

829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155,  
USA, Northern Hemisphere, Planet Earth,  
Solar System, Milky Way Galaxy, the Universe

first edition  
printed in the United States of America

**Freedom & Strength Press**  
*You can't be free or strong until you can speak up*



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## SIDE A/SIDE B

ISBN# 1-891470-35-3

\$24.52

book, chapbooks, 2 Compact Discs

**scars** *nope* *ayy* *qnd*

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**children  
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ISSN 1068-5154

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# FEATHERS

ERIK WILSON

We are jockeying for position, she and I, driving south on Interstate 5 just outside of Bakersfield. It's an automotive pas de deux that I've been dancing off and on all morning, with vehicles of all types and drivers of all persuasions and temperaments. This one just happens to be a blue Toyota, driven by a blonde woman who looks to be about five or ten years older than me, who seems determined to go just fast enough to keep me behind her as long as the other lane is crowded and I have no chance of swooping past her on the right and opening it up again. It's a rather macho game she's playing, one that I would not usually expect from a driver that looks like she does, but really not very much surprises me this morning, today, right now.

She's had a couple of chances to pull into the slow lane and let me pass her, but instead of taking those opportunities, she sped up and stayed just in front of me, looking at me in the rear view mirror. I'd seen it happen before, and I knew that at some point either I'd find an opening on the right, or she'd get tired of looking at my grill about to kiss her back bumper, pull over, and I'd win, zoom away and be shut of her and her kind. Until I got behind the next pokey person with not enough brains to drive sensibly and stay out of my way.

There's a big semi on the right that she's using for leverage right now. A big eighteen-wheeler bombing down this straight, brown, boring-ugly highway, that she's driving next to just fast enough to keep me from passing her on the right. As she pulls ahead far enough to where I think I can see an opening, I realize that there is a car in front of the truck, giving her another shield from being overtaken and making me sigh in frustration.

I ease up just slightly, pissed that I can't maneuver around her just yet, but knowing that I will eventually. Soon, I hope.

She looks once again in the rear view, and I hope that she can see the expression on my face. I don't resort to gestures or horn-honking or lights flashing, just a scowl and a slight shaking of my head. I can see what looks like a smug expression on her face, and I imagine that she can read mine as well.

I'm driving south because my life has gone south. My marriage is over, and Teresa and the kids are staying in the Bay Area, trying to pick up the pieces and go on with their lives without me being there to screw things up anymore. I'm heading to my brother's place in Echo Park, with the idea that

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maybe I can start over again and not make such a mess of things this time. Try to dry out, give up the booze for a while, like I had promised Teresa I would so many times before. Maybe learn to work on controlling my anger a little better. Learn how to be an adult... whatever that means.

I'm driving south because it's the only direction I know how to go anymore.

It's going to be difficult, I know. I think I'll miss my kids most of all. Artie and little Maddy, Madison, the two sweetest kids on the face of this earth. Teresa is so good with them. It amazes me sometimes how good she is with those two. The amount of love she has for them is boundless, unending. She'd die for either one of them before she'd let something happen to them. And those two kids -- they love her right back. They'd follow their mother anywhere, do anything for her.

Sure, they also love me. When I'm sober.

Teresa used to have that kind of boundless love for me, had it for years, until I finally killed it inside her. I could see it coming, but I couldn't stop it. Couldn't stop drinking, even when I knew it was becoming a choice between the bottle and my family. I tried to slow things down, tried to look at what I had and what I was losing, but it seemed that life just moved too fast for me. I could never get a handle on it long enough to commit to staying sober.

It's been nearly 48 hours since I last had a drink, and things are moving fast right now, but not fast enough for me. I've got a woman in a blue Toyota in front of me that's keeping me from going the speed I want to drive, and I'm not happy. My gut is churning, and I've got that gun-metal taste in my mouth. A drink right now would go down real easy... real easy. But I'm trying not to think that way.

My brother says he'll help me stay dry. Says he might be able to get me a job at the studio in Burbank, if I can keep it up. We'll see. I plan on making an honest effort, but if it doesn't work out, well... it wouldn't be the first time I disappointed someone in my family.

This woman in front of me is really starting to get on my damn nerves. She's keeping a pace just in between the semi to my right and the car in front of it. I've had to drop back to where I'm just slightly behind the truck, keeping up my speed in the left lane. There are two cars behind me now, wanting to pass me and the semi and the car in front of it and this crazy blonde woman in the blue Toyota.

The car in front of the semi speeds up a bit, and I think maybe, just maybe, the woman will take the opening and drop in and let me pass. Before that can happen, though, I see brake lights. The car in the right lane swerves, then keeps going. Both the Toyota and the truck on my right hit their brakes,

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and I wonder what's happening. It only takes a minute to find out.

Some ducks -- a mother duck and six or seven baby ducks -- have wandered out onto the highway, and are apparently trying to cross to the median strip in the middle. The mother walks in the lead, and the baby ducks all stay close to her, following her. They are in the middle of the right lane, probably scared by the car that just swerved and missed them, but unable to go anywhere fast enough to avoid the rest of the oncoming traffic. The truck on my right is doing at least 80, and there isn't a hope in hell that he can do anything about these ducks in his path.

