 11 months for writing - how delicious that would be, she could hardly wait to get started. She divided 63,000 by 325 days and found that she need write only 193 words a day! How hard could that be! She decided she would rise at eight, eat breakfast, have coffee, begin writing at nine and work until noon. She could see herself at noon, hitting her stride, words flowing easily. Perhaps I'll write a little longer, she would think. No, I am a disciplined, professional person. I write till noon. I quit at noon and resume at nine tomorrow.

The phone rang at two thirty. She went into the bedroom, sat in her comfortable bedside chair and picked it up.

"This is Maggie."

"Pam here."

Her faintly British accent informed every syllable.

"Um" said Maggie.

"Miriam says Sally's having a dreadful time with some serious family issues."

"Hum.." said Maggie.

"Do you have any news?"

"Um, not really."

"You don't have to beat around the bush with me, Maggie, I'd like to help if I could."

"Well...."

"Do you think I should go over. Just for a visit, mind you, not give a reason. I do that once in a while."

"Well..."

"I guess that's the thing to do. Have you talked to Miriam again today?"

"No."

"Well if you do, tell her I called and I'm going to just drop in on Sally, check out the lay of the land."

"Yes."

“By the way, sometimes her kids take spring break with her mother and stepfather. So if they’re at hospital, no need to inquire.”

“Right.”

They said their goodbyes and Maggie sat a moment more before getting the dirty laundry from the hamper in the bathroom. She started a tubful, mixed the meatloaf and returned it to the refrigerator, picked up a new piece of note paper and sat down at the kitchen table.

Her father, she wrote, a well known polymath, set the stage for his gifted daughter. Father and daughter, on their long nature walks, explored the history of fiction, discussed its effect on the social climate of each century. A gentle man, he adored his longlimbed and gregarious offspring. Sensing the greatness of her future he gave objective shape to her instinctive understanding of literature. Soon she became as well versed as himself. Added to this knowledge was her vivid and soaring imagination, giving rise to plots and intricacies of character born out in her later novels.

She took joy in raising her daughter, took joy in her relationship with her husband Billy and grieved terribly at his loss. Her sorrow was eased by her close and almost daily relationship with her granddaughter Molly. Like many writers of genius, her novels took shape only after years of living, the first one being published during her fifty seventh year.

The phone rang again. Sally was driving and they had a fenderbender. Don hurt his lower back but he’s fine, said Pam.

They said goodbye and she turned to what she had written.

Pleased, she went into the living room and brought back into the kitchen two photo albums, old and dogeared. She looked at each picture carefully. Part way into the first album she found the picture of herself at age 10 with her father. His hat was squarely on his head, his shirt seemed stiff and new. He was staring at something beyond. She continued paging through the album, knowing from long habit that no other picture of him would appear. That was the end of it, the end of him.

Once more she read what she had written, savoring each word, each thought. How true, how wonderful. What a shame there were no pictures of the two of them, herself a curious young woman of twenty, her father, so educated, so sweet natured, so attentive. ‘I’ll do you up proud,’ she thought, ‘I’ll do you up proud.’

Startled she noticed the clock. An hour had gone by. She had forgotten some things on her trip to the store and planned to go again.

She began her list:

Cereal

Orange juice

margarine

She stared into the middle distance, then added:

Accident on way to hospital

Sally driving, Don hurt

Doctor’s report - his manhood was just sliced right off

The phone rang. “Maggie, it’s Miriam. I’ve got awful news.”

“Oh” said Maggie.

“It’s Sally. They got in an accident taking the kids to the hospital. Sally was driving. Don hurt his lower back but he was checked out and he’s okay. Nobody else got hurt. They left the children at the hospital and drove home okay. Don’s laid up a little but nothing bad.”

“Um” offered Maggie.

“Did Pam call you already. You sound as if you knew. She called?”

“Yes” said Maggie.

“Well I guess Don’s okay, just a sore back.”

Silence.

“It wasn’t worse was it”

Silence, then a little sigh.

“Maggie, tell me so I can help. He was hurt worse than his back?”

“Um”

“How bad?”

“Bad”

“Oh my. Sally insists on driving. She says Don thinks it’s unmanly, but she says that’s silly. How bad is it?”

“Well.... he thinks it’s unmanly....”

“Yeah. They fight about it. What happened? Something about manly or unmanly?”

“Well..”:

“C’mon Maggie. I know you don’t like to gossip but what is it. Did he hurt his penis or something.”

Long silence. “Yes”

“Oh Jesus how horrible. How bad?”

“Bad”

“Oh my God. I’ve got to get over there. But we can’t say anything, we have to go along with what they’re putting out.”

“Yes”

“Well thanks, Maggie. I’ll call Pam and we’ll just keep this to ourselves. Remember, the kids are at her mothers’. Talk to you later, maybe I’ll see you there.”

“Bye.”

Calm and untroubled, she put the photo albums in the kitchen trashcan, tied up the bag and threw it down cellar. There were two more albums in the living room. She fetched them and took a pair of scissors from her kitchen workbasket.

The pictures were all of women, herself with her mother, herself with a friend. Later on, Maggie and Moe, Moe and Mol. Moe, Mol and Danny. And Billy mixed in. Billy. A nice person though she didn’t miss him at all.

Carefully she removed each picture and cut her face or her body away and replaced it in the little holders. She was still working as it grew dark. The phone rang several times but she was too busy, having too pleasant a time. When it grew quite dark she took a pair of garden shears and carefully cut through the cord of the tele-

phone. She laid the phone out very carefully, the receiver off the pedestal, both pointed the same direction.

It was too dark to work so she sat contentedly, pleasantly aware of the blackness which edged in so gradually. Her mind was clear and uncluttered. Only Moe and Mol will remain, she thought. That's better than three of us.

A strange way toward a tragic truth

Alexandre Sébastien

That night, a howling wind swept the streets of Camels Garden and wreathed in thunder clouds, a torrential rain was pouring down on the village. Sheets of lightning lit the sky from time to time, and Earl was aroused from his deep sleep by the sudden crashing of the window shutters in the storm. Rubbing his eyes wearily he glanced at the time; it was five by the alarm o'clock . Without warning, he was suddenly aware of faint whispers which seemed to be distant calls for help outside.

Confused and startled, he got out of bed and went to the window. Outside branches in the copse seemed to dance rhythmically and frenetically through the storm. Musing on the voice which still murmured in his head, it seemed to be that of a child. He peered into the darkness, struggling to see in the gloom and his gaze came to rest on a figure in white emerging from the shadows . A sense of panic set in, and his heart began to thud against the wall of his chest; his stomach churned in anticipation.

He shook his head in bewilderment at the strange and confusing occurrences which had just taken place and thought about it again. In an instant, as if being struck by lightning the person-like shape had vanished.

He had no time to catch his breath before a sudden thunderous knocking at the front door set all his senses reeling. His heart missed several beats and he ran full tilt down the stairs to the hallway. Coming to an abrupt halt, he beheld the same figure briefly before it flittered away into the darkness, but not before he had the time to recognise the strange figure – it was her.

With his breathing now returning to normal he leapt outdoors. With an irrepressible impulse fired by the unusual mystery which he had witnessed, he called out her name – it was in vain. The howling East wind, blowing at its full strength in the

midst of the storm, almost had him off his feet and his voice was lost in the commotion. Rain pounded his eyes and brought him to his knees.

Now lost in his thoughts, he recalled events from his recent past which obsessed him and made him wish for that timeover once more; his wife, however, did not share his feelings. Earl found this odd, and despite the many attempts he made, she would never breathe a word about it. This refusal on her part aroused suspicious in him that she may have had something to do with their daughter's death.

By the time he had regained his senses, the gale-force winds had broken and a thin tube of spinning air arrowed downwards towards the ground. Inexplicably, a sudden change of direction had the tornado charging towards him. He hardly had time to move an inch or even cry out in alarm before his feet left the ground. While his body was whirling in the air, the whispering of her voice gladdened his heart.

'There's nothing to be afraid of, Daddy,' Carrie called soothingly.

'Carrie, Carrie.....,' he yelled as a response, but it wasn't long before his voice faded away as he kept spinning relentlessly inside the tornado.

Now much later on, he landed on his feet and dusted himself down, looking not only astonished that he was still alive but also at what he was wearing and where he stood. This grassy ground full of daisies with scattered bushes, shrubs and trees in blossom whose boughs were gently singing in an evening summer breeze beyond some bird's chirpings, held for him a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

'This black and white t-shirt and this faded pair of jeans?' he asked himself, pondering over the question.

He glanced around himself for a while before the light suddenly dawned. He was right back in the copse just before his house, where the disaster happened while he and his wife were playing hide and seek with Carrie, their little girl. The place was at the far end where the copse sloped firmly downwards to the sea, so he hurried there and reached his destination before long.

Looking down in abject terror, a growing chill of self-reproach came to him while before his very eyes, Carrie was struggling for her life against violent waves which threatened to take her last dying breath. Worst of all was when he saw his wife struggling against the relentless and turbulent sea in an effort to swim back to the shore. Speechless with rage, he sank down to his knees and slammed his fist on the grounds, weeping in anger.

In an instant a dazzling light rising from the sea disturbed him, drew his attention and he arose with an arm lifted before his face. Through his fingers, he made out Carrie's ghostly shape going up and up to the sky, to heaven disappearing little by little and once more her murmurings caught his ears: 'Adieu. I love you, daddy'.

'I love you so too, Carrie,' he sobbed and when darkness gradually returned as if the spell had broken, he found himself back at home, sitting in the living room.

