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Amy Brueggemann

Scrambled Eggs

I glance out my bedroom window as the sun peeks up over the lake, extending its brilliant rays across the water in delicate swirls of pink, orange, and yellow. It is morning. Our lone cabin nestled on the lake's Wisconsin shores is still silent, and will hopefully continue to be so for a few more hours. Our cabin, very similar to an average-looking home, is placed beside a stream that draws from the lake and goes deep into the woods behind, flowing to its end at a small pond. Having only recently arrived late the night before, my family of four and I take advantage of this time to sleep. As it is the beginning of the final week of June, for us it means only the start of our one-week family vacation. The trip to the cabin is a tradition for my family and me, and it is one we look forward to each year.

As I open my eyes, checking at the early time on the clock beside my bed, I sigh. Not a sigh of annoyance, but a sigh of relief. We are finally on vacation, and it is the start of our first day. My husband, Bill, snores heavily in bed beside me, his graying hair matting against his pillow, and the covers rising and falling with each breath he takes. He could sleep all day, but I sure can't. I pull back the covers.

I decide to go for a quick run before making breakfast. After lacing up my sneakers, and pulling my still natural blonde hair up into a ponytail, I head out the door. This is my favorite part of vacation. As I am running down the gravel path that encircles the lake, my heart pounds, my feet hitting the ground. It always gives me such a rush. I forget all about the stress of my nursing job back in Minneapolis and taking care of my demanding family. My mind is at ease, being that my husband and my three little girls are still safe and sound asleep back at the cabin. I do love my girls, of course, and I begin to think about them as I run around the lake—Samantha, the eldest at thirteen, with her audacity and her ability to always keep me on my toes. Abigail, twelve years old, always finding ways to grab my attention, whether that be by getting into mischief or shocking the hell out of me by how unbelievably smart she can be. And then Leslie, such an independent seven, with her curious big blue eyes that say everything. She can be a handful, though, I think maybe due to her short temper and the idea in her head that she always has to prove herself. All of them are little mirror images of me, with their various lengths of blonde hair and blue eyes.

I run for an hour or so, and then I head back inside the cabin to make breakfast. Although I do attempt not to wake my family earlier than necessary, it is unavoidable. The clamor of pots and pans can be heard and the smell of scrambled eggs and ham drifts throughout the place—through the tiny kitchen, the family area in front of it, and the two bedrooms and bathroom connected to the kitchen from the side. I hear stirring from the bedrooms, and within minutes the rest of my family is standing in front of me—rubbing their eyes and gaping at what I am preparing. I finish setting the table and look up.

“Good morning, sleepyheads,” I say, smiling. I give Bill a kiss, and nudge my kids towards the table. Samantha and Abigail are already fighting about something. Here we go.

“MOM!!! Abby took my fork! Hers fell on the floor! How can I eat without a fork?” Samantha screams, glaring at her sister, Abby, who only looks at me—eagerly waiting for my response. I don’t have the patience for this, but remember that I don’t want endless fighting on this vacation. I take a deep breath.

“Sam, we do have more forks—you know that. Don’t get so upset. Abby, don’t try to cause trouble, and go get your sister another fork from the kitchen.” Abby squirms out of her chair and runs to the kitchen behind us to get a fork. She sticks out her tongue at Samantha while standing in the kitchen. I roll my eyes.

Samantha smiles to herself, as though she has won some small victory, and waits smugly for her fresh, clean utensil. I stare at her, reflecting on the way in which she is so confident and lives with the excitement of being able to explore such new areas as clothes and boys. Abigail sits down, nudging Samantha with her elbow and making sure I cannot see—although I do. The two, despite their frequent fighting, are inseparable most of the time and I can find them causing mischief almost anywhere. I am continuously struggling to prevent them from blowing up our house!

Bill shovels the food into his mouth, always the first one to clean his plate. He smiles at me, then the girls, and puts his plate in the sink. He heads into the family room, sits down on the couch and turns on the television. Typical.

“Leslie, eat your eggs, honey,” I say, as I notice Leslie has not even touched her plate. She scrunches up her face and shakes her head from side to side. Samantha and Abigail head to their bedroom, leaving their plates half-eaten on the table.

“I don’t like eggs.” Leslie pushes her plate away.

“Leslie, I don’t have time for this. You don’t like anything! At least try to finish them, you haven’t even eaten one bite.” Why does she always have to push me to my limit?

Leslie crosses her arms in refusal, and, fed up with the whole thing, I finally tell her to go to her room. She throws a tantrum, and I threaten to not let her go

fishing that day with Bill, Samantha, and Abigail. She throws her fork at me. It hits my upper thigh and falls to the floor with a clink. I cannot believe she is already throwing a tantrum—and throwing things at me!

“That’s it! You’re not going. Stay in your room and think about your behavior, young lady.”

Leslie storms off to the bedroom she shares with Abby and Samantha, and slams the door. Soft crying can be heard from inside the bedroom.

“What’s her problem?” Samantha laughs, just now coming into the kitchen with Abigail.

“Yea, was Sesame Street cancelled or something?” Abigail mocks, looking towards Samantha for approval. “No wait, she’s too old for that now, it must have been Barbie’s precious Swan Princess.” They both snicker. Oh, you two are cool, right—well I’m not laughing.

“Stop that, you two! Maybe I should make you both stay home, too.” As I dish out that challenge, Samantha and Abby immediately look at their feet and hurry over to Bill to beg him to let them go fishing now. He relents, and starts gathering up the fishing supplies from our van outside. Fine. Get them out of this house so I can have some peace and quiet.

“We should be gone most of the day, hon,” Bill calls out as he picks up the last of his fishing gear and heads out the door. “Be back around supertime?” And then they are gone.

I sigh, looking at the table and kitchen counters, cluttered with breakfast dishes and lost pieces of food. Leslie’s fork is still on the floor. I am so tired of picking up after them, and it never ends as much as I harp about it. I decide to throw myself into tidying up the room, muttering to myself occasionally and glancing sideways at the room where Leslie is every so often.

As lunchtime approaches a couple hours later, and the kitchen becomes spotless, I go to the girls’ room to check on Leslie. I assume Leslie’s outburst mainly has to do with the fact that we were up so late the night before, although her outbursts are frequent at home as well. Leslie had fallen asleep for awhile during the car ride, but for the good part of the duration she was awake, bursting with energy in anticipation of arriving at the cabin. We arrived past midnight, and it was a good hour before I had been able to get all the girls to bed.

As I open the bedroom door, I do so as quietly as possible to prevent waking Leslie—in case she is asleep. As I peer inside, I cannot make out her body’s shape in her bed. It is empty. I enter the bedroom and look around. Leslie is not there. I check each bed, in it and under, and then wonder if maybe Leslie has snuck to the bathroom while I was cleaning up the mess in the kitchen. I walk two doors down past our bedroom to the bathroom. It, too, is empty. I then begin a rampage through the entire cabin, hoping to find Leslie hidden under a blanket somewhere or sitting in a corner as she does so often at home. But Leslie is nowhere to be found.

I try not to panic, and assure myself that the only door out of the cabin is in the kitchen – so if Leslie has left I would have without a doubt seen her do so.

“Leslie!!! Where are you? Come on now, this is not funny! You get your behind out here right now!” I shout throughout the cabin, but all I hear in return is silence.

Finally, I go back to where I started—the girls’ bedroom. This time I notice something I had not before. The window. It is open just a fraction, with just enough space for a small, seven-year-old girl to squeeze through. My heart skips a beat. I run for the front door.

Immediately outside I scan the open area in front of our cabin. I look for Leslie’s bright pink t-shirt with purple flowers on it. I’m sure it will stand out from all the green trees and overgrown shrubs. There is no sign of her. I sprint behind the house and stare at the deep forest in front of me. I look for any indication that Leslie has been there, but again there is no hint of her. I begin calling out her name.

I run in all directions from the cabin, yelling my daughter’s name at the top of my lungs. She’s only seven years old, is all I can keep thinking. Not wanting to assume the worst, I let any horrible thoughts of what might have happened escape from my mind. My baby is fine, most likely she is just hiding behind a bush just waiting to be found. I continue to look all around our property, along the gravel road, down by the lake, and even back inside the house. Our cabin is so isolated—there is no way someone could have taken her. I hope not. But maybe—it happens. Oh God. Or what if she has fallen down somewhere, what if she is hurt, unconscious...or something else? I cannot bear to lose my child. I don’t want to lose my baby.

This is all my fault. I should have just let her go fishing! But she threw that goddamn fork at me! I had to punish her, right? I had to stand my ground before she started throwing knives. God, where do I draw the line? Now I’m back inside the cabin, and I glance out the front area window in the family room. What do I do now? Tears fill my eyes. I’m a terrible mother. I cannot even control my own children! I cannot even keep them from causing trouble, from disappearing, from running away from me. I sit down on the couch beside the window, tension starts immobilizing my body, and an expression of worry freezes onto my face. I cannot move. I don’t know what to do. Why is this happening to me?

By the time Bill and the girls return from fishing that evening, I am still sitting on the couch, not moving, not blinking, still staring out the window.

“Hey, Mom! I caught a fish it was pretty big although Sam caught a bigger one but that was only because . . . Mom? What’s wrong? Mom?” Abigail tugs on my sleeve, and all of them stare at me in bewilderment. I don’t move or say a word. I can’t bear to look at them.

“Honey? What’s going on?” Bill places a concerned hand on my shoulder.

“Leslie. She’s gone. I don’t know where she is,” I say flatly, not looking at any of them.

“What? What do you mean?” Bill asks.

“Just what I said. Go see for yourself—she’s gone.”

Bill goes around the cabin area searching for her, not finding her, of course. He looks to me, expecting me to do something—anything. I cannot look at him. Suddenly his eyes light up as though he has just discovered something and he leaves me where I am, with a flashlight in hand, and heads outside. The sun will soon be setting behind the lake.

Samantha and Abby give me awkward glances, afraid to say a word that might upset me even more, I’m sure. I’ve never been like this before, not able to function. Inside I’m screaming to look for my daughter, but outside my body will not let me. My body wins.

“Oh, Leslie. Where can you be?” I finally whisper to myself, hoping beyond anything that Bill will walk in any minute with Leslie in his arms.

“She’ll come home, Mom,” Samantha says, putting her arm around my waist. “Leslie is going to come home.” I faintly nod, but without looking at her.

An hour passes, and as the night surges on, I begin to lose hope. Each minute is another minute something terrible could have happened to Leslie. If only I had not been so hard on her, if only I had hugged her more or noticed her more than just letting her run away. I at last glance over at my two other daughters, who, exhausted, have fallen asleep on the couch, still in the clothes they fished in earlier that day. Poor things. The sun has already been down an hour or so, meaning that Leslie is now all alone somewhere in the dark.

Then the front door bursts opens. Bill, standing in the doorway, looks over at me and draws from behind him, still clutching his heavy, warm hand, a small and teary-eyed Leslie. I immediately leap from my seat, shaking and sighing with an immense relief I have never felt before. I run towards my youngest daughter. Wrapping her in a giant hug, I have the intent of never letting her go.

“Found her down at the end of that stream,” Bill begins. “You know the one deep behind the forest behind our cabin here?” I only nod. There is a stream behind our cabin that flows deep into the woods for a mile or so out into an open pond. “I figured she was somewhere in the water because when I came back fishin’ earlier I noticed our other rowboat was missin’ from the dock. Didn’t think too much of it at first, figured maybe it had been loosened and drifted off somewhere. But when you mentioned Leslie....well anyways, she was in the middle of the pond out there! Just sittin’ in the boat!” Bill exclaims, sweat dripping down his forehead. “Apparently, she rowed all the way out there, all by herself, if you can even imagine that, and then lost one of the paddles in the lake. I found her layin’ in the boat, just sorta sleepin’ with tears still dried to her face. Lucky I went down that stream, honey, or who knows when we would have found her. She had been there for awhile already.”

Bill begins to fade from my view as I look at Leslie, checking every hair and both her arms and legs, making sure she is alright. Besides a few small scratches, she seems just fine. As my concern eases, my anger at her actions begins to rise.

“Leslie! Do you know how worried I have been about you? Do you know how scared I was when I could not find you? Why on earth did you do that? Why?” I wait for her response, clutching on to her in fear that she might leave me again.

“I was really mad, Mom,” she replies, her voice wavering, clearly shaken from being out in the boat so long. “You always let Sam and Abby do everything! You always care more about them! I don’t like eggs and you made me eat them—but they did not eat them either! I saw them put them in their napkins when you didn’t look and swoosh them around a lot. I don’t like eggs and you tried to make me eat them, Mom.” She burst into tears and my heart began to ache for her. I know this was not just about the scrambled eggs. Every time I have ever scolded her flashes through my mind. But I love her. She needs to know that. She has to know that.

“Leslie, don’t you ever think I don’t love you!” I shriek. “If I did not care about you – why would I make you eat at all? Why would I dress you and make you go to school? Why would I have searched high and low for you? Why would I ...” At this moment I begin to cry, something most mothers avoid doing in front of their children. I cry and I hug my daughter again. And again. How do I possibly explain love to my child? Why should I even have to?

“I’m sorry I threw the fork, Mommy. I’m sorry,” Leslie says as she looks at me, and I know from her look that she will never do it again. Never again, I tell myself, as I draw her in even closer.

Michael Danaher

Absence

Bill sat on the front porch, whittling a twig he had found. He was a younger man, in his thirties. His calm, confident eyes looked at the stick as he carefully carved the wood so smoothly that it began to look polished. His thick dark hair was parted and slicked to the side, giving a presentable and amiable aura as he steadily shifted back and forth in his rocking chair. His blue overalls looked new, even though he had worn them to work on the farm for the past few years. Yes, he was looking sharp. He breathed in the fresh country air as he looked around his land, his share of Nebraska. The sun was just beginning to set, and the sky was painted with a thousand brushstrokes of orange, pink, and yellow. Bill took pleasure in watching the colors bleed into one another, reflecting on the fields that surrounded him; and he thanked God for such a beautiful sight.

“Crops looking good, isn’t it, boy?” he asked his dog. The black lab lifted its head, looked at Bill lazily, and lowered it again to the gray wood of the porch where it rested. He rocked back and forth in his chair, whistling to himself. The stick was finished now and he tried to think of something to do. It was Sunday, and he had done his work for the day. The animals were fed, the cows were milked, and the plow was fixed. He didn’t have a thing in the world to do for the rest of the day except sit on that porch, satisfied.

“Bill?” a woman’s voice yelled from inside the house.

“Yeah?”

“Can you come help me peel these potatoes?”

Bill’s smile vanished. The kitchen work was Rosemary’s job. Why should he have to help her on the one day he was allowed to be lazy? Cooking was her business. Not his.

“I’m comin’,” he sighed.

He slowly rose from the chair, stepping over the dog, and entered the house through the creaking screen door. Inside he saw his wife, busy as usual in the kitchen, running from the stove to the counter to the icebox. He watched her; she was beautiful. Any displeasure that had assembled from walking from the porch to the kitchen had disappeared with the sight of her endearing face and figure busying around the small room. He sometimes forgot how lovely she was. Today, her Sunday dress flattered every curve on her body. Her milk-white skin was as smooth and soft as silk, and her legs moved so elegantly that she seemed to float. Her dark red hair was tied into a bun so as to not get any flour in it

while she baked. She had failed though; patches of white were clearly visible, giving her temporary gray streaks. The apron she wore was old and stained, and the heat had caused beads of sweat to form on her hairline at the top of her forehead, which the flour was also sticking to. These were all things Bill looked past, though. She was frustrated, and Bill loved it. It drove Bill crazy with adoration. Her beauty could never be suppressed. He was convinced she must be Aphrodite herself.

“How are ya doing in here?”

“Terrible!” she snapped without looking at him. “The icebox is leaking, we’re low on flour, I can’t get the wood in the stove to light - I think it’s too wet from that storm last night - and supper is nowhere near finished.”

Bill smiled as he poured himself some water from the pitcher. “Well, I can help you with dinner and the icebox. Jimmy can go get some dry wood. But I think you’re gonna have to shake all the flour out of your hair if you’re planning on using any more.”

Rosemary looked at Bill, as if prepared to slit his throat. Bill approached her and wrapped his arms around her, holding her.

“Remind me again why I married you,” she said.

Bill, still smiling, gave her a kiss on the top of the head. “Because you love me.”

She lifted her arms from her sides and placed them around Bill. “I know. I do love you.”

“Well, if we want to get supper ready in time, we better get a move on. Let me see these potatoes.” Bill advanced to the table where the unpeeled potatoes sat as lifeless as dirt.

“I’m sorry, Bill; you don’t have to help me, I can handle it. Go on back to the porch, rest up.”

Bill looked to her, pretending to be angry. “You called me in all the way to the kitchen, making me leave my chair on the porch, and now you say I don’t even have to do anything? That the effort was for nothing?” She saw through his antics. He didn’t mind helping her, and she knew it.

“Alright, fine. Peel away, then,” she said.

“I will. Should be easier than whittling that stick out there.”

“Oh, Mr. Barret called. He said you and Jimmy did a fine job on their wagon.”

“Jimmy did all the work, I just watched. But that’s natural, he’s really got a knack for fixing things.”

“Speaking of Jimmy, where has he gone? He was actually supposed to help with dinner.”

“God knows where that boy is. After he finished his chores, he asked if he could go off and play. I asked if he’d said his prayers—after all, it *is*

Sunday—and he did, so I let him run off. He headed off through the corn towards the Mike Caseys’.”

Bill peeled the potatoes casually. He smiled to himself as Rosemary attempted again to light the stove. She was a good wife. They were loyal and loving, to each other, but especially to Jimmy. They had tried for more children, but problems happened and Jimmy was the only surviving child of three. They lost their first child shortly after birth; he only lived 2 months. The other child was the result of miscarriage. Only Jimmy survived, and after his birth, Bill and Rosemary decided it was best to end on a good note, rather than trying again and losing another one of God’s creations. Besides, Jimmy was a grateful and loving son, the pride and joy of his parents.

Bill and Rosemary heard the screen door swing open and footsteps quickly advancing to the kitchen. A ten-year-old boy with dark, unkempt hair and muddy shoes ran into the kitchen, holding a fish.

“Look what I caught!”

“God Almighty!” Bill exclaimed, as he looked at the biggest catfish he had ever seen. It was nearly half the size of Jimmy’s body.

“Jimmy! Wipe your feet! I just cleaned the floors yesterday!” said Rosemary, ignoring the fish.

“Isn’t it the biggest you’ve ever seen?”

“I’d have to say it is! That thing is gigantic!”

“Jimmy! What did I say? Wipe your feet! Now!” She was still trying to light the stove.

“Here, you wipe your feet, and give me this beast so we can cook it up nice and good for dinner,” said Bill.

“Ok, but don’t gut it without me.”

“Deal. You go wipe your feet, then we’ll gut this monster together.”

Jimmy ran away, leaving a trail of mud along the floor behind him.

“Jimmy! You’re cleaning that floor tonight!” called Rosemary.

Bill smiled and took a sip of his water.

“What the hell?” He looked down to what was in his hands. It was coffee. “What’s this? Where did I put my water?”

He looked up. There was no water or kitchen or potatoes or Rosemary. He was sitting in a burgundy-painted square room with a fireplace directly across from him. No fire was burning. To his right were leather cushioned seats with wooden backs; they were separated by an oak table, on which a lamp stood. Framed pictures and a crucifix hung on the wall.

Bill was choking with anxiousness. “Dear God, what is happening?” he said to himself. He got up off the leather chair he had been sitting on. He advanced to the couch and looked at the pictures that hung on the wall in some attempt to figure out what was happening. He saw himself in one of the pictures with his

wife. There was also one of Jimmy. And then there were other pictures of older people and children that he didn't recognize.

"What is this place? Where am I?" Fear paralyzed his senses. He had to get out of here. He had to go home. But how was he to do that? He didn't even know how he had gotten here.

Bill tried to remain calm, but it was pointless. He scanned the room over and over in panic, finally noticing the door in the corner of the room. He ran over to it and opened it. The outside terrified him. He saw illuminated streetlights, it was night. There was no farm outside. There was a paved road lined with houses and strange vehicles.

He ran out in the street. "Rosemary! Jimmy!" he yelled. "Where are you!?" A car rushed passed him, sounding its horn, nearly flattening him. It was like nothing Bill had ever seen before. He looked around. This place was nowhere he had ever been. He felt like he was suffocating. Where was he, and how had he gotten here? He dropped to his knees in the middle of the street, gasping for breath.

"Bill!" he heard a voice yell. He looked up to the house which he had come out of. Through his blurring eyes, he could make out the figure of an elderly woman. He squinted, but it was no one he recognized.

"What? Who are you! What is going on?"

"Bill, get in here this instant! It's freezing out!"

Bill didn't move, uncertain if he should trust her. She left the stoop she was standing on and approached Bill in the middle of the street. He stayed put. Her skin was loose and hanging. Wrinkles engulfed her face and nasty yellow teeth protruded from her gray lips. She grabbed his arm.

"Get off me!" he screamed, and slammed her hands away. The force of his arm made the old woman fall to the ground. She began to sob, but she didn't seem hurt.

"Get the hell in the house right now!" she cried.

"Get away from me!" He felt weak, as if his bones were going to snap in half like a stick. His head was spinning. A car advanced in the distance from down the street, and stopped in the middle of the road with its headlights blinding Bill. The driver door opened and a tall, slender figure wearing a black trench coat and hat approached Bill, still kneeling in the middle of the street.

"Come on, now," said the man. "Let's get you inside where you belong." Bill made a swing at the man's hand just as he did to the old woman. But Bill's attempt failed; it didn't faze the man in the slightest way. The young man brought Bill to his feet and walked inside the house. The next thing Bill knew, he was sitting once again in the burgundy-colored room.

"Did you take your medicine today?" the woman asked Bill, rubbing her elbow. "Medicine? What medicine? I don't take any medicine!"

The woman's look suddenly turned into an annoyed scowl. "I'll go get your medicine right now," she said. "Don't go anywhere."

"I said I don't take any medicine! What the hell is the matter with you?" protested Bill. He watched as the frail woman wobbled away through the hall that was connected to the room.

The tall man walked in the door after placing his car in the driveway. He sat on the green couch, with a hollow look, staring at Bill so hard that he seemed to be staring through him.

"What is this place?" asked Bill. "I don't belong here. What have you done with Rosemary and Jimmy? You people are going to burn in hell. You hear me? God damn it!" The man frowned and looked away from Bill, who searched for words. "Now I don't know who you are, mister, but you better start giving some answers. Why are there pictures of me on the wall?"

The tall man lowered his eyes. Without a word, he rose from the couch and slowly moved to the hallway where the old woman had exited. Bill sat alone, again scanning the room for some means of an explanation. The woman and man re-entered the room before he could make a move. She carried a large white pill and a small glass of water.

"Open your mouth," she said.

"No! No way am I going to let you poison me! Get away, Satan!"

"Come on, open your mouth," the man commanded.

"Go to hell!"

"Is it always like this?" asked the man.

"More or less," said the woman. "He's never run out of the house before, though. Looks like I'm going to have to tie him down from now on." She looked at Bill. "Open up." She pried open his mouth and tried to force the pill into his mouth. Bill spit it out onto the floor.

"What do you want with me? I want the police. You two are trying to murder me! I want to go home!"

Bill carried on, screaming. The old woman covered her eyes with her hands and walked out of the room, slamming a door somewhere; she didn't come back. The other man stood across the room, studying Bill's face as if trying to read his thoughts.

"What are you looking at?"

The man looked away.

"What you're doing is very wrong. I don't know how I got here, but I suggest you get me home safe and sound, or else you're going to pay. Now what is this place?" The man didn't answer. Bill's face exploded in to a fusion of rage and despair. "Where am I? I demand an answer!"

"Just calm down. You're safe here."

"I want Rosemary...and...and...Jimmy...where are they?"

The man looked uncertain of how to answer the question. After a long pause, he responded. "They'll be here soon enough."

"You mean they're coming here to get me?"

The man frowned, nodded, and sipped the water Bill had not used.

"Oh, good...good..." Bill trailed off into inaudible mumbling. He was becoming less apprehensive. He again looked around the room. It wasn't familiar, but it wasn't as terrifying now. He stood up and shuffled his way over to the wall of pictures, scanning them more carefully this time now that he had the assurance that his Rosemary and Jimmy would be there shortly.

"This picture looks like my son Jimmy. He was young then."

The man looked sad. "How old is he now?"

"Oh, now let me see here. He is ten. I tell ya, they grow up so fast. I can hardly believe how quickly everything goes by. Do you have any children?"

"Yes...well...no...not yet. My wife is expecting."

"Well, congratulations. I remember the day Jimmy was born. I deemed myself the luckiest man alive. To hold that baby in your arms...it's really something. It's the greatest gift of God, I think.

The man looked away from Bill. "Yeah, well, I'm not so sure those gifts come as often anymore."

"What's that?"

The man didn't answer.

Bill's brow furrowed. "You can have your opinion on anything, sir. But when you offend my faith, that's crossing the line."

"I'm sorry."

"Too late for that."

"I don't want to talk about this."

"Well, you better."

The man looked down as if he was reading his answer off the floor. "God took my father away from me." The man snapped his fingers. "One day my father was there, happy as ever. The next day, he was gone. Just like that." The man snapped his fingers.

Bill calmed a bit. "Well now, loss is a hard thing to deal with. But God works in mysterious ways..."

"I used to think so."

This last comment enraged Bill, and it took every ounce of energy that he had to not beat the man senseless. But his temper was softened when he saw the man's face. His eyes were welling with tears. Bill obviously did not know the man's pain, and could see that nothing he could do would console him. This sight of this complete stranger ravaged his thoughts, and his mind became entangled, uncertain of how to convince himself that God was in fact present in the world. He can give things and take them away, he told himself. That's it. That's what

he did to his children; God has the right to take away anything he wants. Loss is part of being human. Bill knew that works of God were baffling, that not everything could be explained. But God had a plan. He had to.

“You should take up that Bible there. It may teach you something,” said Bill.

The man looked down to the Bible on the coffee table and set his water on it. “It’s better as a coaster.”

Bill ran to the table and removed the glass from the book. He sat down, wiping away the ring of liquid that had formed on the cover.

“It’s a *book*,” said the man.

Bill looked up at the man, then to the Bible, then to the man again. He sat down, unsure of what to say. The man approached Bill, clumsily slouched in the armchair and staring at the book. He leaned over and kissed Bill on the top of the head.

“Bye, Dad.”

“What? How dare you!”

Jimmy locked his door on the way out.