The woman ahead of me hits her brakes, and I do the same. As we brake, the semi plows into the group of ducks, hitting the mother with the front tire and killing her instantly. She is squashed flat, one with the pavement, and feathers fly into the air as the truck keeps moving. He misses most of the babies, as far as I can tell, and in my rear view mirror I can see them scurrying back to the side of the road, away from the highway and their dead mother's body.

I pass the truck driver, and I can see him shaking his head. I feel sorry for the guy, but at the same time I know that there was nothing he could do. Not a damn thing.

After about a mile, the woman in the blue Toyota pulls into the right lane and lets me pass. I look at her as I do, and I see that she has her hand to her mouth, and it looks like she's crying. I hit the gas and pass her by.

What a terrible thing to see, I think. Those poor baby ducks. Those poor baby ducks.

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# MY REWARD, MY PUNISHMENT...MY SON

STEVEN MANCHESTER

Several long years ago, I fell head-over-heels in love.

“Congratulations!” the doctor exclaimed, “You have a healthy baby boy!” Overwhelmed, I took him in my arms and carefully inspected the fragile, squirming gift. Ten fingers, ten toes and the wail of a siren made my eyes fill with tears. He was beautiful, absolutely perfect, and the endless possibilities for the future washed over me like a magical tidal wave. I cried for the dreams we’d share together and the lessons I was anxious to impart: Baiting a hook, hitting a curve ball, being a gentleman without being a weak man...all of it. I was sure that this boy was my reward for every good intention I’d ever had. What I didn’t realize, however, was that our dreams were solely contingent upon the success of my marriage...

It’s been said that most relationships don’t end in a sudden burst of anger or betrayal. Rather, like a panting dog, love collapses exhausted at the base of walls that can no longer be hurdled. In my case, with my son still in diapers, “irreconcilable differences” escorted me from my comfortable recliner into a world of living torment.

Though equally hurt, we decided to act like real adults and “do what was in the best interest of our child.” This, I discovered, would prove impossible, as “the best interest of our child” was as different in our minds as our ideas for saving the marriage. Almost instantly, my newly estranged wife considered our son her closest ally and determined that she and the boy were a package deal. She couldn’t see the separation. My son was hers and if I wasn’t with her, then I was merely an outsider. In essence, if she and I were to be

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separated, so were he and I. The nightmare had begun...

While our innocent baby boy sang along with Barney, my wife and I went to court; an intimidating place designed to bring justice to criminals; a horrifying place where truth can prove as rare as an attorney willing to tell it. At 150 dollars an hour and in no hurry to resolve our differences, both lawyers muttered half-truths, while a stranger dressed in black robes allowed nearly fifteen minutes to decide our future. I panicked and cleared my throat... I was swiftly threatened into silence.

Before it started, it was over. Society's views would inevitably dictate the outcome: My new ex-wife was a little girl; a victim who cried more easily, while relying on the maternal bonds (we all cherish) to bring her victory. I, on the other hand, was naturally bigger; nothing more than the breadwinner, who unfortunately represented the same gender that historically abandoned its kids. With nothing for me to do but watch, my entire world was slowly dismembered, piece-by-bloody-piece.

With no apologies and even less compassion, the judge issued a punishment harsher than any prison term, while the haunting crack of the gavel sealed the cruel deal: I could take my son on loan, two nights a week and every other weekend! I was in shock! I'd heard the brutal rumors, read the frightening stories, but still, I couldn't believe it. Yet, there I stood: A man who was being criminalized for committing no crime; a trembling father who was no more than one-half of a relationship that no longer worked.

"I suggest that you work together with regards to your son's education, religious aspirations, activities," the judge concluded with an empty smile.

I glanced over at my EX. She grinned.

"The judge went easy," my attorney whispered, "you've been given standard visitation." WENT EASY? I was enraged, and still paying this idiot to defend rights that were never mine.

The EX called the shots now. Due to one simple chromosome, from here on, my love would be valued less. Reality tasted like broken glass. For the first time since my son's birth, I silently wept.

Not long after we left court, reality set in...

There was a strange support from those who cared to listen, but it was equally infuriating. "I would have done this... And I would have said that..." most boasted, but these were only the words of people who'd never experienced child custody, or perhaps, from those who valued their pride more than their own offspring. In either case, it didn't matter. Their opinions were empty and valued as such. I felt completely alone.

And so it went: I'd take my son for our court-ordered visits, only to drop

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him off two hours later, so another man could bounce him off his lap. Ironically, each new boyfriend was given all the time he wanted with my son. At first, it killed me, but I decided, "Whatever's best for my boy. His happiness must come first!" Though it stung terribly, that attitude sustained me all the way to Christmas.

I waited in my old driveway for 4 excruciating hours, while three inches of snow muffled the screams from the cab of my truck. When they finally pulled in, my ex-wife snickered, "I must have lost track of time?" and handed over my son. I was livid! My boy was dead tired and half-asleep. And the EX...well...she just grinned, confident that there was nothing I could do about it. It took everything I had left to conceal my tears. I didn't plan to give her anything for Christmas and was doing my best to stick to the plan.