In a state of shock from his wife's inconceivable behaviour, the considerable distress of their little daughter made his anger boil up inside him. He struggled to control it and repress the incessant tremblings in his hands. Never in his wildest imagi-

nation had he expected such a barefaced lie although his wife's silence about this dramatic event had hinted at it.

With Amy's unexpected warning voice sounding in his ears, alerted by the thorough mess in the hallway, Earl's fury was aroused. The small oak panelled table had fallen into ruin, clothing swept the floor clear of the debris from the storm, and shards of glass billowed before her in a cloud of dust. With a spring in her step, she entered the room, smiled and hurriedly threw her arms around his neck, her heart now at peace.

'Bless you, you're safe and sound,' she burst out, kissing his cheek. 'What the hell happened here?' she asked him, her face etched with amazement.

No response came and at her complete surprise, he leapt to his feet brushing past her arms. Sitting still and dumbfounded, a frown creased on her forehead and as she met his cold stare an uneasy feeling crept through her body. The silence continued and Amy perceived from his manner of pacing up and down the floor that she had made a mistake of some kind. Far beyond her thought, it was not until he looked at her again that all became clearer.

At once fear clutched at her heart and sent her pulse racing. Horrible thoughts started to flash through her mind - her throat dried and she licked her lips nervously; she fought back the tears. The tension was at its height and his curt refusal to speak first raised the temperature and made it unbearable to her. Stopping abruptly and teeming with rage, he focused his gaze on her and at the very moment her heart missed a beat. His lips parted, breaking the deadly silence.

'How could you have let....?' he asked her bitterly, unable to go further.

'What are you talking about?' she inquired in mock surprise before she continued: 'And what is all the mess in the hallway about?'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you about it. But I know what you did; the dreadful meaning of your silence,' he said harshly, walking past her.

No longer able to stand his gaze, she took her eyes from him, summoned up her courage and took a deep breath.

'What silence?' she said in a breathlessly. 'I was in a state of shock after the accident. Nothing unusual after such an event, I struggle each day to live through it,' she cried.

'That's the point; living through what you did or did not do,' he yelled. 'You didn't lay down your life for hers,' he told her cruelly.

'What! I didn't let her...and never would have!' she shouted 'I would have let her...,' it was too painful for her to go further.

Flushed with anger, she leapt to her feet and walked around the table, keeping a safe distance from him.

'I did all my best to save her, Earl,' she said firmly. 'When Carrie fell by accident and rolled down to the sea, I hurried to catch up with her but against the powerful flood tide...and that's enough,' she sobbed, tears welling up in her eyes.

'How could such an outrageous idea have crossed your mind?' she asked him shakily.

'It stretches credulity to the limit but she reappeared and even talked to me. Carrie brought me back to that day and I saw you hardly trying to save her,' he

explained, his eyes glistening with tears with the intensity of the flashback.

'What! You're simply monstrous and completely out of your mind. I can't believe your words for a second. All this is beyond me, I can't bear it any longer,' she snapped, struggling to hold back her tears and appalled by his macabre talk.

'Me, monstrous? You disgust me; your own little daughter. You should be in her place,' he snarled savagely before sweeping out of the room.

It was the last straw, she stood there in silence as if she couldn't do otherwise, feeling a pang of conscience although she refused to admit it. Overcome with emotion, tears traced pathways down her cheek and dragging herself to the sofa she slumped down in it, burying her head into his hands.

Earl, meanwhile, was packing up upstairs and then went to the bathroom to gather some other things. Her barefaced lie had torn his heart out, his own wife to whom he gave unconditional love had betrayed him, had let their daughter die. He was on the brink of the abyss, he could no longer stand so much suffering and while he snatched his razor, suddenly gripped by a fit of rage, he struck his throat with it. Little by little, anger, pain freed him and he smiled. He felt good now, and he cherished this moment as ever because he knew that each second remaining was a closer step to Carrie until his eyes closed.

By this time, pouring out all her suffering, Amy tried in vain to fight back her sorrow which kept weighing heavily on her. Lifting her head, her heart gave a sudden leap and missed a beat as she saw Carrie just sitting at her side.

'Carrie!' she gasped in bewilderment.

'Hello, mummy,' she replied in a whisper.

'Oh, my God,' she gasped, before she continued: 'Oh, sweetie. I'm terribly sorry for what happened but you know I did my best. You missed me so much and love you too so.'

Carrie just leered at her, and before long Amy was seized by a strange fit of coughing. Staring at her daughter, she started to sense the meaning of her look. Now her throat was constricted and she swallowed hard; breathing started to become difficult and her eyes became bloodshot. She stretched out a hand to Carrie, the other holding her throat. Amy looked in astonishment as her daughter began to float upwards to the figure of her father, smiling in wait for her. Her last vision was of the two of them laughing as the life ebbed away from her stricken form.

Motivations

Andrew Cook

And I try to get motivated
to get up
and throw rocks
through my window
at the grueling
nightmare.

And I try to get motivated
to put feathers
on my arms and desire
you like no other.

And I try to get motivated
because there is
a man at my door
speaking iridescent sunshine.

And I try to get motivated
cause there is a killer
underneath my eyelids,
sick, insane from the violent sunsets
on the western coast.

The White Wolf

Benjamin Green

He peered at the world through the fish eye of his six-power scope. It almost felt like he was cheating, but it was a sign of his growing prosperity.

Besides, this was war. The wolves might regard the cattlemen's stock as easy pickings, be they sheep or cows. Still, they would have to reckon with him. They preyed on the weak and helpless, and he was the predator they had learned to fear.

The few wolves that would even come near now approached with great wariness. It was a measure of success in his one-man war against wolves, and an indication he should probably quit soon.

That thought brought on a parade of mixed emotions in him. Part of him craved the thrill of the hunt, the pitting of his wits against the beast. He had thought like a wolf for so long, he found it was hard to get out of the mindset.

No, that wasn't quite true. Wolves killed for food. His killing was to feed a deeper, more primordial need...

He found himself becoming disturbed by the run of his thoughts. Just then, he saw his target come stalking into view. He put aside his quandary.

It was clear the wolf had reservations about the action he was taking. He would trot forward a couple of steps, before hesitating, his ears twisting back. Then he would start forward again.

It was clear the way his ribs were outlined against his fur that hunger was impelling him. Probably it was the smell of death that was holding him back. A lot of his brethren had met their end here. Still, the need to eat spurred him on.

He remained still, moving only to scoop some snow into his mouth, lest his breathing give him away. The wolf had abandoned caution, loping toward the sheep pen.

He waited and waited, the trigger only a half-pound away from breaking. He wanted his enemy close enough to taste the prize, before he rang down the curtain.

The wolf crouched, in preparation for his leap over the sheep pen. He grinned as he stroked the trigger. The wolf seemed to leap into the air, going spraddle-legged. Then he toppled over sideways, surrendering to the inevitability of death.

He let out a whoop of triumph, and began running toward the prone animal. It seemed infuriated by its immediate destruction, because its muzzle was pulled back in a snarl.

With the last flickering embers of life, the wolf glowered at the man who killed him. Whether there was any recognition or not, it was difficult to say, since the eyes glazed over in death.

He spent a moment gloating over his latest triumph. Then he pulled out a Buck knife, and began to skin the carcass.

The government man ran his fingers down what had once been the spine of the wolf pelt. "It's a beautiful specimen."

The hunter nodded, more in acknowledgement than agreement. "It's one less wolf killing cattle, that much is certain."

The government man looked up, squinting through his spectacles. "You have to admit that they are beautiful creatures."

The hunter snorted, and crossed his arms over his chest. "They're pests is what they are."

"Everyone has to eat, and it has been a bad winter. Even the livestock are struggling."

The hunter shook his head. "I don't care what they do. As long as the bounty remains where it is, I'm going to say that they're fair game."

The government man's head bobbed. He had been given his opportunity, and he was going to take it. "Since you brought up the matter of the bounty..."

The hunter stiffened, then let out a long sigh. "I guess I knew this day was coming."

The government man held up his hands. "Don't worry. I can pay you the full twenty bucks for this one."

He hesitated for a minute. "It is just that you have been *too* successful at what you do. The government has decided to reduce the bounty to five dollars.

"The cattlemen believe the wolf populations are now down to controllable levels, and there are those who have expressed concerns that they may be *too* low." He neglected to mention he was the head of that movement.

The hunter's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

The government man shrugged. "A certain number of predators are necessary to keep the deer and moose populations in check."

The hunter scratched his stubbled chin. "Y'know, I never thought of it that way." He shrugged. "I think it's time to retire Old Trusty."

The government man's eyebrows wagged up and down, then he shoved his glasses up to the bridge of his nose. "There's always, hunting, you know."

They commiserated for a few minutes longer. Then he gave the other man his money. Once the hunter was gone, he picked up the phone. He had to pass the word along to his new friends at the Sierra Club.

Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* had done a lot to open the public's eyes to the dangers of environmental degradation. He just had to remember what pseudonym he used with them. After all, having a conviction for violating the Hatch Act would put a crimp on his career.

He kissed the rifle, before putting it up on the rack. It was a Winchester Model 70, with the huge six-powered scope. It had been built just before the turn of the century, and was about sixty-five years old.

His grandfather had bought it for what was then frontier duty. By then, the Wild West was pretty much gone, having been tamed by the iron horse and the telegraph.

Already, it was being romanticized by Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Still, in more remote areas of the West, the law was an abstract concept, and order came out of the barrel of a gun.