Michael Danaher

Afternoon Drinks

My phone rang while I was drying the dishes. John, an old friend of mine, was being released from the hospital, and his mother begged me through the receiver to visit him. I was uneasy about it – I hadn't seen him since his wedding, five years ago. But in that short time, his life had begun to unravel. A few months earlier, his wife had left him. He'd started noticing a change in Linda a couple of years after the wedding, I guess: late nights, phone calls, the works. Soon after that, he came home from work and a note reading "Goodbye. Don't try and find me" was posted on the refrigerator. It was around that time that John decided to slit his wrists. Fortunately, his mother stopped by that day and found him before he'd lost too much blood.

"Please, Al," she said, "pay him a visit. He hasn't seen you in so long, and I just know it would lift his spirits."

I agreed and hung up the phone.

"Who was that?" my wife asked, coming in from the dining room. She seemed to float rather than walk.

"John Dunphy's mother. She wants me to visit him. They let him out of the hospital today."

Sarah smiled. "Well that will be good for him. I think it's a wonderful idea. The poor guy's been so lonesome." And with that, she took the dish out of my hand and placed it on the counter. She wrapped her arms around me, kissed my cheek, and then rested her head on my shoulder. "It'll be fun to see your friend again."

"Yeah, I guess."

I wasn't so sure. In the small contact that I'd kept with John over the years, he had never told me about Linda. He simply never brought her up, and I never had any reason to question. I'd ask how she was, and he would say she was fine. That was that. And what else hadn't he told me? How well did I really know him anymore?

"What the hell am I going to talk about?" I asked Sarah. "I shouldn't talk about his condition. I can't talk about Linda. I can't talk about you because it'll remind him of Linda, and so will anything from back in college because that's where they met. Maybe this is a bad idea."

Sarah lifted her head and looked at me. "No, you're going. You'll think of something to say."

I pulled up to his house around 2:00. We'd made plans to spend the day together, and, frankly, I was terrified. The guy used to be one of my best friends, but I had no idea what to say to him. I'd never dealt with this kind of situation, and more than once on the highway I'd contemplated pulling a U-turn and heading back home. It was too late for that now, though. I was parked in his driveway with the engine off.

He lived on a street lined with identical houses: one door, two windows, a stoop, a flat roof, one story, and a one-car garage. All of them painted the same dull colors—sand or tree bark. The neighborhood was old, and house prices were probably dirt cheap. It was probably the only place he could afford as a high school religion teacher. If I hadn't had the address written down, I would've been knocking on every door. Either that, or leave. But I couldn't do that to John. I owed him this afternoon. His mother told me that; so did my wife. I hadn't spoken to him for years, after all.

From the outside, the house looked awful. The screen on the front door was torn halfway down and the bushes were overgrown, pressing up against the windows, crawling up them like some science-fiction monster. The shades were pulled down, but for some reason I'd expected that. I watched the house through my windshield and almost wondered if maybe John was dead. He had been on suicide watch in the hospital and had met with a therapist, but who knew what could happen? For all I knew, behind that torn screen and front door, John was lying dead with a note for me to find.

I got out of the car and tucked in my shirt, squinting down the street. The sun beat down on the driveway, festooned with weed-caked cracks. My car left behind a trail of fluid, but I didn't care. Odds were John wouldn't, either. In fact, it added to the overall façade of his home. I reached into my car and pulled out a 12-pack of beer, lukewarm now from the car ride. I wasn't even sure if John drank anymore or if he was even allowed to. I couldn't see his psychiatrist being too happy about him wetting his whistle. But no one had warned me. All I was told was to spend the day with him, and since I had known John, that's how we had spent our time.

After shutting the car door softly, I lugged the beer up the driveway and onto the small stoop. I paused, staring at the screen door and the pine door behind it. For a moment I didn't know where I was. I didn't know even know who John was. But some outside force made my legs bend and start toward to the door. Before I knew it, my finger was pressing the doorbell.

No answer.

I rang it again. Nothing. Relief came over me, quickly replaced by panic. I couldn't leave. This man was unstable. He knew I was coming. And thank God he was unaware his mother had orchestrated the meeting. She'd told me she'd keep the secret, so he wouldn't think it was a pity visit. But if John really

was dead in there, I was the one who was going to have to find him. I'd probably have to crawl in through a window and find him dead in the bathtub, or hanging from a noose in the kitchen. Then I'd have to break the news to his mother, and then I'd have to visit her for years. I would be the last link to her son.

I rang the doorbell again. Still no answer. I pounded the door.

"John! You in there?"

I heard some scuffling around inside. A moment later, the door opened. John's tall, thin frame stood in front of me, fortunately not covered in blood. Instead, he looked terrific. His sleek black hair was parted on the side and slicked over behind his ear. There wasn't a whisker on his face, and his eyes gleamed. His shirt was neatly tucked in and the brown of his belt even matched his shoes. There was no way this was the same man who had tried to kill himself.

"Holy shit," he said, smiling. "There he is."

I smiled and stuck out my hand. He grabbed it and pulled me toward him into a hug.

"It's great to see you."

"Likewise," I said. "What took so long? I've been ringing the doorbell forever."

"Sorry, I didn't know when you were coming. I sat down to watch the tube and must've dozed off. Come on in. Jesus, it's good to see you."

He held the door open as I stepped in. The living room on my left was clean and organized. A folded blanket was draped across the back of the couch, and magazines were neatly spread out on the coffee table. The television was on, showing a baseball game, but it was muted. Sunlight forced its way through the closed white blinds, and I didn't see a speck of dust lingering in the air, unlike my home. The place was spotless.

"I see you brought some cocktails," he said. "Here—let me get those for you. I'll toss 'em in the fridge."

"Yeah, I'm sorry they're not that cold. For some reason I bought them before I left."

"Not a problem. I got some cold ones waiting to go. I'll be right back. Make yourself at home." He vanished down a small hallway with the beer. I walked over and took a seat on the couch, trying my best to not mess anything up. I scanned the titles of the magazines. *Redbook*, *People*, *Vanity Fair*. They must have been Linda's.

Before I had time to do anything else, John was back, holding out an ice cold bottle. I thanked him and twisted off the cap.

"So how was the drive?"

"Fine," I said. We both took a sip.

"Yeah, things have been pretty crazy. Thanks for coming."

"Of course. So how is...everything with that?"

“Well, things have been better.” He took a gulp of his beer, swallowing hard. “I’m supposed to meet with this shrink every week who the hospital put me in contact with. And I’m on medication. Happy pills, I guess.” He chuckled. “Eventually, though, we’ll start meeting monthly, and eventually I’ll be able to ebb my way off of therapy all together.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s helped a lot already. I think I’ve made some progress. At least I don’t want to kill myself anymore.” He smiled, shaking his head. “And my mom’s happy about that. Probably worried I’d go to hell or something,” he laughed and took a swig. “Ridiculous.”

I smiled and took a gulp from my bottle, unsure how to respond. The condensation on the outside of my bottle began to build up, and I started peeling back the label.

“Well what about you, man? How’s life? I haven’t seen you in, what, five years?”

“I think the last time was the wedding.” I bit my lip. It probably wasn’t a good idea to remind him of Linda. He could have a relapse or something. I’d read about things like that.

“Yeah,” John said, watching a commercial on the television. For the first time, something in his eye changed; there was a spark of distance, like I wasn’t even in the room. I wondered what had been going through his head before he pressed the blade to his wrists. How long had he thought about it? Had he been worried about the pain? I wondered if he’d flinched at all or if he’d thought about his mother. He had probably pictured his funeral. Flowers and collages of him through different stages of his life. All the people there—faceless, indistinct. But they would be there, nonetheless, weeping. A gigantic mass of anonymous mourners. That’s what everyone sees, I suppose. It’s probably what sold him on the idea.

Years ago, when we were in college, John and I had been close. I’d lived with him all four years, and he’d even asked me to be the best man in his wedding. I’d accepted. If I had known then what the marriage would lead to, I think I might have broken up the wedding. Anyway, he’d gotten married, I’d gone off to dental school, and our lives had diverged. Every year we’d talked less and less. It wasn’t long before our annual phone call had fizzled into emails and eventually into nothing. I’d gotten married, and John couldn’t make the trip. Something with Linda; I don’t remember. But the truth is it didn’t bother me. We had grown apart by that time. I had new friends, a new life. John seemed to be a small memory, a tiny speckle in the back of my mind. Life was just fine without him.

“Hey, do you want another beer?” John asked, tapping the top of his empty bottle.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, choking the rest of mine down.

He got up quickly and walked to the hallway. I checked my watch: 3:30. I had no idea how long I was going to have to stay. Was this the same man I had known for four years in college? Did I really used to be friends with this guy? I didn’t remember a word I’d said at the toast, or a word that I could have said. John had always been a drinking buddy. He was one of the first people I’d met, and we’d hung out because it was convenient. We didn’t like the same movies or music or politics or anything. But I meant something to John. Why else was it so important that I pay him a visit?

But so what if we used to be friends? That was years ago. People change. I’d changed. I didn’t want to spend my Saturday afternoons drinking with a friend from college I didn’t even know anymore.

“So how’s the wife?” John asked, handing me another bottle.

“She’s good. A little pissed I couldn’t cut the grass today, but you know.”

John nodded and drank, apparently not seeing the joke. I watched him from the corner of my eye. He fiddled with the bottle cap in his thumb, not saying anything. His face was whittled with heavy creases—much deeper than I remembered or had noticed when I arrived. He had obviously aged significantly in the last five years. And it was showing.

“You know, I sometimes wonder where Linda went,” he said.

I took a drink and wiped my lips with my hand. He went on.

“I didn’t do anything, Al. All I ever did was try to treat her right. I never laid one hand on that woman. She was always wanting things. First the fridge isn’t up to par, so we need a new one of those. Then the dishwasher doesn’t clean everything like it should, so we need a new one of those, too. Then the dryer. Then the TV. It never ended with that woman. And then one day she says to me—she says that she doesn’t know what she’s doing anymore. So I ask what she means, and she just starts crying. Then she goes and locks herself in the bathroom until morning.”

I nodded so he knew I was paying attention.

“But I didn’t do anything, Al,” he went on, “I really didn’t. I couldn’t afford all that shit. Not on my salary.” He took a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. The smoke drifted slowly over to me and filled my nostrils, stinging them. “So this guy starts calling not too long after that. Whenever the phone rang, she would run to it, or yell not to answer it—that it was for her, and she would get it. Every once in a while I would answer, though. And this fucker would just hang up. But I knew it was him. Couldn’t even ask me if she was there or not. What a coward. She left me for a coward.”

He took a long, slow drag and stared at the magazines.

“It’s for the best, John. She doesn’t deserve you.” I didn’t know what else to say. I decided to finish my drink.

“I miss her. I really do. And if you asked me why she left me, I really couldn’t tell you. I didn’t do anything, Al.” He looked up and saw my bottle was empty. “Stay right there. I’m gonna get us some more beers.”

“I’ll be here,” I said. I checked my watch. Something told me I was going to be drunk before dinner. The closed blinds were glowing and every now and then I could catch a glimpse of dust floating in the air. I wonder if I’d brought it in with me or if it had been there the whole time, hiding.

I heard the clanking of glass in the kitchen and John cursing. He reentered the room, holding a bottle of whiskey and two small glasses filled with ice.

“I’m out of the cold stuff, and yours is still kinda warm. I figured we’d get things started with this.” He set a glass in front of me. “You a whiskey man?”

“Not really, but I’ll have it every now and then.”

Pleased with my answer, he poured my glass half full. The smell stung my nostrils, worse than the smoke. John poured his own glass, filling it up more than halfway. Then he lit another cigarette and sat back on the couch, taking a drink from the glass. I watched his hands grasp the glass. For an instant, his shirt sleeve slid up his arm, and I could see the bandages on his wrists. I imagined the scars below them. Straight and thin. Red. Ugly. Such a horrid thing covered up so easily.

“Diego,” John said.

“What?”

“That’s the guy’s name. Diego. She left me for someone named Diego.” He inhaled on his cigarette and stared at the ceiling. “She called me from a payphone just to make sure I wouldn’t call the cops or something, and I made her tell me his name. Diego.” He laughed and took a sip. “But it doesn’t even matter anymore. I love her to death, I always have...” He finished his drink and refilled his glass. “It’s just that I’m pissed I didn’t see it coming, you know? That’s all. I’m pissed that somehow this could have been avoided.” He sighed and watched the ice floating in his drink, frowning. “It just makes too much sense. I’ve never been good with women, you know that. I finally find the one, the love of my life, and she cheats on me. She breaks my stupid heart.”

For a second, I thought he was going to cry. But I spoke up before it could happen. “There’s nothing you could’ve done, John. Nothing. This is beyond you. You’ve got to understand that.”

He laughed. “You sound like my shrink.”

“I’m just saying...”

“I know what you’re saying, and I thank you for what you’re trying to do, but there’s no need. There really isn’t, Al. It’s a lose-lose situation. Either I did something wrong and I’m flawed without knowing it, or it’s beyond my control and there’s nothing I can do to prevent it. Like God is playing some sick game with me. I’m doomed either way.”

I shifted in my seat, pretending to adjust my pants. I watched John finish another glass and refill it. Nothing but whiskey and a couple slivers of ice.

“Jesus, John. Take it easy. Should you even be drinking?”

“Doomed,” he said, shrugging off my question. “That’s it. I’m doomed.”

“You’re not doomed. You’re getting help. This kind of stuff takes time.”

“Oh, go to hell, man.” His eyes fell on me with rage. I was terrified and quickly shot my eyes towards my drink, scared to make any movement. “This is the first time I’ve seen you in five years!” he said. “Do you have any idea how long that is? We were friends! You just disappeared. Vanished into thin air.” He slammed his glass on the table and buried his face in his hands. “And that’s it, right there. All this. My life. What a fucking mess.”

“What are you talking about? You have friends, a decent job, you’re getting help. You’re on the right track.”

“Decent job,” snorted John. “I teach religion in a high school. Talk about bullshit.”

I watched my drink. There was nothing good about the situation. An afternoon of drinking was a terrible idea, and I hated myself for even conceiving it. I could have taken him golfing or to a movie or something. We could have just gone out to lunch and had a normal conversation like two normal people. I should have done something else. Anything. His eyes were not so bright anymore. His hair had fallen from his behind ear across his forehead, and his shirt was ruffled and un-tucked. He refilled.

“John, maybe you should slow down a bit with that. Seriously.”

“You’re right.” He set the glass down on the coffee table. “Hey—let’s go see if your beer is cold yet.”

“No, John.” But I couldn’t stop him. He was already off the couch, stomping towards the hallway. I followed him this time. The short hallway emptied into a kitchen, but it was nothing like the living room. A mountain of dirty dishes stood in the sink. Newspapers were open on the small round table and the floor. A couple of fruit flies zigzagged over the trash bin, overflowing with empty beer cans and used paper towels. The place was a sty. It was like I had suddenly walked into a different house. John opened the refrigerator and pulled out two beers that I had brought.

“Well, they’re not that cold,” he said. “Here. Feel. What you think?”

I took one. It was still lukewarm. “Look, John. I don’t even really want one. I’m fine.”

He took it back. “Yeah, you’re right. They’re still pretty warm.” He opened a cabinet and took down a glass, filling it with ice from the freezer. A brand new bottle of whiskey sat on top of the fridge, and he brought it down as well. Then he walked past me and into the hallway. I followed him into the living room as he plopped down on the couch, spilling some of his drink on his lap. For a while, he just sat silent.

“You think I’m doomed, Al?”

“Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You still go to church?”

“Yeah, I still go.” I had no idea what he was getting at. “Why?”

“And you actually believe all that?”

“Sure.”

He laughed. But it wasn’t a chuckle. It was a full-bellied, heaving laugh that sent his entire body into convulsions. He laughed for minutes, wiping his eyes with his hand.

“Fair enough,” he said. “So then it’s true. I am doomed.”

“Will you stop fucking saying that?”

“No. You’re right. You’re always right. You were right to go on in school, you were right to get married to the right woman.” He sipped. “And you were right to forget about me.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to be somewhere else, and I imagined myself back home with my wife. I envisioned us sitting on our couch, her feet propped up on my leg and her laughing and kicking when I tickled them. I thought of the football game that would be on TV or the magazine I would be scanning. I could be doing anything but this. But here I was.

“It’s not that I forgot about you...I just...”

“Stopped caring.”

My heart was pounding. “I guess.” I couldn’t believe my own words.

He smiled. “Well, looks like you and God are good pals, then.”

I looked at the floor. John began to weep. What a mess. What had his mother hoped to accomplish by my coming here? I’d known in the back of my mind it would end like this. I wanted to leave. I wanted to go home.

“I should have died,” said John. “He shoulda just let me die. Gone from this shit. Rid of it all.”

I couldn’t talk. I should have said that his mother cared, that he had friends at work. Some student that he’d connected with, someone would miss him. There was no point in what he was saying. I should have said a lot, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know how.

John was a complete wreck. He ran his hands through his hair and let it fall. He should never have been released from the hospital. Nothing was better, nothing would ever be better like this. How could they let him come back to this house and live here alone? No, he didn’t need this.

“Listen,” I said. John quieted himself. He sat motionless with his face in his hands. “Listen, why don’t you come stay with me and Sarah for awhile. Just until, you know, you get back on your feet.”

A look passed between us. He tried brushing back his hair with his hands and wiped his eyes with this sleeve. He watched me for a long time in silence.

I continued. "It'd be good for you to get out of this house, man. You don't need to be here right now."

He folded his arms and studied the glass on the table. "Do you mean that?"

I froze, biting my lip. I didn't want to, but I couldn't leave the guy in his shitty home with his shitty life drinking shitty booze. He had nothing left. I was the one, his only ticket out of here. I had to do something.

"Of course I mean it."

John wiped his eyes and nose again, and watched his feet massage the carpet. "Shit, man," he smiled. "That really means a lot to me. Let me think about it."

"Anything I can do."

He laughed. "You could go see if that beer is cold yet."

Liz Elsbernd

Judge

Mrs. Beameyer always sat in the sixth pew from the front. One time, she had walked down the center aisle, genuflected deeply next to her pew, and found that it had already been occupied by a young couple with a newborn baby, who, not surprisingly, were too busy even to notice Mrs. Beameyer standing beside the pew, civilly but impatiently awaiting the moment of their epiphany. They squeezed the baby's toes, stroked its small fingers, poked its little nose. The man noticed her only when he turned to grab the pacifier out of the diaper bag. Then, they had scooted out of the pew, forcing *her* to sit on the inside.

"Wouldn't want to have to disturb you during Mass, ma'am," the young man had whispered as he slid back into the pew, smiling obliviously. "Babies are, you know, a bit capricious. You never know when they might—"

But Mrs. Beameyer had already knelt down to pray. From that Sunday on, she arrived no later than one half hour before Mass began.

Usually she didn't mind getting to church early. But today, the building seemed especially empty, especially lonely, like a convenience store after midnight. It was, after all, the middle of July. Mrs. Beameyer knew that the low attendance could not be solely credited to the broken air-conditioner, or the spindly platforms lining the outside aisles left by the workers renovating the church. People these days simply didn't seek God when the sun was shining.

Indeed, there certainly were fewer people here than on a normal summer Sunday morning. Five minutes before Mass was to begin, Mrs. Beameyer turned her head slightly to the left, pretending to gaze at the statue of the Virgin Mary situated in a little niche off to the side of the altar. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of a short, wide outline of red. So Mrs. Minsin was here. Mrs. Minsin always wore red to Mass. *Always trying to draw attention to herself*, Mrs. Beameyer thought disdainfully, turning her head back toward the crucifix hung center stage above the altar.

Mr. Cansado, one of St. John's two regular cantors, approached the microphone on the right side of the altar. His gaze was fixed on some distant object over the heads of the congregation, probably on Father Matthew standing at the back of the church.

"Goodmorning," Mr. Cansado mumbled, jumbling his words together as he briefly brushed his eyes over the assembly of parishioners.

“Good morning,” the congregation mumbled back.

“Please join in singing number three-eighty-five, ‘Gather Us In,’ number three- eighty-five.”

That poor Mr. Cansado. His wife had just died a few months ago, of ovarian cancer. It wasn’t that Mrs. Beameyer was sorry for the wife’s sake—the woman had been obstinate and bossy, always throwing her weight around—but she felt for Mr. Cansado. By the time he finally came to his senses and realized that his was a troubled marriage, Mrs. Cansado had already been diagnosed. And everyone knows you can’t divorce a dying woman.

“We gather here today in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” Father Matthew drawled dryly, tracing the sign of the cross in the air in front of him. Right on cue, an infuriated squeal rang out from a few rows behind Mrs. Beameyer. It was probably that little Brimington boy. His mother was always hanging onto the back of his collar, stuffing cheerios down his throat trying to keep him quiet. Mrs. Beameyer didn’t understand why Mrs. Brimington even brought the child to church; she couldn’t possibly pay attention to both her son and what was going on during the Mass, and the *boy* certainly didn’t get anything out of it. Besides, with all the racket and commotion he created, Mrs. Beameyer found it difficult to nurture her own spiritual life.

The remainder of the Mass, thankfully, went on fairly uneventfully. Mrs. Beameyer, assuming an attentive stance, sat upright and jutted her chin toward the lector during readings, bowed her head piously after the gospel, and refrained from adjusting her sun-hat absent-mindedly during the homily. As the intentions were offered up, Mrs. Beameyer added a silent prayer for Mrs. Minsin: that she might humble herself in the name of the Lord. Mrs. Beameyer truly felt sorry for her; she must feel so empty inside, to always be looking for approval from the outside world.

After Communion had been distributed, Father Matthew announced that—it being the second Sunday of the month—there would be a coffee hour after Mass that morning. A sociable lady, Mrs. Beameyer looked forward to this opportunity for fellowship with other members of her congregation. During the closing hymn, she could hear the children thumping down the stairs to the parish hall to be the first one in line for doughnuts, and she marveled at the lack of discipline for children these days. She had never let her own daughter leave Mass early; after a few Sundays of protests, Beth had learned that true faith required obedience and self-control. Mrs. Beameyer quickly shifted her mind away from thoughts of her daughter and the promise she’d made of paying her a visit that very afternoon.

As Mrs. Beameyer turned out of her pew to head down to the parish hall, she was unfortunate enough to catch the eye of Ellen Crow, who was waving frantically at her.

“Regina!” Ellen grinned, making her way through the crowded aisle, against the flow of traffic. “How *are* you? It’s been *ages*, hasn’t it,” she gushed, placing her hands on Mrs. Beameyer’s shoulders. Mrs. Beameyer braced herself, as she felt Ellen pulling her in to her bosom.

“Why, yes. It has been ages,” Mrs. Beameyer replied, after being released from Ellen’s forceful embrace. “I didn’t expect to see you until later this fall.”

“Well, Jim and I decided we just *couldn’t* wait until fall to visit the kids,” Ellen explained, glancing towards the rear of the church where Ellen’s husband Jim was standing, arms folded across his chest and eyes downcast toward the floor. “We enjoy the nice weather down south, but we sure do miss the kids.”

Mrs. Beameyer mustered a sympathetic nod and said, “Oh, I’m *sure*. After having them around for nearly forty years, it must be quite a change.” They began making their way toward Jim and the stairwell leading to the parish hall.

“Well you’ll just *have* to meet my granddaughter,” Ellen prattled. “It’s a shame that after all our years of friendship, you’ve never officially met her.”

That’s when Mrs. Beameyer noticed the girl standing next to Jim, mirroring his arms-across-the-chest stance and downcast eyes. The girl was pretty—no, beautiful—and tall with a dark complexion. Unlike her grandmother, who was big boned, the girl was petite, with high cheekbones and a broad chin. Sensing Ellen’s voice getting nearer, she looked up briefly, the whites of her dark eyes flashing briefly before retreating again behind her long eyelashes. Mrs. Beameyer had seen this girl somewhere before.

“Regina,” Ellen said, “This is my granddaughter, Diana. Diana, this is Regina. She and I have been friends for *years*.” Diana looked up again, a split second longer than before.

Mrs. Beameyer was sure now. Where had she seen this girl?

“Hi,” Diana muttered, in a voice barely above a whisper.

“How do you do,” Mrs. Beameyer replied, barely moving her lips. She had known the girl’s mother, Agnes, as a child. She used to sing every other Sunday at Mass; sometimes she sang *and* played the piano. But that had been when Ellen and Jim still had some authority over their daughter. Sometime during her adolescence, Agnes had refused to come to church, dismissing it as an outdated, irrelevant institution with a fondness for male authority figures. From her slumping posture and obvious discomfort, Mrs. Beameyer sensed Agnes’ daughter shared a similar belief.

“We thought it might be a good idea to bring Diana along today, since—I’m sure you’ve heard, we’ve got another grandchild on the way!” Ellen exclaimed, hugging Diana’s small frame to her side. “A few extra prayers for our family sure couldn’t hurt, could it, Di?” As the girl was released from her grandmother’s grip, her long sleeveless black sweater caught on one of the buttons on Ellen’s jacket,

revealing a slight bulge in the girl's belly. Before Diana could unsnag her sweater, Mrs. Beameyer immediately recalled where she had seen the young girl.

Two weeks ago, while grocery shopping at Lucky's, Mrs. Beameyer had been waiting to have her purchases rung up when she heard the two middle-aged ladies behind her—probably friends since childhood—begin making up stories about the lives of the cashiers.

"That one's probably got a coupla kids at home, one has ADD, the other wets the bed. Daddy left shortly after the birth of the second child. She's thinking about heading back to college someday, but that's just somethin' she tells herself to get her through the day."

The other woman laughed, obviously enjoying the game. "That pretty little thing gone and got herself screwed—literally—when she did it with some guy she think she love. Her parents say she gotta take care'a the finances, and now she gonna be working dead-end jobs like this one for the rest'a her life."

Mrs. Beameyer had stopped listening after that, partly because the cashier had just finished ringing up the lady in front of her, and partly because her thoughts had shifted to the young, noticeably-pregnant female cashier in the next lane. *Babies having babies*, Mrs. Beameyer had thought to herself, shaking her head. *Such a shame.*

"Thank you, Ma'am," Mrs. Beameyer's cashier had smiled. Ignoring the standard expression of insincere gratitude and grabbing onto the handles of her two plastic grocery sacks, Mrs. Beameyer had glanced again at the pregnant girl in the adjacent lane, at the effortless smile playing on her lips as she chatted with her customer. Suddenly, without knowing what she was about to do and why she was about to do it, Mrs. Beameyer had turned around, looked her cashier straight in the eye and said, "You have a nice day now." And then she had walked out the automatic glass door and forgotten all about the young pregnant cashier.