Days turned into weeks, as I tried to contend with my son's misguided guilt of his parents being separated. It wasn't easy. I only had a fraction of her time to soothe him. In the meantime, nothing seemed to ease the spite of a woman who had no qualms about using our child as a pawn in her cruel games. She had custody, so the boy was constantly used as a tool to negotiate for more. While I was fighting for just visitation, she was going for \$\$\$...as much as she could get!

Weeks turned into months and if at all possible, things got even worse. Put simply: Imagine that the person who hates you most controls the person you love most? She would bash my character, using our son as her sounding board. I understand the intensity of emotions, even the darkest feelings, but this behavior never made sense to me. For every derogatory word directed at a child's father, isn't half of whom that child is- also insulted? On the flip side, there could be no comparable reply without compromising the invaluable lessons of honor. Boys don't talk badly about their Moms and understand respect! Knowing this, I never reciprocated my wife's vicious slander. She, however, made it a sport to stain the very name our child called his own.

As time dragged on, several mysteries were solved: When a person demonizes another, it evidently frees up their conscience to justify almost anything. (I suppose no one looks in a mirror and sees a demon looking back?) In our case, words like abandonment were forever used to mold me into a monster, often permitting acts of great greed and cruelty. I was at the whimsical mercy of one who was consumed with hateful vengeance. And through it all, she convincingly swore, "I need to protect my son. I need to put him first." PROTECT HER SON FROM HIS OWN LOVING FATHER?!! Perhaps it's human, but she could never understand that being a father was a whole separate business from being a husband.

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The playing field was so damn uneven! Everything I'd ever been taught; everything that made me who I was, raged inside of me to lash out. I wanted to go to war with her, I truly did, but the same recurring question always halted me: Do I pull on the boy until he breaks in half? The answer, of course, was no. The only thing I really could do was my best, and hope that (in time) he'd know the depth of my love for him.

This worked for a while, but eventually, I was getting beaten so badly that I had no choice. I put up my gloves. We went back to court.

As I painfully recall, I was allowed (briefly) to explain all that I missed because my ex-wife considered the visitation order a suggestion and not a court mandate. In turn, she lied and vowed that she never interfered with visitation; never slandered my name to our son; blah, blah, blah. The judge's shaking head couldn't decide the difference between fact and fiction. In the end, no one in the courtroom could and oddly enough, it didn't seem abnormal for the setting. With a stern reprimand for us both, we were dismissed back to our own agendas. My ex-wife had won again!

At every level, I was at a serious disadvantage. I was struggling financially and begging to be more involved in my son's life. As a last resort, I conducted some frantic research. The years of gathered statistics were sobering: Very few women had ever been fined, or jailed, as a result of being held in contempt of court for withholding a child from visitation. In the blurry vision of the court, it was considered a punishment for the child as well. I'd learned: There are many perceptions of the same truth, while in court; the only one that mattered was the judge's. These truths had finally worn discouragement down to disheartenment. I had to ask: If victory is a guaranteed impossibility, why ever enter the ring again? The answer turned my heart to stone.

For all intents and purposes, my son's mother had been granted complete and total control, making life pure hell! No matter her games or punishments for me, there was never any true recourse. When confronted, she would simply laugh. "Wanna go back to court?" she'd bark. This little girl had been empowered to all ends; a prime example that our "we" society had finally, and completely, surrendered to our "Me" society.

The months crawled into years. As I look back, I guess it's the little things that hurt most: I'd practice baseball with him, only for her to storm the field after his last game, snatching up his trophy so that I'd never see it. There were Christmas' when I'd play Santa for a little boy who had been kept up all night by his Mom's family. Each year, he was too exhausted to enjoy the holiday with me, or mine. And every school year, I was forced into beg-

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ging to see his report card, as she was convinced, “You don’t care about his grades. If you did, you would’ve never abandoned US!” The examples are endless, though I’m not sure they matter anymore.

What does matter and always will, however, are the many poor decisions made because I no longer had a say. My son was, and still is, being raised by a woman who could never understand what it’s like to be a boy, or what it takes to become a man. Sure, she’s taught him how to bake moist Brownies and the joys of sitting around the kitchen table chatting with the ladies, but she could never teach the sacred rites of passage into manhood: How to protect himself without starting a fight...the glorious list is endless. In short, dirt and worms and slingshots are taboo in her world, as they should be, but in the end, it’s not her world that suffers. It’s our son’s.

As if God blessed my son’s life to only one; his mother, I still struggle to help him retain the half of his identity which came from me; a half also filled with family and tradition. To make matters worse, when any responsibility for my son’s upbringing was taken from me, it became incredibly dangerous for me to discipline him, or be the father God intended me to be. I remember wishing I had the same rights I watched my ex-in-laws enjoy. The more time that passed, however, the less I kept watch. Even I knew I had been castrated in fatherhood. How could I possibly teach a boy to be a man when many of these attributes were stripped from me long ago?

