

THE PROSE SECTION

CHILDREN, CHURCHES & DADDIES
SCARS PUBLICATIONS & DESIGN
TEN YEAR EDITION

SIDE B

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editor's Choice Award Winner

David Seals-McClellan B3

Lance Fischer B22

Xanadu *art* B30

D.B.Rubin B31

Melanie Locay B38

Scott Whittier B47

Julie Lein B53

art B56

Clarence Fischer B57

Janet Kuypers B60



SCARS PUBLICATIONS
EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARD WINNER
DISTRACTION

DAVID SEALS-MCCLELLAN

I drove up to the supermarket I guess around 11:30 at night. It was Sunday and there was one of those thick heavy fogs that came suddenly and lay on the city. Sunday nights were especially lonely for me. The entire city was like a graveyard, mourning the loss of the weekend. The streets were especially vacant tonight.

I pulled my car into the lot, having my choice of all the parking spaces. As I parked, a woman paced near the shopping carts, under the fluorescent lights. I looked closer to see what her problem was. She looked intensely grief-stricken. The rhythm of her pacing suggested she was close to the edge. I used to feel more kinship with people like this, before I met my girlfriend. I walked towards her, trying not to stare, but I couldn't help notice her face was red and swollen with tears. I chose a cart.

It felt good to enter a grocery store with a pocketful of money and no one around to get in my way. All this food for me! The doors opened behind me and in walked the sad lady. The light illuminated her face. Her face was beginning to wrinkle around her eyes and mouth. She was somewhere between thirty and forty. She looked Icelandic. She had dry, frizzy, medium-length blonde hair, shaped like a mushroom. Her eyes were small and slanted, almost Asian. She was pale except for her red cheeks. She looked distraught, but maybe it was just my imagination. I could get carried away sometimes.

I pushed my cart into the produce section and reveled in all the color. Only nature could create this. The sad lady followed, but continued down the aisle, drifting past without expression. She stopped at the nuts and began inspecting jars of almonds. I stood checking the pineapples for soft spots. She began to move down the aisle again, slowly. I tried to make out her ass but it was covered by her windbreaker. She turned the corner and was out of my sight. I placed a pineapple in my cart.

As I moved down the aisle, I noticed how many choices you had in an American grocery store. Everything screamed with color, hoping you would buy it. I rolled along the back row looking at the signs over each aisle. ‘Coffee, tea and spices.’ ‘Envelopes, stationary, greeting cards.’ To the right were promotional items. To the left was meat. A 13-inch beef tongue, wrapped tightly in plastic, lay next to a package of entrails. I felt sorry for that poor cow. Who would eat a cow’s tongue? Black folks. And Slovaks too. But to me, there was no way you could ever make that taste good. I thought of a headless disemboweled carcass lying on its side in some dark factory, blood and guts wasted, spilling out, the son of some poor mother cow, being rolled end over end by ignorant hands into some mountainous pile of carcasses, burned and creating a brown death-stench that filled the sky.

I felt wonderfully alone. When did you ever get the city to yourself? I traveled up the pasta and canned vegetable aisle, stopping to compare navy beans. Suddenly, the sad lady appeared again, pushing her cart towards me. I didn’t look directly at her, but felt her approaching. She stopped a few feet away from me and looked over pasta sauces. I still hadn’t looked at her, but felt she was flirting. I glanced at her for a moment but she “studied” a jar of sauce. There was only a can of almonds in her cart. She returned the pasta sauce to the shelf and walked towards me. As she passed, we both looked at each other.

She had an interesting face. Not pretty, not ugly, but interesting. It seemed to conceal sadness. I often wished I could rescue people. Make their pain go away. But it didn’t work that way. She was probably a good person. Maybe an enemy to herself, like all of us sometimes, but not evil. Maybe she had done some terrible things in her life, but who hadn’t? She was just a child, trying to make it through this mess, like the rest of us.

These were how I got my kicks, watching and imagining. I liked to guess people’s life stories. My girlfriend knew I did this and thought it made me more interesting. She never felt threatened, or at least never told me she was.

I moved back down the aisle, towards the rear of the store again. I came upon the dairy section and searched for the cheapest yogurts. I examined the labels, trying to remember if sugar-free was better than fat-free, low-fat better than no-fat, or if high protein was better than low carbs. Maybe low calories was what I was supposed to be doing?

The sad lady appeared on my left. She leaned forward and took a package of vegetarian cold cuts. She read its label like it was the Quran. I would have picked her up like a six-pack in the old days. But those days were over for me. In her cart now was a loaf of bread to go along with the can of

almonds. I pretended not to see her as she moved closer, still looking forward. Oh make your move already! The whole song and dance was bullshit!

Why did it have to be that way with women? Why didn't they just come right out with it? Why all the goddamned intrigue? Fuck "the chase." In my lifetime, I had missed out on many women who claimed they had shown their interest in me by gazing or smiling at me. Who was I, "The Amazing fucking Kreskin"?

There was still a sadness in her face that I wasn't imagining. Maybe she was at the age when one began to realize that the jaws of life held you forever. Maybe in the past she had suffocated lovers out of panic. It was probably all fun in the beginning. Laughter, sex. Then he probably stopped calling, causing her to call more. Her polite veneer would erode and he would charm and lie his way out of danger. Maybe there'd be more sex, until he stopped calling again. Then her anger would boil over spilling onto him, at which point he'd be out of patience and dispose of her in any number of ways.

I selected my yogurt, placed it in the cart and was off again. The front wheel wobbled as I moved away. I always picked the cart whose fucking wheel wobbled. I walked up the cheese aisle, stopping to pick up a nice smoked Gouda. As I got to the front of the store, no one was waiting, nor were there any checkout people. I moved toward the only register with a lit sign.

A short fat man named "Glen" appeared with a moustache, loosened tie and rolled up sleeves. He had been proudly serving me for seven years. What a waste of oxygen, I thought. "I was beginning to think the food here was free," I quipped. He smirked. "Actually, if you ever came in and saw no one around, you'd know we were being robbed and should call the police." I thought about cutting his throat, but placed my items on the belt instead. This guy had probably been whipped for thirty years. And all that was left was this fat petty dictator, who probably made misery for seventeen-year old bag boys.

I turned to lift the last yogurt out, when again the sad lady had appeared. She waited behind me, staring vacantly into space. A cheap bottle of red wine now stood in her cart alongside the bread and almonds. Crazy people food, I thought. The register totaled fifty dollars and ten cents.

Glen bagged and I counted money, when we both thought we heard the word "SOLO." We looked at each other, then back at the sad lady, who was examining magazine covers. We looked at each other, then he resumed bagging and I resumed counting. I double-checked the total and noticed that fifty dollars and ten cents, digitally, spelled "SOLO". I looked back at the sad lady who was immersed in Cosmo.

I paid Glen and pushed my cart through the doors. Walking to my car, I heard the doors open behind me. Out the sad lady came carrying a single bag. What kind of car did she drive? Loading the bags into the trunk. of my car, I continued to watch her, but she didn't walk to any car. She walked through the parking lot, past all the yellow lines and dumpsters, out of the lot and across the street.

I keyed the ignition, reversed, pulled out and headed for home. Driving up the street, I passed the sad lady walking on the sidewalk. The fog enshrouded her making her look ominous. I watched her in my rear-view mirror, taking my foot off the gas and coasting toward the curb. What was I doing? I watched her approach. As she neared she didn't veer away from the car, but kept walking, glancing over without much interest.

I surrendered my hands. "Miss...I just saw you in the store...and I really don't mean to scare you...but I wondered if you wanted a ride?" She slowed a bit, staring at me like I had just spoken Arabic. "I really don't mean to scare you," I said. "It's just dark and late and you really shouldn't be out here." She bent down to get a better look at me. "Besides, it's almost midnight and I haven't done my good deed for the day." She looked around inside my car, then at me. She stood up and I watched her belly come closer. She pulled the handle, opened the door and climbed in.

It scared me how quickly she got in. She sat down and looked at me, still without a word. "My name is Dave." I said, extending my hand. "Lorraine." I thought she said, though it could have been "Laurie Ann". She stared at me with her glassy Mongoloid eyes. She did not acknowledge my hand, so I withdrew it pretending to check it for germs. "How far are you going?" I asked. "LaSalle and Duquesne." she said. "Wow, that's a good six blocks. Did your car breakdown?" "No." she said. I put the car in drive and wheeled away from the curb.

We drove along in silence. I watched her peripherally. She studied the floor, the dashboard, the door, me, the back seat, like she had never been in a car before. It was odd that she accepted the ride, but clearly she was in her own tree. "Don't you feel endangered walking out here by yourself?" I asked, looking at her. She watched the bushes race past. "It's not far," she said in a whispery tone. "Do you drive?" I asked, for the purpose of gauging her normalcy. "No," she replied.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have a sad face?" She looked at me, then straight ahead, and began to tap her foot nervously. "No," she said bluntly. "But also a very pretty face." I added. She continued to tap her foot. We approached her intersection. "Somewhere around here?" I asked. "Right

there.” She said, pointing to a brown brick building. I pulled the car over.

She was curious to me. Unstable. I was more logical. Regulated. Merely a different kind of chaos. “Thank you,” she said with a fake smile, gathering her things. “You’re welcome,” I replied dumbly, “Be careful.” She climbed out and shut the door. I watched her become smaller as she walked away. How did she survive? I started to drive off, when I noticed she had put her groceries down and was searching her pockets. I waited. She began going through her purse, then turned it upside down, emptying its contents on the walkway. I turned the ignition off and got out the car.

I walked over to her and she was down on her knees, sifting through her junk. As I got closer, I could see her lips moving. When I was close enough, I could hear her scolding the items on the ground for hiding her keys. “You lose your keys?” I asked. She jumped up, startled, with a look of terror on her face. She was trembling. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” I said. She stared at me as though she didn’t recognize me. And who knows, maybe she didn’t. “Can I help you look?” I asked. She softened a little, then returned to her knees, sifting and talking to the items on the ground.

Her anger intensified, smacking and throwing things that were not her keys. Her breathing intensified as well. I scanned the ground quietly. “Why can’t I find my keys?!” she said beginning to panic. “WHY CANT I FIND MY FUCKING KEYS?!!” She stood. “WHY CAN’T I FIND MY FUCKING KEYS?!!” She reared back and kicked her purse like it was for the World Cup. In full frenzy, she tried to kick everything off the walkway, screaming dryly, pounding her fists into her thighs.

On a string, two dirty brown keys appeared on the edge of the walkway, next to the grass. I picked them up and asked her, “Are these them?” She walked over and took them without saying anything. She walked past all her junk, opened the gate and walked into the courtyard. As she walked, she talked to herself, using her index finger for emphasis.

I stuck my foot in the gate just before it closed. I slid the groceries in the way as a jamb. I quickly gathered all her belongings and put them into her purse. I hurried through the courtyard catching up to her just as she arrived at a door. “You know,” I said out of breath, “You really ought to get a key chain.” Her face was beet-red.

She opened the door and we entered. How aware of me she was, I didn’t know, since she hadn’t acknowledged me. Yet I followed. We went up a flight of stairs. I watched her ass as we climbed. Not bad. A little meat. It was all right. Its flatness made it look wider than it was. We stopped at the first door on the

left at the top of the stairs. She opened it and walked straight to the bathroom closing the door behind her. I didn't enter, but could hear her running water. I stood in the doorway with her purse and groceries, looking around.

It was simple and clean. Dimly lit. Everything had its place. A throw rug over a hardwood floor. An old couch with collapsed cushions. The kitchen was connected to the living room. 1960ish. I think it was a studio. No TV just an old boom box on a chest of drawers. It reeked of simplicity. A magnifying glass rested on a stack of magazines near the couch. A small bookshelf stood in the corner. On top of it were some small-framed pictures. Abstract art hung from the walls, adding a dark dimension to the room. The heavy smell of old furniture hung in the air, reminding me of a vintage clothing store or antique shop.

The bathroom door opened and out she came. She had washed her face and calmed down. She walked over to me, sullen, looking down at the floor. She took her groceries and purse. "Thank you." She said. "You're welcome," I said, "You okay?" "Uh huh," she said, nodding. "Can I offer you something? A glass of wine?" "Umm...okay." I replied, stepping inside. She closed the door. "I like your place. It looks very comfortable." She smiled faintly, turned and walked into the kitchen.

I wondered how she perceived what just happened? Had she blacked it out or was she fully aware? Should I ask? How did she perceive me? Did she have anybody who cared about her? There had to be someone, right? It would be very tough going through life without that. I began to feel guilty for being there.

In the darkest corner of her apartment, two large colorful paintings caught my eye. I walked toward them, checking the room for dried blood and pentagrams. One painting was of a giant pair of hands, connected by one arm. They were multi-colored and struggling to go in different directions. Another was of a worm that had been chopped into a million segments, and families of little people occupied each one. The segments were numbered asequentially.

Moving on, I discovered her bookshelf. A lot of standard feminine bullshit. The Brontes, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, Alice Walker type shit. I wondered if she had ever cut off a man's penis? I checked the segmented worm again to make sure it wasn't a penis. There were photos of her on top of the bookshelf. They seemed hidden or forgotten. She was younger, prettier and happier in all of them. In one, she stood smiling between two large females, hugging them. She had not been stomped on by life's boot yet.

She came into the living room drinking a glass of wine, carrying a wine

bottle covered with a plastic cup and the can of almonds from the store. "Did you paint those?" I asked, pointing to the pictures. She looked and nodded yes, setting everything down on the coffee table. "They're pretty good. Is there a story there?" She walked over to the paintings and looked at them very intensely. "I don't know...I did them a long time ago...I guess there could be." She returned to the table. Of course there was a story. Nobody just sat down and painted a conjoined hand or segmented worm for no reason.

She sat down and poured more wine into her glass. I joined her. She poured wine into the plastic cup and pushed it towards me. I checked to make sure there was nothing fungal or lysergic in it. I drank.