Yes, Mrs. Beameyer was certain that this was the same girl. Ellen talked incessantly as they waited in line for their coffee and doughnuts, asking questions but scarcely taking a breath to wait for answers. Mrs. Beameyer went through the line first, and attempted to find a table with just one empty seat. But no such luck.

". . . just *so* hysterical, that I couldn't help. . ." Ellen chattered, never staying on the same subject for more than thirty seconds.

Mrs. Beameyer hadn't realized how cold her hands were until she cupped them around the small earth-colored coffee mug. As Ellen turned to Jim, recalling the time they had eaten at the most *amazing* restaurant, Mrs. Beameyer stole a glance at the girl.

Diana was sitting hunch-backed in her chair with her elbows resting flat on the table. Her dark, shiny hair, gathered tightly in a high ponytail on the top

of her head, was pulled so tightly, in fact, that the corners of her eyes slightly slanted upwards. Her long, slender fingers were picking apart her chalky paper napkin, and flecks of powdered sugar stuck like a floury paste to the bottom of her palm.

Rubbing her thumb up and down the handle of her coffee mug, Mrs. Beameyer couldn't help but feel sorry for the girl. She had never even had a chance. And now she would pass her lack of faith on to yet another generation. *And that beautiful smile she was hiding*, Mrs. Beameyer couldn't help but think to herself, feeling a twinge of envy creep through her veins.

"So. Re-gee-na. How has life been treating *you*?" Ellen inquired, reaching over to squeeze Mrs. Beameyer's hand. "I mean, really, how have you *been*?"

"I've been doing well," Mrs. Beameyer said, and repeated, "doing really well." She nodded as if to convince herself. "I was just elected president of the St. John's school board," she said, swallowing perceptibly and still nodding. "I've really been quite busy lately, with, you know, all the volunteering I did before, plus all the time I spend as leader of the St. Catherine circle. . . ." Mrs. Beameyer cleared her throat and lowered her eyes.

"Oh, Regina, you *do* do so much for so many people," Ellen praised.

"Yes, it certainly does make one feel good to help out the less fortunate," Mrs. Beameyer responded. She prayerfully hoped that, in sharing how she—Mrs. Beameyer—made the world a better place, Diana, too, would be inspired to turn her life around. Poor girl.

Mrs. Beameyer parted with Ellen and her family and walked up the creaky stairs leading out of the parish hall. She leaned heavily on the handrail, her hands still cold and a sickly shade of white despite the summer heat. Her palms grew clammy as she pushed open the heavy wooden door of the church and made her way to her ash-gray Crown Victoria. She sank down into the driver's seat and removed her hat, stretching her neck upwards toward the rearview mirror to assess the damage the humidity had done to her hair. After a few quick pats, Mrs. Beameyer ignited the engine and backed out of her parking spot. Instead of turning right at the first stop sign near the church that would lead her home, Mrs. Beameyer reluctantly steered her car left, toward her daughter's house.

Mrs. Beameyer felt a bead of sweat slide down her temple as she stood on the stoop of Beth's house. Her finger hovered above the doorbell briefly before she decided she'd knock instead.

"Hi, Mom," her daughter, Beth, greeted her. "Come on in. It's too hot to be standing out there."

Mrs. Beameyer could tell her daughter was trying to pretend that everything was okay, trying to pretend that she wasn't angry. She had done that on the

phone, too, when she had called to invite her mother over “for a cup of coffee.” Mrs. Beameyer played along.

“Yes, it certainly is a warm one today,” she said, stretching her lips in a taut smile. She caught a glimpse of her granddaughter, book in hand, staring blankly at her from the room just off the foyer. Their eyes met. Mrs. Beameyer ignored the sinking feeling in her chest as her granddaughter’s eyes darted back to the book opened on her lap. The child’s hair was in a ponytail, and her bangs were clipped back with a red mini-barrette. She was sitting on a piano bench, next to a Steinway settled in the far corner of room. “Oh, my, dear. I didn’t realize you had started playing again.”

“I haven’t, Mom. It’s for Denise.”

“But, dear, why in the world would you buy a brand new piano for Denise?”

“She started taking lessons a few weeks ago,” Beth said, leading her mother into the kitchen and taking a tray of ice cubes out of the freezer. She glanced at the clock. “In fact, she has a lesson in just a few minutes.”

“But. . . I don’t understand.” Mrs. Beameyer accepted the glass of ice water her daughter had handed her. “Denise is deaf.”

Beth stopped shuffling through the drumsticks and Flintstone push-pops trying to get the ice tray back in the freezer. “Yes, Mom. Denise is deaf.” Her voice wavered slightly, then steadied as she continued. “I’m glad you’re finally ready to acknowledge that.” Beth shut the freezer door but didn’t remove her grasp from the handle. Instead of turning around to face her mother, she stared at Denise’s drawings covering the refrigerator door.

Mrs. Beameyer knew she shouldn’t have brought up Denise’s deafness. In fact, she was as surprised as Beth was to hear those words spill from her lips; she never had known how to address the subject. As she shifted her weight to her left hip, unsure of how to handle her daughter’s silent treatment, Mrs. Beameyer glanced across the kitchen to the adjacent dining room. She hadn’t eaten in that room for years. Her eyes traveled to a framed photograph of Beth and Denise as a baby above the picture window. Denise was lying on Beth’s lap, her mouth extended in an o-shaped smile, and Beth was leaning over her with a crunched up nose and wide, smiling eyes. Mrs. Beameyer dropped her eyes, feeling a twinge of guilt seep into her for letting her fears get in the way of her relationship with her daughter and granddaughter. *But it’s not as though I really could ever have a relationship with Denise*, Mrs. Beameyer rationalized. *I can’t talk to her, and there’s certainly nothing I can do to help her.*

“I just don’t get it, Mom,” Beth said, finally removing her hand from the freezer door and turning around to face her mother. “I just don’t understand.” Again she was silent. Mrs. Beameyer stared into her water glass, at the two ice cubes dancing around each other.

“I shouldn’t have come,” Mrs. Beameyer said, setting her glass down on the counter and turning back toward the living room and the front door.

“Mom, just *wait*.” Beth grabbed her mother’s arm and whirled her around forcefully. Mrs. Beameyer caught the flash of fury in Beth’s eyes before she dropped her mother’s arm and sat on the stool near the counter. Beth rested her elbows on the table, clutching her head between her hands. “I feel like I don’t know you anymore, Mom,” Beth said quietly. “You weren’t always like this.”

Mrs. Beameyer paused before answering. “Like what, dear?”

“Oh, you know. So... I don’t know. God, Mom. You haven’t noticed? You really don’t think *I* haven’t noticed—that *Denise* hasn’t noticed? She thinks it’s her fault, Mom.” The doorbell sliced through the ensuing silence. Beth stood motionlessly next to the kitchen counter, her eyes glossy with tears before she composed herself and disappeared around the china hutch to answer the door.

“Hi there,” Mrs. Beameyer heard Beth say warmly as the screen door thudded closed. “Denise should be in the family room waiting for you.”

Beth returned to the kitchen. She perched herself again on the stool, gesturing to her mother to do the same. “I’ve missed you, Mom,” Beth sighed. “*Denise* has missed you.”

“I never meant... I mean, I didn’t mean to...” Mrs. Beameyer stuttered. She cleared her throat. “It’s just that I don’t know how...” She sat stiffly, maintaining perfect posture despite the backless stool.

“I know, Mom. I know,” Beth said, the final remnants of anger draining out of her eyes. “None of us really know how, do we?”

Mrs. Beameyer reached for her glass, noting that the ice cubes had almost completely melted. “I suppose not, dear,” she replied, accepting her daughter’s implicit offering of reconciliation.

Mrs. Beameyer listened intently as Beth began filling her in on all the activities Denise was participating in at St. John’s Elementary school: how she’d developed an interest in badminton in P.E., and how she’d gotten second place in the class spelling bee.

“But all she’s been doing in the last few weeks is practicing that piano,” Beth went on. “It’s amazing, really. Even though she can’t hear it, she can feel it—the vibrations of the sound and the ivory of the keys.” Beth traced the lip of her glass with her finger. “And she really enjoys her teacher—a high school girl from down the street. Denise is even growing her bangs out so she can look like her.”

Mrs. Beameyer nodded, listening to the muffled music wafting out under the family room door. “Well, as long as she doesn’t get too caught up in vanity at her young age. Girls these days seem to be lacking in the area of modesty.”

“Oh, Mom. I don’t think you have to worry about that,” Beth answered. “Denise has a good head on her shoulders. Besides, her teacher really is something.

She and Denise communicate by writing in a notebook during their lessons, since the girl doesn't know sign language. The things they write back and forth," Beth said, "They're absolutely incredible." She took a sip of water. "The very first day, the teacher had Denise write her own definition of music before and after the lesson. At the beginning of the lesson, she wrote: 'Music is the little black dots in between the lines.' At the end of the lesson, Denise wrote: 'Music is connecting the little black dots between the lines.'"

Just then Denise appeared from around the china hutch. She shyly reached out and tugged on Mrs. Beameyer's arm. Mrs. Beameyer felt an unexpected surge of joy pulse through her veins, but her face still registered no emotion and her arm hung limply in the child's hand.

"She wants you to go with her, Mom," Beth said softly. "Go."

Mrs. Beameyer got up reluctantly, and Denise led her into the family room. Mrs. Beameyer froze. Ellen's granddaughter sat in a folding chair near the piano bench, looking out the window, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. Denise pulled her grandmother across the room and down onto the piano bench when Diana swiveled her head around and locked eyes with Mrs. Beameyer.

The air conditioner had been humming loudly, but now it kicked off, leaving a deafening silence hanging in the air. Diana dropped her eyes first. Mrs. Beameyer stared at the girl, unblinking.

"Denise wanted you to hear her play," Diana said finally, looking down at her long, bony fingers grasping a skinny spiral notebook in her lap. "I..." she began, sighing. "In our lesson today, we discussed how music is really all about emotion." Diana lifted her eyes and waved the notebook above her lap. "She wrote in here that she's never seen you smile with your eyes."

Mrs. Beameyer was silent as the little girl began to play. Although she hit a wrong note here and there, lingered on quarter notes and raced through half notes, the tune was faintly recognizable. *Amazing Grace*. Mrs. Beameyer wondered how much Beth was paying this girl for the lessons.

After she had finished, Denise placed Mrs. Beameyer's hands on the keys. "But I don't know how to play the piano," she protested, craning her neck to see Beth standing in the doorway. Beth just shrugged. Diana and Denise looked at her expectantly.

This is ridiculous, Mrs. Beameyer thought, looking down at her hands on the foreign keys. She squirmed in her seat, wishing she were still on the front stoop of Beth's house, before she knocked. She could have just walked back down the steps and driven back to her house. Better yet, she could've told Beth she'd come another day.

But here she was. They were all looking at her. She could feel Diana's dark eyes studying her. Mrs. Beameyer slowly pressed down on one key. It didn't make a sound. She tried again, but pressed down harder. This time the tone

rang out sharply. She played another note, and another, and before long she was madly stamping her fingers down on the keys, and then pounding with her fists, and then crying and pounding and crying.

Denise pressed one hand on the piano, sensitively, then turned to her grandmother and touched her tears. Then, silence. Mrs. Beameyer felt her mascara coursing through the rivulets on her face; the spot on her cheekbone that Denise had touched tingled, almost as though the small hand had still possessed the magic of the music, of *Amazing Grace*. Then, looking her grandmother straight in the eye, Denise waved her hand in a long slow semicircle horizontally in front of her face, then closed her fist and reopened it slowly, like a blooming flower: sign language for *beautiful*.

Valerie Flynn

Sikhulekile Ekhaya

Red earth creeps up my new Gap khakis, tainting their purity, my brand-new REI hiking shoes also polluted with the merciless African soil. The sun, orange in the Swaziland hills, burns my bare arms despite four months of preparatory tanning expenses. *The Lord's testing me*, I think, scratching a bug bite on my shoulder. *Pastor Mark said he would.*

I look about me to the tops of the rolling hills, lush with green in the distance, abundant in red hues from the sun and earth; not at all the flat plains I had envisioned of an African land. Despite my expectations, however, I'm overcome with a beauty that is, unmistakably, a gift from God. *How unfortunate that this beauty has yet to discover the truth of Christ and his majesty. We'll save them from evil*, I think, a burst of energy and pride creeping down my spine. *Forgive me for my unnecessary suffering, Lord, I'm ashamed. Help me do your work.* Peering into the distance I'm welcomed by twenty or so huts shaped much like a beehive with nothing but thatch, sticks, and moss holding them together.

I've been here for only a few hours, with no one accompanying me but for the Lord. I'm here to help spread His word and to save the African villagers from sin. My congregation discovered this village a year ago; a group of people devoid of modern technology and who practice a religion called Zion, an abomination of Christianity which takes the splendor of Christ and pollutes his words with the Africans' own savage beliefs. As a result of our discovering these people, we've seen it as our Christian duty to help them, and thus sent missionaries here with the hope of spreading the *true* word of Christ; to cleanse their thoughts and rid them of impure notions about Christ. Now, during my college spring break, I've traveled here to aid the missionaries in their work; it's my hope that I can shed some light upon some of the African villagers, and, even if I convert one person, will have made my week's travel worthwhile.

"Sawubona!" Turning, I'm greeted by five small children crying out welcoming greetings in eager voices, their wonderfully small features smiling in every way. My heart melts as I crouch down to their level.

"Hi, little ones, what're your names?" The children giggle and, after looking at one another for a moment, begin to speak in foreign tongue and then, in unison, burst into a beautiful song with as much heart as one could ever expect to hear out of children's voices. Looking at their small features, the scars spread across their faces and their arms, their bare feet and worn dress, I forget my khakis and

shoes. *Jesus, this is why I'm here! Someone must help these young beauties!* I smile deeply.

"Dinah!" I glance up and jogging towards me from the huts is the familiar face and spiky short red hair of Sarah, an old friend of the family who's been here for a year. We embrace and exchange words of enthusiasm for one another.

"Come on, Me Lady, I'll show you to your room," she says to me, masking her Midwestern drawl with a forced cockney accent, linking my arm in hers and making herself stand taller than before. Sarah's always been one for theatrics. "Now, Darling," she says, continuing her silly accent, "This here is the Zion church that the unconverted villagers pray in," she explains along our walk to the missionary house, pointing to a building which looks similar to an old, abandoned shed; all that is to greet the eyes are long walls about six feet high made with dried mud, trailer-size in length, a roof made of tin scraps, and a simple, solid wooden door. *Wow. What an ugly church, Lord. How do the Africans feel inspired without windows and beauty?* "But look, Dinah," Sarah says eagerly, breaking her fake accent, "do you see *our* church in the distance?" She points further up the hill to a beautiful church made of white stone, more simplistic than those we have in America, yet beautiful nonetheless, with a steeple and a cross standing tall. "We built it in only four months, and we were even able to import ceramic statues for the interior!"

"Look at the way the sun illuminates the cross, Sarah! Jesus would be so proud of you; you guys are doing such cool things for Him and his people." We put our arms around each others' waists and share a moment of silence, reflecting in the beauty of the sun touching our cross.

* * *

Four days in Swaziland and all I have done is field and garden work. I'm grateful for a chance to help; I know that my efforts are aiding to feed the missionaries and the many villagers that we convince to convert, but I want *more*. I want to work with these people, to speak with them, pray with them, hold their hands and guide them to our church. *Like right now, I think, walking between the huts on my way to the gardens, these women beside me, in tattered dresses with bare feet, bathing their children in the open sun and exposing their naked flesh to the world around them; have they no modesty? No respect for the bodies which you grant them? Why don't they build a bathhouse for their children?*

"Hello," I spin around and find myself looking face to face with an African girl no older than myself, skinny and beautiful. Her hair is wrapped in a tall scarf of faded oranges, reds, and yellows, and her dress is similar to the rest of the African villagers, worn and tattered but revealing once bright colors. However, this black girl, with her delicate and petite features, carries herself, I don't know, *differently* somehow.

“Hello?” I echo, skeptical of my hearing. *Did she just speak English?* Looking down to her feet I notice that she, unlike most, wears shoes upon them. Seeing a slight amount of recognition upon her face, I decide to try my luck. “Do you know English?” *Could she be the girl whom I’m to save?*

She giggles at me; a very proper giggle, with her right hand brought carefully up to her mouth. “Yes, I know English.” I stare at this girl, who speaks my language with such preciseness. I’m in excited disbelief, and unable to find words to the only language I know. “My name is Simphiwe, although to the English I am called Beauty. Are you new here?”

“I—what? Oh, yes, I’m new here! I’m helping out for a few more days before returning to the states. I’m Dinah,” I say, walking towards her and extending my hand, which she takes within both of hers. Now that I’m closer I notice that the what-should-be whites of her eyes are yellow, yet her irises themselves are almost completely black, devoid of a specific color. I look down where I am greeted by the traditional calluses and dirt caked between her hands’ crevices and underneath her nails. *She’s not so different from the other villagers,* I think with a surprisingly strange relief.

“Where did you learn English, Simp—Beauty?” I ask, realizing that I don’t want to butcher her native name.

She looks up, searching her brain, and then continues, slowly, annunciating every word. “When I was younger, I would go with my mother to the city of Kaphunga at the bottom of the hill. We would go in search of medicine for my father—he is a spirit now—but while in the city a woman took an interest in me, as I reminded her of her daughter whom she had not seen in many months.” Beauty pauses to make sure I am following, so I make a sound of approval and nod my head. “After my mother and I returned to our village, the woman waited one month and then traveled up the hill to us, where she offered to purchase me from my family for an agreed upon number of sheep and fresh fruit.”

I gasped, “Purchase you?”

“Yes, Dinah, *purchase me.* It is, how do you say—uncommon—but it does happen amongst my people.” I nod, trying to hide my disgust and confusion. “This woman then became my new mother, and she enrolled me in a girls’ school in Kaphunga, where I was forced to leave behind my siSwati and learn to speak in English and Afrikaans.”

“Why?” I ask, again confused.

“English and Afrikaans are the white man’s languages. They are the languages of power and control of the whites over the blacks. I learned them so that I could be a part of the power. You understand?”

“Yeah, sure,” I smile reassuringly. “Pease go on!”

“Well, I stayed with my city mother for seven years, but when I reached the age of seventeen, I decided that I did not like the city life for various reasons,

and left her to return to my home in the hills.” Again, I am confused but I nod despite my questions. *Didn’t like the city life compared to this?*

“It was a difficult action, Dinah, because as you know I was a purchased daughter. My real mother was so happy to see me, though, that she hid me. When my city mother came to reclaim me, my real mother showed her of our village’s famine, how the sheep and fresh fruit were gone, and that my mother could not reimburse her for the price lost. The woman was very angry, and did not care that my mother was poor and hungry. She tried to take legal action but my village family knew nothing of such things and kept me hidden. After a year, the whole thing was dismissed and so I have been here ever since.”

Sitting in thrilled silence, I’m captivated and perplexed by her story, and Lord, for a moment I even forget that I’m here to save her.

* * *

I promise, Jesus, I’m going to this church for the right reasons; I won’t betray you. The only way for me to open her eyes to your truth is to witness and gage how far she has fallen. It’s the day before I have to return home, and I feel as though I haven’t made a breakthrough with my friend. Since we’ve met I’ve spent every day with Beauty, bringing her to the missionary house and doing her hair, nails, and makeup, all the while trying to talk to her about my church and God. She’s so unreceptive, though! She stares at the floor and nods politely, but I don’t even really know if she hears me or is having fun. Yesterday I brought her to my room, let her try on some of my clothes, gave her my favorite bracelet, and all throughout tried talking to her about God, but she still just shrugged and said “No, thank you, Dinah,” when I asked her to come to church and pray with me. Since it’s my last full day in Swaziland and I’m running out of conversion time, I’ve decided to come to her church, try to understand what she believes, and gage what I need to do to convert her from there.

Now, stepping inside of the shoddy Zion church, which left such a negative impression of beauty that first day, I’m struck by the inside, as well. Beauty’s church is devoid of anything except for four long benches placed against the walls. She explains to me that the benches are for the men and young boys, whereas the women and children kneel or sit in the middle of the church. I accompany her to the center, walking barefooted across the hardened dirt. Together we kneel simultaneously on a rug made of woven thatch, which hurts my knees through the floor-length skirt I was asked to wear. As the tips of my bare toes are pressed up against the cold mud floor, I close my eyes and wish I still had on my shoes that I was asked to leave by the door; Beauty said that walking barefoot had something to do with bringing our bodies closer to the earth and the Lord, or something like that.

As the prayer session begins, a man who seems to be the pastor stands at the front, roaring something in siSwati while the members echo him in response, some

closing their eyes and putting their hands to their heart in passionate response to the words. I can feel Beauty swaying forward and backward on her knees beside me, and despite my urge to turn my head and watch her, I keep my eyes on the pastor. Closing my eyes I let his words and the villagers' presence seep into me. Suddenly, the members all burst into song. I feel my heart beat faster, my body warming to the unimaginable beauty of their voices. My head feels as though it is spinning and the humidity of the air mixed with the heat of close bodies breaks me into a light sweat. I open my eyes in disbelief, struck with an overwhelming feeling unlike anything I ever have. *What is this strange feeling? Why does my body feel so light? Jesus, I don't know what they're talking about, but for some reason I feel like you're close to me; closer than you ever have been. How is this possible? Is this evil that I'm feeling? If so, why does it feel so right and so close to you? Please, Jesus, give me a sign!*

Suddenly the women stand, and I find myself doing the same, looking about me anxiously. Beauty and another woman each grab my hand, and I find myself in the midst of a circle, which the entire congregation is a part of. Still singing, the members begin to walk clockwise, holding hands throughout. I close my eyes again, feeling our walk begin to turn into a jog, followed by a full out circular run, voices echoing throughout. I allow the feeling and the breath of each member to run through me. I can almost see Jesus standing in front of me, smiling and embracing me, lifting me into the air with each step my foot takes and with each note echoed by the congregation. I open my eyes and the first person I see across from me is one of the children who greeted me my first day; she looks directly at me and smiles, her eyes seeming to seep into my being and touching my heart as no human being has ever done. My heart races and I look about my wildly, *this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong . . .*

* * *

“Dinah! Dinah, open your eyes!” I stir and find myself laying on the hardened mud surface of Beauty's church, a few members of the congregation beside me offering me water out of a dirty, chipped cup. Beauty says something in siSwati to the members around her, who then disperse and join back in the circle, increasing their speed until they are again running around us faster and faster. Closing my eyes, I allow Beauty to help me up. We then head towards the door, forcing the members to stop running and break the circle so that we can walk outside.

“What just happened?” I ask softly, feeling immediately cooler having left the church.

“You passed out, Dinah. Don't be embarrassed,” she reassures me, squeezing my hand. “It happens many times to members of our church. Circle wears out the elderly or the malnourished. You are just not used to our ways.” Beauty smiles. “They will run for many hours more.”

“Why? I don’t get it, I—” I stop, not knowing what I even want to say.

“It is symbolic, Dinah. It is our ‘Circle of Life,’ assuring our never-ending life with the maker, and our never-ending community.” I give her a skeptical look. She ignores me and continues. “We take great pride in our Circle, Dinah. It is what keeps our sense of brotherhood.” Beauty sits down upon the grass, looking up at me.

Jesus, I—

I have no words for him. I feel lost and disconnected. For the first time in my life, I feel empty.

“Beauty, why does your church have no things of magnificence or holiness? How can you pray in a place like that?” I ask her, perhaps too haughtily, but I don’t correct my tone. I’m angry, I’m confused, and I don’t know how to handle this. I’m here to help *them* because they are *wrong*.

“Does not the maker say to live one’s life in simplicity? We do not need fancy windows or statutes to bring us closer to him. We have each other’s love and support, and we have our faith. Dinah, we know nothing of extravagances; we know only of each other, the land, and the maker.”

“Well then why did your people allow the missionaries to move in and build a church? Why do some convert, Beauty? If your church is right and you know so much and you live such a holy life, than why do you allow outsiders in?”

“Sikhulekile ekhaya, Dinah!” Beauty exclaims, “It is a siSwati saying that has no English translation because your people do not know of such words, but it is a way of asking permission to enter one’s home, which your people never did. Instead, they tell my people that the white man is righteous and holds the key to a better, more spiritual life.” Beauty stops and sighs, while I stare at her in astonishment. “I am sorry if this is offensive, Dinah, but it is true. Converting to your ways is unstoppable; it occurs throughout the entirety of Africa, which only leads to problems for our people. We are told that our ways of healing and harvesting are not good and that missionaries will provide us with better, so we do not protest when they move in, uninvited, and with time we allow them into our homes and our lives in hopes of a better life, as promised.”

“Isn’t it a better life, though?” I ask, sitting down in front of her.

Beauty ignores my question, looking to the sky in a pained voice. “I have seen that with missionaries comes new ways; we will change because we must for you. Our beliefs we will no longer have. Our sons, seeing your nice things, will crave them and they will go to the street, they will steal and they will be violent because they want your things but do not have money to get them. The music machine that I have seen you carry to the fields will become more important to our sons than their sisters or their village.”

Beauty then looks deeply into my eyes, and takes my hand in hers. “It will not stop with our sons, Dinah; it will be our daughters, too. They will go to the

street corners, giving to strangers their Precious Gift for money; not to buy food but to buy fancy clothes and other finery.” She looks down and gestures with her eyes to the bracelet I gave her. “These gifts will become more important to our daughters than their mothers or the village.”

I glance down and start playing with the bottom of my skirt, not wanting her to see any sign of offence on my face. *That was my favorite bracelet. She didn't even appreciate it.*

“I saw this when I moved in with the city woman, Dinah. She brought me into her home, with four rooms that held no purpose but to sleep and be alone. I imagine you have a home similar?”

I glance up at her, but do not respond. She doesn't need to know that my house has five bedrooms. Beauty continues, sensing that I will not respond. “My city mother's cooking room was three times the size of our huts here in the hills; she had fancy things to look at all around her.” She pauses, makes sure I am listening, and then continues, “I was not so young that the changes went without notice. She and I barely communicated or worked together; we didn't tell stories, we didn't teach each other. I went to the girls' school, she to work in the white mans' homes. It was there, I think, that she learned to want and *need* items that I had never even known existed.” Again, Beauty looks to the bracelet upon her wrist and I feel my face grown flush.

“I spent years in the city, learning your language, and I began to venture out and meet people my age and visit their homes. It was there that I learned that my city mother was not alone; this way of life is common in the city Africans who have been touched with white influence, or, as I later learned it to be called: Western.” Here Beauty stops and studies me for a reaction. I give her none. I have none to give. Blankley, I stare back, unsure if I want her to continue.