In the real world, bitter angry words fall on deaf ears, so silence has watched the months tick off the years. All the while, life has been cheated the many magical moments shared between a father and his son. In my darkest nightmares, I could have never imagined watching the childhood of my own blood whip by, while strangers told me (along with those who didn’t wish me well) that my input as a father would be limited and my role as a Dad reduced to that of a visiting friend. Yet, it happened! And through it all, the same damn question has haunted me: There was never any question about the value of a mother’s love, but at what point did a father’s love become valued less? I’m yet to find a reasonable answer.

Though tragic, I now look forward to my son becoming a grown man. I honestly long for the time when our relationship will no longer be controlled by the ever-changing moods of one hateful person. I wish this, even though I know the best years will be fast-forwarded!

As much as I wanted to avoid appearing bitter, it has obviously proven impossible. But you must understand! My dreams, my hopes, my loves...my very future, are found in my son. Once he was taken, all was lost, and it’s nearly impossible to grieve someone you still see from time-to-time! In a

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comically twisted sense, my ex-wife finally found enough ways to share her wonderful gift. It's taken years, but I understand her now. Resentment is a difficult demon to slay.

In closing, as a result of my painful experiences and tormented research, I am saddened to report that we live in a fatherless society today, where many of our children are void of a male influence. In reality, though, abandonment is not the primary cause. Rather, thousands of alleged deadbeat and apathetic Dads stand in the shadows, wishing they could fulfill the most precious responsibility God could ever impart: To raise a child; their child. Instead, they have been forced to atone for the sins of their forefathers.

I suppose the most stiffening truth is that the majority of men are only one decision; one single choice away from being where I am.

The shocking part is that this decision probably won't be theirs to make!  
-Evan and Jake's Dad

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# THE RESOLUTION OF JAY RANDOLPH

BRUCE ADKINS

After leaving the busy turnpike, Jay Randolph turned his new Subaru on to a lonely stretch of two lane highway. Jay still couldn't escape the conclusion that he must be insane. Why else would he drive 400 miles just to vent his anger over something that happened 38 years ago.

Even harder for Jay to understand was just how he was going to accomplish this venting of his anger. Short of murder, Jay didn't have a clue.

The old River Road still looked the same, Jay thought. The Snake River wound its way along one side of the road and on the other side the fields were alive with rich, golden wheat as far as the eyes could see. At the top of a hill a sign read CRATERVILLE-- 7 MILES. Jay slowed down so he could inhale the pollution free air and view the old countryside he knew so well as a boy.

Jay, a tall, skinny, 56 year old widower with a pencil line mustache and crew cut gray hair, was employed as an x-ray Technician at a large medical center.

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For years now Jay had suffered horrible nightmares. In his nightmares he was always eluding the police. Women were always bailing him out. He was always facing the same old bald headed judge. Sometimes he woke himself

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up pleading not guilty, your honor. One night he dreamed he shot the judge and woke up scared to death.

His analyst friend convinced Jay that he was full of repressed anger. The anger, the analyst discovered after long sessions of exploration, stemmed from an incident that happened to Jay when he was a senior in high school. "You'll never get well until you resolve this inner conflict. You'll never be a free man until you deal with this matter," Jay's analyst told him.

The incident concerned Maggie Ann Ferris, a heavy set girl with buck teeth and stringy hair. Maggie Ann claimed Jay intentionally made contact with her large bosom in the hallway at school.

Jay maintained he didn't intentionally make contact with Maggie Ann's large bosom, that it happened accidentally while he was trying to squeeze by her on his way to study hall. Anyway, Maggie Ann hauled off from the right field and slapped Jay so hard he went sprawling across the crowded hallway floor.

After he recovered Jay tried to laugh it off and forgot it, but Brent Douglas, a star football player, wouldn't let him. "There's Jay Randolph, the little pervert," Brent told the football team. This and other similar remarks made by Brent kept the incident alive for the rest of the school year.

The principal called Jay into his office and reprimanded him. Girls looked at Jay in a strange, condescending way. Lisa Hatcher, a girl Jay had been trying to date would no longer speak to him. Even the school janitor got in on the act. "It is true you're a booby pincher?" the janitor asked Jay.

Jay forgot the incident as he went off to college. But now, after all these years, Jay was convinced the scar from the incident still lingered in his gut. It was like a cancer that wouldn't go away.

The two classmates responsible for Jay's anger were reported still living in Craterville. Brent Douglas was said to be a popular criminal attorney. Maggie Ann Ferris, now Maggie Ann Bruno, was a junior high school history teacher.

Jay had avoided attending all his high school class reunions in the past for fear of facing Brent Douglas and Maggie Ann Bruno. But now Jay resolved to confront his old classmates face to face and settle his anger problem one way or another.

As Jay drove up and down the streets of his old home town he was amazed at how it had changed. The high school he attended had been converted to a junior high school. The movie theater was replaced by a big WalMart store. The corner drug store was now a parking lot.