She got up and walked over to the dilapidated boom box on top of the chest of drawers. Many tapes cluttered around it. She inserted one. Some Edith Piaf-Marlene Dietrich-Nico bullshit began to crow. It depressed immediately. She returned to her seat. After a long silence, I asked, "Who're we listening to?" She sat chewing almonds. "I don't know her name." she said staring blankly. "It's very sad," I said. "Yeah," she said, "You could slit your wrists to this." She sipped her wine.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked. "Why?" she asked sharply. "I didn't mean to strike a nerve." I said, tired of acquiescing to her volatility. "You didn't strike anything. Do you really care how long I've lived here?" "I didn't say I cared. I was just trying to be conversational." "Then why ask?!" she spat, leaning forward glaring at me. Her eyes blinked rapidly and her jaws clenched. Her hands trembled as she reached for her wine glass. They shook so badly, I didn't think the glass would make it to her mouth. She continued glaring at me. Finally, she leaned back in her chair, still looking furious and tapped her foot nervously. Her head swiveled around the room while her eyes began fluttering stroboscopically. This must've been what they mistook for demonic possession back in the old days. She looked at me again, still enraged, put her glass down, picked it back up, drained it, then looked very melancholy. Her eyes became watery. She stood up and the tears came. She walked into the kitchen.

I sipped my wine and looked around the room. It was dark. She was like a young Mrs. Havisham. There seemed to be ten years of dust covering everything. She came out of the kitchen. Her face was red and sunken, but no more tears. She shielded her eyes with her right hand as if there was a bright light shining in her face.

She was worse than I thought. This was probably the longest anybody had ever sat listening to her who wasn't getting paid. Maybe she didn't know

if I was real or not. That'd be cool. I made fake binoculars with my hands and followed her in.

She sat down, still shielding her face. She began tapping her foot again. "I don't mean to get so upset," she said with a slight smile under her hand. "I just wonder how you can you tell someone you just met 'that you don't care about them?'" "Bad word choice on my part. I do care. I was just trying to make conversation." She was quiet.

"You read all those magazines?" I asked, pointing to the stack of magazines next to her. "Why is the male nature so vulgar?" she asked, still shielding her eyes. "Excuse me?" I asked, disbelieving my ears. "The male nature...it's vulgar. You're a male. Why do you think your nature is so vulgar?"

I almost said, "Fuck you," but then I remembered she was insane. I thought about it for a moment. "Hmmm," I said, "Vulgar? The male is a product of nature...and nature doesn't create anything it doesn't need...so what do you suppose the value of the male nature is?" "The tongue is a valuable part of the mouth, is it not?" "True." "Yet it's covered in saliva, is it not?" "True." "Yet there is more bacteria on the tongue than on the anus of a dog." "So men are a vulgarity, infecting nature?" I asked. She sipped her drink, tapped her foot and continued to shield her face.

"Why do you think the male nature is inherently vulgar?" I asked. "The male nature was spiritually violated by its own inception and therefore became intent on violating the spirituality of animals, women, the earth, in order to regain, redeem, reedify its own power. The female threatens the "ego", which again is a male construct, and ideologically exclusionary to the female...we don't really have an ego because according to your god, we have a lack. But once the "ego" was created it took over all male brains, like a plague and brainwashed them into believing they were formed in God's image and therefore entitled to seize spirituality back into their own ridiculous hands." "Are you a vegetarian?" I asked. That seemed to confuse her. "Listen, why don't we change the subject?" I asked, raising my glass. She made no acknowledgement, sipped her wine, tapped her foot and continued to shield her eyes.

"What are all those magazines?" I asked. She began singing with the music. "Gee, but I'm blue...and so lonely... I don't know what to do...but dream of you...there once was a time...when I called you mine " "You sound like you know what it's like to have had your heart broken." She ignored me and continued to sing. "Dreams don't come true...still I can't help but dream of you...that's all I do" She slurred her speech a little as she acted out the

words. She was in her own world. She took the desk lamp next to her and sang into it like it was a microphone. The light from it shined under her face, making her look twenty years older.

She gulped her wine and stood up clumsily. She sang and danced like a drunken clod, bumping into the coffee table, stumbling against the easy chair. Her eyes were very glassy. I watched quietly. I don't think I existed to her at that moment. "There once was a time...when I called you mine...then I lost you...and with you gone...life no longer seemed half so fine" She spun around and swayed back and forth. She was out of her smart mind. But maybe I was too. I stood up and started to dance with her. I put my hands on her hips. She definitely wasn't starving. She did not acknowledge me. She reached down for the wine bottle and took a big hit. It smelled horrible from sitting out too long. I took the bottle from her and took a big swallow as well.

I kissed her cheek and neck and she allowed it. I held her hips more firmly as we danced. "I sit here blue...and so lonely...I don't know what to do" I moved her over to the couch and sat her down. I climbed on top of her. I think part of the reason men were bigger than women was so they couldn't move when we got on top of them. She lie there without struggling, as I slid my hands down her pants and began massaging her vagina. She was lifeless, even though I could feel her vagina moisten. As I loosened my pants, I stole a quick glance. She lay there eyes wide open, mumbling perpetually. Only she knew what she was saying. I was surprised at her lack of resistance. I got her pants down and opened her legs. She stared blankly at the ceiling, continuing to mumble. I worked my penis into her and began thrusting.

She was right...my nature was vulgar. But how did she know? Maybe she wasn't that crazy after all.

SCARS PUBLICATIONS
EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARD WINNER

ROBINSON'S BIRTHDAY

DAVID SEALS-MCCLELLAN

Robinson sat on the stairs outside his apartment. It was a cool night. Inside his apartment was much warmer. It was quiet. No one around. Everyone was in bed ready for tomorrow. The cars driving down distant streets was the only sound. Robinson looked at the building across the street. Tomorrow, the sun would rise over it, as it had done for the past four years. It would set behind him, over the same spot on the ocean as it had done for the past four years.

The next day, Robinson sat in his chair looking out the window. It was late afternoon and very hot in his apartment. With his windows closed, the heat inside was unbearable. With them open, the noise from the Pakistani children playing outside was unbearable. He chose the latter. They dribbled a cheap basketball, running back and forth between the buildings screaming. They weren't even playing basketball, Robinson thought to himself. Where were these kid's parents, letting them run amok, making all this noise? Why wouldn't they take them to a park to keep them from disturbing all the hard-working tenants? Then Robinson noticed their parents were right there. Mrs. Raghbir and Zuhmed were laying out a sheet of unleavened nan on the driveway. How were the cars going to get in and out, he wondered?

Robinson swiveled away from the window and faced the TV. There was a talk show on that featured the scum of the earth, which would be followed by a "TV Judge" show that adjudicated for the scum of the earth, then a "TV Dating" show where the scum of the earth dated. Robinson watched because he didn't have to think. He thought about all the American soldiers who died for this.

He finished his beer and got up to get another. As he strode, he noticed the cheap brown carpet covering his floor. He hated it, but never seemed able to get far enough ahead to do anything about it. It had become a symbol of his inadequacy. He returned to his seat with a beer and took a long swallow.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Went the noise outside, startling Robinson in

his chair. Pop! Pop! Pop! It went again. Robinson leaned forward and looked through the blinds. One of the kids had a sheet of large bubble wrap and was jumping up and down on it. Because the complex was two buildings, divided by a driveway, every sound the children made amplified, echoed, and ricocheted between the structures. Robinson's eyebrows lowered angrily as he considered going out there. But there was no reasoning with them. They were from a third world country.

Robinson relaxed and turned back towards the TV. After four years he hadn't decorated his apartment yet. No art, one easy chair, a bed, an old stereo and a phone that never rang. He only used the phone to listen to personal ads and order pizza. In fact, since his one friend Bill had moved to Oakland, no one in the city had his phone number.

It was 5:23 PM and Robinson still hadn't said a word or left his apartment all day. He drained his beer and got up for another one. As he walked by the fan, it oscillated making the curtains dance a bit. The refrigerator wasn't making the beer cold, just lukewarm. He stuck four in the freezer.

Honk! Honk! Honk! Honk! Honk! Came a noise from outside that sounded like Canadian geese. Robinson walked to the window and looked out. A Latino man stood on the sidewalk, holding onto an old shopping cart with one hand and squeezing a bicycle horn with the other. The man and his cart were both middle-aged and raggedy. Inside the cart, were all kinds of Tupperware bowls, metal containers, canvass bags, filled with food. Honk! Honk! Honk! Honk! Honk! The man squeezed the horn again. Several children ran up to him and gave him money for corn cobs on a stick, snow cones and pastries. After serving his last, the man was off again moving up the street. Honk! Honk! Honk! Honk! Honk! Why didn't he use a bicycle bell, Robinson wondered? Wouldn't that disturb fewer people? But that wasn't the point though, was it? It wasn't about the smallest disturbance possible, it was about the greatest disturbance possible, because that sold more corn on the cob.

Robinson felt sticky and tense. The heat was stifling. He rose and went to the bathroom. He drank his beer while urinating. What a birthday. And it was almost over. He was tired of screwing whores. Getting blown in cars and alleys. That got old quick. There was always that deep remorse that followed. And feeling dirty. He remembered three whores ago when his rubber broke. He knew immediately, but kept fucking her because it was the best feeling he'd had in a long time. After he came inside of her, she screamed at him, pushed him and smacked him. If he hadn't caught anything, it was worth it.

Robinson flushed the toilet and leaned on the vanity. The room was dark.

He stared at the floor. Suddenly everything seemed very real. His aloneness. Feeling trapped. He wasn't supposed to be here. He was supposed to be happy. With a good woman, job and children. This wasn't the life he picked. This wasn't where he was supposed to be at age 33, friendless and alone on his birthday. The floor swelled. He became dizzy and stood straight up, shaking his head.

He leaned over the bathtub and turned on the water. He walked into the kitchen taking deep breaths. He took a beer out of the freezer and rolled it over his chest. It was cold. He rolled it over the back of his neck. Soothing. He opened it and took a big swallow. In the cabinet above the stove, he kept a little pipe filled with weed. A little birthday hit might just be the thing. He pulled it out, lit it and sucked away. He blew out a thin plume of smoke, then returned it to the cabinet. He walked back to the bathroom, stopping at the stereo to bend over and turn it on.

As he stood up, he felt something "pop" in his heart. Suddenly, his heart began to accelerate and the walls seemed to be surging and receding. His airway felt like it was closing and he was certain he was suffocating. He could no longer feel gravity under his feet and believed that the furniture, carpet and doorways were all conspiring against him. This was ridiculous, he thought. He massaged the skin over his heart to calm it down, but it didn't help. What the fuck was going on? Had someone slipped him acid? The heart would certainly explode if it continued to beat like this. He had to slow it down in a hurry. He tried to take a deep breath, but couldn't get much air in. He paced back and forth clutching his chest, terrified he was having a heart attack. It felt like it was pumping oxygen out faster than it was pumping it in. He tried to take several short breaths in succession, but hardly any air got through.

He went to the window and opened it. The fresh air relieved him for the moment...but then his heart began to race...and his breathing became constricted again. Robinson ran to the front door and stepped outside. Luckily, the children were gone now. He held on to the railing and rubbed his chest with the heel of his hand, using a deep circular motion. He tried to breathe deeply, but still, little air was getting in.

Robinson stepped back inside, frantically searching his mind and apartment for answers. He heard the bathtub still running, so he stripped off his clothes, dropped them on the floor and ran to the bathroom. He jumped into the tub and felt instant relief. He turned off the water and lifted his legs onto the wall in front of him. Ahhh! He was able to breathe. He took a deep breath and blew it out towards the ceiling. He noticed the ceiling seemed to be pulsing...and spiraling...and coming down towards him. He sat bolt

upright, his heart accelerating and lungs swelling again. He looked down at his chest and saw his heart doing the merengue. "I'm going to die -- I'm going to die," he thought and jumped out of the bathtub.

Robinson ran back into the living room. He struggled to put his clothes on over his soaking wet body. He noticed he'd forgotten to close the front door. It was getting more and more difficult to breathe. Fully clothed, he ran through the front door, out onto the sidewalk, clutching his chest. Once outside, he stopped and tried to compose himself. He began walking down the street trying to look as normal as possible.

It was working. His heart was slowing and his airway seemed to be opening again. But then the street started to tilt and he began to lose his balance. His heart-beat rose and his airway closed again. Robinson stopped and tried to breathe. A young black man was approaching. As he passed, he smiled at Robinson mockingly. This man was complicit with whatever forces were trying to kill him, Robinson thought. Robinson didn't want to die -- on Venice Boulevard -- like a dog. So he turned around and started back towards his apartment.

He was trying to navigate the swaying street, pretending nothing was wrong, when he noticed a teenage latina walking towards him, carrying a plastic grocery bag. As she passed, she too stared at Robinson, peripherally, smiling secretly, delighted at his misery.

He made it back to his apartment and went inside. He grabbed the phone and dialed 9-1-1. "Emergency" the operator answered. Robinson gasped. "I-I c-can't--b-b-br-breathe." "Are you having a heart attack, sir?" "I...don't...know...p-p-p-please send h-help." "Okay sir, I'm going to send an ambulance...are you at 3755 Cardiff?" Robinson gasped. "Yes." "Is that an apartment or a house?" "Apartment--number one." "Is there a security gate or anything?" "No." Robinson said wheezing. "Okay sir, I need for you to stay calm--." Robinson hung up and went to the freezer. He grabbed a package of frozen chicken breasts, placed it over his heart and returned to the living room. He laid down on the floor, putting his feet up on the chair. He opened his shirt and rubbed the frozen chicken breasts over his heart.

The phone call had made him feel better. The accelerated heart, shortness of breath, and doom were only coming in waves now. He waited for the ambulance, hoping they wouldn't use their siren.

And the next morning at 5:17 AM, the sun did rise over the building across the street. And around 8:02 PM, it set over the same spot on the ocean as it had done for the last million years or so...but no one seemed to notice.

SCARS PUBLICATIONS
EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARD WINNER
THE ALL-TERRAIN BICYCLE

DAVID SEALS-MCCLELLAN

I was glad I had decided not to drink the night before. I rode towards the bike path in silence, thinking. The chain circling the cog was the only noise. Early morning was the purest time of day because nobody was out. The sun was bluing the sky. My mind was fresh, my body rested and clean. This had been the first week in about 2 months that I hadn't gotten drunk or high. Because it had been about two months since my girlfriend confessed that she had fucked her ex-boyfriend.

It had come as a complete shock. I felt hollowed and dead. I pressed my lips together and stood as straight as I could when she told me. I even laughed to show that I wasn't hurt and in complete control. When it came to vulnerability, I always showed the opposite of what I felt. But nobody had ever figured that out about me. She hugged me with a face full of tears. But I just stood waiting for her to finish. She waited for me to hug her back -- an old female trick. But I wasn't having it. As remorseful as she seemed now, was as willing as she was to fuck her ex-boyfriend that night.

She was a sociopath, I told myself. The girl I was meant to be with could never do such a thing. I didn't make as much money as her ex. But I also didn't cut her down like he did. Nor did I work late all the time, then go to strip clubs on the weekends with my friends. I was better looking and in better shape than him too. I always thought we had good sex. I always made sure she finished before I did. I couldn't figure it out.