“We are taught that it is right to be like you, Dinah,” she says softly, taking my hands within her own. “We forget what is important to us. We don't just adapt to your Christ, we adapt to your *life*. We forget our mothers, our grandmothers, we forget how to weave and make mealy pap for our families; we forget the Circle of Life. What we remember is how you have everything, and that having is what will make us flourish.”

Suddenly, with her hands within mine, I find my strength. How can she say this? We are here helping *her!* We are feeding her people who convert, we are building them a church, we are giving them medicine; what can we possibly be doing wrong? Who put all these horrible ideas into her head? I feel sick to my stomach and I am filled with loathing and disgust. *This is the sign I needed, Lord. They are evil.* Pulling my hands away from her, I stand, feeling shaky from anger. I stare down at her and shoot her daggers with my eyes, which she stares up into pleadingly. Without a word, I turn and head towards the missionary house. In the distance stands our church, now cast in shadow.

* * *

“Dinah, we’re so grateful for all of your help, and it sucks to see you leave; come back for next year’s spring break if you don’t decide to run off to Cancun, instead!” Sarah exclaims, hugging me goodbye. I thank the missionaries on my last day in Swaziland, bidding them everlasting success in saving the natives.

“Wish the weather would have been better for you these past few days, Dinah,” One of the male missionaries says in parting, “I can’t understand why the sun hasn’t been coming out. Well, anyways, it was great seeing you again. Best of luck in the rest of your studies and we hope you come back to join us!”

I leave them with perhaps a bit more eagerness than I would have expected, as I’m anxious to return to the states and to my campus apartment, and I’m even more anxious to talk with my church about all that I’ve encountered. I wish that I could’ve had more time with the natives, but yet I’m also relieved to be free and rid of their burden and evil; I can always pray for them from home. Besides, I look forward to purchasing new khakis, as all of mine are now tainted red.

The taxi meets me at the bottom of the village hill, which I hop into excitedly. Driving through the polluted and corrupt streets of Kaphunga, I cannot help but notice all the young boys out begging, and the young girls walking with a purpose.

Anne Goedken

Sickness

In the plush pale peach chair trimmed with oak, Leslie crosses and uncrosses her legs, waiting impatiently for the doctor. It seems to her a half hour has passed since the nurse led her down the bright, blue-carpeted hall and into this room, but her delicate gold wristwatch claims it's only been four minutes. Jack, her husband of thirteen years, sits next to her in a matching chair, its oak arm touching hers. Jack reaches and grabs her left hand, taking it up to his lips to kiss the spot between her knuckles underneath the sparkling carat and a half diamond on her ring finger.

"It's going to be okay," he says soothingly, dropping her hand back down his thigh, where it rests between the soft moleskin fabric of his khaki pants and the warmth of his large, tanned hand. "Whatever he says, we'll deal with it."

"I already know what he's going to say," Leslie says, dread behind her voice. "Cancer. What else could it be?" Her voice gets louder. "They've tested for everything else."

"Shhh! Do you want the whole office to hear you?" Jack squeezes her hand tightly. His tone is firm, but never angry.

"I'm just getting frustrated with all this. Why can't they figure it out already?" Leslie can't find comfort in the soothing pastel watercolor paintings on the wall or in the numerous medical degrees and recognitions above the doctor's desk. Her toe uncontrollably taps the carpeted floor. Her right hand slides the pendant of her gold necklace back and forth. She is consumed by thoughts of her daughters, Molly and Sarah, waiting at home. At eleven and nine, they would be just old enough to understand cancer. Leslie imagines herself in a hospital bed, her head shiny and bare from chemo treatments, nurses buzzing around her, monitors beeping monotonously, and her daughters sitting at her bedside, tears streaming down their round cheeks.

"You know, it could be nothing," Jack says after a moment of silence.

"Then why did Dr. Meadows call us in here? He could have called with negative results. He has every other time." Leslie admires Jack's optimism, but finds it degrading at times. Throughout their marriage, Jack has been the one to make everything better. This time, she senses it's different. Even doctors can't cure cancer, sometimes.

The sound of the door knob jiggling sets loose a cage of butterflies in her stomach. Jack stands to greet the doctor, forcing Leslie to follow, her hand

still firmly attached to his leg. After the required handshakes and fake smiles, Dr. Meadows sits at his desk, his blue eyes darting from Leslie to Jack. Leslie appreciates his professional manner. He isn't the kind of doctor who wants to be everyone's friend, like some Leslie has seen in the past – the ones that dress in a button down shirt, khakis, and a loose tie. Dr. Meadows enters the room with a presence. His tie always tightly tied, blazer always on and buttoned. He speaks sternly and honestly, but not condescendingly. As someone who came into the office with background knowledge of symptoms and conditions, Leslie is grateful for his attentiveness.

"Thank you both for coming in," Dr. Meadows says. "I know it's a hassle with work."

"Not a problem," Jack says. His job as an attorney allows Leslie to stay home part time with the girls. In the mornings, she works for a local magazine.

"Well, the lab ran the tests we talked about. Leslie, both your red and white blood cell counts are normal."

"That means..." she trails off.

"No cancer," the doctor confirms.

"That's a relief!" Jack lets go of Leslie's hand and leans back in his chair. A smile stretches wide across his face. He runs his hand through his longish brown hair. The worry and stress vanish from his face.

"What is it then?" Leslie probes, unable to accept the good news at face value. She knows it has to be more.

"That's the reason why I wanted you both of you here today."

"She's not pregnant is she? I didn't think it was possible after the snip-snip. You know?" Jack asks, suddenly in much lighter spirits than two minutes ago.

"No, no. Nothing like that." Even Dr. Meadows lets a small smile escape.

"I know something's not right. I know my body," Leslie says, still tense, waiting for news she expects will send her life crashing.

"You're right," Dr. Meadows says. "But there's nothing seriously physically wrong with you."

"I don't understand," she says, leaning closer to the doctor now.

"Do you know how many times I've seen you in the year you've been under my care?" he asks.

Leslie stares through him. *What does that have to do with it?* she thinks. *I've been sick.* "I don't remember. There's been a lot of things going on this year."

"Eleven," he answers his own question.

"That can't be right," Jack protests. He turns to face Leslie. "You haven't been here more than five or six times, have you?"

“A couple times it was just a sore throat. I didn’t tell you about those. I just ran by the office. It wasn’t important. But then I started getting the bruises and feeling so tired. You know about all that.” Leslie speaks defensively. She feels attacked, not only by this doctor who says it’s nothing, but by her own husband. *How can they judge me when I’m so sick?*

Dr. Meadows picks up the thick file on his desk. “Two times for a sore throat. Once for back pain. Once for an annual check up. One time was for a feared case of pink eye. The other six visits were related to this current batch of symptoms – fatigue, bruising, interrupted sleep patterns, and headaches, among others.”

Leslie and Jack sit in silence. She’s too busy trying to account for all eleven visits to have a response.

“I reviewed your file too, Leslie. On average over the past five years, you’ve been to your general practitioner eight times in a year.”

“Well, don’t you think one of you guys should find something one of these times? Obviously something’s wrong!”

“I want to refer you to someone. She’s a colleague of mine. My patients have had a lot of success with her.” Dr. Meadows scribbles down a name on a prescription form and hands it to Leslie.

“What does this doctor specialize in?” Jack asks.

“Psychiatry. Leslie, you’re exhibiting symptoms of hypochondria. Counseling may be able to help you work through some anxiety.”

“I’m not imagining this! You must not have checked everything yet.”

“I don’t doubt that you’re feeling symptoms, but they don’t point to any serious medical condition. That is the only thing I can do for you right now.” He nods towards the slip of paper she holds away from her body as though it’s toxic. “Take it or leave it, but I hope you give it a chance.”

* * *

“Unbelievable. Where does he get off?” Back in the comfort of their SUV now, Leslie refuses to let Dr. Meadows have the final say in her diagnosis.

“Why don’t you relax for a minute,” Jack suggests as he pulls away from the medical center. He brings his arm up to shield the late afternoon sun reflecting off the glass building. “Remember what we thought an hour ago? That it could be cancer? This is good news.”

“No. It’s not. If I had cancer at least I’d know what was wrong with me. Now I have to find another doctor...”

“Stop,” Jack says sternly. “What is any other doctor going to tell you?”

“Meadows has got to be missing something. He couldn’t possibly have run every test there is.”

“What did he check for last time you were in there?”

“Anemia.”

“Listen, Hon, I supported you the last time you wanted to change doctors, but I think we should stay where we are right now. Think of the girls.” Leslie had forgotten about the girls. They go to the same clinic for their strep throats and school physicals.

“Great. Now they’re going to be known in the quack’s office as the girls with the whack job mom. We definitely have to switch.”

“Did you see the bill from the last time?” Jack asked. Leslie shook her head in ignorance to his rhetorical question.

“Six hundred dollars for that first round of tests. I don’t even want to see this one. We’re way over our deductible.”

“So now you’re putting a price on my health? Is that how it is?”

“No! Leslie, I would do anything, pay anything if it would make you feel even a little better.”

“Right,” Leslie mutters under her breath.

“But the doctor had the first diagnosis you’ve gotten since this whole thing started. I think you should at least see what it’s about. Go on that medical website you love so much.”

“I don’t believe this. You think I’m crazy too?”

“Not crazy. But honestly, Hon, you’re always saying you’re coming down with something or researching exotic diseases on the computer.”

“How do you...”

“It’s called the history button. I check up on what the girls are doing. I thought one of them might have been researching for a paper.”

They sit in silence. Leslie has no reply; she’s exhausted from the last hour’s events. She rests her head against the glass of the door window, surprised by how cold it is against her skin. The world outside the window flies by, but inside the car she is stuck in one moment. *Hypochondria, hypochondria*. The doctor’s words bounce around in her otherwise empty head.

Stopped at a red light, Leslie sees two young children using blue and red plastic sand buckets to collect the newly fallen snow in their front yard. The little girl waddles slowly in her puffy lavender snowsuit, struggling to transport her treasures to a large pile where an older boy diligently works to pack the mound into a half formed fort. As Jack accelerates and their SUV moves away from the snow children, she turns around to watch as they become smaller and smaller. For a second, Leslie thinks the little girl resembles her youngest daughter, Sarah, in her similar colored snowsuit from a winter five years ago.

She remembers a four-year-old Sarah approached her at the kitchen counter on a mid-December morning. The first snowfall of the year was enough to coat the formerly brown back yard with a pristine white powder, but not enough to call off school for seven-year-old Molly. Cleaning up from breakfast, occasionally glancing at the 13-inch television showing the morning news, Leslie didn’t even see Sarah until she felt a tug on the leg of her jeans.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Leslie had asked her playfully. Sarah was carrying the lavender snowsuit, but had already stuck her white and purple polka dot hat with the big ball on top over her uncombed blonde curls.

“I wanna make a Frosty,” her squeaky voice requested. Leslie had felt the beginnings of a sore throat that morning. She didn’t want to risk getting sick by going outside in the twenty degree weather, but she couldn’t deprive Sarah of winter’s first snowman opportunity either. In the end, she called her neighbor who had a son Sarah’s age so they could play outside together. Leslie watched from the window as Sarah attempted to make the snowman’s head. She waved and motioned encouragement to Sarah whenever she glanced up. Later, she made hot chocolate for the kids.

Leslie hasn’t thought about that day in years. She never did get sick that time. Pulling into the driveway, she wonders what brought the memory to mind. Was it the girl in the snowsuit or the doctor’s diagnosis?

“What do you want to tell the girls? You know they’re worried,” Jack asks, reaching up to hit the garage door opener on the vehicle’s visor. The white door on the white and sand brick house inches open.

“How about, ‘Girls, the doctor thinks Mom is going crazy?’” Leslie suggests.

“That’s not necessary. Just reassure them it’s okay.” Jack and Leslie meet at the white fiberglass door leading into the kitchen.

“But it’s not okay. I might never get better if we can’t figure this out.” Jack’s arms wrap around her waist. Her cheek falls naturally to his shoulder.

“I said we’d deal with it no matter what,” he says. “Do you still have that piece of paper?”

“Yes,” she says grudgingly. She feels the paper wadded up inside her pants pocket. “I’m not going to need it anyway.”

“Ready?” Jack asks. He doesn’t wait for an answer before pushing open the door. Before the door clicks shut, frantic footsteps echo through the open layout of the house. The sources of the loud thuds on the wood staircase stand at the arch between the kitchen and family room as Leslie is still unwrapping her red scarf from around her neck. Red faced and out of breath, the innocent faces stare at her expectedly.

“You two look like trouble. What have you been up to?”

“Nothing. Swear it. Just waiting for you guys,” Molly says.

“We saw you comin’ from upstairs. So we ran,” Sarah adds.

“I hope there was homework involved while you were spying out the window,” Jack says, sounding only mildly serious.

“Come on! Just tell us already. What’s wrong?” Molly pleads.

“Relax.” Leslie rubs Molly’s shoulder as she passes her to get to the stainless steel refrigerator. “The doctor says I’m fine.”

“Really? Cool.” The statement seems enough assurance for Sarah who sneaks below Leslie at the fridge to grab a juice bag and heads for the television in the family room. Leslie keeps the door open still. Rearranging the head of lettuce, cups of yogurt, and pudding snacks, she pretends to look for dinner options.

“You don’t have cancer then?” Molly asks cautiously.

Leslie freezes with a block of cheese in her hand. She spins to face the twelve-year-old.

“What made you think Mom has cancer?” Jack questions gently.

“She says it all the time.”

Leslie carelessly throws the cheese on the otherwise bare granite countertop and walks closer to Molly. *How did she hear that?* Maybe she overheard a conversation between her and Jack, or the phone call to her mother, or from the back of the SUV after school as she was telling her classmate’s mother, or maybe she listened to her as she talked to the next-door neighbor on the front porch.

“The doctor says I don’t have cancer, honey. I’m okay.”

“I don’t believe you,” Molly says, backing away. “You don’t want to tell us ‘cause it’ll scare us.”

“No. I promise...”

“You’re lying! You said you were sick!” The moisture building up in Molly’s eyes catches the overhead light, making them appear like liquid glass.

“Baby...” Leslie moves in to hug her daughter, but Molly darts out of her pending grasp. Footsteps pound on the stairs.

“I’ll take care of it,” Jack says, kissing Leslie on the cheek as he passes. “You’ve had a long enough day.”

Leslie sits at the breakfast bar, spinning the package of provolone in her hands. Even her eleven-year-old daughter senses there’s something wrong with her mother. She wonders how she can convince her husband and doctor of the same thing. If she could just get to another doctor, Leslie thinks, that would be the answer.

Later in the evening, Leslie lies in the dark master bedroom upstairs. The muffled ring of the doorbell echoes in the room, and she hears excited voices below in response. Jack and the girls must have ordered a pizza, she guesses. After arriving home, Leslie’s familiar fatigue had returned, forcing her to forego making dinner for resting in bed. But she lies wide awake on top of the deep burgundy bedspread now, mind racing. She glances at her bedside alarm clock. It’s six-thirty. She has at least a half hour before Jack finishes with the pizza and comes upstairs to check on her. That’s enough time for her to pass out, but not to seriously injure herself. Leslie opens the nightstand drawer to find a translucent amber prescription bottle of sleeping pills. The doctor had prescribed them for her irregular sleeping pattern. She’s always tired during the day, but awake at night.

Leslie grabs the bottled water on the nightstand and pauses before unscrewing the cap. But she knows this is the only way to get their attention, to make them run more tests. They'll take her to the emergency room and she'll be under the care of a new doctor, one who hasn't read too many psycho-babble psychiatry books like Dr. Meadows. He'll be able to find the real problem. Maybe it's not even cancer, she realizes for the first time. It could even be more serious – a brain tumor maybe. That would explain the headaches, anyway.

An excited squeal floats through the open layout of the house. Molly must have gotten the taco pizza she usually requests, but rarely gets.

"I'm doing this for you, girls," Leslie whispers to herself, as she twists open the prescription bottle and dumps the round, blue pills into her open hand. Only twelve left, she counts. Leslie forces them down her throat in three gulps with the water.

Carefully, she places the amber bottle back in the drawer and the water on the nightstand, hiding the evidence. She lies back in her bed to wait for sleep and the rescue to come.

Hilary Hahn

The Auction

Beau Bradley sat on his faded blue recliner, watching the six o'clock news. His plain green t-shirt was tucked neatly into his favorite pair of Levis, and his brown loafers sat on the floor next to him. The new was almost over. He kept looking up the wooden staircase to see if his wife, Sarah, was done getting ready. She had the whole day off from the Bakersville State Bank, and he didn't understand how she could still be late. He was done with his carpentry work by five and ready by six; surely she could have been ready by now.

"Sarah! Let's go. We're gonna be late!"

"I'll be down in a minute!"

"Women," he mumbled. Even after thirty years of marriage he didn't understand Sarah at times.

The annual Bakersville charity auction would start at seven, and if they left now, they could make it to Big Red's auction house by then. Even though the bidding didn't start until seven-thirty, Beau wanted to be there by seven. He hated being late, and besides, the whole town was going to be there.

Beau knew this year's charity auction wouldn't be any different than the last fifteen he had been to. He could picture them all. Old grey-haired Betsy Rae would be there because she would never miss out on hearing latest town gossip. Bob and Suzy McGee would be there eating all the free cookies, while their three children ran around wild. And Ed and Rita Howard were sure to be putting on their usual kissy-face show, even though everyone knew they fought all the time at home.

At six-thirty, Sarah finally made her way down the steps. She was wearing a red turtleneck to hide the unwanted stomach fat she gained after having three boys, dark blue jeans, and black boots. Her dark brown hair was loosely curled and rested neatly on her shoulders. Sarah's fashion-conscientious style contrasted to the simple way in which Beau dressed. He wasn't into impressing people with his clothes; he was content with wearing his plain t-shirts and faded jeans. Sarah still looked like she was in her thirties – thanks to the help of cosmetics – while Beau seemed aged. His brown hair had become a thin mesh of gray, and varnish stained his worn hands. At times, it made him uncomfortable to think that they might look like an odd couple – like Sarah was way out of his league.

"Ready?" she asked.

“Yeah. Let’s go,” Beau said.

Beau and Sarah hopped into his white Ford truck and headed to Big Red’s. When they were first married, Sarah always sat right next to him. Beau would take her hand and place it on the shift-stick, then he would place his hand on top of hers, and together they would shift the truck into different gears. He liked sharing this with her, the way they would go from first – third – fifth- and back, until they were in neutral and at their destination.

Tonight, Sarah sat with her small frame pressed against the passenger-side door. Her whole body, even her head, was turned away from Beau and looking towards the world outside. They were only a few feet away, but Beau felt the distance between them. And this wasn’t the first time either. When their youngest son moved out, they thought it would be great having the house to themselves again. Besides their jobs, their kids, the weather, they seemed to have had lost communication. When Beau got off work, Sarah was no longer in the kitchen cooking a big meal; she’d be holding up a canned or boxed food item in her hand, suggesting, “you pick...macaroni and cheese, or chili.” They didn’t even sleep in the same bed anymore. Sarah made Beau sleep in the guest bedroom because he snored too loud and she couldn’t sleep. He didn’t like this at first; he didn’t understand why his snoring bothered her now, but he slept in the guest bed and eventually got used to not sleeping with Sarah.

Beau was the first to break the silence between them in the truck. “Did you donate anything this year?” Beau asked. He never donated anything. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to; he just left it up to Sarah. She always knew what to give and what to keep.

“Yeah. Just the usual. You know, things we don’t need anymore.”

Except for the faint sound of country music coming from the radio, the rest of their ride was silent. Once they rounded the final corner, Beau could see the trail of headlights floating toward the auction house. When the truck hit the long gravel road that led to Big Red’s, the sound of rattling rocks filled their ears. It was close to seven, and Beau could see that the grass parking lot was almost full. Shawn Foley’s canary yellow Mustang was parked further back in the field so no one would knick his doors. Beau wasn’t about to park that far away; he could have cared less who hit his door – his Ford was nearly twenty years old and had been through three wrecks. Once he reached the mass of cars, Beau decided to park his truck between the Johnson’s rusty Buick and Ben Gibson’s Harley.

By now it was dark. When they stepped out of the truck, a cool September breeze flew over their shoulders. Sarah was always cold, and she raced ahead of Beau so she could hurry inside. Beau took his time. The wind didn’t bother him; he was used to working outside. Although his specialty was cabinets, he loved the outdoors and often helped other local carpenters build houses. The

auction house was in full view now. Other than the two white doors, Big Red's was exactly what its name implied – a big, red metal shed.

From outside, Beau could hear the sheltered sound of noise. Once he opened the white door, everything roared to life. He could hear Walter Readington and Roy Sanders laughing in the corner as they tugged at their Wranglers, and chugged the canned beer they weren't supposed to bring inside. The "Gino Sisters," a group of high society ladies, were whispering words of gossip in the corner. And, as usual, the McGee children were running wild, screaming and hitting each other as they ran through the crowd.

Instead of carpeted floors or comfortable chairs, the Bakersville auction house took on a different look. The floor was what one could call natural – it was made strictly of gravel. Wooden picnic tables were scattered throughout the room. The charity committee did improvise the room a bit. To make the picnic tables more "homey," each one was covered with a red and white checkered plastic cloth. Each table also had a centerpiece, which consisted of a thin blue vase that held one single carnation.

On the left side of the room there was a snack area. Grandma Richardson, as the locals called her, had baked her famous chocolate chip cookies, and brought her homemade apple cider. There were plenty of other goodies, ranging from gingersnaps to brownies to pumpkin bars. A paper sign over the snack table read, in bright blue marker, "Bakersville Goodies: Made From the Heart." Although the treats were free, donation boxes were strewn about the table and, except for the McGees, everyone always donated.

Against the back wall in the middle of the room, Beau could see the main stage. It was only a few feet tall, and four by seven picnic tables long. A cedar podium was set off to the right hand side, and the rest of the stage was covered with auction items. You name it; it was all on the stage: copper kettles, yellowware, ping-pong tables, basketball hoops, bookshelves, stuffed animals, Bakersville Baker's gear, candles.

The auction house was full of locals, and Beau scanned the room looking for Sarah. Among some Bakersville teenagers, Beau saw Sarah talking to her good friend, Suzie. He was on his way to talk to them when Ralph Mayfield slapped Beau's shoulder from behind and said, "Hey, buddy!"

Beau quickly turned his head. He was startled a bit at first but then smiled and said, "Ralph. Good to see you here." Ralph and his younger brother, Ray, owned Mayfield Brother's Construction, and Beau had helped them out on several occasions. Ralph and Ray were both older than Beau, but they didn't act like it. The Mayfield brothers always found time to drink Pabst on the job, or whistle at any woman with legs that walked by their job site.

"Come here. I gotta show you this," Ralph said, as he motioned for Beau.

Beau followed Ralph to the stage full of auction items. “Look,” Ralph said, pointing to a calendar that was propped up against an old television.

“Yeah,” Beau said, “looks like a calendar or poster.”

“It’s a calendar. Can you see what’s on it?”

“No.”

“Good,” Ralph chuckled. “It’s a Playboy calendar. I stuck it up there quickly when I got here. I can’t wait to see the look on everyone’s face when they go to auction it off.”

Beau laughed with him. “Always playin’ tricks, aren’t ya, Ralph.”

Ralph was looking toward the front entrance. “You know it,” Ralph said. “But, hey. I’ll catch up with you later. I think my new flavor of the week just walked in.”

As Ralph walked away, Beau shook his head and laughed. He gave the Playboy calendar one last look, but before he left, something else caught his eye. Among the clutter of auction items, Beau noticed the top of what looked like a rocking chair. He walked closer to the left side of the stage to examine it. When he got there, all he could make out was the top of the chair. That was all he needed to see. It couldn’t be, he thought, it just couldn’t be. Within the oak headrest, two birds of paradise stared blankly back at him. There couldn’t be another like it in the world – it wasn’t possible.

It was the chair he built for Sarah almost thirty years ago when she was pregnant with their first son. Having a child with her meant everything to Beau, and he wanted to give her something special in return. Before a baby was in the picture, the two of them had spent countless nights rocking back and forth on their front porch swing. They would talk for hours, and Sarah always reminded Beau why she loved to rock. She’d tell him how her mother always rocked her to sleep as a child, and how that back and forth motion comforted her.

Beau wanted his children to feel what Sarah had felt as her mother rocked her to sleep and he wanted Sarah to pass this feeling onto her children. Most of all, he wanted the chair to be a surprise. Beau did most of his cabinet work in an old barn that stood on their property, and since the fumes could be harmful to the unborn child, he knew he could build it there without Sarah finding out.

Their baby was due in August, and Beau wanted the rocking chair to be done by then. Through the month of July, Beau worked vigorously on his surprise. He started with a block of solid oak wood and from there he began shaping. With an electric saw he started to slowly cut his pieces. Most his cabinet work he did with ease, but he took his time on this; everything had to be perfect.

The July heat was scorching that year, and as Beau delicately crafted each piece, sweat dripped from his body, causing the sawdust to stick to his skin. Once the framework was completed, he had one last task. He couldn’t just give Sarah a plain rocking chair; he wanted to hand carve something special in its headrest.

Beau didn't have to think hard. Sarah loved flowers. She was always pointing them out to Beau, and telling him their meanings.

"You know what my favorite flower is," she said one afternoon.

"No."

"Birds of Paradise."

"What?" She went on to explain to Beau that the birds of paradise flower looks like a bird. But what she liked about it the most was its symbolism – it symbolized joyfulness. She told him how she felt like they were two birds of paradise joined together to be forever joyful with one another.

It took Beau three days to skillfully carve a birds of paradise flower in the left corner and one in the right. He would press the carving knife hard against the wood and push up. Curved pieces of wood dropped onto the floor as he worked. When the stem and the fan-like shape of a tropical bird's head had been carved, Beau went back over it. He gracefully went over the design, smoothing its edges. Once all the pieces were put together and secured, he varnished the wood for a final touch. The rocking chair was perfect. Sarah would love it.

Everyone began to take their seats as soon as Red, the auctioneer, made his way to the stage. Beau scanned the room for his wife, and saw her sitting next to Suzie in front of the stage. He walked towards her in a fast pace of anger. Our rocking chair; how could she do it, he thought. Beau put on a fake smile and nodded as he passed the Werner's, Mr. Hyland, Mayor Cole, anyone he knew. Sarah was sitting at the end of the picnic table, and Beau took a seat across from her. They were right in the heat of the action.