A big street clock flashed 76 degrees and 2:37 PM when Jay checked in at the Old Midland Hotel, the one remaining fixture in town. In his room Jay removed his shoes, stretched out on the bed and spent a few minutes

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reading the sports page of USA TODAY.

Then Jay flung the newspaper aside and began pacing the floor. “Brent Douglas,” Jay said, formulating his speech. “You may not remember me, but you helped ruin my senior year in high school. You taunted me, belittled me, called me a pervert. You humiliated me in front of the whole school.”

“I wasn’t man enough back in high school to take a stand against you, but I am now. I have come today to demand an apology from you or else I’m going to kick your ass right here and now.”

Jay was working himself up in a rage. He stopped pacing and looked out his third floor window. There was a rodeo in town and a group of men wearing cowboy hats were milling around in the streets. Jay studied them for a moment and then began pacing again.

“As for you, Maggie Ann Bruno,” Jay continued, “Do you remember the time you slapped my face back in high school? I’m sure you do. That was probably the highlight of your life.”

“How could you ever be so conceited to think I would be interested in your breasts or any other part of your anatomy,” Jay said, raising his voice. “Because of you I’ve had nightmares off and on for the last 38 years. I want you to know I’m not leaving here until you apologize to me.”

Still in a rage Jay picked up the phone and dialed the law firm of Brent Douglas.

“This is the law office of Bennett, Dean and Jordan,” a young girl said answering the phone.

“I’d like to speak to Brent Douglas, that famous criminal attorney,” Jay said, laughing.

“Who is this?” the girl asked.

“None of your business,” Jay snapped.

“What did you say?” the girl asked.

“This is Jay Randolph, an old high school buddy of Brent’s,” Jay said.

“Didn’t you know? Mr. Douglas is dead. He was shot about three months ago,” the girl said.

“You’re joking, aren’t you?” Jay asked.

“No, he’s dead all right,” said the girl. “I went to his funeral. He got involved in some type of romantic entanglement.”

Probably shot by a jealous husband, Jay thought. Jay stood looking out the window again. The men wearing the cowboy hats were gone now and the streets were empty. Brent Douglas is dead, Jay thought. The good looking All State football player. That’s so hard to believe. He was always so healthy, so

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invincible, Jay thought, and now he's dead.

Jay shook it off and called the residence of Maggie Ann Bruno. Once again, a young girl answered the phone. "I'd like to speak to Maggie Ann Bruno," Jay said.

"Maggie Bruno is a patient in St. Marks Hospital. May I ask who is calling?" the girl asked.

"An old acquaintance," Jay said and hung up.

Thirty minutes later a husky male attendant dressed in a white uniform let Jay down a long hall of the St. Marks Hospital. The attendant stopped and unlocked two double doors.

"They keep this place locked up?" Jay asked.

"Oh yes, this is a psychiatric ward," the attendant said.

Midway down the hall the attendant knocked at a door, then opened it without waiting for a response. Maggie Ann Bruno was sitting on the edge of her bed. She was skin and bones, a skeleton of her old self. Her hair, still stringy, was down in her face, her mouth hung open and there was a far away look in her eyes.

Jay was stunned at the sight of his old classmate, but he tried not to show it. "Hello Maggie Ann," Jay said.

"I'm not signing any autographs today. I'm not giving any interviews today," Maggie Ann said.

"She's the governor of Texas today," said the attendant. "Yesterday she was Hillary Clinton."

"Maggie Ann, it's me, Jay Randolph," Jay said. "Don't you remember me? We went to school together."

"What newspaper did you say you were with?" Maggie Ann asked.

At that point Jay gave up. "Sorry," said the attendant as he escorted Jay out of the building.

It took Jay a while to come to terms with the day's events. Although Jay didn't get to confront his old classmates as he had planned, he still felt somehow at peace with himself.

Two weeks later and after enjoying 14 straight nights of restful sleep, Jay woke up one morning convinced his nightmares were over. At last, Jay realized, his old pent up anger was gone.

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# STILL THE GREATEST

## J CORN

It was the strangest thing. One day the marble bust of Harry Houdini that I kept on my desk—for obvious reasons—decided to wink at me.

Not being one to doubt the world's greatest escape artist—dead or alive—I, of course, winked back. Though when the formerly inanimate piece of marble spoke, I found myself a little worried about the state of my mind.

“One can extricate himself from any trap or bond ever devised. The key is to believe in oneself.” Harry's voice was hard and polished. Or maybe his face was, I forget now. Either way, he was quiet and difficult to hear.

“Thank you, Harry,” I replied.

“No, boy. Thank you.”

“For what, Harry?”

But he didn't respond to my question. The marble lips regained their immobile expression of distant bemusement. I noticed that his eyes were squinted in concentration and I found myself wondering what the world's greatest escape artist was concentrating on.

The small marble bust showed Harry with a bow tie secured around his neck. Two weeks after he spoke to me the tie was unraveled and hung in bas-relief about his neck as if a stone gorget. That night, as I packed the sculpture in bubble wrap and a cardboard box, I noticed that Harry's last name had been misspelled on the base—“Houdni” it read. How clever, Harry, I thought.