I spun my peddles in a low gear to warm up. Too early for tourists, I thought. Especially on a Saturday. The path would be free of morons. There'd only be hardcore cyclists out. Not that I was so hardcore. I didn't even own a touring bike, just a rickety hybrid. But I had muscular legs and liked to work hard. And Lance said, 'It's not about the bike'.

I arrived at the low-fence barrier, which lead to the bike path and

climbed off. I hoisted my bike over it then got back on. I turned on my stopwatch and dove down the descent leading to the bike path. Twenty yards in front of me, was a Greg LeMond/Lance Armstrong looking guy tearing up the road. He was about 6'0, lean and muscular, prominent ball calves, maybe 180 lbs. He wore a bright yellow jersey, open to his navel, with black cycling pants and a compact pump sticking out of his rear jersey pocket. His bike was delicate looking and moved forward effortlessly on a perfectly straight line. I, on the other hand, bobbed and weaved and fought my bike. I had zero technique, yet somehow was gaining on him.

He must've already done 100 miles, I thought to myself. There must be a reason he's going slower. I continued pedaling comfortably, still gaining on him. Soon, I had arrived in his draft, so I relaxed and focused and stayed on his back tire. I traveled undetected for a bit, but then he noticed my shadow and bore down, pedaling more intensely. I pedaled harder to keep up. If I could stay in his draft I might be able to keep up with him. I got lower on my bike, thought of my ex-girlfriend and pedaled more furiously.

I struggled to stay on his back tire as we dove down a hill. But he pulled away from me going down and coming up. We got back onto the straightaway and I worked to catch up. My legs burned, but I pumped as hard as I could until I caught back up to his draft. We were about 5 miles from the ocean and I didn't feel that badly. My competitive nature drove me. I was always interested in knowing where I ranked on the totem pole of life. I was going to try to stay with him until the ocean.

Another descent approached. And just like before, he pulled away going down and coming up, disappearing onto the straightaway. I shot down then labored up the hill. When I got back on the straightaway, I saw that he had opened up about a 15-yard lead on me. Again I sprinted, ignoring the burning in my legs and lungs, quickly fighting my way back into his draft. He glanced down and saw my shadow.

I imagined him being impressed and gaining respect for me. I felt pretty good knowing that the ocean wasn't too far away. Then a wave of insanity came over me. I veered around him, accelerated, pedaling with him stroke for stroke, then passed him. I chose not to look at him as I took my rightful spot in the lead. I kept sprinting hoping I could maintain it until the ocean. But it was going to be close. I looked down and didn't see his shadow. But I knew he was there.

Another descent approached ahead. I raced towards it, determined not to let him pass me this time. I built up more speed and dove down with

more momentum this time. But on my left, Lance sailed by without as much as a glance, returning me to my rightful spot in the rear. We both made it back up to the straightway with about 2000 yards left to the ocean. My legs were on fire and getting very heavy. I didn't know if I could make it the rest of the way, but I wasn't about to stop now. I stayed on his back tire, pedaling with him stroke for stroke. He wasn't slowing any, but he wasn't pulling away either. My lungs were heaving for air. With about 75 yards left, I veered around him again and accelerated past him. I pushed and pulled my pedals as quickly as I could, looking onto the thousands of screaming French, lifting me with their applause.

I glanced behind me and saw Lance still there. He looked at me pointed south, into the distance. I looked and saw Palos Verdes, 10 miles away. It just so happened that I was already going there, but not at his pace. The race was over. I planned to fall back to my true identity, enjoy the ride and let him go as far and as fast as he wanted. We both turned left at the overpass, with me still leading and headed south. But I slowed my pedaling and "let" him pass. I kept up the façade a little while longer and then fell farther and farther behind.

With Lance getting farther and farther ahead, it felt good to ride at a more comfortable pace. I noticed the sand more, the water, people rollerblading and playing volleyball. I loved the Southern California mentality – people spending entire days doing this. My ex-girlfriend would spend entire weekends hiking and camping. Some of my best memories of us came from hiking and camping together. We worked together on the preparations...driving...setting up the campsite...exploring trails...finding some beautiful place to sit. We even made love in a cave once.

I shook my head to clear the memories. It was time to move forward and get my shit together. I made an okay living as an architect's assistant, but it was time for a change. I wanted to go to Design Center in Pasadena, but it was expensive and I needed to take a few classes to get my GPA up. I wasn't young anymore. I didn't have all the time in the world left. I did want to eventually get married and have kids. Every time one door closed another opened up, I told myself. It was time for me to get my life together.

Lance was ahead about a quarter of a mile. One of these days I'd have to get a real touring bike to see how fast I could really go. Maybe I wasn't as bad as I thought. But they were so expensive and always got flat tires. I hated changing flats. And I always felt a little superior when I rode past a guy who was changing the flat on his expensive Italian touring bike. I wondered

how close I could get to Lance before the end of the path. I accelerated.

I focused on Lance, to see if I was getting closer or if he was getting farther. I passed a Latino couple on their bikes, glancing at them as I went by to see how the faces of mediocrity looked. I rode a straighter line and established a rigorous pedaling rhythm, pushing and pulling with my cleated shoes. Lance was getting closer. Maybe he was just lollygagging, I didn't know. But catching up to him would be a victory for hybrid bicycles all over the world. I got lower and pedaled harder.

I closed in on Lance, now just a few hundred yards away. I imagined the look on his face when he saw me on his back tire. This was the advantage of being in the rear, you always had a target in front of you. I passed another cyclist, a middle-aged woman wearing a sun visor. I blew by, imagining her being stunned by the sudden appearance of my muscular back, powerful legs and exemplary riding technique. She was in awe of my well-made machine and felt her own inferiority as I got farther and farther away.

I could almost spit on Lance now. But I stayed hidden behind him so he wouldn't see me. I arrived on his back tire and felt instant relief. But the path began to twist and turn and I struggled to stay hidden. As we rounded a big corner, he did a double take and saw me. He smiled, then crouched around his bike and exploded. I pedaled frantically to keep up, but was losing him through all the turns. The path straightened out but he continued extending his lead. He was too strong. He had a whole other gear I didn't. I got low too and pedaled with more ferocity. We weaved past several pedestrians and cyclists. But he pulled farther and farther away.

Then suddenly it was silent. My depth of perception began to fail. Everything around me was slowing down and turning yellow. I was feeling the life leaving my body, but I kept pedaling. My body was chilled. My legs were losing power. I felt as if I was watching myself from some out of body place. Drowsy, I could make out Lance looking back to check on me.

A public restroom approached on the left. I squeezed my brakes and slowed my bike to a halt. I dropped it on the sand, stumbling over it and staggered towards the restroom. My legs threatened to cramp with every step. I limped around the corner and went into the men's bathroom. Everything was spinning wildly. The walls of the restroom surged and receded. I stood awkwardly in front of the urinal and worked my penis out of my shorts. It looked traumatized, all mashed and twisted. I steadied myself and aimed for the urinal. A trickle of dark yellow pee squirted feebly into the receptacle. I was still panting, but my wits were returning. In the doorway, a silhouetted

figure appeared. "Are you okay," he asked. "Yeah..." I said weakly, zipping up and walking gingerly towards the door. It was Lance...

...As he walked towards me I could tell he was totally bonked. The first thing I did was lay him down on the sand in the shade and elevate his feet onto the bench. That way he could keep more blood in his brain. Then I asked him if he had any food. He didn't. I asked him if he had any money. He didn't. I asked him if he had someone who could come pick him up. He didn't. So I gave him a couple of gels and a protein bar and made him drink his water.

I praised him for his strength and asked him if he was always such a tenacious rider? He said that he wasn't, but that he had been wound up lately and was trying to take it out on the bicycle. He was an overachiever with muscular legs. I asked him why he was riding a hybrid? He said he couldn't afford a touring bike. I tried to keep him talking to help him stay lucid. I told him about all the times I had bonked. He asked me how long I had been riding. I hadn't realized it had been nearly twenty years now. He asked what I did to get into cycling shape. I explained to him different things like interval training, sprints, hill climbing. I explained to him the importance of diet, intensity, duration and consistency.

His legs were starting to cramp, so I got down and kneaded out some of his knots. He was grateful. He said he would like to get into real cycling shape and asked if he could come out and ride with me sometime. I told him that would be okay, but that he would need to get a touring bike. I told him he could buy one cheaply, used, and that he should save his money if he really wanted the cycling experience. I also told him when he felt better we could ride back up together and he could draft off me the whole way. He was most appreciative.

He wanted to know how far I rode. I told him it depended on the day, but that my long rides were anywhere from 50 to 75 miles. He wanted to know what routes I used. I told him I did some routes around Malibu, Encino, Ventura County, some I did inside the city. He asked where I had started from today. I told him West Hollywood, which felt a little strange, because it was like saying, "Hey, I'm gay." But he didn't seem to flinch. We talked a little longer about how we both came to LA, what we did for a living. He was an architect's assistant and wanted to get back in school. He told me how it was all computerized nowadays.

He seemed like a good soul. He was very calm and easy to talk to. I sat there listening, when suddenly something came over me and I just blurt-

ed out, "Would you like to go and have coffee sometime?" His eyes widened a little. There was a long silence and then he said very courteously, "No thank you." I could tell he felt awkward. He quickly changed the subject and went on about structural requirements for beach houses or something, but I didn't hear a word he said. I sat there shrinking with embarrassment, nodding my head, smiling. Then a little voice said, 'Hey, you asked a guy out for coffee, he said no, get over it.'

When he finished speaking, I asked him if he felt ready to try riding back up. He lay there, with his feet still elevated and said, "You know, I think I'm going to go over to the water and just veg there for a while, until I feel better. Then I'll try to make it back up." Rejected again, I thought. "Okay." I said with a smile, extending my hand to him. He shook it. "Do you have a card or a way I can reach you?" he asked. "For what?" I said. "So I can repay you for that bar and those gels." "Don't worry about it," I said. "Bring food next time and maybe one day it'll be your turn to rescue someone."

He thanked me again. I climbed on my bike and wished him luck. As I pedaled away, I couldn't help but wonder what came over me? I was usually a little more subtle. Could I have phrased things better? The guy probably wasn't even gay. I smiled and shook my head. About two hundred yards ahead, there was a guy riding north on a green Bianchi. He had good technique. Very low in the saddle. Kept his heels down. His legs were shaved too, the sign of a serious rider. We were riding into a mild headwind. If I worked hard now, I could sneak up to his draft and have an easier ride home. This was the advantage of being in the rear, you always had a target in front of you. Of course, once he saw me we might have to figure out who was the lion and who was the lamb. I put my head down and began to accelerate.

SCARS PUBLICATIONS
EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARD WINNER

LAST WORDS

LANCE FISCHER

This story has never before been told. And I don't mean for anyone to actually read this. I'll just write it down on this yellowing paper and be done with it. I'll tell it as it happened; no going around the truth. Maybe it'll help me somehow. More likely not.

I was raised in the suburbs of New York. Just about thirty miles north of the big city. My parents were of the best stock; they loved me much and there was never any tribulation that went unforgiven. We got on fine, is what I mean to say.

We lived in hilly Westchester County and in the winter I'd go sledding with my father on Parson's Hill. Sometimes even my mother came along.

One winter—nineteen thirty-four, if my memory serves correct—my father bought me a toboggan. It was a long wooden plank of a thing, but it was the fastest ride this side of the Hudson. Only problem was, there was no way to steer it. One day I'm sitting on my sled at the top of Parson's, looking down and preparing myself for the ride. That was some steep hill Parson's was, and only a fool would treat it lightly. Just as I was about to push off, some dumbwit jumps on to the back of my sled and forces us over the crest and down the hill at a breakneck pace. I don't think my dad even noticed. It was the most out of control downhill I had ever done. Looking back, it was also the most fun. But for some reason, it's hard to admit that.

The whole way down I never once looked back to see who had disrupted my routine. It wasn't that I didn't want to; it was just such a crazy run, what with us practically knocking anyone in front of us out of our way. The only thing I could be sure of was that it was a girl. I could tell by the way she was screaming and giggling, giggling and screaming. I wasn't happy about going down the hill so haphazardly mind you, but, nevertheless, I wore a big stupid grin on my face for the duration.

We came to a stop a little ways from the bottom of the hill, so I turned around to see who my passenger had been, but she was long gone. Looking further back, I saw that she had bailed out just short of the flat and was already starting her climb back up. My heart sank. I couldn't explain it, but it was true. She remained in my sight, as I trudged up Parson's myself, wondering who she was and why she did that. Then suddenly she turned and waved. I returned the gesture, all the while trying to see what she looked like under those bulky winter clothes and that great big hood she had worn. Undoubtedly, other, more assertive boys may have run over to make her acquaintance, but that just wasn't me. I must have been twelve then, still a simple boy who was never really interested in the opposite sex. Until then, that is.

She disappeared over the crest of the hill and I stopped, milling over who she was. After some time, my father's call broke my thoughts and I continued uphill to him.

That evening I sat on the floor by his feet as he listened to the evening news, a boy completely enraptured by the day's events. Soon after, I went to bed, still fascinated by the excited feeling stirring inside me.

Saturday morning came and went and there was no sign of the girl—my girl—on Parson's Hill (or any other hill in the neighborhood for that matter; trust me I checked). In fact, I can't recall seeing any girls out sledding that day. Maybe I'm wrong. It was so many, many years ago. An old man can't be expected to remember everything, after all. These days I've got to file away certain things in order to remember certain others. But one thing is for sure: that day I didn't find the girl I was looking for.

Winter bowed down to spring as Mother Nature woke from her slumber. The days were cool and the nights crisp and buzzing with life. I had mostly forgotten about my one-time passenger, as boys of that age tend to do with things that once so strongly held their attention.

On Wednesday nights I attended St. Michael's youth group. Can't remember what we actually called it. It was supposed to be a sort of religious recreation, but mostly we just played ball or chummed around with each other. On our last session, just days short of summer vacation, my friend James had brought his cousin Sybil in with him. And wouldn't you know it was the girl that had stolen a ride on my sled! I don't know how I knew, but I did. God works in mysterious ways, indeed.

That last session went on without any of the usual game playing. Instead, the instructors had us discussing things that we would like to do over

the summer. Lots of kids—mostly boys—boasted of the wonderful summer jobs they had lined up and the even more wonderful things they would spend their earnings on, others said they would play outside each and every day the summer had to offer before they set foot back into school, and others still said they would read every last book listed in the library's book club.