Red stood center stage. He was a short, heavy-set man with a bad comb-over and thick glasses. But he had a strong voice and could bellow out auction items better than anyone in the area. In a deep tone, he welcomed the people of Bakersville and neighboring friends, and thanked them for coming to the annual charity auction. While he spoke, the whole crowd sat quiet, and everyone's eyes and ears focused on him. He reminded everyone that the auction items were graciously donated by the wonderful men, women, and children of Bakersville. Red also reassured the crowd that all proceeds would go towards helping the town of Bakersville, especially the Bakersville Baker's football team, which was in dire need of new equipment.

Since Red was a heavier man and didn't like to move about the stage too often, his wife Louise was stuck holding up the auction items as he spoke. The first item up for bid was an afghan that Grandma Richardson sewed by hand.

"Five dollars. Do I hear five dollars? Oh, I see fifteen. Fifteen. Can anyone beat fifteen? C'mon folks, Grandma Richardson spent hours makin' this by hand. Twenty-five! Remember, folks, the Bakers need new equipment. We don't want our boys gettin' hurt out there. Fifty! Good Lord, thank you, sir. Fifty. Goin'

once – twice – SOLD to Ed Howard in the back there. Rita will sure ‘preciate that afghan when winter comes.”

Red spoke loudly, but Beau wasn’t listening. He wanted to say something to Sarah but there were too many people at their picnic table, and besides, they were in the front row. If he started an argument now, the whole town of Bakersville would be talking about them tomorrow. He didn’t understand how she could give away the rocking chair. He thought of so many mean things to say, but he would never say them, he loved her with everything he had. And he realized maybe this was the problem. Maybe he had loved her so much that he couldn’t see she didn’t love him the same way. Snoring couldn’t be the only reason she’d make him sleep in the guest bedroom. He knew he talked about the weather a lot, and when she laughed he thought nothing of it. The weather intrigued him, but she didn’t care to talk about it – flowers, installing an outdoor hot tub, trips to Paris, that’s what he should have been talking about.

The auction carried on in a bustling manner for a half hour. Red sold used books, china, lawn ornaments; the man would sell all day if he had to. Like her husband, Louise was on the heavy side, and it took her a while to bring the next item onto the main stage. Her sleeveless floral dress was out of season and the flab on her arms shook as she dragged the rocking chair across the platform.

“Let’s see. Looks like Louise is bringing us a lovely rocking chair,” Red said as he pulled his pants over his gut. “The chair has some nice artwork on it too, folks,” said Red loudly.

It was in plain view. Two birds of paradise and the worn varnish illuminated under the spotlight. There was no doubt; it was the chair he had spent a month working on.

“Five dollars. Let’s start the bidding at five dollars.”

Beau’s heart started beating faster. He wanted to scream at Red, tell him to stop, but he couldn’t.

“We’ve got five. How ‘bout fifteen. Folks, someone spent a lot of time on this.”

A lot of time, Beau thought. He has no idea.

“I hear twenty to the left there. Do I hear thirty? You can’t even find a rocking chair in stores for twenty bucks these days.”

Beau remembered how happy Sarah was when he gave her the rocking chair. She cried with joy and said it was the most thoughtful thing he had ever done for her. He remembered how she rocked all three of their sons to sleep in that chair when they were infants. Even when they weren’t sleeping, she still rocked in the chair he gave her, humming a lullaby or reading their sons a story.

“Thirty! Let’s see forty. This would make a great addition to any house.”

As Red spoke, Beau sat silent. He looked over at Sarah for some reaction. Nothing. She wasn’t looking at him or the rocking chair; she just stared blankly

into the distance. He remembered the words she spoke in the truck on the way to the auction house: “things we don’t need anymore.”

But he needed the rocking chair – without it, nothing was left. Beau stood up and shouted, “Seventy-five dollars!”

Sarah’s head turned quickly in his direction.

“Wow, folks, looks like we got a new high bidder! Can any one beat seventy-five?”

Beau looked at Sarah, but he didn’t say anything. Her eyes said it all. She was only a few inches away from him now, but the distance he felt was even stronger than it was in his truck.

“Goin’ once.”

She didn’t love him anymore and he would have to face it.

“Goin’ twice.”

But he wasn’t going to do it without the rocking chair. No one else would value the chair like he and Sarah had. And he knew, someday, Sarah would be glad that he had bought the chair, and not some stranger.

“SOLD.”

Megan Lester

Lurking Spirits of the Shadow Realm

I slowly opened my eyes, mentally preparing myself for the harsh light of the sun, but was surprised to see how dark it still was. I rolled over to look at my alarm clock, but the blinking ‘12:00 AM’ in bright red letters was all I saw. Wondering what caused me to wake up, I soon discovered why: my baby was quite the kicker. Grabbing my watch from the bedside table, I squinted to read the time: 9:25. Sprawling out on my back, I leisurely stretched, only to have my left leg cramp up. *Crap*. Resigning myself that I’d have to walk to loosen the muscles, I threw back the covers, carefully getting up, all the while trying not to groan as my back ached.

I couldn’t wait for this pregnancy to be over. Mom never told me it would be so hard, and it didn’t help that she and Dad had moved to Salem about two years ago, when Mom discovered some of our ancestors were killed in the Salem Witch Trials. I’ve been a witch since birth, as it was the heritage from my mother’s side, and while it has been a great gift, it often has its drawbacks.

As I favored my left leg slightly, I turned back to the bed, grinning when I saw my fiancé, Mike, who was still sound asleep. That man could sleep through an earthquake. Then again, I smiled, it must have been a pretty strong storm to knock out the power—too bad I missed it.

Grabbing a spare hair tie from the dresser, I quickly pulled my newly dyed auburn hair into a messy bun as I began my trek around the house. I carefully rubbed my lower back, thinking I’d have to strap on that stupid pregnancy back brace again. I had walked no more than two feet from my bedroom door and into the hallway when I smashed my left foot into a plastic packing box. Looking down the hallway and into the empty room at the opposite end, I noticed several more plastic and cardboard boxes scattered around. Funny, I thought Mike had stacked them along the walls.

I decided to familiarize myself with the house, seeing as we had moved in only a matter of days ago. It was quaint and a two-story, much bigger than the apartment we had previously lived in, and the neighbors here seemed so much friendlier, and *much* farther away. This house made our apartment look like a shoebox, and the price had made a pretty big impact on our savings, but we figured it was worth it, especially since Mike and I decided to start a family together. Our old apartment we had was not at all suitable for kids, which was why we

bought this house. We'd discussed that a wedding was out of the picture for the time being, at least until we got back on our feet financially, and it didn't help that we were only a few years out of college.

Gently pushing aside the box I nearly tripped on, I continued down the hallway, cringing every time the floor creaked. I still wasn't used to the obscene amount of noise it made, but I was determined to find all the spots where it wouldn't squeak. At the very least, I'd go at it with a drill bit and screwdriver until any possible noise was taken care of.

Continuing, I glanced into the other rooms on the second floor: the main upstairs bathroom, an office, a few closets, a door up to the attic, and lastly the room that held the most importance to me—the nursery.

Wall to wall, it was packed full of baby toys, clothes, and piles of diapers. Mike was dying to set the crib up last night, and I just had to put the mobile together to put on top of it. I realized that we'd soon have this room finished and there'd be a little somebody living here. "In less than a month, this will be your new home, and Mommy can stop wearing those awful maternity clothes," I whispered, not finding it odd I was essentially talking to my stomach. When we found out I was pregnant, we decided we wanted to be surprised, but secretly I dreaded all the pink that would come if we had a girl. No child of mine will be forced to wear big, poofy, lacy, frilly pink things—*ever*. I wouldn't subject the kids to such torture.

A low rumbling of thunder brought me out of my thoughts and I headed back to my bedroom, curiously eying the turquoise and black dream catcher hanging above the bed that I had gotten as a gift from my best friend. It wasn't that I was skeptical, but I often wondered how those things really worked. I hadn't had anything but pleasant dreams since we got it, so I wasn't complaining.

Crawling back into bed, I turned towards Mike, who had rolled over on his side, his back facing me. Propping my head on my right arm, I gently traced the outline of his tattoo with my index finger. He had an image of angel's wings that spanned the expanse of his back, from shoulder to shoulder, which he got for his grandmother who raised him. He told me his parents were killed in a plane crash when he was very young, and so his grandma was the closest thing to family and parents he had—a true angel to him.

Something akin to a growl was the first thing I heard from Mike, who rolled over on his back and glared at me the best he could, considering he had just woken up. "I was sleeping," he mumbled, his voice raspy and his bleary dark brown eyes slowly blinking into focus as he brushed his thick black hair away from his eyes.

"I know," I replied, innocently shrugging.

"Why're you up so early?" he said, yawning.

“Couldn’t sleep. Killer cramp in my leg. Thankfully, it’s gone, besides, it’s not *that* early.”

His glare was more obvious since he was awake, but his voice was unusually low. “Is today Saturday?”

“Yep,” I said. “It’s October 30—” I stopped, realization hitting me hard as I sucked in a breath. Mike gazed at me sympathetically, gently running his hand across my cheek and pulling me into his embrace. Three years ago to the day, Lena, my best friend since we were babies, died. I was the only one with her when she died, and I swore that the nature of her death was a secret I’d keep till my own.

Mike had never asked how it happened or why never I talked about it, and for that I was eternally grateful. Some things just aren’t meant to be discussed. When Mike and I seriously started dating, which was a few years ago, we made a deal of sorts. We were each allowed one major secret we could keep from each other. We were free to tell the other person if we wanted to, but I had no intentions of telling any time soon.

When Lena’s family asked how her death had happened, I told them it was shock, or perhaps a heart attack; her body just completely gave up. It wasn’t a total lie, as the autopsy confirmed something like that later, but I felt responsible enough. To this day, I still felt like I hadn’t done enough to help her. I had read over every spell book I owned after she died, and tried nearly all the relevant spells, but nothing seemed to work.

Snuggling further into Mike’s arms, I tried to think of something to brighten the somber mood. “So, I had a dream about your brother last night.” The speed of Mike’s head turning towards mine was almost comical, and I barely had enough time to escape our heads butting.

“What? I don’t have any brother—wait, let me guess,” he rolled his eyes and sighed, knowing exactly what game I was playing. “Was it Gabriel?”

“Actually, it was Raphael, but it’s kinda hard to tell. You’re all so much alike—angels, the whole bunch of you,” I laughed, quickly dodging one of the many pillows on our bed that was flying in my direction. “Stop! Lady with a baby here!” Mike took pity on me and aimed the pillows solely at my head and arms.

“Oi, Mikey, you jerk!” From there, an all out pillow war ensued.

Five hours and two meals later, we were on our way to the cemetery where Lena was buried. The weather hadn’t gotten any better, but at least it wasn’t raining. Since we moved, the drive to the cemetery took longer, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me from visiting. I watched the streets full of houses go by, taking in their Halloween decorations.

At a stop light, I glanced at a house that sat near the corner of the intersection. “Stupid people,” I muttered, glaring at the witch decoration they had. It was one of those where a witch had “smashed” into a pole. Being an actual witch, I took offense in it, as did many of my sister witches, but mostly my mom. “Why do people think all witches fly on brooms?”

“What?” Mike asked, looking in the direction I was and grinned. “Oh, you mean you don’t?”

“Pfft, no. Do I look like I would? The only ‘broom’ I fly on is my car,” I replied, muttering a spell under my breath, and grinning proudly as the witch promptly fell from the pole and landed on the ground. “It makes me sick to see how people are so far off in their interpretations of witches.”

“So why don’t you set the record straight?” he asked.

“And face a modern-day witch trial? No thank you. Having my ancestors go through that was more than enough deaths in my family,” I said, plastering a sickeningly sweet and sarcastic smile on my face.

“Ya know, I’m still convinced you put a spell on me at some point,” he quipped.

I was once again blown away at how well he had taken my declaration of being a witch. It was almost as if finding out your girlfriend being a witch was a common, every day occurrence, like having a twin or something.

By the time we got to the cemetery, the sky was strangely dark, as if the sun had just disappeared behind some thick mountain of rain clouds. We walked slowly over to Lena’s headstone, carefully observing the silence of the cemetery.

Among the dozens of other headstones, there stood Lena’s, with two small statues of cherubs sitting on top of the stone. “She always loved angels,” I smiled, feeling that all too familiar sorrow and guilt wash over me. I lowered myself down to the grass, placing the floral arrangement I had bought in the little vase beside the headstone. “Hey you,” I greeted her, feeling a stray tear escape my eye. “How ya been? I miss you... we all miss you.”

I ran my fingers over the inscription beneath her name, birth date and death date, silently mouthing the words as I traced each letter. *Friends are angels who lift us to our feet when our wings have trouble remembering how to fly.* “Hey, Ariana.” Mike gently squeezed my shoulder. “We should get going. It’s starting to rain... Ari?” I looked up at him, not even bothering to hide the fact that I’d been crying. Silently I nodded, placing my fingers to my lips and pressing them to the headstone, sending a silent prayer that Lena had found peace wherever she was.

We got back to the car as it started raining really hard. “I feel miserable,” I said, sniffing, while wringing the water out of my hair. “And this rain does nothing for the dye in my hair.”

Mike rolled his eyes at me, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like “women,” and headed home.

Agreeing on what to make for dinner was a feat for Mike and me because we had such different tastes. He liked food as spicy as possible, whereas anything spicy gave me bad indigestion, and that was even before the baby. By the time we got home, Mike offered a solution. “Okay, I’m going to make something. You’re going to lie down for awhile, and you have to stay out of the kitchen until I’m done. No arguments, okay?” I nodded, glad to curl up on the huge sofa by the fireplace in the living room and relax my feet for awhile.

About an hour or so later, I woke up to the feeling of someone curled up behind me and the occasional breath of air against my neck. I leaned back, assuming Mike had already finished making dinner and was behind me, waiting for me to wake up. “Hey, Ari, dinner’s ready,” Mike called from the kitchen—the kitchen that’s on the *other* side of the first floor. A strange feeling came over me, so I rolled over to see who was behind me and found nothing but air. Odd, I thought. I must have been dreaming. I sat up, stretched and watched as Mike walked into the living room from the long hallway. That hallway creaked if you even walked *near* it, as did the hallway upstairs.

“You up?” he asked. I nodded, still slightly confused as to what just happened.

“Were you in here at all?” I asked him.

“No, why?”

“Maybe I’m just being paranoid, or maybe I wasn’t really awake, but I felt like there was someone curled up behind me on the couch.”

“Well, I did put blankets and pillows behind you. I guess that could’ve been—”

“Mike, blankets and pillows don’t *breathe* on your neck though.”

“No, oh...weird.”

“Yeah. Kinda freaked me out.”

“Yeah...so dinner’s ready,” Mike said, looking like he wasn’t comfortable with the way our conversation was going. I sighed, hoisting myself off the couch with a grunt and headed to the dining room. Mike followed behind me, and I could hear him hopping from one part of the hallway to the next. I turned around, confused as to what he was doing. He glanced up at me and sheepishly grinned.

“I’m trying to find out if there’re any places that *won’t* squeak when I walk on it.” Raising an eyebrow at him, I smiled and walked to the table, trying not to squeal when I saw what he’d made.

“Thai peanut chicken! Oh, I love you. I really do. This is great.” I ran over to him, squeezing him tightly and then headed back to the table, eager to start eating.

“You still act like a kid every time I make this,” he said, laughing, sitting across from me and watched as I scooped a plateful of chicken and pasta.

“Yes, but you love me anyway,” I replied, grinning back at him between bites.

“And I ask myself why every day,” he said, overdramatically rolling his eyes and sighing.

I often found myself thinking about when his grandma used to make this for us when we were in high school and up until she had to move into an “active senior citizens’ home.” She’d call me and invite me over for dinner periodically, seeing as Mike and I had been close friends since we met my sophomore year—his junior year—of high school.

We ended up going to different colleges; I went to a private school about an hour from home and he went to an art school a couple of cities away. We made it our goal to meet up at his grandma’s house at least a few times a month, since it was a “halfway point” for traveling, and she always made us Thai peanut chicken and gave us lots of sugary snacks. “You’re still both my babies,” she’d always say. Then she’d proceed to tell Mike and me that someday we’ll realize we’re supposed to be together and get her some great-grandbabies.

After a delicious meal, I began to start clearing the dishes, while Mike went to check the weather. Over the past few hours, the storm had really picked up: house-rattling thunder, rain sounding like pellets against the windows, and a wind that made the entire house groan. Since I loved watching storms, and we had a window right above the kitchen sink, I had the blinds open so I could watch the lightning. With one particularly bright bolt, I could see the silhouette of a woman standing in the neighbor’s yard. *Neighbor must’ve forgotten to get the kid’s toys put away before the storm.* I chuckled, placing the dishes in the dishwasher.

A few seconds later, another bright bolt struck and a second, making me glance out the window again, when suddenly a third bolt struck and the face of a woman stared back at me from right outside the window. I gasped, stumbled backward and dropped the silverware into the sink. I laughed at myself as the rational part of my brain told me it was just my reflection I saw, but I had green eyes, not brown, and my hair was auburn, not blonde.

“Ari? Would you stop messing with the channels on the TV?” Mike called from across the house.

“What are you talking about? I’m elbow-deep in water. I highly doubt the remote would work underwater,” I yelled back, wiping my hands off on a towel and heading to the living room. Sure enough, Mike sat on the couch, the remote on the coffee table in front of him, as the channels on the TV kept switching on their own.

“Maybe the signal’s screwed up because of the storm,” I said, thinking stranger things had happened with the old satellite dish I had when I was younger. Mike replied with a grunt and picked up the remote, changing the channels like normal.

A particularly loud boom of thunder made me jump, and I could hear the wind screeching as it continued to storm outside. As we tried to figure out what possessed the TV remote, the back door of the house in the kitchen swung open and began opening and shutting on its own. “Mikey? Did you go out the back door at all today?”

“No, I made sure it was locked before we left for the cemetery.”

“Do you think the wind could have caught the door?”

“I doubt it.”

As if things couldn’t get worse, the power went off. “Okay, this officially sucks,” I laughed, reaching out to find Mike, but not wanting to walk too far in case I tripped. “Mike? Where are you?”

“I’m by the TV. We’ve got a box with a couple flashlights over here and I’m trying to find them.”

“Ya know, the logical thing would have been to get them out earlier. It’s not like we didn’t know a storm was coming,” I laughed, trying to lighten the situation, but still uneasy about not being able to see.

“Ah ha!” Mike cried, flipping on a flashlight—just as the power went back on.

“Your timing is impeccable, as usual, Michael,” I replied dryly, feeling more comfortable with the lights on. He gave me an impish grin and the back door started acting up again.

“Think it could be someone trying to get in?” I whispered, getting the feeling that something wasn’t quite right. With another crack of lightning, the power went back out.

“Ari,” Mike replied, turning on the flashlight, grabbing my hand and taking a step towards the kitchen. “If they were trying to get in, they’d be in here by now. The door was open.” The hallway started creaking, and the distinct sound of footsteps walking could be heard. Mike and I hadn’t taken more than that one step and were still in the living room. We knew it wasn’t either of us.

A chill crept up my spine, and I gripped Mike’s hand tighter. “Mikey, I don’t think we’re alone,” I whispered. The house was silent except for the storm outside, and I swore I could hear a voice coming from the corner of the living room. There was something familiar about the voice. Realization dawned on me, and I instantly knew who it was. Risking a glance, I looked over at Mike, and saw he was straining to make out what the voice was saying.

The voice became clearer and sounded like a distorted whisper coming through the room. “*Ariana! Ariana!*”

“Damn it, I thought I got rid of her!” I hissed, none too pleased that the banishment spell and protection spells I had been doing since she first appeared didn’t work. Why did she decide to come back now? Only one possible answer came to my mind: she spent the last few years regaining her strength and had been waiting for the right moment.

Mike looked over at me, a cross between horror and confusion etched on his face. “Ari, how does she know your name?”

“Mikey, there are some things that I should probably tell you before anything bad happens. I never told you the circumstances around Lena’s death, and my not telling you...it could be bad,” I said, grabbing several blankets and spreading them on the floor, sitting down on the pile and motioning for him to join me. “Sit down facing me, take my hands, and, whatever you do, don’t let go of them.”

It was October 30, and Lena and I had just come back from an old antique shop, where the owner had a bunch of “voodoo” stuff he was trying to sell us. Lena thought it’d be fun to buy some stuff—“Just for kicks” she said. “It’s not gonna work anyway”—so she bought some overpriced Ouija board and a book on séances and summoning the dead. I was adamant in not getting involved in that kind of stuff mainly because I knew what could happen if something went wrong. For some odd reason, I never felt comfortable enough to tell Lena that I was a witch, despite that we had been friends for so long.

The next thing I knew we were sitting on the floor of our apartment, trying to summon some spirits.

“Lena, I’m not getting a good feeling about this,” I said, rubbing my arms as I broke out in goose-bumps. Amateurs and witch craft/spirit summoning were two things that should never mix.

“Wimp,” she replied, continuing to get things set up.

“Seriously, I don’t think we should do this.”

“Why not? It’s almost Halloween, Ari. Let’s get an early start on this. What, are you getting one of your ‘premonitions’ again?” Lena raised an eyebrow at me, her brown hair falling over her shoulder as her blue eyes caught the light of the candles she had placed around the room.

“Lena, it’s not a premonition. I just don’t—”

“Ari, where’s your sense of adventure?”

“I think it left as soon as you bought this crap.”

Lena laughed, sitting down on the pile of blankets and motioning me to join her.

“I’m going to regret this till the day I die,” I mumbled, resigning myself to the fact that, with or without me, she was going to do this. Seating myself across from her, I could only hope that if things turned bad, I could fix them.

“Now,” she began, glancing at the book in her lap. “I’ve got all the stuff set up, but this whole section about summoning spirits is bogus. Let’s just do it like those people on TV do. They always seem to get results. Gimme your hands and don’t let go. The book says if one of us lets go, and there’s a spirit trying to communicate, the results could be deadly.” My head snapped up to meet hers and she grinned.

“Okay,” she said, laughing. “I made that part up, but it says it won’t work if you break the circle. Close your eyes.”

Reluctantly, I closed them, mentally calculating how far away the door was in case things got too ugly. Meanwhile, Lena was whispering something but I couldn’t tell what she said. I wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but a slight breeze drifted through the room and I could feel the hair on my arms standing on end. “Ari, open your eyes,” Lena whispered. I opened them and saw her staring down at the board in between us. “I think we’ve got one,” she said, sounding far too eager.

I looked down at the board and saw the little triangle moving on its own. “I thought you were supposed to be holding on to that to get it to move,” I said, confused. Mom never really covered the whole Ouija board thing; we never needed them. Lena shrugged, but didn’t raise her eyes.

“If there is a spirit here, please try and tell us your name,” Lena called out, and my heart began racing as the triangle began moving. “L-A-C-E-Y. Lacey, is that your name?” The piece moved to the “yes” and stopped. I looked up at Lena and she looked ecstatic. I was terrified. This was no benevolent spirit, I could tell.

“Lena, let’s stop, please,” I begged, but she continued her questioning. Not more than an hour later, “Lacey” had told us how she was murdered by her father when she was very young because he thought she was responsible for her missing siblings. She was responsible, but they didn’t “go missing”—she said she killed them and left their bodies in the family’s well. Apparently, Lacey was a very jealous type and felt she didn’t get enough attention and love from her parents, so she went crazy. Insanity ran in the family, and her father, in a fit of rage, ended up punishing her, but went a bit too far and she died shortly after he finished with her.

“I’ve always been looking to settle the score,” Lena said, her voice sounding higher-pitched and with a strange accent.

“Lena?” I asked, wondering if this was just another practical joke she was playing on me.

“No,” she replied, looking up at me. The first thing I noticed was her normally bright blue eyes were dark, and her hair almost looked blonde in the light. “My name is Lacey.” *Oh, crap.* If Lacey “took over,” I was screwed, and I began freaking out. My pulse quickened, things became slightly blurred,

and I had trouble taking in a full breath. With witches, possession was easier to control and prevent, because we had been instructed on what to do. With normal people, I had no idea.

“Lena, I know you can hear me. You have to fight it. Listen to me and come back. You’re stronger than she is. Lena? Lena?”

Her eyes briefly rolled back into her head before focusing on me.

“Ari, I’m scared. I can feel her inside me. She’s getting stronger. I’m not sure how much longer I can hold on.” Her palms were sweaty; a light sheen of sweat covered her forehead; her breathing came faster and shallower, and her eyes frantically darted around, unable to stay focused on one thing. She suddenly jerked towards me, but I held onto her hands as tightly as I could. Her head lifted back up, and I could tell she was fighting it. “Ari, please, you have to let go. It’s the only way to stop this.”

“Lena, no. If I let go, you—”

“Ari, *let go!* This was a mistake, my fault, and I don’t want you getting hurt.” Her body spasmed again and she groaned in pain. “Please, I know I should have listened to you, but it’s too late.”

“No,” I gasped. “There’s got to be a way. Isn’t there something in that book?” She jerked back and I almost let go of her. Gripping her hands tighter, I began to do the only thing that sounded logical: I began to chant random spells, which ended up sounding more like prayers. Glancing around the room, I noticed that several photo frames had fallen, and random candles had burnt out.

“*Ariana, Ari, what’s the matter?*” It was that strange voice coming out of Lena’s mouth again. “Won’t you play with me?”

“No! Go away! You don’t belong here!”

“Yes I do. Lena wanted me here.” The voice suddenly got cold, sharper. “Why else would she have asked me to come and play?” Lena’s dark eyes flashed dangerously. I knew Lacey was getting stronger and feeding off Lena’s energy.

“It was an accident, a terrible accident,” I cried, wincing as her grip became stronger. “We didn’t think anything was going to happen.”

“And now you’re stuck with me.” She laughed, a harsh, grating laugh and I knew that sentence held more weight than I could imagine. Lena gasped and her skin lost some of its color. It was like I could hear her in my mind speaking to me, telling me how sorry she was that I got involved in this, and to tell her family how much she loved them and would miss them.

Knowing I was facing a losing battle, I pulled her arms around me and hugged her as tightly as I could without letting go of her hands. Then I sat back and let go, watching her writhe on the floor, gasping for air, clawing at her neck before a strangely peaceful smile came over her face as she looked at me. Exhaling softly, she then laid motionless, her blue eyes glazed over in death.