I mailed the little statue to the Houdini museum in Budapest the next morning. I don't know if they ever received it and I never heard anything about it again.

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## ON AN OFF-RAMP

J CORN

A decision has to be made. It's as simple as that. In front of me about twenty yards and slightly down a sloping hill The Bullett Lounge sign switches off like the erasure of a lightning strike's ghost trail in the midst of a storming night, though the sky was clear. Away in space the stars twinkled so vividly in the cloudless night, and I knew it had to be really cold out there what with the wind scouring the hard asphalt. The light hasn't changed. I've been here for way too long for just one cycle through the familiar red-green-yellow-red.

I'm beginning to grow uncomfortable, really. The heat has come on finally. This old heap takes its time getting on-line in weather like this. My jacket is tightened up close around my neck and the lined gloves keep my hands warm. In a moment of suspicion I check the backseat to be sure that my luggage is in place. Then I lock the doors and insure the windows are up tight.

He's looking at me. I'm sure of it now. Out there in the frigid winter's chill, nothing more than a threadbare sixth-hand jacket to shield him from the nightmare of that scourge-like zephyr. He stares and hopes for some show of compassion.

I turn up the heat a little, aware of the chill even through all the layers protecting me from the outside. I turn up the volume on the in-dash cd player. In my pocket is my last twenty. I pull it from my pocket and fold it up into a thin strip. After pondering the little scrap of paper—a tiny bit of shaped pulp endowed with so much value, power.

After what seemed like an eternity the light blissfully verdured. On the deserted street I hesitated. I put the car in park and opened the door. I reached out and handed the twenty to the man who sat, hunched, on the sidewalk in the frigid December night. Then I got in my car and drove away.

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# UNTITLED

SUSAN SOVEREIGN

Donnie and Anna were once again at church camp. This was the second session of the summer. At first, Sam and I didn't think they would go, but both of the children begged so hard that we relented and let them. This meant the twins were lonesome, bored, and whiney. Even though I tried distracting them with crayons, construction paper, paste, and safety scissors, they would only play a short time before demanding that I play something else with them. At this rate, the breakfast dishes would still be on the table when Sam got home from work. Perhaps the answer was to play something with them that would allow me to at least load the dishwasher while we were busy. When Brian suggested hide and seek, it sounded like the answer to my problem. Both twins loved to play this game, quite possibly because they always won. When we first started playing, I would pretend I couldn't find them. Lately, they were getting good enough at choosing places that sometimes I really couldn't find them.

It was always my turn to be 'it'. The twins didn't enjoy having to hunt for me. They thought Mommy should always be readily available and easy to find, even during a game. We had been playing for about 5 minutes when the front doorbell sounded. Brad and Brian had just hidden, so I went to the door by myself. It was the UPS man with a package for Sam. This was a different person than the regular delivery person. I had never seen him before. He said his name was Jim.

Scrutinizing the label, I tried to decide what Sam could have ordered. Possibly some 'man' thing he thought he absolutely had to have, like an automatic battery post cleaner. (I didn't realize there was such a thing until he ordered and received one.)

The timer on the stove sounded, indicating that my cake should be done. Hustling out to the kitchen, I tested the cake and then set it on the counter to cool. Brian was giggling in the background. He thought he had hidden someplace where I could never find him. I placed the shortening, large mixing bowl, powdered sugar, vanilla, and mixer on the counter, and then called out, "Now where can those twins be? I can't find them anywhere at all!"

This comment was greeted by more giggling. I decided that it was time to find them. Brian was hiding in the closet. (That's his favorite hiding place.)

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Two times out of three, that's where he can be found.) Brad wasn't in any of his usual hiding places. I began searching in earnest for him, determined to find him immediately if not sooner. After about ten minutes, however, I decided that I better call him in "Free!" This would indicate to him that he had won and that I could not find him.

Although I called out "Free" over and over, he didn't appear. Quizzing Brian had no positive results. He just kept saying that Brad was hiding where I'd never find him. I was beginning to think he was right. I searched high, I searched low, and I searched in between. Where could that little scoundrel be? After about another 20 minutes with no positive results, I panicked! As far as I'm concerned, when I have a problem with no way that I can see to solve it, the only answer is to call Sam. I called him.

At first, Sam thought I was only teasing. He said that if anyone kidnapped one of the twins, they'd bring them back before very long. Then he asked how in the world I managed to lose a child when I hadn't been away from the house all day. I didn't know quite how to answer that one. I'd been trying to figure it out myself.

Meanwhile, Brad had climbed into the back of the UPS truck while the Jim was talking with me. There was a nice soft blanket and pillow in the back of the truck (No, I don't know why.), so Brad curled up and was soon fast asleep. Jim got into the truck and drove off, unknowingly taking Brad with him.

After an hour or so, and numerous stops later, Brad awakened. He called out that he'd like a drink of water. Jim was startled to hear that small voice from the back of the van. He slammed the brakes on and dashed around the van, opened the back door, and lifted Brad from inside and set him on the ground.