His grandfather had marked out a homestead, and defended it with his trusty Winchester. When civilization at last began to encroach, his claim was recognized by dint of squatter's rights.

He came from a long line of men that ate their daily bread from their ability to use a firearm. He knew he was the last, because his ex-wife had taken the children with her.

Maybe there were others who were keeping the family name and lineage alive. After all, President Johnson was seeking a resolution for an incident that had taken place called the Gulf of Tonkin.

A couple American destroyers had come under attack, and the president wanted to escalate. A war would mean a need for soldiers, and another generation of McCarters to get their baptism of blood.

He could care less, though. Even though he was only the fourth decade into his life, he was a living anachronism, and he knew it. The old rifle, and what it represented fired his blood. He chafed at the restraints of civilization.

He fantasized about the primeval battle of man versus nature, living off the land, being the biggest predator of all.

The ethic of the yeoman farmer was dying away. By the time he was born, America was already becoming urbanized as it grew into an industrial colossus.

Hunting wolves remained the last tenuous connection with the old order, and now even that was gone. He knew he would adapt and survive. Part of his ancestral heritage was Social Darwinism. However, it did nothing to lessen his feelings of alienation.

* * *

It wasn't as if he didn't have enough to worry about. Double digit inflation and interest rates meant that money was tight, and the cattle business was capital intensive.

The oil shocks of the past few years had placed merry Hell with his business. His trucks needed gas to deliver the hay for the cows.

It was easy for President Carter to put on a sweater, and encourage people to turn down their thermostats. He was responsible for several thousand head of beef cattle, and his survival depended on their survival.

He was being squeezed by a government that was calling for national austerity, and environmentalists that begrudged him every resource he used.

Then there was bracket creep. That was threatening to sponge up in taxes what little profit he made. The business with the so-called white wolf was threatening to drive him out of business.

Like most of the cattle ranchers in the area, he was in debt up to his eyeballs, and the only reason the banks continued loaning money was to keep the loans on their books good.

The fact that someone, or something was killing cattle threatened to upset the delicate balance of things. The rumor making the rounds was it was some kind of albino wolf. Half as big as a regular wolf, so the stories went, and impervious to bullets.

Erik Mansfield was not one for listening to far-out tales, especially when the survival of his family was at stake. He intended to confront this so-called albino wolf, and see how impervious to bullets it was. Presuming it even existed.

He suspected it was some kind of varmint, or group of varmints that was responsible. It was clear that it was smarter than the average critter, since it had avoided all the traps laid for it. Still, he suspected that its success so far was causing his fellow ranchers to inflate it.

Rebecca, his wife, looked at him as she packed a thermos of coffee for him into his lunchbox. Her brow was knotted with concern. "Are you *sure* this is a good idea?"

He shrugged. "Do you have any better ideas, mother?"

She sighed. "I worry about you. What if something happens out there?"

He shrugged again. "If I meet a wolf, I have dad's old rifle to take care of him."

"What if it's an environmentalist?"

He grinned. "I figure dad's old gun will answer to the same purpose."

Her eyes widened, and her mouth opened to an O of astonishment. Then her eyebrows knitted, and she put her hands on her hips. "Erik Louis Mansfield! You shouldn't even talk that way!"

He hung his head, a hangdog smile twisting his lips. "I'm sorry, ma'am." Then his eyes flicked upwards. "How 'bout I promise to only wing him?"

She frowned, hands on her hips. "Now you're being sexist! What if it's a woman?"

He let out a war whoop, and slapped his thigh. "Yee-haw! If I rope and brand her, does that mean I get to keep her?"

Her arms crossed over her chest, her frown deepening into a scowl. "Absolutely not!" Then her eyes grew hooded. "What if she bites you? Who knows what you might end up with?"

She threw her arms up in the air, her eyes rolling upwards. "As if the veterinarian bills are not bad enough already!"

That broke him up. Her hardened carapace cracked under the strain of it, and she began to giggle.

He moved to put an arm around her waist, and give her a kiss. Then he whispered, "You needn't worry your pretty little head about me, mommy. I'm going to have my best hired hand with me.

"The worst that's likely to happen to me is I'll miss a night of sleep. And if we're lucky, we'll get rid of the varmint."

She frowned, and put her hands on her hips. "Don't tell me not to worry! I'm your wife. It is my job and my prerogative."

He snorted, then kissed her. "I know. It's something I have to do. We cannot allow some animal to go around killing our cattle."

She bent her head, and nodded. "I know, dearest. Just come back to me in one piece."

He grinned and snorted a couple of times. "Not only will I return in one piece, once I get that varmint, I'll be randier than a kennel full of hounds in heat! I'll be a wild stallion for you!"

She laughed, and gave him a swat on the posterior. "Oh, behave yourself!"

The domestic gladiatorial games were interrupted by the sound of heavy footfalls. They turned to see Carter Mulligan enter the room. He wore a black suit, with

matching watch cap, skintight gloves, and boots. He had also applied black cosmetics on his face.

He was an intimidating presence, standing a full head and shoulders above his boss, who was just shy of six and a half feet himself. Carter's height gave him a deceptive appearance of ranginess. The truth was, he weighed two seventy-five of solid slab-like muscle.

He had always been a big boy, but it was the Marines that had put him in fighting trim. He served two tours in Vietnam as a Marine sniper, which left him with a taste for the Remington 700R4 rifle.

The only negative effects he had suffered from service to his country was it had made an already reticent young man even more quiet and indrawn. When he did speak in mixed company, it was either to espouse radical politics, or tell hair-raising tales of atrocities.

The truth was he was only a tepid conservative in politics, and had neither witnessed nor participated in any alleged American atrocities, though he'd seen the South Vietnamese do some eyebrow-raising stuff.

When he'd come home, he had been spit upon, and called a baby-killer. Nobody wanted to hear his tales of heroism, and what the Americans had done to help their erstwhile allies. They had a fixed template in their mind.

So he would spit on them by giving them what he thought they wanted. His silence and his stare could be quite intimidating, which was why Rebecca didn't like him.

Erik took a couple steps backward, and gave him an appraising stare, hands on his hips. "You look ready for a war."

The only response he got was a small grin, and an arched eyebrow. The other man had a Remington 700R4 slung over his shoulder by the lanyard, tonight sporting a Starlite scope.

In his hand was the other rifle, an old and well-worn Marlin lever action. It had been bought as a varmint rifle, and had been used for that purpose a few times. However, most of its service had been shooting at cans, rocks, or anything else that could be made to answer for the purpose of a target.

He took the proffered weapon. "Thanks. I presume you want to go now."

Carter just nodded. After grabbing his lunch pail, and collecting a good-bye kiss from the wife, the two of them set out for the truck. Neither one said anything for several minutes.

When it became clear his farmhand wasn't going to initiate conversation, Erik took it upon himself to do so. "What was the big rush to get out the door?"

Carter shrugged. "Wife doesn't like me."

He felt a smirk rising to his lips, an eyebrow arching. "Gee, I wonder why?"

The other man shrugged. "Her prerogative."

Erik was chagrined. That was the other man's final word on the subject, and he hadn't even gotten half a dozen words out of the other man.

He was silent for a long minute, considering his next conversation gambit. At

last he managed, “You think the president will get re-elected?”

The other man snorted. “Not likely.”

Erik rolled his shoulders. “You think the country is ready for a B-movie actor for president?”

Carter shrugged. “Can’t do any worse.”

Erik’s shoulders squared. “President Carter’s ahead in the polls.”

The other man’s eyes were heavy-lidded. “It’s early.”

Erik was inclined to agree, and he would have voted for a rutabaga before the incumbent president. Still, he was feeling ornery, and egged on by his partner’s laconic response.

“Are you sure? After all, Ronny’s just a genial B-movie actor with movies like ‘Bedtime for Bonzo’ to his credit.”

The taller man regarded his employer from hooded eyes. “He was the governor of California. Twice.”

He had to concede the point. That was an impressive accomplishment. He parked the truck, and got out. “We ought to have a plan of attack.”

Carter pointed to a rise. “I’d suggest you wait up there, and maintain a watch. I’ll take the point, and act as a rover, beating the bushes.”

They talked it over, with his subordinate opening up, and becoming quite loquacious. In the end, they decided to go with Carter’s plan, as having the greatest likelihood of success.

Erik took his perch on the brow of the hill, while his hired hand melted into the darkness. The minutes slid by, piling up to an hour, then two. The grains of time slid through the hourglass with an aching slowness.

He was beginning to get bored with the entire exercise, and was beginning to suspect that whomever his mysterious cattle killing visitor was, he or it wasn’t coming tonight.

He got occasional reports from his hired hand in a series of sounds that sounded like birdcalls. He shook his head. The man had a remarkable gift for mimicry.

He was husbanding coffee from the thermos, and snacking on the things his wife had packed him. If something didn’t happen soon, he was going to fall asleep.

He felt the heavy hand of Lethe resting hard upon him, making his eyelids feel weighted. He was beginning to waver back and forth, ready to give into the siren song of unconsciousness.

Just then, a scream pierced the night, cutting through the mental fog that was trying to pull him down. That was followed by a shot, and a second, and a growl. Erik put the scope to his eye, and peered through it.

Carter was lying prone on the ground, his rifle still in his hand. Bounding away from him was a white blob. He only saw a flash of it, and was unable to credit what he saw.

Still, it looked like the hindquarters of a wolf. It couldn’t be, though. That thing looked bigger than a Great Dane.

A quick check of his hired hand satisfied him the other man had not been hurt bad.

Then he lowered his rifle, trying to see the thing he had only caught a glimpse of.