“I checked for a pulse but didn’t find one, so I closed her eyes and called 911, even though I knew it was over. I couldn’t tell her family what really happened, so I told them she suffered a severe case of shock and her body couldn’t handle it and she died. I moved out of that apartment within the week. Shortly after, I got out my books and performed the banishment and protection spells. I had thought it worked, since she never came around after that, but I guess not.” I glanced up at Mike, who looked as though he’d seen me in a new light, but then his dark eyes got wide as he glanced over my shoulder.

“She’s behind me, isn’t she?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer. I could feel her presence and was surprised I hadn’t noticed her before. Mike nodded, not daring to open his mouth. I closed my eyes, trying to remember what prayers of protection my mother taught me from when I was young—the one she said not to use in case of an emergency. I could really use Mom’s help right now. I began a low chant, not even sure what I was saying but it sounded right, and it must have worked because Lacey began shrieking behind me.

Mike made a move to cover his ears, but I grasped his hands tighter as a silent reminder not to let go. He looked at me and nodded before giving my hands a gentle squeeze.

I stopped mid-chant, a freezing sensation coming over my body. I instantly knew Lacey was trying to possess me. If she took over, she’d get the baby too, and there was no way in hell either Mike or I would ever stand for that. I could feel my heartbeat quickening, and immediately started fighting it. It was one thing for her to try and kill me, but with the baby, she was not going to win this.

I glanced over at Mike, who had been completely silent this whole time, and noticed he had let go of my hands. In fact, I couldn’t see him anywhere. Suddenly a bright light appeared, and there stood Mike, dark eyes lit with fire and anger, wearing white robes, a black sash and a dark sword, and luminous wings spanned out behind him. Lena stood behind him, her wrath emanating from her translucent form.

My attention was turned back to Mike, who drew his sword and leveled it at Lacey, murmuring words so old that I couldn’t understand them. Lena walks towards Lacey, fists clenched and a look of murder on her face. Mike seemed to have Lacey trapped in some sort of daze, but once she saw Lena walk towards her, she doubled her efforts to take control of me.

When I could feel the heartbeat of my baby slow, and I could barely feel my own heart beating, the tears began streaming down my face. I was willing to give up my own life, as long as the baby could live. Looking at Mike and Lena, in their other-worldly battle with Lacey, I knew this was beyond me. Lacey had me paralyzed, and I did all I could to keep her out. I tried running through all the spells I thought would work, but none did. My mind was slowing down drastically, and things were beginning to get blurry and dark, but I tried holding on as best I could.

In a last vain attempt, I began to pray the one prayer I always found comfort in: the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel. I saw Mike look down at me, a strange light in his eyes. His face grew sterner, and I swore he became even brighter than before. I felt strength coming back to me, and I knew there was only one place it could have come from: Mike. I could hear Lacey and Lena to my right, but I couldn't make out what was going on. I watched as Mike charged at Lacey, his dark sword glowing brightly, and suddenly there was a blinding light.

I tried crawling over to where they were, and I would have collapsed, but a pair of arms caught me—Lena. She was smiling down at me in her full human form, a peace about her I had never seen before, and she brushed a strand of hair from my face. “It’s all over, Ari. We banished her together. I’m so sorry to have put you through this. Lacey won’t ever bother you again, I promise you that.”

I smiled and hugged her as best I could, before a second, stronger, pair of arms gently took me from Lena. The scent was all too familiar, and I looked up into the glowing face of Mike. “I’ll always protect you, and the baby, remember that. Now sleep. You’re safe.” With that, he pulled me closer and I fell asleep, barely conscious of the fact that Lacey was gone.

I woke up the next morning on the floor in the living room, tightly curled up against Mike, who appeared to be sleeping. I didn’t think he ever looked as peaceful as he did at that moment. When I moved, he groaned and opened his eyes.

“Hey,” he said and smiled, but then frowned as he looked deep in thought.

A movement in the hallway caught my eye. A woman stood there, a gentle, white glow about her. Lena. She smiled at us, and a voice inside my head told me everything was going to be fine; she found her way home. She vanished, and I turned to face Mike.

“Well, she can finally be at peace,” I said, running my hand through my hair. It got caught on something, and I pulled on whatever was stuck—a long, white feather.

“Michael,” I said, grinning, and twirling the feather in my fingers. “I think it’s time you told me *your* secret.”

Mike pulled me closer, resting his head against mine and sighed. “Well, I don’t think I have to anymore.” He chuckled, pressing a kiss to my hair. “But I suppose you want to know the details, huh?”

“Well, aside from you being *the* archangel, I’d appreciate it,” I said, looking up into his eyes and smiling.

“Long story short,” he said. “I had no indication of your family’s history. I was sent here in human form to protect you. I wasn’t told why or from what, and I guess it really didn’t matter. I knew there would come a time when my ‘secret’ would be revealed, and I had come to accept that I might have never seen you again after my duty was finished.”

“You mean—” I began, but was cut off when Mike placed a finger against my lips.

“Falling in love with you was never part of the plan,” he said, his voice lowering to a whisper. “But now, things are set in motion that can’t be undone.”

“Ever the cryptic one,” I said, laughing quietly. “So I’m stuck with you now—for good?”

“Yep.” Mike nodded, suddenly looking afraid at where I was going with this.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I whispered, pulling him into a tight hug, feeling unusually emotional. “I couldn’t have done this without you, and I never want to know what it feels like if you leave.”

“Shh,” Mike soothed. “I’m not going anywhere—ever.”

“Mikey?”

“Yeah, Ari?”

“You might wanna get the car. I think we’re gonna have a baby today.”

“Great... born on Halloween. This baby’s gonna be cursed.”

Maggie McNair

Saturday

I woke up and looked over to the clock on the night stand next to my bed. It was 8:15 am. I closed my eyes again and took a deep breath. I rolled over to the other side of the bed and opened my eyes. Joe was gone already. He left around 6:00 am to catch his flight. One Saturday of every month he had to go to a conference in New York City for his job. It was just something that he had to do, and although it made that one Saturday a very long day, I did not blame him. It just was rough to take care of the boys on my own. I took a deep breath and sat up. I slid my feet into my slippers that were kept at the side of the bed. I grabbed Joe's flannel robe and put it on over my nightgown. I walked over to the bay windows at the opposite side of the bedroom and pulled back the drapes to see that the backyard was covered with the first snowfall of the season. There was only about an inch or two and the bare trees seemed to have come to life again as the snow stuck to the branches.

"Mom!! Mom!!" Charlie and Mikey ran into my bedroom. Apparently they had noticed the snow. "It snowed!!"

"Yeah, I saw! It's so great!" Their enthusiasm was contagious. "Where's your brother?"

"He's still sleeping, Mom," Charlie responded as if it was crazy for me to ask.

"OK boys, head downstairs. You can go out in the backyard for a few minutes and I'll make some blueberry pancakes. We have a busy day ahead of us, so don't tire yourselves out." The boys ran to their shared room to change their clothes and headed downstairs. I tied the robe around my waist and headed for Jack's room.

His door was covered with paintings and drawings of people, buildings, trucks and trains he had seen. A few years back when Jack was first diagnosed his therapist had explained to Joe and me that autistic children commonly had special talents. Art was clearly his. He created works of intricate art at the age of seven. It was his pride and he clearly felt his talent should be appreciated. I opened his door and sat down on his bed. I stared at him for a minute. He seemed to be entirely peaceful in his sleep. It was one of the few times that he seemed to be at ease. I stroked his soft blond hair.

"Jack. Jack. Come on, honey, it's time to get up." He slowly sat up. He rubbed his eyes and looked at me, but not in my eyes, he looked to my lips.

“Hi, Momma.” I stood up and began to open his blinds. He immediately saw the bright shimmer of the snow that stuck to the tree outside of his window. He followed me and stared out the window. “Wow, Momma,” he whispered to the outside. I headed for his dresser to find an outfit for him to wear. Unless it was a special occasion, he almost always wore sweatpants because it was too much of a hassle for him to unbutton, unzip, zip up and button again. In the winter time he refused to wear turtlenecks because the feeling of something tight around his neck irritated him. I reached for a Notre Dame hooded sweatshirt. It was his favorite because his grandpa gave it to him. I tried to keep it clean for the Saturdays that Joe was gone so that I could save myself an argument with Jack about his choice of attire. Charlie, six, and Mikey, five, were able to dress themselves but at the age of seven Jack had some problems still and would have problems with such simple tasks for the rest of his life. After grabbing the clothes and a pair of socks I walked back over to Jack, who was still staring out the window in amazement.

“Jack, come on bubba, let’s get dressed.” No response. “Jack, buddy, come on. I know it’s snowing outside but we really need to get dressed and get downstairs.” Still nothing. He just stared blankly at the tree. “Jack!! Let’s go! We need to get dressed!” The mornings were the hardest time of the day with him and as much as I hated it, I would often resort to raising my voice at him. “We’re going to make blueberry pancakes.” He immediately turned to me with his eyes, and his mouth, wide open.

“Pancakes?”

“Yeah, buddy!”

“Blueberry?”

“Heck, yeah!” Over the years I had learned to make the transition in raising my voice from scolding to excitement. He knew the difference but sometimes pretended he didn’t. “Now come over here and let’s get dressed, Jack. Look what we have here.” As I held up the sweatshirt he ran to me.

“It’s the Irish guy!” he yelled as he noticed the familiar leprechaun on the front. I sat on the bed and he stood in front of me.

“Arm’s up!” I said, making sure to keep the excited tone so as to not upset him. He allowed me to take off his forest green pajamas. He held on to my shoulders for balance as I took off his pajama pants and switched them for a pair of gray sweatpants. I pulled a green t-shirt over his head and then held up the sweatshirt, his eyes and mouth again gaping wide open. Once I pulled the navy blue sweatshirt over his head he smiled, showing all of his teeth, showing all of his excitement. “Come on, let’s go. Momma’s turn,” I said and stood up and walked to my bedroom. I got to the door to make sure he was following me and instead he was standing in the same spot running his fingers over the embroidered image on his chest. “John Michael O’Shea!” He immediately looked up and

smiled. He was usually most responsive if I referred to him by his full name. He loved his full name. When he introduced himself to new friends (he seemed to have many “friends”) he would introduce himself as John Michael O’Shea and almost never as Jack. “Let’s go, it’s Momma’s turn.” I held out my hand and he came to reach for it. We walked together back into my bedroom. He climbed onto the bed and I turned on the television for him. Peter Pan hadn’t been taken out of the VCR in three years. It was his favorite movie and it kept his attention. Every time he watched it, it was as if he had never seen it before. Same with the snow.

I went to the window and looked out at the backyard to check on the boys. Charlie and Mikey had managed to build some sort of fort with so little snow, in such little time. I glanced at the clock and noticed it was already 8:45. *Shit. We still have to make pancakes. Time for another four-minute shower for Maggie.* It seemed that this happened often. Time spent with Jack could not be put into real time. What would normally take fifteen minutes ended up being doubled, if I was lucky. I headed to my dresser and grabbed a pair of jeans and a black turtleneck and headed for the master bath. I turned at the door leading to the bathroom and saw Jack in the king sized bed. He seemed to almost sink into the down comforter.

“Jack?” He still fidgeted with the remote control. “Jack?” He found the play button and looked up at me. I didn’t wait for eye contact anymore but I knew if he was looking in my direction, chances were that he was making an effort to listen to me. “Please be good for Momma and stay there and watch Captain Hook, OK? I have to take a shower but I’ll be right out. I’ll leave the door open and if you need me, come get me. OK?” He shook his head and focused again on the remote. He looked for the play button again and turned the movie on. I walked into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. It was not even 9:00 am and I was tired. I took off my engagement and wedding rings and placed them in a jewelry box on the counter. To the left of the jewelry box was a framed picture of the three boys from the previous summer. Along the wooden frame read the prayer, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Every morning I had to look at that frame and say the prayer to myself. I undressed and hopped into the shower. I had only so much time before Jack would remember the promise that we would make blueberry pancakes.

* * * * *

After dusting off the snow and letting the minivan heat up a bit, we were finally on our way, around 1:30. Charlie and Mikey had a swim meet at Elmhurst College. They were both very athletic even at an early age, taking after Joe. Jack on the other hand did not have the patience or the skill to participate in any sports. He most definitely lacked social skills, always preferring to play alone. We tried

to integrate him into activities that would possibly help his social anxiety, but none of them encouraged him enough to play with other children. Jack would not even play with his younger brothers. The boys had gotten used to this and almost ignored him, knowing that was what he preferred. It was heartbreaking but it was just the way it had to be.

“How about some Raffi?”

“Yeah!” Charlie and Mikey responded. They sat in the back of the van together while Jack sat alone on the middle bench seat, silent. They sang along to the song and Jack stared out the window, mesmerized by the fallen snow.

We parked and made our way to the athletic facility at the school. Headed towards the bathroom I told the boys to go into the locker room and change into their suits and that Jack and I would meet them out on the pool deck to take their bags. They had to learn now to be self-sufficient early on. They understood that Jack needed almost constant supervision and they envied him for it. Still, they showed a tremendous amount of patience with him and loved him.

“Let’s go, Jack. Time to watch Charlie and Mikey kick some butt at swimming.”

“Kick butt?”

“Yep,” I responded while grabbing his hand.

“Swim in pool?”

“Yes, Jack.”

“I like to swim.”

“I know, buddy.” Before we headed towards the pool deck we walked through the campus center. I noticed a display that they had set up about adult classes. I knew that they had art classes and yoga because a couple of my friends took them. This was a little different. The display read, “Interested in Getting Your Master’s Degree? Elmhurst College offers night classes and Saturday classes to work around your busy schedule. Sign up for Spring Classes now!” I picked up a pamphlet and opened it with my free hand. *Busy schedule? Ha! I’ll give you a busy schedule. Do you work around a full time mom’s schedule? Sure, I’ll just come between dinner time and bath time during the week. And I’ll just come Saturdays between soccer games and swim meets. And what about Jack? Do you have a day care that will watch him and cater to his every single fucking need? I doubt it.* I didn’t even know why I had picked up the pamphlet. It only made me resentful, which I hated to be. It was just that I had planned to go far in my career. During college I never imagined myself being a housewife. When Joe and I decided to get married young and start having children, I always figured I would go back to work and eventually go study for my Master’s or a law degree after the kids started grammar school. Instead Joe was the one with the career and he provided for the family. I would never be able to work full-time again. Jack needed me. Constantly. I loved Joe and he was an amazing father but

sometimes I really wished he could switch roles with me at least for a while, so that I could live out my dreams.

“Momma?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Honey is for bees!!” He let out a laugh that echoed through the halls. He had forgotten what he was going to say in the first place and just continued to giggle. We had to get to the pool anyway. I put down the pamphlet and sighed.

“Oh well... Let’s go. The meet is starting soon.” I walked away from the display, knowing the opportunity I wanted was just simply out of the question.

* * * * *

“We’re going to need a large pizza for delivery, please.”

“Cheese, I want cheese. Cheese pizza. Large cheese. A pizza for delivery,” Jack sat next to me at the kitchen table making sure I ordered the usual. “402 Sherman. 630-555-9664. To the O’Shea’s. 402 Sherman. 630-555-9664. Just cheese. O’Shea’s. Just cheese.”

“Jack, buddy, I know. Let Momma order the pizza.” I finished the order and hung up the phone. Jack and I were painting at the kitchen table while Mikey and Charlie sat and watched *Finding Nemo* in the family room next to the kitchen. While Jack painted a picture of our house with snow falling from the sky, I took the opportunity to finally get some work done around the house while all three boys were busy. I was able to keep an eye on all of them while remaining the closest to Jack if he needed anything. I unloaded the dishwasher and wiped down the counters. I walked down the couple of steps that led to the open family room and managed to dust and vacuum around the boys. I grabbed the basket of clean laundry that was next to the basement door and returned to the kitchen. The table was big enough so that Jack could do his paintings and I could start to fold what seemed like an unending amount of laundry.

“Momma, when is the cheese pizza going to be here?”

“It should be here in a few minutes. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I am so hungry, so hungry that I could eat a polar bear,” Jack chuckled.

“A polar bear? Wow, you must be really hungry!” I replied as I folded yet another small t-shirt.

“Yeah, hungry. When is the pizza coming?”

“A couple minutes, Jack. Don’t worry, it’s on its way.” I leaned over to put my nightgown in my pile of clothes. “What are you drawing there?” I said, trying to keep him distracted from the wait on the pizza.

“402 Sherman with snow and a polar bear,” he said, reaching for the jar of blue paint that was only a couple inches out of his reach. He climbed onto the table to grab hold of it but instead knocked it over. The royal blue paint spilled directly onto my pink satin night gown that I had gotten from Joe last Christmas.

“God damnit, Jack!!” He looked up at me in shock. Tears swelled up in his eyes. This time he made eye contact. He immediately reached for the gown and began to try and rub it off with his hands, only smearing it, covering almost all of it with the royal blue paint.

“Momma, look, look! It’s all better. It’s OK. I’ll make it better.” He held it in his hands and continued to rub it with tears and determination in his eyes. “I sorry Momma. I sorry. I sorry. I sorry. Momma!”

“Jack, give it to me,” he handed it over, continuing to apologize. My eyes filled with tears. I didn’t care about the stupid gown. I’d sworn at him about a stupid fucking gown. “It’s OK baby. Keep painting. I’ll take care of it. I’m not mad, I promise,” I said, tears falling down my face.

“Momma, I sorry!!” he screamed.

“Jack, I promise it is OK. Come on, go watch Nemo with your brothers. We’re done painting for today. I’m going to bring this downstairs to throw in the washer. Go sit with Mikey and Charlie, OK?”

“OK Momma.” He walked over to the family room, breathing short, shallow breaths, trying to stop crying. He climbed onto the sofa with Charlie. Charlie shared the blanket with his older brother and put his arm around him.

I walked down the basement stairs and at the last step I sat. I sat and cried for a good five minutes. Why had I yelled at him over something so stupid? I knew Jack was at times overly emotional but his tears were very sincere. He feared me. I wanted Joe to be home. I missed him and I just wanted him to come home. I took a deep breath to gain my composure and threw the gown into the wash. I walked back upstairs and began to clean up the paint and put the folded laundry back into the basket. The doorbell rang and Jack jumped up from under the blanket.

“Pizza man is here!” He was clearly no longer so upset.

“Come on, Jack, let’s go get the door.” I handed him the money and he opened the door and with that came a cold draft. He handed the man the money.

“Thank you, pizza man. I love cheese pizza.” We walked to the kitchen and called in the boys. I grabbed the paper plates and some juice and we sat as a family and enjoyed the pizza. The just cheese pizza.

* * * * *

After the clean up we headed upstairs. Charlie and Mikey took showers and I gave Jack a bath. They brushed their teeth and we all hopped into my bed for a quick bedtime story. Jack and I walked the boys to their room to tuck them in and said goodnight. We walked to his room holding hands and he ran and jumped into bed. I turned on his nightlight and it illuminated the room with stars that covered the walls and ceiling. He looked up at the stars in amazement each night and could not go to sleep without them on. I kneeled next to his bed and tucked him in.

“Jack? I just want you to know that Momma loves you very much. Do you know how special you are?”

“Very special!”

“That’s right. You are my first baby and I love you so so much.”

“I am not a baby, momma.”

“You’re right, you are not a baby. You are a beautiful, smart boy. And Jack I shouldn’t have yelled at you today. And I am sorry.”

“Momma?”

“Yes, John Michael O’Shea?”

He smiled at me and said, “Momma, I love you more than cheese pizza.”

I smiled and my eyes filled with tears. I leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Goodnight, Jack.” I stood up and walked towards the door. I turned around and he lay with his eyes closed, peaceful again.

I lay in my bed and read my book. I dosed off with the lamp on and woke again when Joe climbed into bed. He was leaning over me to turn off the light.

“Oh hey, babe,” he said, and leaned in and kissed me. “How was your day?”

“Fine, the boys had a swim meet today, they both did very well. We came home and ate pizza and I got some work done around house. The boys got washed up and I put them to bed. All in all it was a good day.”

“Maggie, I just want to tell you that I know you have a harder job than me. You are an amazing woman for what you do. I love you.” He turned off the lamp and snuggled under the covers.

“Goodnight,” I said as I lay staring at the ceiling. *Oh, and did I mention that today I realized this wasn’t the life I wanted?* I closed my eyes and tried to fall back to sleep, knowing that tomorrow it would start all over again.

Isabelle Stephens

The Touch of Your Hand

“Are you ready to go, my little Princess?” She is such a beautiful little girl, all bundled up in the soft pink, polka-dotted polar fleece jacket that her mother, Ali, insisted on buying. Pink always was Ali’s favorite color, and once she found out we were having a little girl, she didn’t hold back on buying everything pink she set her eyes on. The pink princess hat made Mara Allison’s little button nose look ever so rosy, just like her mother’s. Ali’s always turns slightly pink when she experiences even the slightest chill. I can only hope that the nose is only the beginning of the resemblances. Mara would be nothing less than blessed if she inherited her mother’s bubbly personality or that crazy laugh that makes me love her more every time I hear it. I open the back door of Ali’s Grand Am, and just as I finish buckling Miss Mara’s car seat, the wails begin.

“Don’t cry, Miss Mara. Daddy’s here, he will take care of you. Shhh, now baby doll, I’m here.” Her wails continue. I want to take her out of that car seat so badly. The little cries are tearing me apart. My watch reads eight o five. I can’t take her out, I’m already running late. I try giving her the nook, but the wails keep coming. What do I do? What would Ali do? I’ve got it!

“The smile on your face lets me know that you need me. There’s a truth in your eyes sayin’ you’ll never leave me. The touch of your hand says you’ll catch me if ever I fall. You say it best when you say nothing at all.” The words just flow from my lips. I don’t even have to think about it - every word, every note, comes naturally. The cries subside, and I quickly hop into the driver’s seat. This song is Ali, it’s us from the first day I met her, to the day I married her, till today. I can remember the first time I ever really heard it.

Oh, how I didn’t want to be sitting at that wedding. My high school wrestling buddy was marrying my high school sweetheart. It was one of the most awkward days of my life. That was until I saw her, Miss Allison Benson. Something about her drew me in, and I couldn’t help but approach her. Her sea of blonde curls captured me at first, and once I saw those sapphire eyes, I couldn’t resist. It was a wedding. What did I have to lose? There didn’t seem to be a special someone hanging on her arm, so I asked her to dance and it was the end of my single days. I took her in my arms that night, and I fell in love among the gossamer speckled with twinkle lights and the aura of white roses. She was wearing a little black dress that accentuated every curve. Her hoop earrings rested midway down her neck, which was further enhanced by the petite diamond necklace that rested perfectly on her collar bone, giving her a look of perfection. I couldn’t forget

the swarming giggles that surrounded me after every step we took. She was gorgeous, and she was dancing with me!

The conversation started on the dance floor and continued on for the rest of the night. She talked of the Peace Corps, her teaching degree, her golden retriever, Otis. Her lips never stopped moving that night. I was intrigued, and I wanted to know everything. One dance was simply not enough. We spent that whole night talking, and by daybreak she was completing my sentences for me. There was something about the way she talked to me, whether it was her confidence, the slight craziness, the bossy undertone, the motherly influence, or the bitter sweetness of it all I'm not quite sure. All I knew was that I wanted to tell her everything. I took her hand in mine that night and fell in love. *"The touch on your hand says you'll catch me if ever I fall. You say it best when you say nothing at all."*

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP! The sound of a loud car horn wakes me from my trance. The light has gone green. I make my way down Sycamore Street, which is alive as usual on this bright Wednesday morning. The kids are riding their bicycles up over the ramp made of cinder blocks and a board left over from their father's latest home improvement project. Across the street there are little girls playing hopscotch in their bright blue and yellow sundresses. I make my way farther up Sycamore and take a right onto Hollow Drive. As soon as I turn the corner, I am met by an entourage of weeping willows. Their branches hang in despair, as if they have absorbed all the tears of the many who have made their way up to the top of this dreadful hill. The willows lead me right to a slender white picket fence which stands shielding the large white house with its terraces and black shutters. The yard is covered with a sea of yellow, red, and pink tulips, all showing their brightest faces despite the sorrow that is held within the fence. I sit there. Red tulip—Ali's favorite. Oh, how her face lit up when she found that diamond ring tied to that bundle of tulips. We only dated six short months, but in that six months we were inseparable. She completed me. When I was growing up, my mother always told me to find the girl who complimented me, and Ali was it. The days weren't long enough, and my face ached from smiling so much. Whether we were just watching a movie together, snuggling on the couch or weeding Ali's ridiculous tulip garden, I was more than content. I came to love every little quirk about her and that is when I knew... *tap, tap, tap.*

"Adam, Adam. Are you OK? Son, come on." I look up from my steering wheel into my father's dark green eyes, which are encircled by a sea of wrinkles, each one having its own story to tell. They look a little hazier today, whether it is his grey shirt that is giving them that appearance or the sorrow that has stricken us both, I am not quite sure. My father grabs my hand and helps me out of the car. Before I even have a chance to shut the door, I find myself burrowed in my father's arms. He squeezes me tight; this embrace brings me back to the day Ali

gave birth to Miss Mara. I didn't think my father would ever stop smiling that day. He wrapped his arms around me and said, "I'm proud of you son. She is beautiful." It was there and then that my tears began to fall.

It takes all I have to murmur, "Yeah, Dad, I'm fine," without the tears returning to my eyes as they had the last time his burly arms had held me so close. I am strong. I will get through this. I need to be strong for my little girl, for my wife, for me.

"Adam, I know this is hard for you. I am here for you. I always have been, and I always will be. I'm gonna help you and little Mara get through this. We've been through it all, and things aren't about to change now." He sees the tears welling in my eyes, and he knows enough to turn and not acknowledge them. He opens the back door and carefully takes my princess out of the car. He turns to me with a sad yet very proud look in his eyes and walks past me, close enough to just barely brush my shoulder, giving me the silent order that I was to follow.

I slowly make my way up the five steps, using the railing as support. I follow my father through the old Victorian doors with a slight hesitation, wishing that I could be anywhere but here. As I take my last step over the threshold, I am hit with an overwhelming sense of pity. It is staring at me from every corner of the room. It stings and is burning my eyes, but I can't give in to it, I won't. My father squeezes my shoulder to let me know that he is there, that I'm not alone, as he always does.

* * * *

I stand facing a sea of black in my new suit with my red pin-striped shirt. The new outfit Ali picked out just two weeks earlier for the baptism of our long awaited first child. I said it was too early to be fretting about what I was going to wear, but Ali had insisted. It's just the way she is. She couldn't wait; she can't wait for anything, especially once she has her mind on something. She stopped on the way home from the doctor's the day she found out we were going to be parents to buy a name book. Then she remodeled our guest bedroom. Everything was ready six months prior to the arrival of little Mara. All we had to do was wait. Every night as we would lie in bed, she would ask me questions. "Adam, do you think she'll be quiet and reserved like you, or bubbly and loud like me? Who do you think she'll look the most like? I hope she doesn't have your crazy laugh, Adam. The kids will never let her be." Ali always jokes about my laugh, or rather pokes fun at her own, by commenting on my so called "normal" laugh. I wish I could be back in bed with my wife, but instead I am here facing a mask of sorrow.