Brad has never been afraid of a stranger, especially one who offered him a candy bar. Jim asked Brad what his name was. Brad looked intently at the man and said, "I don't know what your name is. I've never seen you before!" The man at first was confused, and then explained he wanted to know what Brad's name was. Brad replied, "Brad." Jim asked what his last name was. Brad said that was the last and only name he ever owned.

Since obviously this line of questioning wasn't going to get much information, Jim asked Brad what his Daddy's name was. Brad crunched away on the candy bar, got a mouthful, and said, "Daddy."

"No, what I mean is, what's his first name?" he quizzed.

"His first name is Daddy!" Brad insisted.

Jim decided he would try another tact. "Where do you live?"

Brad looked at him as if the man weren't too intelligent, crossed his chubby little legs, and said, "I live at home."

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By now Jim was getting worried. He was concerned that someone would think he had kidnapped Brad, only he hadn't a clue who that someone could be. There were children at most of the stops he had made. He decided that perhaps if he tried different questions, the little tyke might be able to tell him something that would help to get him back home.

"Has Mommy and Daddy ever told you your address? You know, like the city and state you live in?"

"Yep," answered Brad. However, he didn't expand on this comment.

"Well, what did they say your address was?" he queried eagerly.

"Daddy says we live in the state of confusion most of the time," Brad retorted sincerely. "I'm hungry," he declared.

The only food in the van was more candy and a soft drink. Fearing that Brad might not know how to unwrap the sweet confections, he peeled the wrapper off and held it out to Brad. Brad clamped down on the candy. Unfortunately, he also managed to clamp down on Jim's fingers. He bit hard enough to almost draw blood. Jim jerked his fingers back, unfortunately taking the candy, too. This caused Brad to begin crying and sobbing loudly. He quickly gave the candy back to Brad who immediately ceased his wailing.

By this time, Jim was getting desperate. This was his first day on a new job, and he didn't want it to be the last. He called in on his radio to the home office and asked if they had any suggestions. At first, the people at the office thought he was joking and began teasing him about picking up unauthorized packages. The poor man didn't know what to do. At last he lost his temper and screamed, "I AM NOT JOKING. I HAVE A LITTLE BOY IN THE BACK OF MY VAN AND I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE CAME FROM!!!" That was when they began to take him seriously.

The dispatcher asked him to describe the little boy. The route man replied, "He's short, has brown eyes, blonde hair and lots of real sharp teeth. I'd guess him to be about 3 or so. I don't think he was in the van when I left this morning. As a matter of fact, I didn't know he was in the van until about five minutes ago!"

The dispatcher said, "Now calm down, Jim. I'll start calling the places you've delivered to this morning. Read me a list of where all you've been."

When Jim started down the list, he read each name slowly and distinctly, pausing in between people. The Sovereign's were about the sixth place he read. The dispatcher excitedly said, "Whoa! They have twin boys about that age. I'll give them a call right now. Hold on!"

Susan grabbed the phone on the first jingle. "Hello, hello! Brad! Brad! Is that you?"

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The dispatcher said, “No, Ma’am, it isn’t Brad. My name is Charlie, but I think I might know where Brad is if he’s a little boy about 3.”

“My baby! Do you have my baby? Is he all right? Where is he? Why did you take him? Can you bring him right home or shall I come get him?”

The dispatcher finally managed to break in and tell her that Brad was in the delivery truck and that he would be returned to her in about an hour.

It would be difficult to say who was happier when Brad got home. It might have been Susan. It might have been Sam. It might have been Brad, but I truly think that it was more than likely the UPS deliveryman who was the happiest.

## THE BEE

### REED ROLES

There is a humming  
in my brain —  
like a bee  
trapped aainst a windowpane,  
beating against the invisible  
with desperate wings  
trying in vain  
for the other side  
where flowers stem  
the tide  
of green fields.

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## BELLOWS IN THE WILLOWS

PAUL THOMAS

It turned out so different, as if we had plans  
The keeper of time, has cynical hands  
He holds us to ransom, high noon is ahead  
Who remembers the faces, of passion they bed.

The makeup on pillows, and love neath the willows  
The 60 proof cask, and the questions unmasked  
The maybes of could be, that would be the bellows  
And those that stopped so close, they're forever aghast.

And those that craved blindly, and in darkness did see  
Those that burst seams, and believed in their dreams  
Were those that were destined, to always be free  
They were simple at heart, like you and me.

## BATTLING THE SENSES

BURTON R. HOFFMANN

Have I become jaded because I have  
--seen too much?  
--heard too much?  
--felt too much?  
--tasted too much?  
--sniffed too much?

TASTE ANYONE?

So much in our society  
Has become cheap and tawdry.  
Whatever happened to taste?