At first, he was only able to make out shadows, and hints of movement. As his eyes became adjusted to the darkness, he was able to make out his cows. They were starting to stand up, and wander around, lowing.

It was clear they were getting agitated. If something wasn't done soon, they might start stampeding, which would mean some of them would get hurt. The question was, what was getting them so upset, and what could he do to stop them?

He saw something moving in the direction he had been looking in. He saw what looked like an Irish wolfhound charging toward the knot of agitated cattle. It was even making doglike sounds, but he knew it wasn't an Irish wolfhound.

It looked gray rather than red, and as it got closer and closer, he realized it was too big anyways. Nor was it really gray. It was white, and it was huge! The thing was huge enough to be an albino bull, but the face was too long and lupine.

With a cold chill down his spine, he realized what it was. It was a huge albino wolf. No, that wasn't quite right either.

The eye had a swirling reddish-orange glow, instead of the pink eye of an albino. It also radiated menace and evil, like an aura around it.

That *thing* may look like a wolf, but it was just a mask, hiding a deeper malevolence. The word *deadlights* ran through his head like a rampaging steer.

He was panting for breath, adrenaline galloping through his body. If his sphincter hadn't clamped closed, he would have peed himself by now. It was now fight or flight.

He brought up the Marlin, without pausing to peer through the scope. At this range, he wasn't likely to need it. He stood up and began shooting, jacking the lever to clear another cartridge. He kept going until the magazine was empty. Then he looked to see what he had accomplished.

The wolf-thing was standing there, ichor oozing from several points in its side. By all rights, it should be lying there dead. Instead, to his astonishment, they wounds began sucking themselves closed. The ichorous blood began melting back into his pelt.

The wolf-thing turned to regard him with a lupine look that was meant to convey contempt. With a bound, it took a cow. She let out a bleat of pain and terror as the wolf's jaws closed around her neck.

The other cows stamped their hooves, and lowed in agitation. He shook her, serrating the flesh, and causing her to bleed out. Once she was dead, the wolf-thing began to feed. It did so in a liesurly fashion, as if in contempt for the puny humans that sought to constrain him.

The other cows began to settle down, sinking back down in their bovine torpor as they began to chew their cud. They behaved as if they were unaware that one of their own had just met her violent end at the hands of a predator.

Erik was at a complete loss. How was he supposed to deal with something like that? Just then, Carter appeared at his side. "Did you just see that?"

The other man nodded. "How do you deal with something like that?"

Carter was silent for a long moment, stroking his chin. At last, he said, "Two

words, sir. Stuart McCarter.”

He whistled as he worked on getting the little stuffed bird posed on the branch. It had taken time to find a second career once the trade in wolf pelts had dried up.

His first thought was to become a mortician. When he'd confided the idea to a friend though, the man had gone paper white, and suggested trying to find a different career path. It was then that he first heard about his fearsome reputation.

His first reaction was to be indignant. Where did those other people get off telling him what he could and couldn't do? Then he found himself enjoying a dark chuckle over it. People could go limp-wristed over the strangest things.

It wasn't like he had fallen into the job, either. He'd had to wash cars, wash dishes, and fold laundry, or a dozen other menial jobs he had done to put himself through school. Then he'd moonlighted as a janitor, and delivered the morning paper to keep himself afloat while he'd opened his own taxidermy shop.

It had been hand-to-mouth for several years, and he had often napped during business hours, because he had so little time to sleep. Business had picked up, and he was able to devote his full time to his new passion.

It wasn't like he was raking it in hand-over fist, and he got a lot of strange looks from the local busybodies. Still, he was making a living, and staying out of trouble.

He saw himself as a craftsman. He was good at what he did, and there was a certain pride in a job well done. Still, there were times in the dark of the night that he was left to wonder.

There was a certain part of the population that thought him ghoulish. He never offered them a second thought. They had already made their minds up, and wouldn't be dissuaded by anything.

Then there were the environmentalists and animal-rights types, who were demonstrating an increasing militancy. They had made their feelings known in acts ranging from picketing his house, to throwing stones.

His Model 70 had remained on the wall, where he had put it after retiring as a wolf hunter. After stalking the wily wolf, turning his skills to lesser game left him cold.

He'd bought a BB rifle for shooting birds, and plinking varmints that sought to invade his property.

He'd threatened to pull the old Winchester down after an extra-violent protest. That had been enough to cow them into submission, and it had been a while since he had heard a peep from them.

Of course, he could sense the rising tide of resentment against them, and knew that a stormburst was on the horizon. That was likely to lead to violence.

That thought keyed up an old fantasy that had been lurking in the back of his mind. Ever since making the threat, there had been the desire to skin and stuff one that he had shot.

Even worse, he would think about shooting one of the women, and he would get a hard-on. What was that about? He thought they were scruffier and dirtier than the men.

It was true the last few times he had sought out female companionship, he suffered

the humiliation of being unable to perform on command. The woman had been polite about it, but it was clear he had suffered a diminution of his manhood in her eyes.

He had tried dismissing the links that arose in his mind between his setting fires on the stove by dropping coffee filters onto a hot burner, and his increasing habit of catching wild animals, and skinning them alive before stuffing them.

The reason for the latter was a vestige of the hunting instinct. Nothing more than that. He might own that he was a little obsessed with fire, but it was like wanting to hunt and stuff one of the protesters.

He had been living as a semi-hermit for several years. Was it any wonder he had strange ideas? Nothing sinister about such a confluence of things. Still, he was unable to shake the feeling of something dark and ugly moving under the surface.

The bell over his door tinkled. He turned away, grateful for the respite from his dark reflections. He was surprised to see Carter Mulligan at the door. "So, what brings you to these parts?"

The other man stared at him. "Erik and I have seen the white wolf." He let that hang in the air a moment. "You need to take care of it."

Stuart's hands shot up, before coming down with a thump. "*What?* You must be kidding! I gave that up..."

The stone-faced look from the other man cut off his protest. His eyes bored into Stuart. "It's immune to our rifles. It wants you."

His palms began to sweat. Whenever he was asked if he had even the slightest regrets about the wolf killings, he always answered with a brusque no. That was a lie though.

It went beyond the dark iceberg of his personality that lurked just below the surface. When he had been hunting, he had slept the sleep of the just. It was after he had hung up his rifle that the nightmares had begun.

He struggled to remember what it was that haunted the twisted nightmarescape his bed had become, but he knew the thing had been stalking him for fifteen years. Something big, rough, and breathing fire and revenge.

The matter only got worse after the sightings of the white wolf began. An icy hand gripped his heart as the door between the dream and waking worlds opened, and the monster stepped forward, to confront him.

In that moment, he knew he would have to confront the beast. It would give him no peace, and it would keep killing livestock to keep the pressure up.

He nodded. "Yes." There was no point in fighting it. His nostrils flared, and his eyes took on the thousand-yard stare.

Inside, he felt his blood heating up at the prospect of a confrontation. It was clear that this was no ordinary wolf, but a terrible vision of vengeance, bent on his destruction.

Well, it went against the grain for him to leave a challenge unanswered. He repeated to himself, "Yes." Then he added, "And I'll have its pelt to lay on by the fireside."

He was shocked by the brashness of his words when they came out of his mouth. However, they packed a surge of confidence in their train.

He was the master hunter, and whether it was flesh and blood, or something not of this world, it was going to die. His fury was at least a match for this rough beast.

The dark part of his personality that had been submerged began to break free of its restraints, and was starting to surface. He felt godlike, and more alive than he ever remembered feeling in his life.

A diabolical grin lit up his face. The other man nodded, and started backing away.

That evening, he found himself occupying the same hillock Erik Mansfield had occupied the previous night. He was unable to explain why he had chosen it. All he could say with unshakable certitude was this was where his nemesis would come.

In addition to his old Model 70 he had brought out of retirement, he had brought an iron mallet, a double-bladed axe, and three knives. It was clear that this beast was going to require a lot of killing, and this was going to become a hand-to-hand engagement.

This wolf wasn't going to go quietly into the good night, and that was just fine with him. His blood was afire with the idea that this was going to be a grudge match for all of the marbles.

He had suffered for fifteen years at the hands of this fiend, from the hunter to the hunted. Tonight, the matter would be settled, and he would destroy the thing that made him afraid for the first time in his life.

The cows had been cleared from the pasture, but it was an unnecessary precaution. The only other thing alive was a staked lamb at the foot of the hill. It cropped the grass, pausing on occasion to look around. It was bait. A final meal, as it were.

The lamb began to get agitated, tramping its hooves as it looked around. That was a sure sign his nemesis was about. Then he saw a ghostlike shape heading toward him.

There was no attempt at stealth or misdirection. The beast was heading toward him like a furred guided missile. He brought up his scoped rifle, and let out a gasp.

The wolf's eyes glowed with a reddish-orange glow. The word *deadlights* ricocheted around in his head.

In that moment, he realized his confidence was misplaced, and he was way out of his league. It also brought home to him that the beast was just an echo of him.

The puzzle pieces fell into a distinct pattern, and he didn't like the picture that emerged. If he somehow survived, he would become a menace to society. He had thrown off the last restraints of his psychopathic personality, and the beast within him was loose.

Still, he wasn't ready to just lay down, and accept his fate. As long as the breath of life remained in him, he was going to fight.

His lips peeled back in a snarl as he tried bullying his recalcitrant body into doing what he wanted it to. His fingers felt dumb and wooden on the trigger, but they were obedient to his will, even if they did it in slow motion.