"It's such a tragedy. She was so young."

"How is the little one doing?"

"How are you holding up? Everything will be okay."

"If you and the baby need anything, we're right next door."

“Adam, I’m sorry.”

I am drowning right here and now, too much pity, too many words, too many tears. The beads of sweat start accumulating at my brow, my hands become clammy, and I am doing all I can to resist the urge to start flailing my arms and screaming for help.

“Adam, Adam. Let’s go for a walk.” I feel the firm grip of my father’s hand on my shoulder. His solid frame guides me through the crowd of gaping arms, all trying to break me down, trying to console the pain that they can’t even begin to imagine.

* * * *

“Son, I know you’ve heard this time and time again today, but everything is going to be okay.” I look at my father, a man of few words. His lips are pressed firmly together, and the wrinkles on his forehead tell me that he is searching for the right thing to say.

“Dad, I know, I’m fine, I really am.”

“I know what you’re going through. The day I lost your mother was the hardest day of my life. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t miss those emerald eyes and that amazing smile of hers.” I look up from the tawny stones which have held my attention only to catch a slight glimpse of a tear in the corner of his eye. These days, thoughts of my mother are always escorted by a trembling lip and a shower of tears. I can’t look at him. For I know if I do I will see his broad muscular shoulders slightly slumped and his right hand rubbing his temple, trying to conceal his tears. These tears are contagious, and it isn’t something that I need. I have to be strong.

“She really was an amazing woman, Dad. We sure were lucky. It’s too bad she never got to see Miss Mara. She would have loved her.”

“Adam, she’s seen her. Your mother never really left. She’s been here the whole time; guiding me, helping me to raise you, just as Ali is going to be guiding you. You are never going to be alone. Look at your daughter. Ali is in her, just as your mother is in you.”

I throw my arm around my Dad. “Thank you.” That is all I have to say. We continue following the tawny path, walking step for step. Right there and then we become each other’s security blanket. Pain is our common ground, and we feel comfort in the presence of the other.

The warm blanket is ripped from my shoulders as I hear my father’s somber voice. “Adam, it’s time.”

* * * *

The priest’s monotone voice echoes the words, “To the living, I am gone. To the sorrowful, I will never return. To the angry, I was cheated. But to the happy, I am at peace, and to the faithful, I have never left. I cannot be seen, but I can be heard. So as you stand upon the shore, gazing at a beautiful sea – remember me.

As you look in awe at a mighty forest and its grand majesty – remember me. As you look upon a flower and admire its simplicity – remember me...” I look down to find my hands trembling. I am surrounded by an array of yellows, blues, reds, and white; the lilies, tulips, and roses are invading the room, like little ants on a picnic siege. The air is heavy and it is clinging to my skin, suffocating every pore of my body. My skin is burning from the pity-stricken gaze of every person around me. I am trapped and all I can do is tremble. Where are your hands, Ali? I need them! They are the only thing that can stop this madness. Those hands that have been there through everything, those hands that I fell in love with the first time I touched them. My hands are trembling harder, with the same trembling I felt that day I took your hands in mine forever...

“And now, in token that your hearts are joined together in love, will you please join your right hands. Adam, this woman you hold by the hand is to be your wife. She has given you one of the most sacred things under heaven: a woman’s life and a woman’s love...”

The words just stopped then and there. Her hands were trembling. I wrapped my fingers tightly around hers, trying to calm the anxiety, which they had hid so well. I was lost in those deep blue eyes of hers. She looked amazing. The blond spirals framing the sides of her soft ivory skin, her mother’s pearls resting on her delicate breast bone, the flowing white dress which made her look like an angel waiting to get her wings. I don’t remember how I knew when to say, “I do.” I was too taken away by her that the priest’s words were just a mumble to me. It was just me and her, and her trembling hands....

They won’t stop. I can’t contain them. I feel my father’s gaze fall upon my hands and soon feel a firm hand on my shoulder. The same hand I felt that day, the day that my daughter blessed us with her beautiful innocence, the day that I held Ali’s trembling hand for the last time, listening to her last words. “She’s beautiful, Adam, she really is. Take her in your arms and hold her, never let her go. Love her for both of us, please. Adam, don’t cry, you have to be strong. I love you, honey. Everything is going to be OK. I’ll always be here watching you, loving you. Just take care of our baby, Adam.” My hands were trembling so hard I didn’t even notice when hers stopped.

“...Remember me in your heart, your thoughts, and your memories of the times we loved, the times we cried, the times we fought, the times we laughed. For if you always think of me, I will have never gone.” The priest wipes a tear from his eye as he meets my gaze. “Let us all take a moment of silence to celebrate and remember the life of Ali Marie Tate.”

I look up; her blonde curls are alluring me. Her ivory skin is yearning for my touch, and her hands, her hands are desperate for my embrace. I make my way to her, I have to, despite the pity, despite the appropriateness and the whispers which are sweeping the room, she needs me, and I’m not going to let her down.

I slowly make my way to the front of the room and kneel by her side. Her face is etched with tranquility, which brings tears to my eyes. They are fighting violently against my stubbornness, but I can't, I won't let them win. Her eyes are closed. I want so deeply to lean in and kiss each one of them as I did every morning before I had to wake her from her slumber, but I couldn't draw myself to do it. Instead, my eyes are focused on her hands. Our wedding ring resting on her left ring finger, adding to the beauty of her long slender fingers, her perfectly pink nails, and the little scar on her right pinky from our fishing trip up North. They are flawless. They are exactly what my trembling hands need, the warm comforting touch of my Ali.

I reach out and take her hands. My trembling fingers aren't met by the usual warmth of my Ali, but instead by an unknown cold. The violent tears begin to attack, puncturing my face every drop of the way. The trembling moves from my hands to my entire body. Shaking me violently, sparing me no mercy. As I look at my Ali lying there I find myself whispering the words, "*The touch of your hand says you'll catch me if ever I fall. You say it best when you say nothing at all.*" As the tears fall freely showering our hands with warmth, I turn to my little girl, the mirror of my Ali.

The Irma M. Duwa Award for Poetry

The Irma M. Duwa Poetry Award is given each year to the author of the best undergraduate poem in *Outlet*. The 2006 recipient of the award is Kevin McNee, a Philosophy/Psychology double major from Marion, Iowa. Kevin earns the award for “Nighttime,” featured first in the poetry section.

Our poetry contest judge, Bill Pauly, writes:

“Nighttime” has earned the 2006 Irma Duwa Award for many good reasons.

It is a successful and satisfying poem that pulses with movement and humanity and life. It is ripe with striking imagery and purposeful, controlled use of imagination. The architecture and pacing of the poem are remarkable, carefully constructed and controlled. The subject of the poem, while complex and compelling, is not unduly complicated. An authentic human voice rings true, and does not seem forced or contrived, even when dealing with paradoxes, oxymorons, and the tension of opposites. The poem offers many satisfying surprises as it captures the complexities of nighttime and young love, the mysteries, the anxieties and the magic of feeling your way through an emotional shadowland. Musical impulses and imagery are threaded throughout the poem and help stitch it together; they create a background melody against which the rest of the poem is played out. Careful repetition underscores the recurring motif of “us-in-the-world,” and in love.

This poet knows the human heart, knows the art of making a poem. There is hardly a false note anywhere in these lines. What is said and left unsaid both resonate and carry us through the poem as surely as the flickering lights and darkness and the shadowy uncertainty of love.

One strong appeal of “Nighttime” is the author’s willingness to take risks, to be daring with the craft of poetry. The poem is constructed of a series of fragments, paradoxes and striking images. But we get no real sense of fragmentation. Instead we come away with a sense of the ephemeral and sometimes illusory nature of love.

The poem is one extended fragment. Most of the verbs, for example, are in the present progressive, the ever-happening now, creating an immediacy and a compelling forward movement (“floating,” “scratching,” “passing,” “coming,” “moving,” “taking”). Only near the end do two verbs lapse

into the past tense, when we sense a corresponding movement into stasis, when the pulse of “us-in-the-enchanted-world” slows to detachment and uncertain reality, when there appears a separation of “us” (mentioned earlier nine times in various forms) and a shift into “you” and “me” and “my.”

Paradoxes, contrasts, oxymorons and tensions of opposites also abound. “Silently discussing,” “everything and nothing,” “satisfying inconclusions,” “sepulcher ... sonata” and “not lonely... but alone” are not mere stylistic whimsies, or contrivances for artistic effect, but carefully orchestrated choices that help create the sense of uncertainty that chills the night air and dims the sparkling imagery of the opening stanzas.

From the beginning, the remarkable figures of speech, throbbing with light and darkness, sounds and silences, set the poem in motion. From the musical “blue ribbon-notes” and “deep-throated saxophone,” to the glittering “asphalt diamond,” to the faint, ethereal echo and homage of “halos of orange street lights,” to the stunning “the whole world / a sepulcher, a sonata, around us,” images emerge and merge in a satisfying synesthesia of blended senses and advance the motifs of the poem. We are struck by contrasts: the exuberance of possibilities vs. the undercurrents of romantic tension; the enchantment of night vs. the distractions of the couple’s practical concerns. Perhaps, ultimately, they are reluctant to believe that this surreal experience can be made real through love. We, too, may wonder if the world around them will be more sonata than sepulcher, an enduring symphony or the ultimate night, an uplifting melody of joy or a burial place of their young love.

All of us lucky enough to have known young love—there is no other like it—and to have been immersed in a whole wash of feelings, confusions, elations, euphorias and apprehensions, may well feel a familiarity here.

In fact, this poem succeeds because it is believable and human. We can connect with it. It invites us to enter and enjoy, to be eager or anxious, to be moved as it unfolds. It runs the spectrum of human feelings, spins the emotional color wheel. We are witness to something ageless and worthwhile here, and we come away from the poem somehow changed, enriched, enlarged, reminded—but not contented with answers.

The author is to be commended for restraint at the end of this poem, for resisting the easy solutions and simplistic resolutions. As is often true in life, there are no pat answers here, no magic revelations. Instead, we see “satisfying inconclusions.”

This poem does satisfy with a lot of what we like a poem to do: sparkle with authentic life and inventive crafting. It is focused, unified, whole, imaginative, engaging, enticing, well shaped, with surprisingly fresh diction, extraordinary image-making, and richly resonant sound values. Seasoned poets and newcomers alike, as well as readers anywhere, can find much to applaud and learn from in this prize-winning poem.

Bill Pauly has taught for more than 30 years, including two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone, West Africa, and 25 at Loras, where he offered courses in Poetry Writing, Advanced Poetry Writing and Haiku Writing. He recently finished teaching his sixth ten-week haiku class at home. His own haiku poems have appeared in publications such as *Frog Pond*, *Modern Haiku*, and *Cicada*. His awards include the international Henderson Award for Haiku (First place three times, Second Place, and Honorable Mention two times); two Honorable Mentions for the Betty Drevniok Award for the Haiku Society of Canada; and three Honorable Mentions for Senryu in the San Francisco International Competition.

Bill's other interests and involvements include photography and serving as pronouncer for local and area spelling bees.

Professor Pauly also served for many years as advisor and co-advisor to *Outlet*.

Kevin McNee

Nighttime

Night air
floating around us
like blue ribbon-notes
from a deep-throated saxophone,

soles of our shoes
scratching asphalt diamond,
and us, passing under
halos of orange street lights,

silently discussing
everything and nothing,
coming to satisfying inconclusions,

contenting ourselves
with our *andante* movements and the
nighttime neighborhoods,

dark homes and
darker lawns,
the whole world
a sepulcher, a sonata, around us,
and us, not lonely, but drunken
with the time we had alone together,

my limbs
still moving effortlessly
as a pianist's fingers
when you told me

we were taking things too fast.

Jacob Altman

The Isle of Despair

I am all alone on my little island
Trapped by time and circumstance
The killers of romance

Trapped here on this barren rock
Left by Aphrodite to suffer
As naked as the trees in winter

The sea beckons to me
Take the plunge she says
It will wash away the blood of love

Matt Balk

Ritual

The old man, his face riddled with
seemingly perpetual stubble,
creaks out of his twin size mattress,
his callused, wrinkled feet numb from the cold
hardwood floor.

Eyes squinted, driving east
in his 1987 burgundy Buick Century,
he stops at McDonald's
and instinctively orders
two styrofoam cups
filled to the brim with
scalding coffee,
poured by a short, blonde employee
with newly tightened braces.

He drives past the factory
as he has done every day for years.
Its towering smokestacks
belch white death.
He fumbles with the radio dial,
checking for the Cubs score.

His journey ends at
the cemetery.
The old man hikes up the dewy grass and
gently places one steaming cup of coffee on top of
the marble tombstone,
and, after glancing around,
starts talking about the game.

Donna Bauerly

Haiku

feral cat
the cardinal's last song
caught in your throat

Sunday silence
just a whisper
of wind

Robert Beck

For Annette in Her Sorrows

Annette grieves
as she leaves
her loves and lives
behind

time unravels
as it travels
through our lives
unkind

Nor deny
Annette her sigh
from a heart
abused

time alone
can knit the bone
its batterings
have bruised

Robert Beck

Those Favored Years and These

In those favored years our nerves were sure.
Antecedent to our loss, it scarcely occurred
To us to consider where to place our feet
Or whether our brown hands might waver from
The remedies we have since applied to our loss.
Younger than children playing tarzan or truant
Amid the tangle of the neighborhood woods
We rode the spangled jungle-gym of the canopy.

Just as just off the edge of a photograph
Dislodged from frail linings of some cedar chest
Retrieved from a far dim attic corner
After decades, betraying in us a history
We cannot remember, as off the edge
Of a photograph of a place and time we do not
Remember, lies a pertinence, an absolute conviction
Of presence unidentified—so waits the canopy.

It hangs there, netted in our tensed limbs,
The altered vine of nerves just yesterday
Redrawn for our blacktop platform grid
Defined by surface planes and pavement lines.
We wander at angles to, or to one side.
But the grotesques at the back door of our minds
Insist on dizzy verticals and the risk of a
90-foot drop from the tighrope of the canopy.

This is the lumberwork that graphs our desire.
After digging and pulling among the trash
That packs our bulging heads we find the fine,
Tensile web that reports to us of lives
Uncontained among the tiger ferns,
Improbable blooms, pied-puppet cockatoos,
Unbroken sunwashed days and major rains
And lanes that thread the cumulus of the canopy.

Day was an intricate green cloud
 Urging always elsewhere and never the same.
 Unlikely insects of demented rag invention
 Exploited flowers hanging in midair. Delighted
 Flower-colored birds and lawn-colored sloths
 Among passages of sunlight or absolute stars
 Brought their ruin to the forest and passed out of mind
 Leaving the tiny frogs, jewels for the canopy.

With a blacklight gleam the indigo night
 Jittered with eyes and worms and wings and jaws,
 In a cabaret of hungers, a dark lagoon
 Flashing with luminous fish, or the minute wars
 Of tomthumb dinosaurs by fallen banana
 Palms. The electric night demanded its turn
 Against flapping daytime with its green
 Notations across the great hall of the canopy.

Orchideae like pumpkins or streetlamps festooned
 Stations along the moss-upholstered avenues
 Looping like pythons toward dim domains,
 Regions beyond our care to calculate.
 From clouds of bee-filled flowering trees
 Crowded with a marketplace of epiphytes
 Up to the arclight branch where the eagle nests
 Our country and our news were the canopy.

There was expanse and a depth to that polis,
 A lottery of surprises we chased to recover,
 To reconnect, in strategies of forgetting
 No longer possible. The rains still come.
 The forest floats its masterwork, where we rig
 Our canaverals and manhattans, a world web
 In searching homage. We cling to them, dismantled
 Mantling approximations of the canopy.

Robert Beck

Another Omen

Seven tornadoes
backlit on the horizon
playing like children.

Amy Brueggemann

Lost

My small, sticky hand
clutches yours, brother,
your sweat and tight grip
leading me.
The faint smell
of cotton candy lingers
and follows us as we push
through the clink of toy cars,
the chatter of children
darting like mice toward the
wheels spinning round
clickety-click,
the fat man yelling.
And as I reach for a red balloon
you let go of me.

Marilyn Duff

June 15, 2005

The day started out
So gray.
No rain outside
But rain in my heart.
Everyone was standing around
Wishing me half-heartedly
“Happy Birthday.”
No one wanted to mention you,
And what was going to happen.

None of us would ever see you again
Except in our mind’s eye,
Or photographs.

When we got to the church
There were hundreds of people streaming into it.
We were able to see you
Before they closed the casket
With its cold metal hinges
And four angels at the corners.

Everyone was silent
But their faces spoke.
Everyone was shedding silent tears.

You were only seventeen
When you fell out of the van.
You shouldn’t have tried to save the camera.

Marilyn Duff

Things Have Changed Since We Met

Everything changed for us the day
I told you my cousin died
And you talked about your bathroom fixtures.

Hilary Hahn

Dinner with Dad at Five

In worn-out overalls
clouded with the day's brick-dust,
you lean,
folding one powdery-red arm
underneath the other,
hip against the stove.

Slowly,
the silver fork
becomes your trowel
easing its way back and forth

and I watch
your hands,
caked with mortar,
stir the leftover spaghetti.

And somewhere
between the spicy meatballs
and canned mushrooms
there's an answer

as to why she cheated,
why she left us,
and why I love you
even more
because of it all.

Hilary Hahn

Good Rat Bastard

Sometimes
I think about you dying
and what kind of eulogy
I'd give in your honor.

I'd probably talk about how
you said there were two kinds of people:
a good rat bastard or a bad rat bastard.

I'd reminisce about
our canoe trips down the Fever River,
or bittersweet picking,
or riding, top down, in your robin's egg blue convertible.

I'd laugh at your old stories,
like how you convinced me
that I cracked my head open when I was two,
and that I rolled down the cemetery hill trying to smell the flowers,
and that my mom was the wicked witch of the west.

And I'm positive I'd end my speech
with tears in my eyes,
saying, grandpa Dale was a good rat bastard.

Hilary Hahn

My Mom Left

After Raymond Carver

she left us for a Reich.
my brother and I left
to endure the pain.
I don't hate her,
not even minutely,
because she *is* my mom
and I love her.
she used to kiss us goodnight
and let us sleep in her bed.
I write a poem about this.
I call it kisses from mom,
about how it made me feel
after she left,
how this image is buried
deep, deep, in my soul,
and this poem turns out so good
I am almost glad she
left, or else I would never
be able to write good poetry.
I sit in my bed to write
a poem about writing a poem
about my mom leaving,
but while I am writing
I feel moisture
on my forehead, from lips,
my mother's lips,
and I am frozen.
after a while I continue writing.
her kiss is there again.
I wonder if I will ever shake this pain.

Jody Iler

snapshot

You sit on the floor
trying to put on your shoes,
fingers fumbling,
face flushed
red with anger.
“Don’t help me,” you shriek.

Shoes on,
you jump up and run
unsteadily, but fast –
darting across the faded carpet
like a sun shadow.

Years later,
in the empty room
still echoing your laughter,
I whisper, “Slow down.”

Carla Kaufman

Empty Tapes

He had mad love for music:
When he listened,
The beat vibrated his soul.
No one ever believed me
When I told them my Dad liked hip-hop music,
Until I brought them home and showed
How the bass bump blared
And shook da house,
With melody seeping out the big old speakers.
He nodded his head from side to side,
In a backwards hat and baggy pants,
Sang along in harmony to the chorus
Of “Killa Cam,”
And rapped along with each verse
Of Tupac’s “Fuck All Y’all.”
For him cassettes were never obsolete.
In his Cadillac, the songs were still
Fast-forwarded, played, and rewound.
He was my audience,
And I was his DJ:
I recorded my favorite songs for him.
I always think about him
Every time I hear a jam he liked,
Or anything by Nate Dogg.
Our relationship was like a timeline
Marked with music notes.
He even wore his headphones
And tapped his foot in the hospital bed.
I had a fresh playlist ready,
But I never recorded him another song.
Now that he’s gone,
What do I do with these empty tapes?

Carla Kaufman

Grandma Vi

Viola is lost in a maze in her mind.
Sometimes it seems she might know where she's going
But we know there is no way out.

Every day the same routine is a new experience
When you can't remember your own name.

Her pants are always too short,
The whites of her socks peek out and match her hair.
Her nervous cough tells us she's near.
She smiles and laughs when she sees me
And I wonder if she recognizes my face.

In her own home,
I babysat her.
It was like taking care of a child
Whose parents had gone out.
She wandered around in circles
Through the kitchen and living room
As if she were exploring them for the first time.

She walks like she's afraid to step
And taps her toes on the ground below the stoop
As if she were testing the temperature of a pool.

She steps out the front door.
"Grandma is expecting me home," she says, "I should be there before dark."
Should I tell her my great-great-grandma has long since passed away?

Instead I tell her to come inside because it's going to rain:
"I called your grandma and told her you'd be here."

Jamison Kuhle

seasons.

—summer

sleep and sloth and vagrancy.
glaring skies atop wilting grass
and Youth.—
waking at midnight
to gaze upon forgotten stars
amidst the fog of
searching flashlights.
and to savor sweet-sweets
smuggled in dirtied hands
and smile
at too-tall cyclopean-trees.

—autumn

and wasting away across
the sighing countryside.
running through leaves raining,
blazing red and yellow and—
Off! To Conquer!
by stick-guns and pointed-fingers...
and the blooming harvest nights
smelling of dirt and pumpkin
while laughing below
the final flight of an
Indian Summer.

Megan Lester

Betrayal

You left me alone to find my
solace in a glass bottle and
a sharp-edged blade

where thin red lines laced
across my arm
wept their crimson tears.

How can a “bad day”
bring home blazing
eyes and raging fists?

Like fire scorching through the trees,
my life may too quickly burn out—
nothing left but charred remains
of one I thought you loved.

Melanie Sue Mausser

Sleeper Snake

Last night I coiled onto your mattress
Like a baby garter snake with no venom to spit
Should you have found me
In that hiding spot.

I slithered there from the frigid living room
To feel the heat of flannel sheets
And a memory I carried
Inside my belly –

An undigested egg, an undissected rat,
A bloodless meal that could last a month,
Maybe more because cold-blooded reptiles
Like me must survive on the barest diets.

My eyelids dropped, but my eyes did not;
Uninvited into that intimate chamber
I feared a beak or a claw catching me and flinging
My writhing, terrified body out the door, onto the cutting stones.

Vibrations rolled over the top of my head:
A knock of breeze on the windowpane,
The slump of body on a bed in the next room,
The shift of foundation and furniture.

Vertebrae twisted for the right angle at which to strike:
Camouflaged sleep, a blended and mottled, mimicked peace.
But soon the sun was rising. Barefoot, keratin cells
Against the concrete, I wiggled my way out the door.

Before I left, I made your bed: a behavior foreign
And at once too domestic. And I wondered
What other feminine skin has flaked onto that nest?
Then I wished mine had sloughed and been left behind too.

Paul Larson

I Hold Prayers

I hold prayers
very close.
Too close to expose them.
They are rather avid little suckers,
yet I do not suppose they make it
since I often fake it.

Kate Peterson

Celebrating

Saturday night,
Routinely drunk,
The student scrubs her smeared back mascara
And throws her smoky clothes
Near the closet.

In the morning she forgets
On purpose
And calls her puzzled mother,
Giggling wildly like a child.

Later, denial with a smile.
Approached by someone
She can't quite remember,
She eyes her broken watch
In the quick rush to class.

Then again she paints her toenails hot pink
And slams cheap beer
Until sociable,
Parading around the dark campus,
Celebrating.

Kate Peterson

Sting

He stared at his dirty sneakers.
Salty tears outlined her face.
Mumbling one-two-three excuses
He finally left her near the front door.

She lit her last cigarette
And vowed to quit—yesterday,
Cursed him publicly
Then drowned in bed.

They collided once on a Tuesday
But her hopeful eye
Was no match for his empty embrace.

And again on a Sunday.
But there were only the memories,
Haunting like the unfamiliar perfume.

Bill Cozzie

The Ride Home

The Sandman is a real son of a bitch to teenagers. He clouds their dreams with visions of Mustangs, Firebirds, and Camaros. Red and Black. Racing stripes and tinted windows. Booming stereos. Then they wake up and drag their tired and teased souls to the bus stop. The unlucky ones are forced into their mother's minivan. But every once in a while there's that golden ticket holder who's granted his wish and gets a car. It doesn't matter if it's a rustbox '83 Marquis with bald tires and broken muffler, if it drives...it's freedom. It's a blazing stallion to the kids stuck at the bus stop waiting for their mule.

I was one of the kids at the bus stop. Well into my sophomore year of high school. The CTA- and Pace-controlled Chicago transit system was a grinding mess. The buses were loud, slow, never on time, and full of whack jobs. An old Jehovah's Witness once told me, "The Reverend is the second coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and only He can save us from Lucifer." There was also the woman who spent the bus ride crying into the fur of an old teddy bear, stopping only to tell a man who had accidentally bumped into her that she'd gut him. The gold cap on the list of experiences was witnessing a gang-banger strongarm a dime bag of marijuana from a fellow student named Tom Tinman at the back of the bus.

Every day, I stood at the bus stop on 108th and Western waiting for the bus to arrive, to get on the bus and drop the token into the slot along with Dan, Marty, Ryan and his older brother Josh, a junior. Ride down Chicago's longest street to the depot at 79th and Western, get out, make a mad dash across the street and arrive at the Augustinian-controlled St. Rita College Prep for young men.

Every day was a game of roulette with the bus. Would it arrive on time, or would we be tardy again? It was a price we paid for not having gotten our drivers' licenses when we turned sixteen.

Then one spring day, a kid named Erik jerked his huge Chevy van to a halt right in front of the bus stop. He had a big stupid grin on his face and motioned down Western with an open hand as if to say, "Shall we go?"

I was surprised Erik hadn't driven by the bus stop honking, with his middle finger wagging at us. Erik was a tall, lanky kid who had a bowl hair cut past the appropriate age. He had gone to Clissold elementary, a public school. We had gone to St. Cajetan, a rival Catholic school a few blocks away. In high school, he was on the volleyball team with Ryan and Marty and we had always been

rotten to him. Apparently, all wrongs were forgiven that morning and we eagerly piled in through the side door. A ride was a ride. If the Grim Reaper had rolled up in a bone chariot pulled by wolves, I would have accepted.