I wasn't thinking any of those things, but was busy watching. Sybil, as James had introduced her at the start of that night's meeting, was the subject of my observations. I took in as many of her features as possible: the green eyes, the reddish-blond hair, the light complexion of her skin, the freckles on her cheeks. She wore what looked like a school dress, although I wasn't sure if it was.

As countless voices droned on about their summer plans, I sat with hands under chin, staring at a girl I didn't know but desperately wished to. There was nothing sexual about it, I was practically devoid of any feelings of that nature. It just wasn't my time yet, I suppose. But there she was, looking right at me and smiling, deep dimples in each cheek. And then it occurred to me that I was staring and she was staring back. I looked away immediately, surely red as the strawberries Mom used to serve with milk.

She caught me looking at her two more times over the course of the evening. It didn't seem to bother her. In fact, I thought she rather liked it.

Our parents used to carpool when it came time to bring us home. We all sat around the foyer of St. Michael's in wait for them to pick us up. I was sitting alone on a bench, under a life-size woodcarving of Jesus holding out his right hand. After awhile, James came over and joined me. I wanted to ask about his cousin, but couldn't. Too shy and all that. But as luck would have it, she came bopping her way on over to us, sitting down right next to me. Boy was I terrified. I couldn't speak. James would say something pert and I would just nod or shake my head at him. Sybil thought it was amusing. Don't you ever talk? she asked me. I only smiled and nodded. After James had had enough, he popped me one on the arm and asked if I didn't have it bad for his cousin. And with her right there!

Of course, I offered no answer; I was too busy looking at the space between my shoes. James, in his romantic genius, got up and said he'd leave us two lovebirds alone. I didn't want him to go.

"Aren't you the boy with the sled...the one I rode with that day?" she asked after he had left. It amazed me that she knew or remembered and a smile touched the corners of my mouth. "It was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I managed.

"That was fun."

“Yes,” I said again.

“I’m staying with my Aunt Judy—” that was James’ mom, “—for the summer. Maybe, I’ll see you again.” It was only half a question.

“Sure,” I said, still looking at my shoes. Then, without knowing what hit me or how I managed, I actually said, “That would be nice,” and looked at her not quite in the eyes.

“Sibb! Mom’s here. Let’s go!” It was James.

And before I could turn my head to look at her fully, she planted a kiss on my cheek.

It sealed our fate.

We ended up getting married, the two of us did. Very early on, too. In the beginning it was good—it was heaven, quite frankly. We had loved each other without the slightest reservation. But we ran into trouble along the way. I won’t try to sugar coat it—I promised myself I wouldn’t—I’ll just state it plainly.

Sybil was hooked on the bottle. She was what we used to call a lush.

It did not happen all at once; it built up over time. Should have seen it coming though, and maybe I did, but we were young and strong and stupid, and so didn’t seek any help. We hid it as best we could; I hid it, mostly. I can trace that demon back to her first drink, a drink she took on the day of our wedding. We had married in the courthouse with only my immediate family present. (Sybil’s family was mostly gone and by then she had been staying with James for years.) Afterwards, we all drove out to O’Rourke’s for a little after-party and I shelled out the first round, a round that included my Sybil. She refused at first but I insisted, it being our special day and all.

It was the first real drink to part her lovely lips and the beginnings of a diseased wedge that grew between us.

We existed as best we could. Me working at the GM plant, her staying home nursing the bottle. We were never able to have any children. In retrospect, that was surely a blessing. Would’ve been a heck of a time for any child trying to grow up with her as a mother. We did try, though. I thought maybe she’d have no choice but to clean up her act. We never found out.

One day after work and a stop at the corner bar, I walked through the front door of our apartment in what was then Tarrytown. As I did, I heard Sybil talking loudly to herself in the kitchen. Her volume increased as I crossed what served as our living room and dining room, and stopped as the sound of my first step on the kitchen’s tile floor announced my presence. What I saw disturbed me, to say the least.

Her back is to me as she stands at the stove with all the burners working.

The old woman next door is pounding on the wall between us. There's white flour everywhere, somehow even on the ceiling. Our little electric fan is in the sink. Small white fragments of broken dish are littered here and there. The icebox is open and its contents are sprawled out on the floor, covered in wet flour. Slow condensation rises out of the box like steam. There's a loaf of bread on the counter with a deep handprint in it. And there's the booze. Bottles everywhere I look.

To this day I don't know how or where she obtained it all from. Maybe I'll ask her soon.

"YOU!" she screamed, as she turned to face me. She had draped a white apron over her head, but hadn't tied it at the back. Maybe she thought she was cooking or something, I don't know. What I do know is that she had a long knife deep in her chest. It was buried nigh to the hilt, but there was hardly any blood to be seen. Just a tiny red ring around where the blade had gone in. I was in disbelief. This couldn't be happening to me...to us. All the suffering we'd endured; all the feelings and apathy suppressed. It was all for her.

But I was relieved. It's horrible, yes, but over the years I've come to accept that the truth—the honest-to-goodness truth and not simply something close to it—was mostly like that.

Sybil looked through me with her angry eyes just like I had stabbed her myself. She pointed, jabbing her finger at me again and again as if a corpse identifying her killer. The red ring grew larger as she did.

Her eyes widened and she took a shaky step forward. I stood my ground, more out of terror than courage, as her accusing finger and wretched moaning summed up our pitiful circumstance: it was all my fault.

She fell forward on her face, driving the tip of the blade through her back.

Six and a half years later I was released from prison. Manslaughter charges; they couldn't get me for murder, and rightfully so. I had nothing to do with it. But, you understand, someone had to go down for it; the public demanded a conviction, and so a convict I became.

What ever happened to Sybil was left a mystery to me, except that she had not lived. Better to let it alone, I thought. Start fresh; forget the past; move on.

I moved out west, rebuilt my life. Maybe it was easier to do back then. Opening a business—nothing remarkable, just a small town hardware store—was what provided for me and my family. Yes, I remarried and had two beautiful children, although none of them are with us, not a one survived the accident that day.

The dream had been taunting me for three weeks by that time. It came

most every night, and was getting so that I didn't want to sleep anymore. I tried to go some nights without closing my eyes, but that only lasted two or three days and then exhaustion prevailed.

Every time the dream was the same. I would be driving—always alone—on Old Route 100 in Delaney. I would round the turn, passing the ball field on one side and the executive park on the other. The red fence would approach on the right and I'd travel with it that way for a clip. It would be leaning out at an impossible angle towards the highway and I'd shoot nervous glances its way, as if it was the last, weak defense against some marauding supernatural army. At one point, a few hundred yards before the fence came to end, there would be a great big tree in the grassy shoulder that extended from the fence to the roadway. My head lights would catch its enormous trunk as I rounded the bend. My car would charge on, steering wheel locked, heading directly for that rock solid tree-trunk. I would be screaming toward it, hopelessly slamming the brake pedal and gripping the wheel as hard as I could.

Then it would end, and I'd wake up flailing or yelling or both. There would be no more sleep after. My day, no matter the hour, would have begun.

Old Route 100 was an actual highway. We used it maybe once a year, mostly when traveling to and from the Delaney County Fair. Opening day was nearing by then, maybe three months away, and I had promised the children that we would go. But I'll be honest with you, I was deathly afraid. The plan brewing was to leave early morning so that we could return when it was still light out. That, maybe I could deal with.

Some weeks later my nightly battle with slumber was lost—as always was the case—and sleep overtook me. The next morning I woke, having been undisturbed all night. As suddenly as they began, the dreams had ceased.

Nine more dreamless days past and we piled into the station wagon. The drive over to Delaney was uneventful. Once there, we spent the day enjoying the fair's various games and shows and food, and, of course, each other's company. We had a wonderful time. I was grateful for that and I'll never forget it. Close to my heart, it lies.

As for the ride home, it was another story.

Trista and William JR. were asleep in the far back. They loved to sit back there and goof with each other and the passing cars. My wife and I spoke quietly in the front. We rounded the turn on Route 100, nearing the fence, and Ella, my wife, had gently taken my hand in hers. She knew about the dreams, you see. Up to that moment everything was well, I think, and I had even got up the nerve to look away from the roadway and give my wife a

thankful glance—just a little something to show my love. As I did, she pulled away and pointed out through the windshield.

“Lookout!” she yelled, and then the figure was upon us. I swerved to the right anyway, attempting to lessen the blow as best I could. But there was no impact initially, just a white blur, and for a second I thought we had avoided a great disaster. Then the true impact—the one that was inescapable—came just as I was marveling at our good fortune.

Darkness engulfed me.

When the daze finally passed, I saw the trunk of the tree from my dreams framed by the windshield, or rather where the windshield once was. The gnarled trunk was horribly close, as if there were never any engine in the car to begin with. I looked at it, a foot or two from my face, still dazed, when I spotted someone peering at me from behind. The interloper hid away just as I coaxed my slow eyes onto him. Or was it her? Consciousness drifted from me as I wondered.

Sometime later my eyes opened upon the gravel riddled shoulder. How it happened I cannot explain. I grasped the driver’s side door and pulled myself up off the ground. Vertigo overcame me, but the mangled hulk of the car offered good support. As my head cleared and my vision focused, again I spied the person behind the tree, and again the figure slipped away from sight, although this time through an opening in the fence. All at once I knew it was her that had done this.

“Stop!” I yelled, suddenly angry. So angry that I forgot about my family and the accident and everything else. I gave chase.

I passed by Ella’s body but did not pause. Her positioning was enough to tell me she hadn’t made it. Thankfully, the children were nowhere in sight. I slipped through the jagged opening in the fence, gouging my side and tearing my shirt. I bled and wondered how she had passed through so easily.

It was still very dark, not so much as in my dreams, but enough to make it hard to navigate the cemetery, for that is what I entered when I emerged from the other side.

I looked frantically from left to right, my blood boiling. Low lying fog wafted lazily around the headstones and few mausoleums. Terror had full grasp of me now but I ignored it, adrenaline and tunnel-vision calling the shots. Then I spotted her.

Her.

Sybil.

My first and truest love was wearing the white one-piece dress and apron

she had on the day she died, only now it appeared the drab gray of prisoner dress. The apron was worn correctly this time, and a black stain marked the place of entry the carving knife had made high on her chest.

My head pounded, each heartbeat sending a pang throughout, and I pressed the side of one fist to the middle of my forehead, shutting my eyes tightly. When again I looked, she was somehow farther into the night.

She stood, hands at her sides, motionless. I too remained still, waiting for her to give some sort of sign. What did she want me to do? Why should she torment me all these years later? "I knew it would be you!" I yelled accusingly. But it didn't seem to matter. She turned darker now, the color of menacing storm-clouds, and walked slowly downhill through the cemetery.

After a moment, I followed.

When I reached the place where she once stood, she had somehow traveled into the distance. It was an unexplainable phenomenon; never was there any detection of her moving away from me. She only stood as before.

Now I ran, wanting to catch her, to wring her neck, to kill her even though she was already dead. I charged at her, crying through clenched teeth, tears leaping from the sides of my face. As the distance closed, her miserable expression became evident. It did not alter my intention.

Finally upon her, I dove, meaning to catch her with both arms and drive her to the earth, but I passed through her like an arrow through the air and slammed head-first into the grave marker behind her.

Later, when I woke, it was still dark save for the light of the not quite full moon. There would have been silence if not for the relentless song of the numerous crickets throughout the grounds. I put a hand to my head and winced. The blow had been very hard. I attempted to get to my hands and knees, and then saw her bare feet and the hem of her charcoal dress close by to my left. This time there was no anger—only fear—as hot liquid filled the front of my pants. I fell back on my ass and elbows, blubbering incoherencies and pleading her forgiveness.

Her arm rose from her side as she pointed behind me. I turned to look at the headstone and read:

Sybil Rose Geary
1923-1949
May She Rest In Peace

The world became black, so black as my heart.



Artwork by XANADU

THE BOUNCER

D.B. RUBIN

I.

The two codgers sitting storefront on their morning watch on Ashland saw a glint of movement in the car parked across the street. Jack's platinum hair was rising in a morning fog as was his view of the passenger seat containing a pile of money and a 9mm Glock with the chrome handle. It was his car, but he did not remember driving to this spot. Aside from remembering his name, he had no idea of time or place, nor how this mound of cash or and gun arrived to greet him like a perverse mountain seeking its prophet. Jack could be a prophet of doom but he wasn't kicking like that lately. His pent-up anger had found its release on others over the past decade and a half and now was directed inward.

Last he remembered, it was Monday night about 10 PM and he was sitting in a nearly empty rock-bar. Monday night was the evening for those in the tavern trade to hit the pubs of their choice. It was their night, posers were less likely to go out late on a Monday night. That night it was The Exit, equipped with its Goth biker decor and the glare of the blue painting across and above the bar. Jack was the bar's bouncer but was off duty that night. Upon entry to Exit, Jack's ritual was to down a shot of Maker's, bang the shot glass mouth down on the bar, and raise his middle finger to the painting: a portrait of 5 smiley faces including a famous local mass murderer who worked part-time as a clown, a dead rocker and Hitler. Next to him was an already wasted and loquacious Jerkboy with his silent sidekick and guru, Doc. Jack, Jerkboy and Doc were old friends, the troika from the hood.

Doc actually had attended a few years of medical school but was kicked out, a rare event in academia. He had to have done something more than a little lame than flunking a few classes. Questions on this and other sensitive matters were met with an icy stare that froze close any door to discussion especially if the inquirer was familiar with Doc's rep. Doc's name derived from his drug supplying and anatomical talents. Aside from an unlimited supply of pills, he had surgical ability to put a blade in hurtful places. Jerkboy, his loyal acolyte

was handy with an ice pick. Jerkboy was a dumb jerk but his moniker was based on the beef jerkies that incessantly hung from his pre-pubescent mouth fed by a less-than-interested-or-talented-cook of a mother. Jack used to run towards trouble with his buddies. Back then, it's where the truth lay, he thought, where brute force would yield answers. Nowadays, life as a bouncer with side jobs in construction kept life simple and a bit safer.

Jack shook his head, hurting with the glare of sun and dazed with a residual buzz of some kind. Across the street he saw two gray heads staring at him and laughing. Laughing he could take, disorientation and creeping panic was something else. He recalled that Jerkboy was complaining to Doc about his banged up right shoulder, a birthday gift provided by Jack the prior weekend when he laid down the old hood's ceremony of one punch per year plus one for good luck. Jerkboy was a southpaw and spared his left shoulder birthday smacks. At 30, that cost JB a big black and blue. The birthday boy and the crowd had egged on Jack and JB had been numb enough from a variety of sources and was going to take it like a man. Jack, generally slow to heat up, didn't want to be shtucked into socking Jerkboy. He even had words with Doc who rarely lost his temper. He knew there would be repercussions. Somehow during that evening-through-the-fog, Jack sensed the complaints were an overture to his repayment of debt. That's the way it always was with the buddies. Shit and cream stayed evenly spread between them.