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# SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER BLISTERS

PAUL CORDEIRO

Steve sits next to Celia  
and Tom sits nearer to Joyce.  
Larry gets the taller Mary.  
Steve says, "ask Celia  
what she wants to drink."  
Larry buys a round and asks.  
"I want Sex-On-The-Beach," says Celia.  
Everybody's eyes dance a striptease.  
The boys have T-Bone steaks  
while the three ladies nurse  
their watered-down drinks.  
"When do we dance?" Celia asks.  
"These Brazilian passion songs  
move too damn fast," says Steve.  
Larry chews and doesn't care  
which girl's lips move and what  
itches between her legs.  
"Their dames," Larry says,  
"but we're brothers at war."  
Larry shouts to the blond waitress  
with the longest hair to bring him  
another beer and a smile.  
The noise and the smoke make Larry  
think he's in the bush again.  
"All I want is ten hours of sleep."  
says Larry to Steve  
who lights up a cigarette  
after his steak hits the sweet spot.  
"When are we going to dance?" Celia pleads.

"I'm waiting for the right slow one for us,"  
Steve says over the drums and buzz  
of voices clashing in the smoke.  
He never whispers to Celia  
that his engine's hot as Springsteen's  
and how he wants to kiss her etcetera.  
After resting on elbows for two hours  
the house lights flood on  
and their surrounded.  
"I never got my dance," Celia says.  
"Next time I won't bring them,"  
Steve says,  
and fiddles with the gold chain  
dangling off the fat of his neck.  
Steve and Larry and Tom go to their cars.  
Mary and Joyce get in their cars.  
"Good night, Steve." waves Celia, straggling  
behind in the parking lot.  
She looks up at the moon  
and breathes a few deep breaths  
and sighs. She's going to stop  
at the first liquor store she sees.

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# ELECTRONIC SOLITUDS

MARK GRAHAM

I was in electronic solitude  
Dancing like a bird upon the wind  
Dreaming like a Japanese man  
Gathering flowers.

Peace alters my emotions.  
War devastates my thoughts.  
In this electronic solitude  
The waves transmit  
And the frequency abstracts.

One blue line.  
Two black lines.  
Three white lines  
And I'm in business.

I made my masterpiece  
In electronic solitude.  
I shattered the glass  
As the sound increased.

In the underground  
There is no underground.  
It has all surfaced now....

I was in electronic solitude  
Dreaming for a song  
That I could sing.  
This is it  
This is me.

# WAITING

ROBERT THIMMESH

Her body, pear-  
shaped by  
sixty-five years  
of waiting for

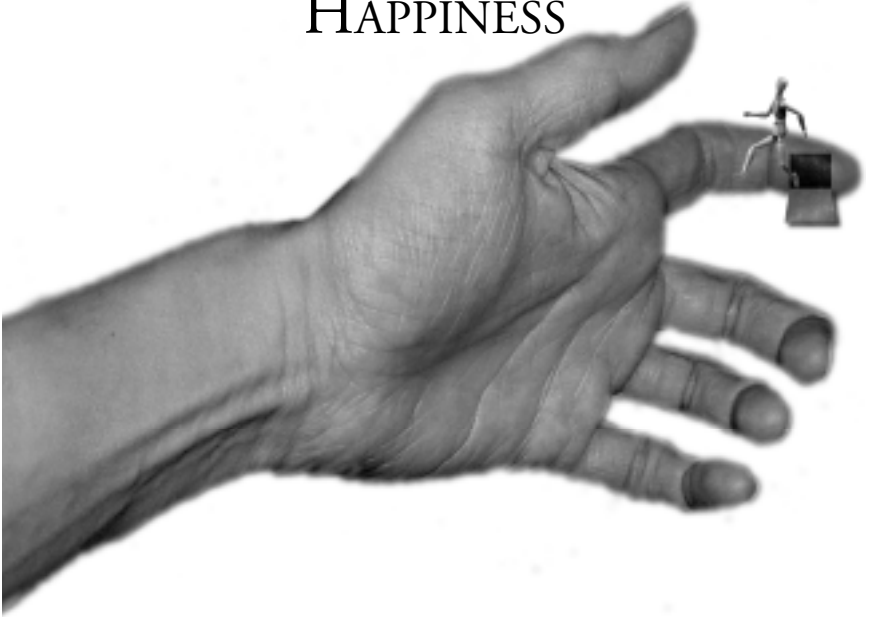
mail  
food stamps  
rides  
doctors  
love  
social workers  
landlords  
exterminators  
death  
relatives  
medicine  
sales clerks  
salvation

Waiting for  
Ebullient sunshine days,  
Pain free wooded walks,  
Coffee conversations,  
Companionship's warm embrace,  
Depression's flight,

She waits for  
more than her  
existence. Waiting for  
a new existence of  
pure being, no waiting.

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# HAPPINESS



Imagine that you're in a chair, and you can't move. There's a book in your lap, but you can't open it up to read it. You know that inside this book contains everything you wanted to know, and you don't know how to get inside the book. Then, the edge of your index finger opens, like it has a door, and out from deep inside you comes a small figure, and they climb out the door and move up your hand. You want to tell the figure to open the book and read to you, but you can't move. Then the figure starts to run towards the book; the book is big, but the figure manages to open the book. The page opens to the table of contents, and the chapters of your life are there, the things that have value to you. And you see the chapter with the word "happiness." You can't read any farther, because you *know* this is what you want to read and learn from.

This figure from inside you know it too, and reaches up to turn the pages to what you want to read.

What do you read?