He set the crosshairs between the eyes, and moved it up a fraction. Then he felt the rifle buck against his shoulder as the trigger broke.

The next morning, Erik and Carter hurried out in the truck, to see if Stuart had indeed brought down the white wolf, as he had promised.

They had not eaten breakfast, which had upset Rachel to no end. She became even more put out when they promised to bring the other min in for breakfast.

There was nothing she could have done though. As the old saying went, they were like a pair of long tailed cats in a room full of rocking chairs. At last, she chased them out, so she could have a little piece of mind.

The truck pulled up behind the hillock, and both men bailed out. Then Erik went back to shut it off, and collect the keys. With everything else, it wouldn't do to have to explain to the wife why the truck had been stolen.

They could see him sitting cross-legged on the top of the hillock. The Model 70 lay in his lap. Carter was the first around. His eyes widened. "Hey boss! You must see this!"

The sheep became skittish upon seeing him, retreating to the end of the tether. Then it returned its attention to grazing.

Erik's eyes also widened when he saw Stuart's body. The throat had been ripped out, almost decapitating him. He had also been torn open with teeth and claws, and had been disemboweled.

Despite all the signs of violence, it didn't look like his attacker had eaten any of him. The front of the body was covered in white fur, and the face was stretched out in a look of unimaginable horror.

Even though he was a Baptist, Carter crossed himself. Erik did likewise, and murmured, "Poor devil, looks like he didn't have time to put up much of a fight before the thing savaged him."

Carter shook his head. "What kind of animal would *do* such a thing?"

The lamb looked up, and as if to answer the question, it said, "Baaaa."

The funeral was held three days later. The only ones in attendance were half-dozen ranchers who had benefited from his services. All of them looked uncomfortable, fidgeting in the pews.

He did not leave a will behind, and there was all kinds of speculation about what the probate courts might decide. Somebody ended up torching the cabin before the week was out, which resulted in all his worldly goods being burnt up. That was considered to be the end of the matter. After his death, the white wolf was never seen again.

Gone Green

Joseph DeMarco

They ask me
"If I'm going green?"
If my thumb happens to be colored
with the same filament
If I happen upon a tree in the woods
Would I hug it
or maybe do more perverted things to it
like smack its trunk from behind
and make it BARK
I reply
"I haven't gone green."
I am green
I always have been
They've tried to teach me differently
"With religion and sex and T.V."
They've tried to brainwash me
They've promised me a big house
And a shiny car
They told me my life would be easier
than any humans
in existence
and all it would cost me was my soul
I didn't listen to them
I don't
I never have
I'll have Crypt-tonight
in my pocket
And even though I'm happy
Later, I'll be feeling glad
As though Superman himself
Flew backwards around the Earth
And slowed time
So we could
live in this moment
forever

Two Old Men

Doug Downie

It was a quiet afternoon at the Dank Den. At the bar were two old men talking quietly and at one of the tables four Mexicans, two men, two women, sat drinking and talking loudly. The men drank Bud and the women drank what looked like vodka or gin. Bill, the bartender, sat on a stool off by himself reading the local newspaper. Once inside the Dank Den the outside world disappeared. The windows were covered so you couldn't see out and no light from the outside was allowed in. The floor was bare formica tile, the walls cheap fake-wood wallboard, and a facade of fake-brick outlined the backbar. In a back room there were two pool tables. The usual glowing beer ads adorned the walls.

"I was a hell of a man in those days." Charles was saying.

"Uh huh." answered Henry.

"I had more women than I knew what to do with. They used to buy me presents. Buy me presents! I didn't buy them anything! They'd take me out to dinner!"

"Yes, that's the way."

"I was married once. It was a mistake I vowed never to repeat."

Charles was in his early seventies. He was a dapper little man, always dressed impeccably; a pressed suit, tie, his shoes shined, and a tweed hat cocked just a bit to the side. He always carried a leather portfolio with him. He was an artist. He spent his days and nights commuting back and forth between the three bars in the little tourist town that the Home was situated in. He'd show his sketches to anyone he could interest and do a charcoal portrait for a couple of drinks. He'd walk slowly from one bar to the next, his cane leading the way in a jerky sort of strut that made him look like he was being guided by marionette strings.

"My wife died ten years ago. A long time now." Henry took a gulp from his beer. He was a short stocky man of obscure Mexican descent. He was a quiet man who kept to himself at the Home, waiting through the days watching TV and reading magazines till the night when they let him go down to the Dank Den for a couple of hours. He had to be back by lights out however, 11:00 PM.

"Well, you're better off Henry, believe me. I keep trying to tell the young men never to get married but they won't listen. They just keep getting married, having babies. Pretty soon there's going to be so many people we'll be stacked on top of each other like sardines in a can."

"That's right."

"You can't even breathe the air anymore in Los Angeles. There's so many cars and highways and factories. They don't even know where they're going. They just go. They don't even know what they're building. They just do it. Progress, they call it."

"Doesn't seem like progress, does it."

"No, it doesn't Henry. Believe me, when you get as old as I am you can see what a waste of time it all is. Young people think they're immortal." Charles turned stiffly in the bartender's direction. "Bill, two more, please."

"That's right. They think they'll always be young."

“They scratch and work trying to get ahead, trying to get all sorts of things for themselves, bigger and better houses, better and better cars, more of this and more of that and pretty soon here you are. Old and ready to die.”

From the table the four Mexicans were at came a curse. Carmen Mendez picked up her drink and threw it in her brother-in-law Herman's face.

“You bitch.” hissed Herman.

Herman's brother Pedro pushed Herman back from the table.

“Don't call my wife no bitch Herman.”

“The bitch just threw her drink in my face!”

“Don't call her no bitch, Herman.”

“She is a bitch!”

Pedro pulled back and threw a right which glanced off Herman's jaw, hitting him in the chest and knocking him off his chair.

“Goddamn you, Pedro!” Herman was up in a flash and at Pedro's throat.

“That's what it is,” Charles was saying, “greed, plain and simple. More, more, more. People don't know when to stop. Everyone wants to get rich, everyone wants more, no one is ever satisfied. No one ever stops to think. They just keep on going along thinking what they're doing is very important. And making more babies.”

“That's right.” answered Henry.

Pedro and Herman, locked together in a stranglehold, careened across the room, smashing into the wall and bouncing back. They knocked over chairs, then tripped up on a table. The table went over, landing on top of them as they rolled on the beer-sticky floor, sweating and cursing.

“And you can't tell young people anything. We were the same way”

“That's right.”

“You get old, you learn, and then it's too late. The trouble is, it's too late for the whole planet. It's gotten so big, so out of control. We could never have imagined it would get to be like this when we were young.”

“Uh huh.” Henry sucked at his beer.

The bartender was pacing back and forth behind the bar, raising his arms in futility, his eyes beads of fear as Herman and Pedro fought.

Herman's wife, Carlita, picked up an empty beer bottle.

“Carmen! You good-for-nothing slut!” She threw the bottle. Carmen ducked and the bottle sailed on passing within two inches of Charles' jaunty tweed hat and crashed into the mirror behind the bar.

“No! No!” cried Bill. Bits of mirror fell clinking onto the line of bottles beneath.

Carmen was at Carlita, going for the hair, grabbing a big handful and tugging and yanking at it. Carlita's head bobbed and flapped like a ragdoll's.

“The human race is like that.” Charles continued. “Like the young. It thinks its time will go on forever, thinks the whole world was made just for it and will never stop giving. We're a young species Henry and we may never get a chance to be an old species.”

“You and I will be long gone anyway.”

"You're right Henry, we're almost gone already."

The door of the bar opened and a young man poked his head inside.

"Hey! What's going on in here?" He was the town taxi-driver. His main fares were the old gents from the Home coming down to the bars and back again. He looked around and saw the overturned tables and chairs, bottles and glasses strewn over the floor. Herman and Pedro still tussled together on the floor.

"Hey! Bill! Call the cops! Don't just stand there!"

The bartender seemed to be in some sort of shock, standing with a mortified stare at the brawl before him. Carlita lunged at Carmen and the two of them went down knocking Charles' arm as they fell. His drink sloshed onto the bar top. He calmly grabbed a bar rag and wiped it clean.

"Maybe a better species will evolve out of it all," he went on to Henry.

"Maybe...maybe." said Henry.

"We've had so many chances to learn and we just haven't got it. It's obvious for anyone to see that the way we go on is no good, that we're destroying the things that make life worth living. Either people are just too stupid or they just don't care. They ignore it and hope they can get away with it. Dumb shits deserve whatever they get, really. Still, it's a damn shame that they have to take so much of the good stuff with them."

"It is a shame. A shame."

The taxi-driver called across the room.

"Hey! Charles! Henry! C'mon! I'll give you a ride!"

Pedro lifted his head from the floor where Herman had him pinned.

"You better get outta here punk, before you get hurt!" Herman slammed Pedro's head to the floor.

"Hey! Charles! Henry! C'mon!"

Charles lifted his arm and waved the cabbie off. Go away, he mouthed.

Back out on the sidewalk the cab-driver took a deep breath of the spring air. Jesus, what next? What a job. I'm not making peanuts doing this, he thought. Maybe I'll cruise around up at the Home, six in the afternoon, some old guy probably wants to come down for Happy Hour. He hopped into his cab and gunned it out of the parking lot of the Dank Den.