But then again, what did his memories of those final clear moments in a darkly lit rock bar have to do with the money that stunk to him like unwashed underwear and a gun that hadn't been recently fired but clearly stunk of his fingerprints. The Glock 9 mm was his, a legacy from his dead cop father. It was an unregistered, non-standard issue sidearm that dad tucked under his trousers. Since dad's death, Jack worked well with the piece over the years. Practiced regularly at the target range/gun shop on Mannheim toward O'Hare. In his Jerkboy/Doc running days, used it to threaten and hit people, but never fired. Dad was a tactical officer for the CPD. His job, "correct the situation, whatever the cost". That's how this single parent raised him and his younger sister Jen. Part of their legacy embedded in them as well was the way they took on life like he did: a hard living, hard loving, passionate, dispassionate, and paranoid. They also had Dad's sense of street justice.

Looking at the gun triggered his instinct to "correct the situation" and augmented his panic when he remembered that the gun was supposed to be under his pillow or in a drawer by the bedside. How did it get next to a pile of money? The bills were used, a mix of 5s, 10s, 20s, and some 50s. Based

on the weekend hauls of bar cash he escorted to the safe, he guessed about 5 thousand bucks. He stuffed most of the cash under the front seat and tucked away about \$500 and the gun in his jacket. One small blessing, the gun had not been recently fired. One small curse, there was rusty brown coating on the edge of the silver handle. Blood, not his. "SheeeITE", he thought. I did something bad and I don't know to whom but I know payback is around the corner. He gazed up at the gray-boys laughing and pointing. The growing sense of confusion and anxiety were taking hold when the alligator brain slowly emerged, took over, calmed the beast, who looked at the mirror, took deep Sufi-meditation breaths, the color of asphalt. Opening his eyes, he saw calm and one day's beard growth. Cool, oriented to person AND place. However long he's been zoned; it's just been one night and part of it in his car. Parked across the seats on two dudes, poster children for the neighbor hood watchmen. Jack opened the door. Alligator boy was ready to schmooze.

II

The rumble of the Lake St. El thundering just outside the open window woke up Doc. He had a helluva headache and was broiling with anger. After leaving Jack and Jerkboy at Exit he hopped on his Harley and picked up his stash of cash, this week in a key-locker at the Greyhound bus station. This was to be his down payment for a cacophony of euphoric and hype buttons his customers swallowed: some Ex, some acid, some meth, and some barbs. Something for everybody. Doc never was kicked out of medical school. He quit. Realized his old street ways and need for living on the edge made it incompatible with 8 years or more of books, 4 walls, and sick people. He channeled his therapeutic instincts into distributing happy pills to the rich, bored and sad. He also realized in his first year of med school that he was a bonafide sickie himself, a sadist who enjoyed seeing pain in others. His epiphany was found rounding with an anesthesiologist on the pain service. He grew a boner on the groans of the morbidly ill and dying. He also dug the quick fix a gas passer and narcotizer could lay on others as well as himself. Having a squirrely sense of honor, Doc understood that being a sadist and a physician would clearly get him in trouble. So he quit school and channeled these dark energies into distributing street medicine and an occasional incision to drain an abscess who wouldn't pay the laudable green pus when a bill was due.

Doc's place was an illegal abode. Against many code violations his large one-room loft was tagged for demolition/renovation. His bedroom, living

room, bathroom, kitchen combo, took up an entire floor of an abandoned warehouse downtown next to the Lake St. El looping around the center of the big city. Looping like a hangman's noose around Doc's anonymity. A long dark hall and creaky creepy stairway led to this nondescript hideaway. He slipped the landlord cash and drugs to stay here and had been doing so for the past few years. One thing about Doc, after his stint in med school he dropped out of radar view in a manner of speaking. He left no paper or electric trail. Registered an address only in a P.O. box where identity was guarded by a monthly slip of bills. His licenses were phony IDs. He signed no contracts, wrote no checks, never used plastic, and unlike all others in the trade, wore no pager. All transactions were in cash. Most conversations were face-to-face or over a pay phone.

His place was Spartan, clean, and because of its palatial proportion and its turn-of-the-last-century trim, elegant. Weapons, cash and passports were hidden behind loose boards where no one but he and the many hidden house rats knew. These and other essentials were appropriately stowed, ready to roll out at any moment. Inside Doc's head was a seismograph that sensitively read the tilt of the land like a Coke bottle upside down, balanced on its mouth in a metal bowl, a Chinese earthquake device used by his distant cousins in Hunan.

Sometime about midnight there was a major tectonic drift of his terra. Coming home, a gun was pointed in his face while climbing up the dimly lit metal stairs that clanged loudly in the empty warehouse with the stomp of his boots. No words were said. A bag was weakly tugged but let loose by angry hands already planning revenge. A head was hit against its left temple that rang a bell and draped a blanket all at one time. When Doc awoke, about 6 hours reckoning by the street sounds and sunlight, he knew he had a hell of a concussion. If he were a man of paper and electric footprints, he knew he would go to an ER, get a CAT scan, and be observed. But he was not such a man. If necessary he would contact "friends/customers" who would provide the appropriate services, discretely.

Grabbing ice, codeine and old espresso redacted to hypercaf over 24 hours on his turned off makeshift stove top, Doc began to think. It wasn't a turf war. One, he paid his narcos and Streets and San Man for protection and a 'board of exchange seat' to do business in the designated Wards. Two, if it was a turf war, he'd have been warned or dead. Next, only Jack, Jerkboy, the rats and his landlord knew where he lived. In that group, the rats were the only ones he trusted and just under them, Jack. But, only Jack owned the

Glock he saw imbedded forever on his cheek. More than once Jack let him play with it at the shooting range.

It didn't make sense unless Jack planned to heist his cash and leave town without a trace for Doc to sniff out. This could have been Jack's long-incoming suicide gesture, for Jack knew first hand Doc's homicidal tendencies. Back at the bar, he last heard Jack ranting to JB about his dead father, the cop. Jack said he would have committed suicide if he had the Glock on hand, but at the time of this low-point he had only a 22 Luger target pistol. Doc would be happy to pull a twisted Kevorkian on anybody especially with someone with whom he had special empathy. It couldn't have been Jerkboy. The dude was too dumb and too loyal. Plus what's his motive? JB had no ambition and was happy with the not-too-unsubstantial crumbs Doc threw his way. Sometimes it seemed that JB needed Doc in order to change his underwear or blow his nose. Doc knew his next step was to find Jack and get some answers, one way or another.

III

The old guys were a bit startled to see a short muscular white boy emerge from the car and stroll toward them. There was something friendly but threatening about the pace of his approach. A tense reptilian smile gave him away. Jack's initial inquiries about his whereabouts were met with no me comprende until Jack started rattling off Spanish and waved a 20 at each of them which was stuffed into their shirt pockets. As he figured, the two grizzled faces were eyes and ears for a Mexican gang that ran illegals to the neighborhood and then juiced their charges for various and sundry services including false I-dees and bribes to INS agents. One of the old boys was up at 4:00 making a mix of sugar and hypercaffinated tealeaves called mate. He described Jack's car pulling up around then. A big bald guy with a black hooded jacket gets out of the front seat, pulls Jack behind the wheel, shuts the door gently and runs like hell down the block.

The revelation shocked Jack on one level but made sense on another. The ex-brasero was describing Jerkboy. What did he and Jerkboy do and whom did they do it too? Were Doc and JB setting him up? When his pager buzzed the number of a public phone in a strip club near Grand and Milwaukee, he had one of his questions answered. The voice he heard chilled his heart, loaded his gun, and placed a rearview mirror on his head. A meeting was planned tonight after he closed down Exit.

IV

The last of those who needed a fix of a warm room and loud noise as a refuge from hustling their bodies all night had left. Neither the girls, nor girl/boys from North Ave bridge nor those from the nearby clubs for men who had a more 'graceful bearing' than the street-johns were in the mood to argue with Jack when he escorted them to the street. They rarely gave him as much trouble as the drunk Shaumburgeois looking to be a weekend Goth biker. Once in a while, when they were a tad too threatening, Jack needed to come from behind and rapidly twist their heads just so, as to induce a rapid neuro-shock and drop them to the floor. But tonight wasn't one of those nights. Jack was glad there was no trouble. He was looking to conserve his energy. He was straight edge tonight. Didn't let friendly customers buy him shots as he usually did. The weight of his upcoming encounter and that of the loaded gun on his ankle kept him focused.

As Jack locked the front steel door, a familiar rumble pulled up to the curb in front of the club. Doc looked like crap, pale and bandaged over his forehead. First thing Jack said was that he thought he had something of Doc's but wasn't clear how he got it. Doc's get up made that point crystal clear. Doc didn't argue, just drew an automatic and pointed Jack toward the alley, littered with the detritus of an evening's work of his after-3 AM clientele. Traffic was light, no obvious cops. Jack did as he was told. As he turned into the unlit alley 10 feet in front stood a hulking silhouette of Doc's right hand man.

Like a runner caught stealing home he was in a dark alley between Doc at home-plate and Jerkboy on third. Reaching to his right hip because there was no time to bend and draw from his ankle, Jack picked out his metal flashlight from its holster and tossed it straight at the giant's head. This toss was very practiced and over the years was the most effective tool for Jack in the bouncer trade. The crack followed by a whimper was unmistakable as were the clumped hump on concrete and the rictus smile on Doc's face. Jack thought for sure that move was his last. But Doc's silent joy became an out loud laugh, something new to Jack's ears. Out of JB's pocket an ice pick and shiny gun, a replica of Jack's, was removed. Doc next removed Jerkboy's I-Ds, face and fingertips. He sliced off the tip of the fifth digit and put it in a thin bottle of fixative that dangled on the end of a gold chain that Doc put around his neck and tucked under his shirt. Doc then tossed the body and a bag of writhing groceries into a bin just cleaned and picked out an hour ago, not to be revisited for at least a week. By then, Doc's roommates espe-

cially trapped for the occasion would be sated.

There was reported a fire early in the AM the next week along the Lake St. el. An abandoned warehouse burned. Destruction was total. When they parted company, Doc clarified his preparedness with the fixative and all. He told Jack that originally he was convinced it would be Jack's pinkie around his neck and had called on JB for the ambush. But it was unsettling to Doc's forensic mind that he was held up and clouted by a strong left. When he saw Jack lock the club door with his right hand and pocket the keys on the right with the flashlight on the right, everything fell into place. Jerkboy was a lefty who Doc figured had a motive harbored by at least 3 sinful inclinations including anger, jealousy and greed. The breaking point appeared to be his 30th birthday, a milestone to some, but a millstone to Jerkboy. JB thought he'd never reach 30 and agonized over the years of him feeling lauded over by two guys who were supposed to be his closest friends. He hated Jack and Doc but as a man who was spiked metal he could never articulate his sense of insecurity except as a thrust of a sharp point through the nose or ear.

JB thought, mistakenly, that he wasn't as dumb as everyone thought. All went according to plans. Created a fight between Jack and Doc over the arm punching ritual. Drugged Jack, found Jack's signature piece' under his pillow, quietly jumped and knocked out Doc and set up a shoot out between each nemesis. While Doc was feeding the fish in Bubbly Creek, he'd step into the business vacuum created by Doc's absence. In case of poor marksmanship he brought a gun and the ice pick. What he didn't bring was a stem-cell implant that rewired him to heal quickly and become ambidextrous.

Jack couldn't stomach Doc's penchant for violence though understood how to apply it in order to survive. He knew that he'd never see Doc again. Never could see Doc again without retching. He also felt abandoned. An orphan cut off from his past. There would be his stories that no one else but Jerkboy and Doc could translate. He'd have to find new old friends and that could take another lifetime.

GOOD SUNDAY

MELANIE LOCAY

"I've never spoken to a convicted murderer before." After an hour of silence, this is all my mother could come up with to say.

"Daddy was a criminal defense attorney. I'm sure you've spoken to at least one before." I feel strange right after I say it. I haven't really mentioned Daddy since the trial.

"I know that dear but he was very good. None of the murderers he defended were ever convicted. Ironically, I bet he could have been the only one to get you out of this mess." This makes the nearby prison guard snicker.

I think she just noticed. I was hoping she would. My orange jump suit is a size four. Prison has done wonders for my figure. If only I could get the word out to all the poor women wasting their money at *Weight Watchers* and *Jenny Craig*.

"Yes. It is true, Daddy was a fantastic lawyer." I reply to her with my palms flat on the counter. The guard has requested I keep my hands there since last week's incident with the hairpin. I could really use a manicure.

"He wanted you to follow in his footsteps, Mia. Can you believe, after all this, USC is still badgering me to finish paying off your tuition? And I told them, if one of their top law students could be so unsuccessful in court, the fault obviously lies in their shoddy teaching. Then they came at me with that whole "pleaded guilty blah blah blah." I wonder if she has a nail file in that small yet tacky beaded purse of hers. Maybe that wouldn't be the smartest thing to have in front of the guard. Mommy's nails are perfectly manicured, long and blood red. Is she still talking?

"Mommy, I never would have been an attorney of Daddy's caliber. Oh, I said caliber!" I haven't had such a good laugh in a long time. I can see through the Plexiglas window that divides us my mother and I; She isn't getting the joke.

"No pun intended Mommy! Oh, come on, laugh. It's funny." Larry the guard is trying to control his laughter. He is standing about two feet away from me and I see his gun shaking as he holds in the giggles. Mom and I are the only ones in the visiting room. I'm sitting on the side with Larry and a single door that leads back to the cellblock. Mom is across from me; on her side there is a potted plant and a door that leads back to her Mercedes parked outside. This Plexiglas window dividing us is pretty familiar; it's been here all my life really.

Nose twitching and eyes squinting, she says to me in her most scolding

tone. "Mia, you're right you never would of been good like him." She has the nerve to look at me as if she is actually upset. No one has benefited more from this than her. But playing the role of the mourning widow suits her, attention craving moron.

"I never would have been as good as he? Is that what you are trying to say Mother?" It is so like her to see me in a good mood and have to just snatch it away.