Ghost

Mary Bernadette

Blue eyes like ice
Soft but not cold
His black tangled hair
Fell all over his face
As he bent down his glance
To hide his expression

The smoke he held in his hand
Dropped with his hand
And fell to the ground
As his fingers let lose
He wiped his face with both hands
Then bent back up his gaze

Nails painted black
It showed his expression
Black eyeliner around his eyes
It had melted and was cold
No one could tell
How many years he had lived
No one could tell
How many years he was old

Tall and a bit slender
He looked like a ghost
His pale complexion
Had darkened his eyes
His black eyeliner was smudged
Hiding all tears
No one, no, no one
Could see to his soul

Sebastian had done something very bad, something he felt was almost unforgivable. He had been in an argument with his live-in girlfriend and had completely lost his cool for the first time in his life and hit her so hard in the face that he had knocked out one of her teeth. She had fallen to the floor bleeding and crying and holding her hand to her cheek. When she had called the local county sheriff, Sebastian had fled.

For the last couple of hours he had walked aimlessly down one dirt road after another, further and further away from the rural trailer they shared, feeling extremely guilty and fearful that a patrol car would pull up to him at any moment, siren blaring and lights flashing, and take him into custody for assault and battery. Growing exhausted from walking and from his churning emotions, he sat down on the cement steps of an old backwoods church.

Sebastian might have assumed that the church was abandoned from its isolated location and its appearance. There was no other structure with two miles of it and it looked on the verge of falling down, its timbers sagging and rotting and its paint peeling. Still, the doors of the church were open and Sebastian could hear that someone was inside going about their business. Something drew him inside.

He found the pastor of the church, an old-fashioned dressed, redneck looking man, near a makeshift altar and approached him. "Can I speak with you, sir?" Sebastian asked, a bit desperately, hoping for a chance to unburden his feelings. "Yes, of course, son," replied the pastor, seeming surprised by and unready for company, but open to speaking with another soul. The pastor led him through a small door in the back of the church to a storeroom that doubled as his office of sorts.

The pastor had Sebastian sit in a chair in front of his desk and he sat down behind it. "So, what can I do for you, son?" asked the pastor, concerned and eager to help. "You seem very troubled by something."

"I did something very bad today...something completely out of character for me," Sebastian painfully explained.

"I see," nodded the pastor. "Go on."

"I got very mad at my girlfriend...the girl I really love...and I assaulted her...hitting her in the face so hard I knocked out a tooth," Sebastian continued.

"That is very serious," responded the pastor, rubbing his chin with troubled consideration.

"Something drew me in here...maybe a chance to unburden myself...get my guilty feelings off my chest...to someone," said Sebastian.

"I'm glad you came in and talked to me," the pastor smiled with genuine compassion.

"I feel like what I did is almost unforgivable," said Sebastian, looking very ashamed.

"What you did is very bad...but I think God can forgive you," the pastor assured Sebastian, "If you are willing to truly make a sacrifice to him."

“I’m willing to make whatever sacrifice you ask. I came in here hoping that there was a way that you...God...could help me forgive myself and face up to what I did...to my girlfriend...to the police...whoever,” Sebastian almost plead.

“Good, son,” smiled the pastor again, pleased at Sebastian’s answer.

There was a silent pause, as the pastor seemed to think long and hard, pondering how to help Sebastian. “Give me your hand, son...the hand you hit your girlfriend with,” the pastor finally requested, Sebastian somewhat puzzled. “This hand?” Sebastian asked, wavering a little, but showing the pastor his right hand.

“Yes, son. Give me your right hand...the offending hand,” directed the pastor, his face intent and full of authority. Sebastian hesitated, and the pastor insisted, “Please, son...do what I ask. This is important. I want to help you.”

Sebastian was unsure and slightly shaking, but held out his hand to the pastor. The pastor grasped Sebastian’s right hand in his left hand, as if to pray with him or console him, Sebastian feeling slightly relieved. In an instant, though, the pastor forced Sebastian’s hand down onto the desk between them. Before Sebastian could react or try to pull his hand away from the man’s grasp, the pastor pulled a large, machete like knife, the kind used to clear brush in the backwoods, from somewhere under the desk with his right hand and in one stroke chopped off Sebastian’s hand at the wrist.

Sebastian screamed in shock and pain, blood pouring from his wrist. “What in the hell did you do?!” Sebastian bellowed in agony and disbelief, trying to stop the bleeding by holding his shirt to the wound with his other hand.

“You have made a payment to the lord for your sin,” said the pastor, a look of religious ecstasy and invigorating purpose about him. “I have taken away the offending part of you and given it to God.”

“You’re crazy!” Sebastian shrieked, rising unsteadily from his seat at the desk.

“If another part of your body offends God, return and we will make further payment...further sacrifice,” said the pastor in a kind of chant, raising his arms to the ceiling as if in the glow of grace. “We will buy your eternal soul away from the devil...one part at a time.”

Sebastian ran from the office and the church, already growing weak from loss of blood, and now pleading for help of a different kind.

Assassin

Jon Brunette

Billy Benson sat on the weedy hillside, looked at the well-kept courtyard below him, and loaded his powerful rifle. Through the riflescope, he saw the wood podium, metal bleachers, and stands that held light bulbs. Crosshairs brought people into focus. It would focus the target, as well. Billy could pinpoint anyone. The crowd

amassed slowly, orderly, like prisoners into the jailhouse chapel. They walked neatly into thirty rows, and sat comfortably in bleachers, about to listen to the black man.

That black male had won the position of Governor. Now, he wanted the White House. Only assassination would stop this Governor's powerful allure. Nobody could dispute that Randolph Jackson could hypnotize audiences magically, with his thick baritone and hands brought slowly but strongly before him. Somehow, he could sway minds with words. People did what he wished, happily. Some people just possess that ability, and especially when they handle it properly. Usually, they lead with popularity, like the fraternity jock with the liquor tolerance.

When it happens, and people believe words spoken aggressively and yet somehow gently, intelligently and emotionally, by a particular individual, the word "charismatic" finds usage. Nobody rises swiftly to lead powerful countries without likeability and charm. Wealth won't hurt, but it won't help. People want to hear, obey willingly, and trust leaders of wealthy nations. One man has to stand powerfully, bring worries of his hungry followers to the forefront, and seduce voters like a blonde temptress to a teenaged virgin. It looked possible with the black male on the wood stage that stretched enormously before him. Momentarily, he would stand behind the fuzzy microphone, spread his beefy arms, and speak lowly, but passionately, until he wrapped everyone in vocal blankets. Then he would likely heighten his tone, and bring the troubles of his people, and all people, to light like a brightly lit lighthouse beacon that just found millions of lost ships in choppy waters. When he spoke, wherever he spoke, hordes would cheer and yell and hold banners that announced his goal boldly. Like all presidential candidates, he wanted to hold naïve but needy minds, like those in the metal bleachers and everywhere, inside his thick dark palms.

Minutes passed like hours. Billy watched patiently from the hillside, behind several jagged rocks. Governor Randolph Jackson, aged fifty years, in wool blue suit and silky red tie, walked proudly into the open auditorium. Sunshine glowed brightly off his baldhead. Finally, he stood by the wood podium, by a pudgy man who wore equally powerful attire. Shortly, Governor Jackson would begin the well-written speech that would insight applause, maybe laughter, but probably win the election.

Billy didn't like the black male, and didn't want him for President Of The United States, unlike everyone who sat and watched. When the state had slashed budgets and cut his job in the local police unit, Billy had trouble paying his house payments. Shortly afterward, he had to relocate to a small rambler instead of his three-level home. Later, he found employment that he didn't enjoy as deeply. When the black candidate stamped the VETO on the bill that would have allowed Billy to stay employed in his police job, Billy thumbed his nose disrespectfully at the colored hopeful to the White House, and vowed to stop the African-American politician. With Billy behind the cause, Randolph Jackson would never attain what he wanted badly. It would just take action, whatever the punishment to him or anyone.

Still, Billy understood his new job. New paydays kept him in wool suits, not silk, but then, he had never worn silk before. He wished for millions but needed little. Yet, he couldn't forget about Randolph Jackson, and the loss of his job in the

local police force, like a child jailed by a vindictive parent. Naturally, the blackness of the local Governor didn't harm Billy. He merely hated the politician for abuse of position. Anyhow, it became abuse of office to the steady-handed shooter, and with rifle in hand Billy wouldn't allow it to happen to the position he wished to obtain.

Currently, the flabby moderator in the brown suit stood at the podium, talked briskly, but with words aplenty, while his three chins bobbed, about to hand the fuzzy microphone to the black man that Billy despised intensely. It took but a moment and Governor Jackson stood proudly, with head held highly, and splayed his thick arms triumphantly. He waited without knowledge for the bullet to tear through his windpipe. Through the scope, Billy trained his bead on the shiny bald-head. One bullet alone could rip through Randolph Jackson, blow his skull into pieces that would look like cantaloupe filled with firecrackers, and kill instantly. One bullet would kill him. Aimed perfectly, it would take but one bullet.

Before Billy acted, he heard thunder. It echoed loudly through the steady breeze. Skies shone blue above the crowd, and looked like a beach ball turned inwardly. One lonely cloud played lazily with the humid sunshine. No cause arose for thunder. No lightning shot anywhere. Still, Billy could see that rain would fall quickly. It began with the loud bleat beyond the crowd.

Aiming the massive rifle, Billy spotted bent branches, behind the wood podium where Randolph Jackson stood solitarily. They shook violently, above bushes and odd-shaped stones, behind the wood stage. Quickly, Billy pulled the trigger. Thunder echoed loudly through the empty blue skies. Overhead, birds flew wildly, and chirped squeakily. They vanished swiftly, before Billy sheathed the rifle. Like expected, and like his employer wanted, his shot worked perfectly.