"Here we go. I knew we couldn't have a conversation without you correcting your stupid mom." *Let the record show she said that.* "You and your father always did that. You two thought you were so above me. Look where you are now." I feign looking around, dramatically surprised I am in a Prison visitation room and not standing in line at Bloomingdale's.

Simple twit, Grandma was right she is nothing more than trailer trash. She could never understand why her only son turned a one-night-stand into his wife. Grandma would always say he could just never throw anything away.

"Mommy, I don't want to argue with you. He and I, we're not good people like you. He made money off the misery of others. He lost sight of what the word justice meant. It was replaced with phrases like plea bargain, reason of insanity, or anything else he could come up with just to get a client off, regardless of their innocent or guilt. He was an excellent pleader, Mommy. I would never have been able to plead as well as he did, Mommy. Do you want to hear about how he pleaded?" She follows my example and leans closely into the Plexiglas window. I lower my voice a bit to a whisper. "Oh, he pleaded up until the very end."

Mommy didn't want to attend the trial. She told me she hadn't watched any of the news about it nor read any of the newspapers. Which isn't hard to believe coming from this woman, whose number one source of news is *Woman's World* magazine.

"I want to know. Tell me about how he pleaded, Mia." The look in her eye could be categorized as one of morbid curiosity. I could see the white in her knuckles as she tightly clutches the tacky, small, beaded purse. That doesn't exactly clash her tacky beaded Gucci jacket, at least the rest of the ensemble consist of a simple black linen blouse and pants. After all, she is in mourning. After twenty-two years of living amongst the wealthy upper class, she's deflected any culture that may try to penetrate as if she were made of Teflon.

I light a cigarette and proceed to tell her my story. I never smoked before, but here I guess, I want to live the cliché to its full extent and it makes me look cool.

It was a beautiful autumn day. There had been a storm the night before,

a lot of wind. The day was so gorgeous and clear. You could see the snow on the mountains. It was sunny, yet chilly enough that you still needed to wear a coat, my favorite type of weather. I have always hated Sundays. But that morning I knew that day would be different, unlike any other Sunday. I left home pretty early I wanted to run some errands before I saw daddy for lunch, our traditional Sunday lunch. My first stop was the bank. The Washington Mutual near school was open one Sunday every month.

"Baby you shouldn't have! What color is it? Aww pink! That is my favorite color. You know me so well. I can't wait to see it. It's an extra small right? Uh what?! You bought me a large!! Are you trying to be funny?? Really, that is so not funny. You think I'm a large! Do I look like a large to you?"

No, actually you look like a talking lollipop. You look like a stick with a head attached. In this day and age when it is more convenient to speak into a cracker-sized little box than talking to the actual living person next to you. It's inevitable not to invite everyone around you into your personal conversations. In line at the Washington Mutual, on this beautiful Sunday, I have to become witness to one of the greatest injustices in American society. This girl, who proudly wears the emblem of XS, on every label, of every garment she owns, has been subjugated to today's equivalent to the Scarlet Letter, an L! The more I look at her, the more infuriated I too become with the person on the other end of her multi-colored, gay disco club looking phone. It is undoubtedly her boyfriend, who is bewildered as to why he deserves this verbal lashing. He must be quite the Adonis himself to be with a girl like her. Tiny waist, perky little...

"Oh I'm so sorry." She says as she falls into me. It feels like just the slightest movement of my hand would send her delicate frame flying into the nearby plastic fern.

"It is quite alright." Where was I? I remember now, perky little nose, butt, breast. I'll just go with perky little everything

"Look what you made me do! I know you can't look because you're on the phone. But you've gotten me so upset. I've bumped into the lady behind me!" She screeches into her tiny multi-colored, gay disco club looking phone

"Lady?" I can't help but mumble it to myself. I'm sure I am the same age as she is, if not younger. I see those crow's feet she is desperately trying to hide. Simply because I am not wearing a tight, pink, velour jumpsuit zippered just so that *my* huge, fake, cleavage is exposed (obviously the uniform of some atrocious tramp patrol) does not mean I am some sort of old, frumpy, matronly woman.

Her boyfriend's blunder is really a personal affront. Perfect body, long blonde hair, perfectly glossed and manicured. But yet perfect is not enough for this man? Then where do I lie on the spectrum of socially acceptable?? With my Gap size sixteen jeans and USC XL sweatshirt? This woman and her boyfriend could probably use my sweatshirt as a tent on their next camping trip.

"Hey!! Let go of my phone!" Ms. Pink Velour Suit screams.

She even has a perfect shriek. I grab her miniscule phone/slash gay disco.

"How dare you insult this freakishly thin and attractive woman and myself, mind you, by claiming that she would ever wear a large! If she is supposed to be a large, then I should be wearing some sort of car tarp size. And do I sound like an SUV to you? You ignorant, sizist bastard!"

"Mommy, I hadn't cursed in years. I hadn't yelled at anyone like that ever. It felt so invigorating. Why are you laughing? I really haven't even gotten to the funny part. Which wasn't very funny to me at the time."

I wish I could say a Neanderthal sounding man, yelled profanity at me and told me that I did in fact sound like an SUV, or actually more like a mini van. But that was not the case.

"Hun, try to take a breath?" I wasn't met with the voice of an Adonis. It was the voice of a woman, a kind sounding woman.

"Who is this?" I asked as if the phone were mine and the person I was supposed to have been talking to vanished.

"Well, I think that's what I should be asking. But it sounds like you're kind of tense. So I'll tell you that I'm Susan, Jenny's *girlfriend*. And I honestly don't comprehend woman's sizes, seeing as I purchase my own attire at men's and army surplus stores."

Embarrassment is an understatement for what I was feeling. Susan went on to tell me that I, in fact, did not sound like any sort of vehicle, but rather quite cute and if I would be interested in spending an evening with Ms. Pink Velour Suit (Jenny) and herself. I am paraphrasing quite a bit. Her proposal was much more colorful and graphic.

"Um, no thank you." I handed the tiny phone/gay disco back to Jenny. Her face was so scrunched in confusion. I thought her perky little nose might break off.

"Next in line please." The voice of the bank teller was like music to my ears. It took me a moment to catch my bearings and realize where I was. I quickly scuttled off to make my withdrawal. Walking to my car, it dawned on me that Susan thought I was cute and had propositioned me for sex. True, she did not see me in my full 200 plus-pound glory, but it's nonetheless the first time I had

ever been hit on. That brought a smile to my face. It was a going to be a good Sunday, one of “first-times”.

I didn’t need Daddy to give me another one of his lectures on how to dress seriously if I wanted to be taken seriously. I stopped back home to change before lunch. My roommate Lydia had papers strewn all over the living room floor and was in her favorite studying position, lying on her stomach on our shag-carpeted floor.

“Talk about a moment of insanity. Just imagine if you two would have gotten into a fistfight and were arrested. The steps taken by your attorney from that point on would be...” Lydia is relishing figuring out the steps to my imaginary case.

“Stop Lydia, please stop. I am having lunch with my father today. I am sure he will inundate me with law musings. I can’t bear to hear any now, not on an empty stomach.” Lydia was my best friend and only friend really. I felt so lucky to have her. When we met in college we became fast friends. We decided to become roommates at law school since we were both going to USC. She is the only person I could talk to openly. I could say things like, I feel hungry, even though she knew I had just secretly eaten in my bedroom closet. And she wouldn’t criticize me. I allowed her to laugh at my mistakes because it wasn’t the malicious laughter I’ve been so familiar with hearing throughout my life as the “fat girl”, but she laughed with me, and knew when not to laugh at all.

“You should be taking notes of everything that man tells you. He is a genius. Do you know how much people pay to have a consultation with him?” To Lydia, Daddy was a hero. Edward Rosen, one of the best criminal defense attorneys’s in the country. In college she recognized me by his name. She had read every article on him and new that I was his daughter. At first, I thought that was the only reason she was my friend, but then I convinced myself otherwise, believed we were true best friends.

“Lydia, *you* should be his daughter. You would benefit by it far more than I have. You’re going to be this incredible lawyer like he is. Sometimes I wonder what I am doing here. I think I’m not cut out for this. I don’t want to become a cold, heartless person like he is.”

“Mommy I swear I wasn’t intending to hurt her, at least not at that point. I didn’t think about it when I said it. But like I said, there was something about that Sunday. I wasn’t thinking about any of my actions before I did them.”

“No, you weren’t. But that little bitch deserved everything she got.” That was the smartest thing I’d heard her say all day.

"But you have no difficulty envisioning me cold and heartless?" She was so mad her voice was shaking. She threw a red cushion at me that we had bought at *Ikea* the day before. Our entire apartment was an *Ikea* wonderland. It was page 46 of the catalog. I was lucky it was the cushion that was closest to her and not the iron ashtray we had also purchased.

"No, Lydia that isn't what I said." Or was it?

"You are such an ungrateful little brat. I have to work for everything I have and you sit around getting fat while Daddy provides you with everything. And your daddy isn't a drunken loser like mine. No, he is an incredible man that is so determined to see you succeed. I will be proud if I have half the career he's had. I recognize his drive and conviction, those qualities your simple mind sees as cold and heartless."

I was stunned. Was she still talking about Daddy? She was taking it so seriously. And she called me fat. "You called me fat. You skinny, bitch."

"Of course that is the only thing you heard. Your mind can't ever go beyond your fat ass. Well then do something about it Mia. Take some of Daddy's money and join a gym. You better go, you're going to be late for your lunch date." With that, she stormed off into her room. I could hear her talking on the phone, yelling and swearing about how I had treated her, but I couldn't make out to whom she was talking to.

"Thanks for the stupendous advice buddy! I'll make sure to tell Edward Rosen his number one fan says hello," I yelled at her bedroom door.

I was so mad on the drive from my place to Daddy's favorite French bistro. But for once I felt truly proud to be Edward Rosen's daughter because it made me the source of envy for Lydia.

"Hi daddy, how are you?" The Sunday lunch thing had become more of a chore than a pleasantry. I think he felt the same. But like Lydia so astutely put it he was the man that financed my studies and pretty much my life. Not to say I wasn't grateful, as Lydia liked to think. But.

"Hello Mia. I am doing very well, thank you. I hope you're not squandering away any of my money. Your education is an investment in your future. I am giving you the greatest gift a parent can give their child. My worries lie with your spending on other frivolous things. How is your diet going?" By his reasoning my frivolous spending was on food. When I walked up to his favorite patio table he was snapping his cell phone shut. Talking to an important client no doubt, it must not have been good news. He seemed to be quite upset and he'd been eyeing me up and down closely, knowing perfectly well I hadn't lost any weight since the last time he saw me. The Sunday before at that same spot.

But I was very grateful because he was an excellent father and he cared about me. The man was a genius. Lydia was right. What kind of selfish, stupid, fat idiot would I had been to not be grateful to him?

"It's coming along alright, Daddy. I was really busy this week with school and wasn't able to get to the gym. I didn't really lose any weight this week. I maintained." I can't look him in the eye when we discuss my weight. I made that mistake before and what I saw looking back at me were eyes filled with disappointment and longing for the thin, pretty, daughter he never had.

"You've maintained huh?" His voice was getting an angry tone I hadn't heard him use ever outside of the courtroom.

"What exactly are you maintaining Mia, your fat ass!?" The slamming of his fist against the table caused my glass of diet coke to spill onto my lap. I could feel the cold liquid penetrating into my pants onto my bulging thighs and untouched crouch. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes.

"Daddy I'm sorry." I could manage to gurgle out between sobs. This outburst caught me off guard. I was accustomed to his silent disgust but he had never spoken to me this way before. I tried to tell myself it wasn't directed at me. The stupid client he had been talking to upset him, Daddy loved me, and he didn't mean this.

The waiter was cleaning my spilt soda off the table, off the floor, everywhere except for off me. I cursed Daddy in my head for always having to sit in the patio of the restaurant; particularly that day, that sunny, gorgeous Sunday in southern California. It is wasn't enough that all of Sous Le Nez En Ville was staring at me, but the people strolling by with babies or dogs at toe all got a show as well. Trying to figure out our scenario, were we a quarreling couple? Most obviously not. Daddy was often compared to George Clooney with his dark and ruggedly handsome features. If it's impossible to believe that I could be his offspring, it's even more preposterous to believe we could have been lovers.

"Stop crying," he said, his teeth tightly clenched in a frighteningly controlled voice. "I have many colleagues that come here and I will not be made a fool of nor the source of trashy gossip. Do you hear me Mia? You're becoming more of a whimpering fool like your mother everyday. But at least she isn't fat too."

If the outburst had caught me off guard, this was a turn I definitely was not expecting. It was always he and I against my mommy. I may have not gotten his looks but I had his intellect. "You listen to me. I may be fat and not the size two Hollywood attorney you dream of me being. But I am not the piece of dumb trash you married. That is what grandma calls her, isn't it?"

"Sorry Mommy..." I meant it when I said it and I still think it today, but it felt necessary to apologize nonetheless. She just silently nodded. I knew she wanted me to get to the good part.

By now our table had been completely cleared. The waiters were drawing straws to see who had to be the ones to ask us to leave or at least move to a more inconspicuous table.

"Mia." Daddy began to laugh. The malicious laugh from my childhood that I loathed. "Kiddo I think we've both said some stuff we didn't mean. I have a meeting to get to. You know, I have to go be the cold and heartless lawyer I am. Go get yourself some ice cream or something." He got up from the table, threw a twenty at me and was off. I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. I realized at that moment that Lydia *was* daddy's biggest fan.

"I can't go too much into detail of what happened next, Mommy. You know, where I went after the restaurant or how I got the gun. My lawyer needs me to keep all that confidential for the appeal. But I know the part you're dying to hear. I knew where I could find them because you were going to be out of town until Tuesday. It was close to sunset when I got to the house. The sky was that shade of pink it gets right before the sun completely disappears on the horizon."

"Hello?" I don't know why I said that as I walked into the house. I couldn't believe my key still worked. Daddy was a maniac about changing the locks. Afraid of some of his not so trustworthy clients I am sure. All of the staff was off because it was Sunday, such a special Sunday. My old room was just as I had left it. A huge picture of Daddy and me in front of the Supreme Court stood on my dresser. I was small then and he could carry me on his shoulders. He told me how one day I would work there, the Supreme Court.

"Maybe I'll be tried there instead, Daddy." I whispered to the photograph. Just then I heard their moaning coming from his room.

"Oh my god Mia. What are you doing here?" Daddy frantically covered himself with the sheets. Lydia's body was as I always envisioned it would be naked. Perfectly tanned and toned.