One bullet ripped through the skull, like a cherry bomb inside a ripe cantaloupe. It broke bones quickly. Blood splattered pinkly amid the trees. The breeze whipped softly, for the moment. With a thud, the bulky male in the pointed hood with the eyeholes toppled limply. He landed on his back, ninety yards from the podium. He landed ninety yards behind the presidential hopeful who had three Secret Service agents on him. They looked burly, reacted speedily, like well-tailored linebackers on the quarterback in the Super Bowl. Gripped in his white hands, a black rifle with scope clicked quietly on the boards. With the lengthy wood track built solidly, beyond the stage like rings around Saturn, which evaporated into the metal bleachers, the impact didn't bend or warp boards. They shook, but didn't break.

Then the breeze became a fiery wind, to blow the assassin back to where he belonged, and probably from where he had come originally. When it did, it brought the white hood partially over his torso. Gold sparkled below the robe, below the hood, and the badge belonged to the local police department. It was plainly visible to Billy, looking through his riflescope. One bullet alone had stopped the murder attempt. And Billy just packed his gun like a well-trained Marine, in which he had been enrolled before the police job that the Governor had jeopardized, before Billy found employment in the SWAT Team. Now, he wore a bulletproof vest and held a rifle, with the intent to kill, like he had in the United States Marine Corp. He had just gone home.

With static, the unit on Billy's arm bleated. Billy said, "With the shot I had, I couldn't miss." The Secret Service agent stood behind the crowd on another hillside. He said, "You performed expertly, William, like we had hoped." Through the static, Billy heard the Secret Service agent announce, "One bullet killed, professionally, like we wanted. We hired you for the SWAT Team exactly for that reason. Unlike some who apply for the Swat Team, you kill emotionlessly, like a paid assassin. It took a paid assassin, who kills legally, to kill an illegal killer properly." Then, Billy walked down the hillside, where the Governor waited happily. In view, he nodded approvingly to Billy.

Although it didn't suit him, Billy smiled, tightly. Grudges held against the Governor vanished like wet dew in daytime humidity. When he landed, finally, by the wood podium, Billy told the Governor, "I will vote Randolph Jackson for POTUS after all." He told the man who personified potential: "Despite faults, you will sit comfortably in the Oval Office, and command properly. With the White House, which stands regally between grand statues, you, Governor Randolph Jackson," Billy said, "will blend like black coffee with white cream. When hired, you will fit perfectly, and allow politicians and voters to mix with your style. It will happen with approval by everyone in your country. After all, the United States belongs to you, to lead heroically, and you will lead heroically." Those words came with a tight handshake to a black man whom Billy had hated previously.

He had hated the black male for another reason than the hooded male whom Billy had killed had. Some judge not by skin, but personality. And Billy put little behind race and all behind intellect and passion. They who live tolerantly live successfully. And Billy now lived happily, finally.

Regret Of The Drunken Text . . .

Brian Anthony Hardie

Agnostic fears believe faith is a
Love not able to be torn from. The innocent
Houses lined in the park deceive the
Scripts written by a
Homeless sensation. From coast to coast,
To the avenues of sorrow, mistaken foods are sold on
Circumstance, tattooing the sensitive
Voices on the opposing spectrum. Abrasive pigtails send
The ill fated intentions of souls suffering
The harm to hurt. Informal attires of the poets sadness
Is to forever confide in the hope of another. She
Foreshadows the loss through the sensation of
Desolate theories. Dripping from the pipes of my
Stomach, burns are lathered with oils of hostile
Scents. Thus Pain is cured with the flexible arm of
A single-handed solitary aid. Consider the oceans filled
With perished liquors stimulating the fluids of imagery.
Indecisive Florida shores observe the indulgence. Glossy
Eyes do not intrude on chances,
Only the original daring plead.

The Red Hooker Room Nathan Hahs

1.

I guess I first became aware of it last winter. I had been seeing Makenzie for a couple of months and had been over to her house a number of times before I noticed the door. It was a regular, plain door at the rear of her kitchen. When I asked her about it, she said it was nothing. She then excused herself and left the room. Having never noticed the door before, I was curious. I walked over and turned the knob. It was locked. I looked down. I looked up and there was the key. I reached for it, but Makenzie returned and I played innocent.

Two weeks later I am back at Makenzie's and I ask her what the door leads to. Again, she said it was nothing. This time I took the key. I didn't think she noticed, but the next day she asked me about it. I confessed. She said it was important to her and asked for it back. That evening I went to her place and returned the key. She asked if I had been in and I told her that I had not. She seemed very relieved to know that I hadn't gone in. This, of course, piqued my curiosity even more.

The next morning I broke into her house using the credit card method. I took down the key and cracked open the secret door. There was no light switch that I could feel, so I opened the door all the way. What I saw was both bizarre and frightening. The entire room: walls, ceiling, and floor were covered with pictures of Jesus. What little paint I could see was red. I walked into the center of the room, where there was a cinder block with one red candle on it. Beside the candle was a box of matches. I took one more look around the room and quickly left. I locked the door and replaced the key. I almost wished I hadn't gone in. Now I couldn't plead ignorance.

2.

Makenzie did not see pictures of Jesus. She did see the cinder block and the candle. The pictures she saw were of an old woman dressed in black, sitting in a rocking chair with a black cat on her lap. The woman from whom Makenzie had bought the house had told her that the back room was special. This woman was a prostitute. When the closing on the house had been settled, Makenzie had gone into the special room.

A week later, Makenzie had gone back in the red hooker room. Again, she saw the pictures of the old woman. She lit the candle and closed the door. As soon as the latch caught, the pictures came alive. The women began to speak. Not just one, but all of them. Each was telling Makenzie something different. Makenzie sat on the floor, listening. Her surprise led to confusion, which led to panic. She blew out the candle, ran out of the room, and locked the door behind her.

Makenzie was new to town. She had no one to tell. She was overwhelmed by this special room. She did not know how to best handle the situation. She had never given any thought to the supernatural, but now she was living with it. She spent the next several days trying to make sense of it, but could come to no conclusions. She decided she would go back in the room.

3.

She knew. I don't know how, but she knew. But, I was perplexed because she asked about pictures of an old lady sitting in a rocking chair. I didn't know what she

was talking about and I told her so. I told her that the room was covered with pictures of Jesus. She gave me a strange look. I told her that this room had pictures of Jesus. After a lengthy conversation, we decided that everyone must see something different. She asked if I had lit the candle. I told her that I hadn't. She told me that if I wanted to take it to the next level, I should light the candle. I got up from my chair and approached the door. I unlocked it and went in. Jesus was everywhere. I lit the candle and closed the door. It happened. I was surrounded by a Jesus symphony. It was mesmerizing and terrifying. I stood motionless, holding my breath, taking it all in. When I began to feel faint, I blew out the candle and stumbled to the door. Makenzie had a huge grin on her face. I was dumbfounded, but at the same time hungry for more. We agreed to tell no one about the red hooker room.

4.

Summer turned to fall and the temperature was getting cooler and cooler. Makenzie sipped her coffee as she pondered the red hooker room. Today was the day. When she finished breakfast and dressed for the day, she took the key and unlocked the door. She put the key in her pocket as she walked over to the cinder block. She lit the candle and shut the door. The pictures came alive. This time she knew what to expect. She spent all morning in there trying to discern the meaning of what the old women were saying. As interesting as it was, she eventually grew tired and blew out the candle. This room must have some purpose, she thought. She also wondered why the prostitute would sell the house. She needed to talk this over with someone, but she did not know who.

She drove to the first bar and ordered a white russian. To her surprise, a dark-haired man told the bartender he would pay for it. This man was seated two stools away from her. When Makenzie smiled and thanked him, he moved closer. They struck up a conversation, but Makenzie said nothing of the red hooker room. After another round of drinks, they agreed to meet the following night at that same bar. At home, she stood in front of the door, pondering the questions that had arisen earlier. As the night wore on and she found no answers, she decided to go to bed.

5.

I met Makenzie that winter at the bar. I paid for her white russian and sipped my whiskey. We quickly became friends and spent a great deal of time together, mostly at my house playing cards. We had a great time, but I felt she had a secret.

A few weeks later, I figured out what it was. She had something locked in the room off of her kitchen. She said it was nothing, but I was resolved to find out what it was. I tried to probe her for information, but she would give me nothing. I would have to handle this on my own.

6.

The third time I went into the red hooker room, Makenzie went with me. As before, the pictures of Jesus talked to me, but she saw the old woman, who spoke to her. Neither of us could make out one clear voice. Everything blurred together. We both soon left the room and had a drink. Makenzie said she didn't think she would go back in. She just couldn't make any sense of it. I did not tell her, but I had every intention of going back.

The next morning, when she was gone, I went back in. This time I heard one

voice above the others. Jesus was saying, "I am for you." It was coming from the picture I was standing on. I knelt down and carefully removed it. I blew out the candle and went home. I hung the picture over my mantle and went to work.

That evening I went to Makenzie's. I could tell she was upset. She interrogated me about the missing picture. I told her that the picture had told me to do it. She became quite angry and asked me not to come back over.

7.

I drove home, feeling melancholy that I had lost a friend. I pulled into the driveway and a chill ran up my spine. I wondered if I had taken this too far. When I opened my front door, I was taken back. All of the walls, as well as the floors and ceilings, were covered in pictures of Jesus. The picture I had taken from Makenzie's had multiplied and taken over. The pictures began to speak. It was deafening. I walked through my house and everything was covered with pictures of Jesus. I became sick and ran to the front room. The voices stopped, but there was a horrible ringing in my ears. My head was spinning and I felt like I was about to vomit. I stepped outside and closed the front door behind me. I could not go back in there. I should not have taken the picture. I bent over and threw up. I made my way to my car, completely delirious. Then, I drove here.

Bent and Venting

Adrian Ludens

I know they're out there, skulkin' around in the woods. Hidin'. Waitin'.

They're federal agents lookin' to bring me in. Granddaddy would've called 'em 'Revenuer Men'.

They won't take me without a fight; that's for damn sure. Every gun I own is cocked and loaded.

My daddy taught me about runnin' moonshine. Granddaddy taught him. I ain't about to throw away three generations of hard work 'cause of somebody's idea of what is and what ain't right.

So here we set, hunkered down, waitin' on the feds. They're out there. I know it.

The reason I know is 'cause of the roof on the barn. One of the ventilatin' pipes above where I got the still set up is bent off-kilter. Gotta be from one of them government men crawlin' around up there, spyin' on my operation. Like I wouldn't notice the damage he done.

I pried the cast iron door off the wood stove and rigged it with rope. I tied it around Ruth's chest and told her to wear it for protection. I know all about them sharpshooters. Climbin' trees and shootin' folks who are just workin' to make ends meet. Sonsabitches!

Sorry. Being cooped up's got me pretty bent, and I'm venting.

Ruth says we're fixin' to run out of food soon, but we ain't leavin' the house. We're gonna sit tight. Stay buttoned up. Let the feds make the first move.

I know they're out there, skulkin' around in the woods. Hidin'. Waitin'.

So am I.

Nothing

Sarah Bailyn

I've been standing on the parkway for at least five minutes, staring. The cold seeps through my unsuitable jacket, which adds to my general sense of numbness. I was so sure it would still be here. Obviously not literally, but I thought I'd be able to feel it somehow. Like an invisible sci-fi force field maybe, or a change in atmospheric pressure. But there is nothing. I'm shocked by the nothingness. There had been a *house* here, for God's sake. A fairly sizeable three-bedroom house. It was a big solid thing, filled with smaller solid things: furniture, dishes, books, toys, pencils. They were there for so long you'd think they'd have left some kind of echo. But there is only a patch of dirt, scattered with brick dust and stones.

The empty space gapes like a missing tooth between the houses on either side. I am suddenly overcome by the sensation that the whole place has been stolen. Stolen is better, a momentary shock and a feeling of violation, but stolen things can be recovered or replaced, a life rebuilt. That can't happen here. The house is in pieces and its contents sold at auction. This in itself is almost incomprehensible. The parts that had formed the whole had seemed so firmly locked together, like the parts of an atom stuck to one another with electromagnetic force. But now they're all dispersed, separated and weak. A table here, a cupboard there. I suppose most of them were period pieces anyway, ripped from their original settings and sold to my parents at antique fairs, so I suppose it's only right that they should separate again and re-form with other pieces in other homes. But that's a broader view than I can presently manage.

I walk along the borders of the lot. I can't bring myself to walk across it, right *through* the house. I concentrate on practical things, to control the force-10 gales blowing around inside my head. I pace out where the living room had been, the dining room that was used twice a year at Thanksgiving and Christmas, the kitchen. I put my hands up and trace the outline of the upstairs bedrooms. There was my room, facing out the side. In that room I cried every summer because I didn't want to go to camp, and in that same room I cried two months later because I hadn't wanted to come back.

It had been a small room, as bedrooms go. More an extension of the space inside my head than a three dimensional box. Green and yellow. Who chose that? Maybe a leftover from the previous inhabitants. I wonder if they ever drove by the house, just to see how it was, whether we'd done anything to it.

Eventually I lower my eyes. I'm ready to go in. Through the doorway, of course. I'd feel like a ghost going through the walls. I turn right and go into the living room. A beautiful room, but too dark and quiet for anyone to spend any time in, like a Victorian parlor. I quickly move through it to the family room, just as everyone did when it still existed.

I'm standing in what had been the most cluttered, unlovely room in the house.

It was also the room everyone spent the most time in, by far. I can see my mother sitting in her chair, coughing and clearing her throat. Dad is slumped in his, dozing, the cat on his stomach. Hour after hour of television had poured out into this room. The dirt here is probably toxic.

Millie's red two-door pulls up at this point. She looks pale as she gets out. She smiles, a bit tentatively. Is it OK to smile, she's probably wondering.

"You'd think the tree would have fallen," she says. The oak that had leaned against the house for years is still there. Dad's birdfeeder hangs off it like a plumb bob.

I say, "It was my escape route, you know, in case anyone ever broke in."

"I planned on playing dead." She hesitates, shocked at what she said, then continues to walk towards me.

"Wait!" I call.

"What?"

"You can't walk straight through."

"Why not?"

"Doesn't it feel weird?"

"Not really." Millie has always been a pragmatist.

Not to be outdone, I hold my arms in front of me for protection and walk straight across. I feel ungrateful, like I'm belittling everything my parents worked for.

I am astonished at how quickly I can walk from one side of the house to the other. It's only a few steps. How cramped life is! We tread the same small circles over and over again, like an ice skater practicing figure eights.

"We should've moved," says Millie. "This wouldn't be so hard if we were army brats."

"I just can't get over the fact that the house is simply not here anymore," I say. "*Not here*. How can it not be here? I feel like I'm in some kind of alternative universe that's exactly the same as ours, with the exception of the house."

Millie kicks the tree. "It's in your head, though. And mine."

I feel dizzy. I can't carry it all in my head. It belongs out here, locked in upholstery and carpeting.

"But in my head I'll forget things. I'll forget whether the downstairs bathroom was white or blue. I'll forget where the crack in the front window was. And when I die, that's it, gone forever."

Millie starts to cry.

"No one will ever say, 'The Perrys lived there.' The older daughter had the smaller bedroom, but she'd chosen it herself, age two. In 1978 her parents attempted to lacquer a slice of pine tree to form a coffee table, as was the fashion. Half-finished, the slab sat in the basement for the next twenty-five years. In 1987 Mrs. Perry finally threw out her orange La-Z-Boy and bought a leather one."

"Stop it, stop it." Millie pleads with me. The cold air makes vapour rise from her tears, like a soul from a body. "Everything has to go sometime."

I turn to her. I'm nearly shouting. "Why does everything have to go at once? Why couldn't we get rid of a few things at first? Take our time over it.

Then sell the house.”

“Why are you making this so hard?”

“It *is* hard!”

Millie screams, “*You* wanted to get rid of it all, Marsha, not me! *You* said we’d make more money on the empty land. *You* sold all the stuff!” She sobs into her hands.

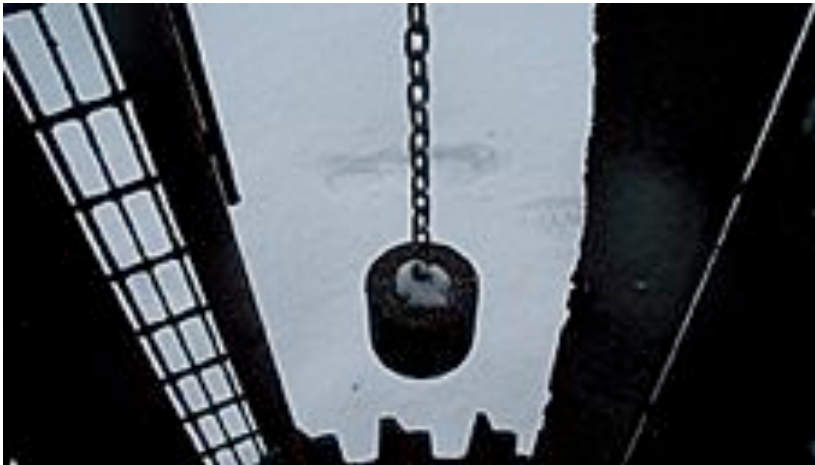
I feel exiled. As if the world was a place I’d been on holiday, but now I’m stuck there.

We sit in Starbucks for most of the afternoon. Always the rebel, I order tea. There’s no paperwork to sort through; we hired someone for that. So we just sit there, not saying much. Millie watches the snow come slanting down. I stir my tea. It’s like we’re sitting shiva for the house.

At about five, my brother-in-law phones. Apparently Jonathan, my sister’s little boy, isn’t feeling too well and wants his Mommy. Millie starts to tell him she’s busy but I shake my head and mouth, “It’s OK. Go home.”

I leave soon after she does, and go back to my apartment downtown. It’s cold inside. I never did get around to asking Dad how to bleed the radiators. Grabbing a comforter I wrap myself up on my ancient couch. I still can’t cry, but maybe I’m getting close.

I sit for a long time. A familiar wave of guilt washes over me. My parents did not do anything to deserve this. Not to say they were ideal care-givers – far from it – but they loved and provided for us. I’m not sure why I’ve always regarded their house on Theobald Street as a kind of supernova, a collapsed star with infinite gravity that I couldn’t approach without getting completely sucked in and destroyed. So I stayed away. But in fact my rebellion was always rather weak and unsuccessful. My many and small rejections hurt my parents without truly setting me free. Would I finally feel free now? Both they and the house are gone, and soon I’ll have some money in the bank. This could be a whole new beginning. But in fact, it feels much more like an ending. Not even a real ending, one with fireworks or epiphanies or a marriage. Just the frustrating type that dwindles down, distracted, unresolved, slowly petering out to nothing.



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