"They didn't have the kind of ice cream I wanted Daddy. I got this instead." I pointed the gun toward them like I had seen them do in *Reservoir Dogs*. That movie had given me nightmares for days. It was one of Lydia's favorites. I was sure she would enjoy the pose. But all she could do was cry.

"Please don't do this Mia. I am so sorry. I didn't mean to call you fat. You're

my best friend. I don't want to die!"

"Your laying stark naked, with my father, in my parents' bed, in the sheets I helped my mother pick out at *Linens N Things* and you think I am mad about you calling me fat? You're right." I shot her first, once in the stomach then in the face.

"Oh God, Oh God, Oh God. Mia put the gun down. Honey Daddy can get you out of this. We'll plead reason of insanity. We'll portray her as a whore that broke up my family and was threatening me. It will be okay. Please put the gun down. Please!" He was a lawyer to the end. He was standing next to the bed now splattered in Lydia's blood. The sheet had fallen and he was naked.

"Do you love me Daddy?"

"Yes, of course sweetheart. Give Daddy the gun." He was inching closer to me. I had never seen a naked man in person before much less that close up, or splattered in blood for that matter. He was shaking uncontrollably. At first I thought he was cold. But it was fear he exuded. The room filled with an odor of fear and blood.

"Do you think I'm sexy Daddy?" His eyes widened. For once in his life he was speechless.

"I think you're beautiful princess."

"That isn't what I asked!" I yelled back at him waving the gun around.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Yes I think you're very sexy. The sexiest woman I've ever seen." For once you could tell he was lying. He spoke the words as if he were choking on his own vomit.

"Well then give me a kiss daddy." We got closer to one another. He touched my face with his bloody hand. I had never kissed a man before. His tongue felt strange in my mouth, but I won't lie. I enjoyed it. I could feel his hand go for the gun. I pushed him away.

"You liar!" I yelled at him and kept firing until there were no bullets left in the gun.

And the rest of the story you know because you were the one that found us. Sorry about using your Egyptian cotton towels to clean off the blood. They were just the first things I grabbed. Be glad it wasn't your *Prada* raincoat that was on the chair, am I right?"

"Why did I have to come home early?" Mommy says it aloud to herself. She looks like she's about to be sick. We sat in silence for what seemed like hours. Not really but I love how that sounds.

"So Mommy did you notice I lost weight in here?"

THE FAMILY JEWELS

SCOTT WHITTIER

Please let it be the girl in the red shirt.
That's what I thought to myself the first morning.

I could hear water splashing into the sink. I could see sunlight and shadows glint and sparkle through the half-closed bathroom door. I wasn't sure how much I'd drunk, how much I'd slept, how much I'd done or with whom.

The sheets only smelled half like me.

The faucet squeaked and went silent. I saw a sleeve as she gripped the door's edge. Red.

Ruby walked into my room.

I can't go to breakfast without make-up.
She was too beautiful.

She was that kind of girl who didn't know it was the plain ones who needed her dedication. The kind of girl you remembered in red no matter how drunk you were or how long the night dragged on in blackness. She was stunning. But I was charming. And we had omelets. I paid with cash.

*

Two years ago.

That's when I learned how much things are really worth. How they can be taken away and taken back. I learned to take what I wanted. Because you can't buy love or happiness or trust--all that good stuff we already know about. But that was when I learned I could steal it.

I didn't tell Ruby about the divorce right away. I didn't tell her how they were throwing away thirty years and robbing me of every youthful memory. I didn't tell her how I gritted my teeth when her friends teased me about being too pretty, gelling my hair, shining my shoes, cufflinks on French cuffs. I never told her that dad broke our family and cheapened our name by becoming a liberated homosexual in his fifties.

I certainly never told her about the first time I signed dad's name to a check. Mom laughed nervously. She understood resentment. It was practically a joint account anyway. After the fifth signature, she stopped laughing.

When I used his credit card to buy dinner, Ruby noticed. I laughed it off.

And it felt good, like revenge, like freedom, like taking back something that had been stolen from me. But in the end it was just money. It wasn't personal. There was a part of that feeling that wasn't satisfying. Its value was too easily replaced. And it couldn't repay the emotional debt I was owed.

I needed sentimental value. It's not about making them pay. It's about making them feel it. I knew my theory was right the day mom got the restraining order.

I had to smile to myself as I twirled the diamond earrings between my fingers inside the pocket of my pants. Like change. Like payment handed back to me.

So I stopped visiting. The divorce really upset me. I didn't want to be pushed and pulled between them. Everyone understood.

*

I just started spending the weekends with Ruby's family.

I even had my own room there. Ruby slept upstairs in the preserved suite of a teenage princess. I wanted that family. So I took part. I took it.

They had everything. House, money, all-American kids who actually visited on weekends, lapdogs, canopy beds, even insurance. Her mother didn't blink when the pearls disappeared.

This place is a mess. There have been carpenters and plumbers and pool men in and out of here all summer long.

It's the only thing Pearl said before she picked up the phone and called her insurance. Pearl loved me like a son. Like a family heirloom that would gain value in future years.

I was the handsome rich kid--fancy boy. I hated it until it was taken away. And then I wore the old me like a disguise. I smiled and laughed and paid for dinner. No one suspected I wasn't genuine. Overlooked obvious flaws.

*

Everyone and their sister keeps their jewelry in their underwear drawer.
That was true. I knew it.

Ruby was pretty upset when the bracelets vanished from their hiding place under all her silky unmentionables. Thin threads of jewels, like straps. So easy to slide off. Strapless.

You were the only person who knew where they were.
That was true. She knew it.

But it wasn't hard to imagine someone looking in the top drawer, peeling back her panties. It wasn't hard to imagine the friends of friends and late-night parties that revolve around a house of pretty roommates.

It wasn't hard to imagine what people would think. The things that would have to be said about someone's boyfriend's gambling problem, someone else's lapse in fidelity, the kind of men, the possibility of strangers. Self-incriminating accusations.

How much was it really worth? Relationships? Friendships? Us?
Priceless.

*

No lease. Cash is fine. Half the utilities. I'll deal with the landlord.
The usual deal. But not the usual reasons.

She wasn't the type to cut ties and her losses when the debt got too deep. I should have known. Short hair with brassy tips. A little overweight. A little too much make-up. A nurse who chain smoked and used the c-word. She did what it took to do what she wanted.

Low-class bitch. A rich girl would have known better. She would have taken aerobics and gotten a pedicure.

Brassy just talked on the phone to her wispy little boyfriend, blew smoke at the receiver, stroked her cat. Pussy. At least that's a more polite word.
But she had a Rolex.

*

Brassy found gay porn on his computer, you know.

They all sat around the table that night with their drinks and added giggles to the bar noise. As if someone would admit something like that. As if

girls tell secrets about their boyfriends that only make themselves look worse. No one here ever would.

I looked over at Ruby and smiled.

And Brassy is a slut.

No one likes sluts, not even other sluts. Ruby's cheap little roommates tittered and gasped and never mentioned the men who spent the night when their boyfriends were away. We never mentioned them either. We just passed in the halls on those mornings and pretended to be half asleep. There are so many things people don't mention.

Secrets are good. They make you feel safe. Something to protect that protects you in return. A little bit of knowledge, a few words, a tiny fact that gets locked away like a trinket. No one can take it away. It almost disappears, ceases to exist. But you never lose it because you know where it is, right where you put it in your tiny stash of hidden treasures.

*

Time flies. Watches disappear. Shit happens.

There have been so many people over here.

There hadn't.

Friends of friends. I didn't know half of them. What about that guy you had over?

Brassy didn't flinch at the hint of blackmail. That guy was months ago. No one ever came over, and she knew it. But it hardly mattered. I was moving. I just couldn't live with her and the cat and the smoke and the phone. Bitch. Everyone understood completely.

Can you believe she's suing me for back rent and utilities? Of course I paid. Cash as always. No I didn't get a receipt. We were roommates. I trusted her. Bitch.

I almost used the c-word. But that would have been classless.

*

Ugly. Old. Probably not even antique. But they belonged to her grandmother and she was supposed to love them even if she never wore the rings.

I didn't hear her roommate's stories until the tarnished little gold circles were long gone. But it increased their value in my internal account. I knew.

I could tell. I could feel it when I saw their own little box inside the box, tucked under all the prettier pieces. I could feel their warm weight and rich history resting in the palm of my hand.

Goldie threw a fit. She was always a spoiled little brat. She was short and slim and pretty in that way brunettes manage cute when they should really go blonde. This one would be a piece of cake.

She accused me right away, at the top of her lungs, irrational.

You know he did it. Your bracelets. The stuff at your mother's house. It's so obvious.

Coincidences. She probably just lost them, left them at her parents' house, dropped them in her closet. There were a million explanations.

Why blame me?

But I wanted her to. It was so easy to be the rational one as she stood there screaming.

Call her bluff. Cooperate. Deny.

Please, call the police. I want to clear my name.

Fingerprint me. Give me a lie detector.

As if Goldie could facilitate such a complicated process.

Is it really as easy as seen on TV? Slices, dices, cubic zirconia...

*

There were a few things I didn't count when I appraised my worth.

I didn't expect Ruby to be so levelheaded. She was supposed to be overcome with emotion or scandal or denial.

It doesn't matter if you did it. But for some reason I can't bring myself to defend you. Why don't I want to stick up for my own boyfriend? I can't date someone I can't trust.

But I could have fixed it. She wasn't serious. She'd cool down and come back. After two years, I had earned some sentimental value of my own. Within days, she was calling.

But then that airhead Goldie actually called the police.

They couldn't do anything about it. But they could tell her about the checks and the court dates and the restraining order.

Still. I could have fixed it. I was upset. The divorce. My poor mother. I wasn't myself. And I didn't want to worry Ruby. She could be so emotional. She could understand.

But then there was Brassy.

I could have fixed everything else. I should have known better. She wasn't just rational. She was tenacious. Like a bulldog. Short, fat, squat, ugly. Dog. Bitch. C-word.

How many pawn shops are in this city? How many Rolexes are there in those pawn shops? How many stacks of papers are filed away with rows of social security numbers from sellers of jewelry and stereos and guitars?

An inefficient formality that never led anywhere—a convoluted treasure map.

But she deciphered it, followed the trail, retraced my steps.

She found it all—the shop, the Rolex, the paper, my incriminating number.

Turns out gaudy, overpriced watches have serial numbers that can be as unique and incriminating as my own nine digits. Turns out there is paperwork that comes with a six-thousand-dollar timepiece. Turns out the paperwork was halfway across the country with her fairy ex-boyfriend.

*

He put it in the mail Monday. Or so I hear.

And that was the last I heard.

An old roommate passed me on the street and pretended not to see me. I don't care. That's not what I care about.

They will never find the rest of it. Not even if I remembered and admitted. But I don't care about that either. It doesn't matter anymore. They ruined it. It's all worthless now. They uncovered my treasure. They exposed my truth and revealed my true value. They took my prized possessions. They stole my secrets.

DYING WORDS

JULIE LEIN

Jill reclined in her uncomfortable plastic chair, crossing her arms as she stared at her grandmother on the hospital bed. They had been here for days, ever since her grandmother had lapsed into a coma. Jill had discovered her grandmother collapsed on the kitchen floor.

The doctors were baffled. Jill's grandmother was in perfect health, all the medical tests came back normal. Her grandmother shouldn't be in a coma, yet she was. All they could do was wait and hope she woke up.

Jill yawned, fighting fatigue. She'd been up for days by her grandmother's bedside, just waiting. She'd rest for just a few minutes. If her grandmother awoke, Jill would be right here. She leaned forward, resting her head on her arms on her grandmother's bed. Closing her eyes, she was soon asleep.

"I'm a witch."

"What? Grandma?" Jill asked, startled out of her nap. Lifting her head off the hospital bed, she looked into her grandmother's eyes.

"I'm a witch and so are you," she whispered again.

Jill's flesh grew cold, her heart pounded. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. She thought she saw a flicker of life in her grandma's eyes.

"Can you hear me? Grandma?" Jill implored. Then she saw her grandmother's eyes drift out of focus, looking right through her.

"Grandma, can you see me?" Jill stood, gripping her grandmother's hand as she moved in closer. Her grandmother's eyes then closed and she was gone.

Jill looked up in time to see her grandmother's heart monitor flat line. Her grandmother's heart had stopped beating!

"No!" She screamed as a team of medical personnel rushed past her, pushing her out of the way. She let go of her grandmother's hand as they surrounded her grandmother's bed. Jill saw the bright red crash cart being wheeled in and the doctor prep the shock paddles.

"Clear!" He yelled at the medical team. They stopped working and moved off her grandmother as he positioned the paddles and administered the shock.

Her grandmother's tiny body lifted up off the bed in a violent jolt from the electric shock before falling back onto the bed. The doctor shocked her

again and again, each time increasing the power, all with no change in her grandmother's EKG. The deafening sound of the heart monitor was all she could hear. The flat line remained.

Giving up, the doctor shook his head, replacing the shock paddles.

"Time of death, 8:30 PM," he spoke in monotone.

He then turned to Jill and approached her as the rest of the staff left the room in silence.

"Jill, I'm so sorry."

Jill took a deep breath to stop her tears from flowing before speaking. After collecting herself, she looked up at the doctor.

"You did all that could to try and save her. Thank you for all your help."

She paused before adding, "I'd like to be alone with her now."

"I understand."

Without hesitation, the doctor left, shutting the door behind him. Overwhelmed with emotion, Jill's body shook out of control. She hugged herself and sobbed.

"Grandma, I love you, I'll miss you," she said as she sat down again by her grandmother's bedside and held her still warm hand.

Did her grandmother say that she was a witch? No, couldn't be. She shook her head. She closed her eyes and placed her grandmother's hand on her cheek.

All of a sudden, she felt her grandmother's fingers move on her face, she opened her eyes in time to see her grandmother's head turn towards her and she was smiling, her eyes full of life and light.

Jill backed up in her chair, dropping her grandmother's hand and falling backwards onto the tile floor. Her heart raced as she pushed herself off the floor and again looked at her grandmother lying on the bed.

Her grandmother's eyes were shut and her head hadn't moved as she thought it had. She looked the same as she did when Jill first sat down beside her just seconds ago.

Am I losing my mind? She thought. Jill picked up her grandmother's hand and, with tenderness, kissed it before replacing it on the hospital bed beside her.

After making arrangements for her grandmother, Jill drove home exhausted, feeling empty inside. She didn't realize she could miss someone so much, she thought, wiping away fresh tears. It had always been Jill and her grandma since she had been a little girl and her parents had given her up after divorcing. She never knew them and never wanted to, she had been content with her grandma, content and happy.

"I miss you so much, grandma," Jill spoke out loud as she pulled into her

garage. She shut off her car and sat for a long time before entering the house that she and her grandma had shared.

Jill tossed and turned in bed that night. In every dream, she could see her grandmother's face looking up at her and hear her dying words, "I'm a witch" repeated over and over.

Jill sat up, running her hands through her tousled blonde mane. She had to see her again. She had to see her grandma one more time. Jill rushed to her closet, got dressed and hurried downstairs to grab her car keys before hustling out of the empty house. She hoped she would get there in time.

After the short drive back to the hospital, Jill found and entered the morgue, in search of her grandmother. As she made her way across the large, dark room, she saw her lying on a metal table, a sheet pulled up to her chin. She made eye contact with the one remaining medical examiner before speaking.

"I'm her granddaughter," was all Jill could think to say. The medical examiner gave her an odd look, but said nothing as she stepped away from the grandmother's body.

"I'll give you some time," she said, leaving the room. The metal doors slammed together behind her as she left, echoing throughout the lab.

What now? Jill thought.

She reached out and touched her grandmother's cheek, the flesh felt cool to the touch. Jill held her grandmother's hand as she did in her grandmother's hospital room.

She noticed the star shaped birthmark on her grandmother's right cheekbone, just in front of her right ear. Jill's free hand moved to her own cheek, touching the same star shaped birthmark on her right cheekbone. She remembered her grandmother always telling her, even when Jill was very little, that the birthmark made her special, different from any other girl. Did the birthmark make them witches?

How could she find out for sure?

Jill knew of only one thing to do.

She sat down on the steel table next to her grandmother. With all her energy, Jill pulled her grandmother's fragile body up and held her to her chest, making sure the birthmarks on their cheeks touched as she held her grandmother close. Jill then felt an intense heat in her right cheek. She could see the glow in her periphery emanating from their cheeks touching. The heat scalded her, but she refused to let go.

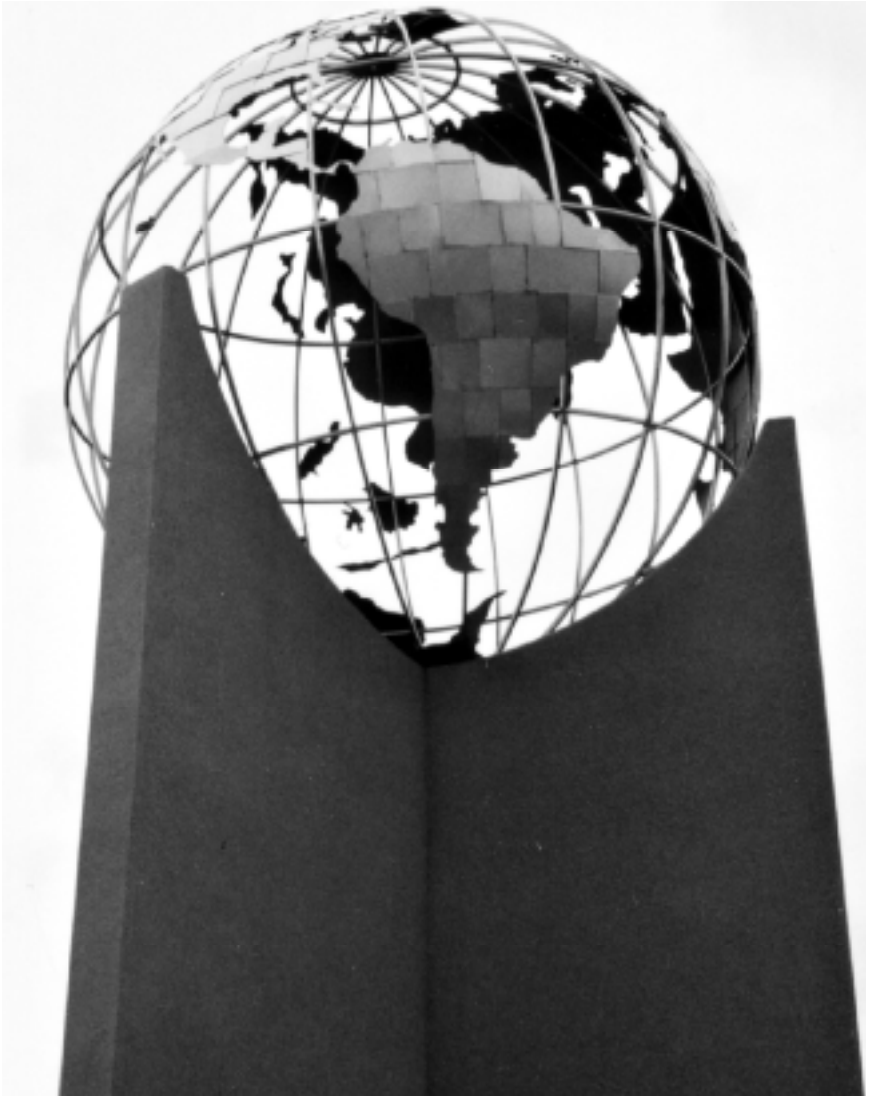
"Come back to me," she whispered into her grandmother's ear.

"Come back to me," she repeated, this time through tears.

Jill closed her eyes and rocked her grandmother back and forth, trying to block out the pain. She knew only a few seconds had passed, but it seemed more like minutes or even hours, still she held on.

“Please, grandma, please,” Jill pleaded through tears that were now overflowing. Then in an instant, the pain and the heat were gone.

Just a second later, she felt her grandmother’s arms come to life and hug her. “I’m here,” her grandmother whispered into Jill’s ear.



A DAY IN THE LIFE

CLARENCE FISCHER

It was the year two thousand and twenty five when all hell broke loose.

There weren't any truly dazzling technological advances worth mentioning—except maybe the CondoToaster. It could toast any kind of bread or pastry, be it a bagel, a bun, a loaf, a muffin. It would even slice it for you if you wanted. But the most ingenious feature was, beyond doubt, the Condiment Applicator. Want butter on that toast? Done. Cream cheese and jelly on your bagel? You got it.

But getting back to my point... All hell broke loose that year. Lives were drastically altered. The government was overthrown. There was marshal law. The weak were weeded out. Death tolls rose while stress levels diminished (for some, anyway).

Here's a for instance:

Just the other day I was waiting for my turn at the automatic teller of my local Citibank (the only bank-chain still in operation, as it were). I was next in line. I sat impatiently in my car, a nice Nissan I had just leased (no, they're not the only car manufacturer left—there's Daewoo) waiting for the buggie in front of me to hurry the hell up and get on with it. So, I'm sitting there, this lady's taking her sweet time...and then I see it: she's trying to make a deposit.

A deposit.

Now, everybody knows you don't make a freakin' deposit in the godalmighty drive thru. You want to make a deposit? Well then take it inside. Don't hold up the rest of the world because you're too lazy to get out of your damn car!

So, what do I do about this travesty? I'll tell you what I do. I calmly lower my driver side glass with a verbal command. With my right hand I reach across my body and grip my gun. I then proceed to blow the ignoramus' hand off.

To my surprise, the young woman in the Nissan minivan behind me cheers for all get go. She pumps her arm up and down while she hangs out her window and yells, "I bet she won't pull that one again!"

I nod in agreement as I replay the scene in my head. The woman had

reached out to insert her deposit envelope and I nailed her dead on the wrist with one shot. I'm telling you, felt like some great weight was lifted off my shoulders. Free therapy.

The idiot now throws her car (it's a cheap Daewoo) in drive and hits the gas way too hard. She drives up on to the curb and her little toy car gets hung up there. I can see through her back window that she's flailing around like a headless chicken. Oh, well.

I pull up to the automatic teller and plug it. A wad of the crazy lady's cash is dispensed. Well, no need to access my account! I think.

I lean out my window and place half the cash on the keypad for the nice young lady behind me. I point to it, smile, and give her the thumbs up. She acknowledges with an enthusiastic wave.

Before driving off, I figure I'll give the douche-bag another shot—this time with the car. I put her in drive and floor the son of a bitch. My grill bashes into the rear of the cheapo Daewoo (good thing I have the crash bars, but I'm still going to need repairs; body shops make a killing these days, as you can imagine) compacting the already nonexistent trunk and sending some of the back window flying up front. I see through the space where the window was that the lady's stopped flailing.

Good for her!

I crest the tiny right-hander, hang a sharp left, and exit the bank property. I'm thinking I'm going to have to see my auto body engineer sometime tomorrow morning. He's been—

That's when the cops pull up. Cop, really. There's just the one. These days one is plenty.

He gets out of his cruiser and he's covered in that black plastic armor they all wear. It's intimidating to say the least. He strolls up to me all nonchalant and says, "What's doin' kid?"

"Nothing," I say.

"Tell me what happened," he says, and he makes a halfhearted effort to point towards the bank.

"Oh. That."

I start with a spiel about how I was in such a hurry to get on with nothing, and the cop just nods imperceptively. I try to look him in the eye as I speak, but all I see is my misshapen reflection in the blacked-out visor of his dark helmet.

As I go on about the whole incident he steps toward his car and leans in the open door like he's not listening, but I know he is. He comes back out

with a steaming cup o' joe and just holds it without drinking.

I'm blabbering on and on and he's still nodding and while I'm talking I'm wondering how he's going to drink that coffee through that enormous helmet.

He doesn't. He just keeps holding on to it and nodding.

"Then I rammed her for good measure," I say, and he flips up the visor of his lid. Finally, I see his eyes. They're cold and unemotional, I think, and coming from me that says a lot.

"Sounds routine to me," he says flatly, lifting the cup to the opening in the helmet.

Cripes! He's gonna burn his face off! I shout in my head, but as he brings the cup close to his face the space in front of his mouth parts, letting him sip naturally. I relax and let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"I'll just need your pedigree information," he tells me. "Then you're on your way."

I start giving him my name and he tells me to wait, stupid, so he can get his pad out. That's when my truck starts idling rough. Really uncharacteristic, mind you. So, he's switching his drink—his hot drink—to his other hand and bam! my car backfires. The cop is startled just enough so that he jumps the slightest bit. I watch as the brown liquid swashes around in the cup, reaching for the lip and then falling back down.

A single drop of sweat runs down my brow and into my eye. It stings terribly, but I don't dare move to wipe it away.

"HE SHOT ME!" yells that bitch from the bank, as she staggers around the corner of the building. She's shaking her handleless arm in front of her like she's a prosecutor and it's the only evidence in a major murder trial (of which there are no more, coincidentally).

That did it. The cop jerks to his left and his coffee leaps out of the little cup and into the air. It comes down on his left hand and he lets out one part yell, two parts angry growl, as he draws his gun.

He blasts one from the hip, stopping the raving lunatic woman in her tracks. Then he pivots to me, extends his arm and jams his gun into my gut. "You asshole," he says.

Two rounds later, my story ends.

SCARS

JANET KUYPERS

Like when the Grossman's German shepherd bit the inside of my knee. I was baby sitting two girls and a dog named "Rosco." I remember being pushed to the floor by the dog, I was on my back, kicking, as this dog was gnawing on my leg, and I remember thinking, "I can't believe a dog named Rosco is attacking me." And I was thinking that I had to be strong for those two little girls, who were watching it all. I couldn't cry.

Or when I stepped off Scott's motorcycle at 2:00 a.m. and burned my calf on the exhaust pipe. I was drunk when he was driving and I was careless when I swung my leg over the back. It didn't even hurt when I did it, but the next day it blistered and peeled; it looked inhuman. I had to bandage it for weeks. It hurt like hell.

When I was little, roller skating in my driveway, and I fell. My parents yelled at me, "Did you crack the sidewalk?"

When I was kissing someone, and I scraped my right knee against the wall. Or maybe it was the carpet. When someone asks me what that scar is from, I tell them I fell.

Or when I was riding my bicycle and I fell when my front wheel skidded in the gravel. I had to walk home. Blood was dripping from my elbow to my wrist; I remember thinking that the blood looked thick, but that nothing hurt. I sat on the toilet seat cover while my sister cleaned me up. It was a small bathroom. I felt like the walls could have fallen in on me at any time. Years later, and I can still see the dirt under my skin on my elbows.

Or when I was five years old and my dad called me an ass-hole because I made a mess in the living room. I didn't.

Like when I scratched my chin when I had the chicken pox.

FROM SCARS PUBLICATIONS

BOOKS

Sulphur & Sawdust
Slate & Marrow
Blister & Burn
Rinse & Repeat
Survive & Thrive
(not so) Warm & Fuzzy
Torture & Triumph
Oh.
the Elements

Infamous in our Prime
Anais Nin: an Understanding of her Art
the Electronic Windmill
Changing Woman
Harvest of Gems
the Little Monk
Death in Málaga
the Svetasvatara Upanishad
the Significance of the Frontier
the Swan Road
In The Palace of Creation
Momento Mori
In the Palace of Creation

Hope Chest in the Attic
the Window
Close Cover Before Striking
Autumn Reason
(Woman.)
Contents Under Pressure
the Average Guy's Guide (to Feminism)
Changing Gears
The Key To Believing

829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155, USA

first edition

printed in the United States of America

Side A/Side B copyright © 2003 Scars Publications
individual pieces © individual creators

COMPACT DISCS

MUSIC

MFV the Demo Tapes
Kuypers the Final (*MFV Inclusive*)
Weeds & Flowers the Beauty & the Destruction
The Second Axing Something Is Sweating
Kuypers Overstating *voice sampling*
MFV, Weeds & Flowers, The Second Axing
Stop. Look. Listen to the music
The Second Axing Live in Alaska 2 concerts

PERFORMANCE ART

Pettus/Kuypers Live at Cafe Aloha
Kuypers Seeing Things Differently
Pointless Orchestra Rough Mixes
Scars Torture & Triumph compilation CD
Kuypers Change/Rearrange
5D/5D Tick Tock
Scars Oh. web-based CD
Kuypers Six One One
Kuypers Stop. Look. Listen.
Order From Chaos The Entropy Project
Kuypers Masterful Performances mp3 CD
Scars the Elements compilation CD
Kuypers Death Comes in Threes
Kuypers Changing Gears *for live 6/17/03 show*

SIDE A/SIDE B

ISBN# 1-891470-35-3

\$24.52 (*with chapbooks & CDs*)

Scars Publications & Design

<http://scars.tv>

Children, Churches & Daddies

ISSN 1068-5154

down in the dirt publication

Freedom & Strength Press