That morning, at a red light on 79th and Western, not a football field's distance from school, we were rear ended by a utility van driven by an apologetic and panicky man. The accident wasn't anything serious. Just a loud bang and a jolt forward, the steel bumper didn't show a single mark. To exchange information, Erik and the other man pulled into the McDonald's parking lot next to St. Rita. Everyone got out and walked off to get to class before the bell rang. I stayed with Erik while he and the man took each other's insurance information and phone numbers. I couldn't bring myself to walk away like that. It seemed weird to leave him like that, even though Dan and Marty said it wasn't a big deal.

Erik picked us up every day, though not out of friendship, more like obedience. If anything, he got treated worse. Everyone in the van mocked him, threw stuff at him, jerked the steering wheel out of his grasp, and slapped him in the head while playing air guitar to Metallica and AC/DC.

Getting a ride to school changed everyone's attitude. There was no need to wait at the bus depot excruciating minute after excruciating minute once the long school day ended. We all felt entitled to leave right when the bell rang and not let anything hold us back. If I needed to see a teacher about a failed quiz and asked Erik to wait a few minutes, I was shit out of luck and would be stuck taking the bus.

As sophomore year neared an end, the van seemed to belong to us. We were telling other kids they could have a ride, and it didn't matter what Erik thought. On the last day of school, we sat in the van waiting for Erik (who had stopped locking the doors, and I had started to wonder if he left the doors unlocked so we would climb in and wait for him, instead of hitching a ride with someone else) with the curtains pulled. Marty and Tom Tinman passed the nub of a joint back and forth while Principal Bamburger patrolled the parking lot with the fat wattle under his chin wiggling as he ordered loiterers to leave school grounds. The van was akin to a turtle's shell. The inside was spacious and comfortable. There were two captain's chairs behind the driver and front passenger, and behind them, a fold-out bench seat. Only the driver had a seatbelt. We had grown out of our ramshackle wooden forts and right into this white and green striped van. It was safe, and powerful. A War Machine. And we would begin to use it as such.

During junior year, Erik gave us rides home most of the time. A lot of other people had gotten licenses and cars and offered rides in order to make friends or feel like the boss for a few minutes. A teenager with a car is a boss, a force to be reckoned with. Driving fast and random, they control the road because experienced drivers avoid accidents. Teenagers do not, that is why they tailgate,

speed, and cut in front of other cars. It's the first time in their lives that adults can yell and complain and the kids don't have to listen, they just hoist their middle fingers into the air like Old Glory up a flag pole. Driving is their right and it's more fiercely defended than voting or bearing arms, and teenagers have it stamped on their hearts that rights cannot be stripped away.

Such things that cannot be taken away are unkempt and turned into playthings. After Erik got into an accident his first day, and his parents didn't take the van away from him, a light clicked on in his head. He realized the van was his family's beater, the useless vehicle only fit for the teenage son to drive. Strong enough to keep him safe in an accident and old enough to not care about if it wrecked.

One afternoon I was riding with Erik by myself. He drove with his knees, and he treated the road like a minor annoyance, something to be checked up on every few seconds. He tried to make conversation but his driving was pissing me off.

"Pay attention to the goddamn road."

"You worried, Bill?"

"Yeah, I don't feel like getting in another accident."

"Why? I get in accidents all the time. It's nothing to worry about."

"You're going to get us killed."

"I get tickets a lot too."

The van turned into a rolling ball of mayhem when loaded with a pile of teenagers and Erik's new attitude. Western Avenue was chock full of people we knew, and it turned into "car wars," a term I coined that never stuck. At 2:15 p.m. on Mondays through Fridays, Western Avenue was a battle scene of teenagers armed with unwanted pencils and pens, pennies, and empty pop bottles and cans. Even the freshmen taking the buses slid the windows open and spit or tossed uneaten lunch items at passing cars. We aimed for open windows. Drivers swerved and sped around, jockeying for good position so the battling passengers could take the best aim. The van was the greatest of them all. While most of the other cars had one or two passengers, Erik's van typically had six, sometimes seven. The van was also full of useless junk from Erik's family.

One of the funniest things I have ever seen was Josh throwing an open bottle of sun tan lotion into the open window of Sean Fitzpatrick's gold coupe, covering everyone in the car with greasy white cream.

In a sense, the van was winning car wars, and that made it open to other attacks. I rode home with Erik another time when someone had written "Blowjobs \$2.00" on the back window with a white permanent marker. Another time, soup cans were tied to the bumper with fifty feet of string. The worst for me was when someone dumped hundreds of National Geographics in the back, and

Erik made me clean the mess up in order to get a ride home. If it had been Dan, Marty, Ryan, or Josh they would have told him to fuck off, gotten in the van, and made him drive. But I agreed and sat in the back, picking up the magazines while he drove.

At some point Erik and his family took the van on a weekend vacation. When he returned the van was full of vacation leftovers. A camera, goggles, dog-eared paperbacks, plastic toys, a referee's whistle and a pair of shoes.

The after-school rides home spiraled out of control as our attention was turned towards people we didn't know. Random people driving home from work or going to the store were targeted. People getting in and out of their cars on the curb jumped like soldiers getting out of the way of incoming artillery when the van screeched past at forty mph with Josh blowing the whistle. Students walking home from rival schools were taunted and insulted.

I sat on the bench seat with Dan. Ryan and Marty were in the captain's seats and Josh had shotgun. Dan was playing with the camera. The camera didn't have any film in it, but the flash bulb worked properly. He gave the impression of photographing other drivers. An old black man driving a Cadillac behind us was getting very annoyed. Dan kept flashing the camera at him, and the old man kept putting his hands over his face but Dan wouldn't turn the camera away.

"Dan, take a picture of this guy," Ryan said, pointing to a middle aged black man driving a white Volvo delivery truck beside us. Dan pulled the curtain aside and shot the flash at the deliveryman. He turned and smiled, sticking his thumb up. Dan and I turned back to the man in the Cadillac.

When I turned back around Josh was telling Erik to turn onto 100th Street. Three blocks before 103rd where he usually made the turn. Josh sounded panicky.

"Why are we turning here?" I asked. No one answered me, so I asked again, "Where are we going?"

Marty turned to me and said, "Ryan hit that guy in the face with a shoe."

I turned around, and right out the back window was the white delivery truck, rumbling after us like a bull trying to catch a cow for mating.

"Why the fuck did you throw a shoe at him?" I demanded and pushed Ryan's shoulder. He turned to me, his eyes the size of spotlights. "I just tried to throw it through the window!"

"You fucking moron!"

Everyone shouted commands at Erik to follow, but they were all useless, none of us had a clue what to do. Josh directed Erik to turn right, back toward 98th Street.

"Don't use your turn signal!"

"And don't slow down at the stop sign!"

“But don’t hit anyone.”

“Go faster!”

I turned around and the Volvo truck was nearly on the bumper, the delivery man at the wheel impassive and concentrative. The van whipped around the corner and rumbled up Campbell Avenue all the way back to 98th. At 98th, Erik turned back toward Western, but the light on 98th Street was red. He turned down the alley. The van charged over the cement surface and squeezed through the fat black garbage cans like an ogre through the eye of the needle.

“Try and knock some garbage cans into his path!”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever fucking heard!”

“Don’t hit anyone when you come out of the alley!”

“Yeah, don’t hit anyone!”

When we cleared the alley, Erik brought the van back around and sped up Campbell once more, right back around 98th and down the alley again. Going in circles. Josh waved his finger in front of Erik’s face. “Now turn left!”

“I hope he doesn’t use his radio to call the police.”

“He’s using his radio?”

“No, I said that I hope he doesn’t.”

“Does he know the license plate?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

I wondered what he would do if he caught us. Six versus one. Did he have a gun? A club? A truck driver at a job I had once had showed me a bundle of stripped copper cables bound together with electrical tape.

“Why the hell do you have that?” I’d asked.

“Ever drive around the projects? Ya gotta watch out for *them*. *They’ll* rob ya blind. If any of *’em* stick *their* hands through my window, this mother will break every last bone.”

I looked back and saw the truck lurking into the alley. The Volvo was wider than the Chevy van and couldn’t drive down the alley fast enough to keep up. Erik turned left and then aimed the van right on Artesian Avenue and sped all the way down to where the street met Beverly Park on 101st Street. We had nearly lost the truck when we came to the park.

The houses had been shielding us from view as we raced down the blocks before 101st, but the park only had a few trees and backstops for baseball diamonds. The truck driver could see the van speeding parallel to Beverly Park and came after us. Erik was forced to stop at the intersection of Maplewood and 103rd. The street was crowded with traffic and kids from St. John Fischer Elementary were walking home. The truck was gaining almost right on the bumper again. At a break in traffic, Erik gunned the van onto 103rd, right towards flashing lights, a dinging bell, and closing railroad barriers.

“GO, GO, GO, GO, GO!”

The Almighty God himself must have opened that lane up on the crowded street and kept the barriers up long enough for the van to roll over the train tracks. The gates went down and the miracle train roared past like a Tyrannosaurus Rex, saving us from the delivery truck. I took one more look back at the train and thought it was the most absurd ending ever. Quite possibly the best proof ever for divine intervention.

We had to take a long route around to get back to our neighborhood. On the way home, our eyes were glued to the windows. We were on the lookout for police cruisers, and wary of the truck popping up again if the driver found a path around the railroad tracks.

Car chase stories are uncommon unless you routinely speed around high on methamphetamines with illegal weapons in your backseat, that's the only thing we'd learned. Images of getting beaten up, arrested, and being turned over to my parents circled in my head that day, and I'm sure my father would have taught me quite a lesson if we'd been caught. However, we weren't caught, so we didn't learn anything. There wasn't any realization that we could have died, that cars aren't toys, and that people shouldn't have shoes thrown at them. Car Wars dissipated slightly but I think it was on a subconscious level. On the surface we were teenagers who had gotten away with a crime. It was one of those nasty ordeals that immature people take pride in accomplishing.

Michael Danaher

Illusions

At the time, Geoff Laird was just a name. He was a no-face upperclassman whom I had never met nor heard of. His name was written next to the role of ‘Hamlet’ on the back door of our high school auditorium. Underneath it said, “Understudy: Michael Danaher.” It was my first time trying out for One Acts, and I had landed the role of the Gravedigger in the production of *Fifteen Minute Hamlet*. Understudying the role of Hamlet, though, terrified me. I wasn’t confident enough in my acting abilities to play the lead. But I was glad I was only the understudy because usually they don’t do anything; they’re supposed to memorize all the lines and blocking on top of their own, but it seemed unnecessary. I was safe.

Then the first day of play practice came.

We were all stationed in the center section of the auditorium, nothing but the stage lighting softly gleaming on us. The director, Mrs. Sleger, was pleased with the turnout, and couldn’t wait to get things underway. She was a short, stocky woman evoking a bulldog. Her disposition was either warm and welcoming or utterly terrifying. I sat with a group of friends, amongst other students whom I had never seen before.

“Does anyone know where Geoff is?” Mrs. Sleger asked.

For a moment there was silence, and I was praying for anyone to announce that he was in detention, or he got held up talking to a teacher about an assignment.

“Yeah,” someone called out, “he told me yesterday he wasn’t sure if his parents would let him do the play this year.”

Mrs. Sleger’s face scrunched up like she had just taken a shot of whiskey. “And why not?”

“He got a speeding ticket. It’s his punishment or something.”

My heart began to race. My hands shook and my forehead beaded with sweat. I knew what was coming.

“Okay,” Mrs. Sleger said. “Ask him to talk to me. Michael, you’ll be Hamlet today.”

Any normal person probably would have been elated. After all, no one really goes out for theater to get small, insignificant roles. People try to land the big one, the role that you can brag to your relatives about. What bigger than Hamlet? But I wanted to die. My friends, also in the play, thought it was the best thing

that could have happened to me. We had all agreed to try out and we all made it, most of us in *Hamlet*, some in a different One Act. But I didn't share their enthusiasm. I was content with my role as the Gravedigger. It sounded cryptic, and I knew I would be handling a skull. There weren't that many lines, but it didn't bother me – less to screw up, I thought.

Backstage, I looked over my lines as another One Act ran through its performance. The lines never ended, and they made no sense to me whatsoever. I had read Shakespeare in English classes, but I had no idea how to actually speak it. The success of this play rested solely on my shoulders. I was Hamlet. I was the play. And the play would be horrible.

I was right. The run-through was the most painful hour of my life. There were so many stage directions, and the words I spoke were an incoherent, garbled mess. Mrs. Sleger tried to be as understanding as possible with my lack of experience, but I knew that she had no confidence in me. I thought being an understudy was a safe way to say that I was of some use. That if Hamlet never showed up, I was the guy to go to. Of course in my mind, Hamlet actually would show up and all would be perfect.

The next practice was more of the same. Geoff Laird was beginning to become a myth, a figment of our imagination. Information about his absence leaked out and he was quickly becoming a legend. Laird had been late for school one day and tried to make up for it by speeding. He was pulled over going about 80mph in a 30mph zone – hardly something to shrug off. His parents did not take this lightly and had since grounded him from his car, as well as from the One Acts, which he loved so much. Laird was a veteran to our high school's theater department. Mrs. Sleger was aware of this. She was also aware that if Geoff didn't show up, the short, awkward actor trying to portray one of Literature's greatest characters would ruin everything.

The third practice was a deep, heaving sigh of relief. Geoff had shown up. We sat in the auditorium seats as Mrs. Sleger told us the instructions for the day. I sat in the back of the group with six or so friends, and I couldn't have been happier. Sitting in the front row, by himself, was Hamlet.

“Michael, can you give all of your blocking notes to Geoff?”

“Sure,” I said. He turned around with a big smile and nodded politely to me, indicating that he was Geoff. I could tell he was ecstatic to be Hamlet.

The group broke off into their different factions in the back hallway behind the auditorium. We weren't allowed to actually be backstage because of noise levels. Only the people who were in the One Act being performed were allowed to stand in the wings, awaiting their cues. Everyone else was sprawled out in the hallway on the ground – there was nowhere else to sit.

“Hey, man, what's going on?” I asked, approaching Geoff.

“Hey,” he said. His tall, lanky frame stood in front of me, obviously a better role for Hamlet. His short dark hair gave him a clean-cut look, and I wondered if the rumors about him were true.

“Do you want these notes now?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” He took my script and quickly flipped through it, noticing all of the highlighted lines and stage directions scribbled illegibly across every page. “Looks great, thanks a lot. I’ll get this back as soon as I’m done.”

“Take your time.” I watched him as his eyes widened with excitement and studied the pages of the script. I was more curious about his driving, though. “So were you really going 80 in a 30 zone?”

He looked up at me, as if surprised that the news had spread so quickly. Then he gave a shy smile. “Kinda. It was more like 85.”

“Jesus! That’s crazy.”

“Yeah.” He was still smiling, as if he had won some award. His driving had brought him fame. “My parents weren’t going to let me do this thing originally.”

“That’s what I heard, but thank God you are.”

He laughed. “Yeah, well, my parents are only giving me my car for school, so I’ll be able to do it. They didn’t think it was fair to take such a big role away from me.”

“Well, take it easy with that. I don’t want the responsibility.”

“Yeah, don’t worry.” We chuckled and he began to copy my notes as I went back to my friends.

As the month passed, play practice became the best time of day. I had been moved up to the role of Polonius as well as the Gravedigger, and it didn’t bother me at all. Theater was far superior to anything else we did. By the time school and football practice were over, my friends and I couldn’t wait to get back to the school at night to hang out backstage and see Laird. We didn’t really see him any other time. The back hallway became our meeting place, and Laird quickly became familiar with me and my circle of friends. We would talk about a new band we’d heard or a rare movie we’d seen. However, the friendship would quickly augment.

Laird became one of the highlights of play practice. He was an outstanding Hamlet onstage, but his antics offstage were far more memorable. He would sit in the control room, which hung like a press box in the back of the auditorium. The room was used to manage stage lighting and sound mainly, but Laird would constantly sneak up while we were taking notes and play sound effects. Even though everyone knew it was going to happen, it still made everyone laugh. Mrs. Sleger even found humor in it – a woman so strictly governed by seriousness, and who had told us that the sound room was completely off limits. No one could get mad at him.

In the months of practice, my friends and I would get to know Laird and his car pretty well. Once practice started going until midnight or later, we could count on Laird for a ride home. Our parents offered, but they were content to stay in bed, and we were content to not ride with our parents. Laird's Ford Explorer became a sort of safe haven for us. It gave us freedom. We were given strict instructions to stay in the back hallway during practice. And while this rule applied to everyone else in the One Acts, it simply didn't apply to us. Every chance we got, we snuck off to Laird's car. After the battles for shotgun were over, and everyone was dangerously piled in, Laird would take off towards the nearest fast food drive-thru or anywhere else, just to drive around.

None of my friends could drive, and Laird was the perfect solution to the problem. We were only sophomores, thirsting for our driver's license, and Laird, being a junior, fixed everything. When it got nearer to dress rehearsal, leaving became extremely difficult. Mrs. Sleger would randomly walk out in the back hallway to chastise us when it got too loud. We had to be more careful about sneaking out, but we did it successfully. Usually not so many people could go, but I always made sure I had a spot in that car.

Most of those nights, we felt untouchable in that car. There were no worries, even when Laird would turn the wheel and pull the car over the curb and off the road, onto an empty field adjacent to our high school. We didn't wear seat belts, and the sense of danger as the car sped up and down hills, tearing through the grass as Laird attempted donuts, was like nothing I had ever experienced. No one expected it the first time he did it. But each time we were in the car, we begged him to take the car off-roading again.

Laird offered something no one else could. If only for a short while during play practice, he gave me freedom. It was a privilege I had never had underneath the eyes of my parents. But when practice came, none of that mattered. We were free on those nights, and no one would take it away from us.

One night practice ended around 1 a.m. Laird was driving me and two other friends home when his phone rang. It was his mom. Laird turned down the music and told us all to be quiet. We obeyed. We could all hear his mother yelling at him on the other end of the phone, asking where he was and why he wasn't home. Laird quietly told his mom that practice had gotten out late and he was giving us a ride home. More yelling on the other end of the phone followed. It wasn't completely audible, but it was something about responsibility. Laird agreed and said he'd be home shortly and hung up the phone. The car ride was pretty quiet the rest of the drive.

Soon the production came. Unlike my friends, I was able to act onstage with Laird. And in those moments, Laird was flawless. His acting gave me confidence in my own. As Polonius, I would be stabbed and dragged offstage by him. A few minutes after, we would exchange a fake skull of Yorick as I played

the Gravedigger. It didn't bother me then, but since, the death of Yorick, always troubled me. We were informed that he had been killed because he showed Hamlet some light in this life. He told him things that no one tried to. As a simple jester, his only crime was conversing with Hamlet, sharing knowledge with him that Hamlet had never experienced. Yorick probably thought he was doing some good in this world. He imagined that no consequence could come for something so simple. But he paid for it with his life. It never felt right to me.

After the One Acts ended, life went back to normal. I didn't see Laird that much except in the hallways between classes. The football season had ended, and my time was preoccupied with training for next year's varsity season. I decided against doing the musical in the spring for reasons I can't recall. But I knew Laird would be doing the same backstage antics as we had in the fall. We would meet up with Laird on random weekend nights, but other than that our meetings were sparse. He had a girlfriend now.

The fall of my junior year was one of the most promising times in my life. I had tried out for the One Acts and had landed a lead role. I was much more confident this time around in my acting abilities. The previous year had helped to rid my mind of any doubt, thanks to Laird. Laird had landed the lead in a different One Act, which meant I wouldn't be acting with him, but I didn't mind. Any little bit of hanging out with Laird was enough. And much was the same this fall as the previous. Even though we could all drive, we still rode with Geoff out of tradition to go off-roading and sneak away for food or just for the hell of it. It had become a ritual, and we had planned to make the most of it since it was Laird's senior year.

That fall I had started a band, and it wasn't long before we had our first gig. It was for some fundraiser and we didn't get paid, but we just wanted to play in front of people. Laird told me he would come watch. When it was almost show time, I scanned the audience for my friends. I didn't see Geoff. After the show, I remember standing outside with my friend, Tommy, deciding what to do with the remainder of the night. A woman walked out of the venue, bawling, along with a man trying to comfort her. We didn't know the people and didn't make it any of our business. We instead decided to go get food. There was a place close to his house, so I didn't mind bringing him home. What happened when I brought him home, though, is etched in my memory forever.

I pulled into his driveway sometime after midnight. His dad stood in the open garage. Something was wrong. As I put the car in park, he came towards us.

"Are you guys okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I replied, unsure of what he was getting at. "Just getting some food."

He seemed to shrug off the answer. "You heard what happened, didn't you?"

“What do you mean?”

“Geoff Laird died tonight.”

For a moment the words didn't stick. They hung in the air, bouncing around, never really sinking into anything. He had to have the wrong name. I had seen him that day; he was perfectly fine. Laird couldn't have died. Something like that didn't happen.

“What?” Tommy asked

“Apparently he was in a pretty bad crash. You guys should come in.”

Before I knew what my legs were doing, I was walking through the garage and into Tommy's house. My parents weren't home, so I didn't have to worry about being late. I sat down in Tommy's living room, neither of us saying a word. We both tried to grasp the gravity of the situation. It still didn't work. I may have been offered a pop or something to eat; none of it interested me.

“No. You have to have the wrong Geoff,” I said.

“I'm not positive, but I'm pretty sure.”

It had to be mistaken information. I didn't need to hear anymore. I was tired and just wanted to go home, go to sleep, and wake up to find out who really died. So I left.

The first thing that came was the prayer service. It was a Sunday night, I remember, and I had never seen a church so crowded, not even for Christmas. The lights were low, reflecting on fifty pews overflowing with mourners. Prayer services were unfamiliar to me, and the deathly silence, despite so many people, made me uneasy. We were gathered to honor the memory of Geoff, dead at the age of 17. I could see people from theater scattered throughout the church. The priest said something about the reality of loss and tragedy. I'm sure he said something comforting, but the words didn't penetrate my thoughts. Laird's accident kept playing in my mind. Of course I wasn't there to see it, but I knew how it went. Laird had taken his dad's BMW out for a spin with his girlfriend. His dad was unaware of this, thinking his car was safely stored away for the winter. Laird had taken the car out to some country roads to show off the car's speed. Apparently he picked up too much speed, flew over a hill in the road, flipping the car multiple times. The car had broken through a fence and could be seen from the road 100 yards away as it burned. I like to believe what I was told, thinking that Geoff and his girlfriend died on impact as the car violently tumbled to the middle of some barren field. I like to think that he didn't feel any pain from the crushed, rolling car, or the flames that ensued.

I listened in the back of the church as peers, teachers, and parents all took turns at the microphone, sharing their favorite memories of Laird. I knew everyone from theater, all sharing similar memories playing in my head. People talked about how Laird always brought peanuts to practice and threw his shells all over

the auditorium floor. Or how during the dress rehearsal/performance of *Fifteen Minute Hamlet*, Laird would run around back stage in nothing but a t-shirt and tights. My body shook. I couldn't bring myself to go speak. I didn't know what comforting words I could possibly offer with his silent father and weeping mother both idly stationed in the front pew. I couldn't talk, only listen and shake.

I stepped outside the church right when the prayer service ended and waited to talk to friends outside. Nothing reached above a whisper. I don't remember who I talked to. I do remember, though, once most people were gone I began crying uncontrollably. That's never happened to me, at least not in public. Mrs. Sleger walked over to me, and hugged me for what seemed like an eternity. He was only a kid. He didn't deserve it. None of it made any sense.

Soon Geoff would be nothing but a memory. There would be the wake and funeral, but all that would pass. Once again, he was a no-face teenager. That's how he would be remembered to those who didn't know him. But he was more than that. He was more than another obituary to read in the paper, or another gravestone to implant in the ground. He was more than just another death, another statistic.

Laird had the same illusions that most kids do at that age. It's the illusion that they are untouchable, immune to any sort of danger that comes their way. I'm not sure what sparks this delusion. It's probably the same feelings that cause people to not wear seatbelts or use protection during sex. It's the same sense that drives people to smoke or drink or do anything that damages the body. It's the same gut feeling that makes young men and women go overseas to fight wars. No harm can come to us. We're just kids; we'll always be protected.

Laird was proof that this was wrong. He was only a kid. We all were.

Liz Elsbernd

The World Was Too Much With Me

“The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away...”

-William Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much With Us”

At seventy-six miles per hour, our full-sized maroon van speeds down the interstate. Nonetheless, our bumper seems to attract cars as though it possesses some formidable type of magnetic force. No one ever pays attention to speed limits.

Sinking down in my seat, I center my weight on my tailbone and prop my knees against the back of my friend Ashley’s seat. Since Ashley and the rest of my friends are busy reading or listening to music, and Ashley’s dad, Dave, is deep in discussion with his other daughter, Ali, I gaze out the window and probe the horizon, discovering that the South Dakota and eastern Wyoming flatness has finally proved itself finite. A thick black squiggle stretches along the bottom of the canvas of dreary gray sky. As thin and see-through as tissue paper, a curtain of misty clouds shrouds the silhouette of distant mountains.

The Bighorns!

I had never been in the mountains, never, in fact, been further west than the Black Hills of South Dakota. In my mind, Wyoming has always been two-dimensional, nothing more than a square on a map. Mountains had always been foreign and somewhat cartoonish to me, somewhere people went dressed in scarves, heavy coats, and wool mittens to ski and drink hot chocolate. But now, as we speed on down the endless stretch of interstate, Wyoming and the mountains become *real*.

We slither slowly up the gravel road coiling parallel to the contours of the mountain. The air conditioner is off.

“We don’t want the van to get overheated,” Dave had explained. “No use having car trouble way out here.”

Our windows are rolled down, and the dust from the road hangs in the van, sticking to our eyelashes and coating our teeth with grit. My face is dusty. My hair is crunchy. And I won’t be able to shower for a week.

By the time we finally park and pile out of the van at the foot of a trail, I start to have second thoughts about my decision to join Ashley's family and my friends on this trip; I feel out of place. Backpacking in the mountains is something that outdoorsy people do. Although I have always felt a hollow, forlorn sense of sadness while driving through cities, I have never felt completely at home in nature, either. Its austerity frightens me. I feel disconnected. Detached. Yet, somehow, I know that the root of my disconnection stems from the quintessence of my connections, for I am attached to the very things that detach me from myself, from the world around me. The mountains—so far removed from anywhere, any *thing* that is familiar to me—echo my emptiness and isolation.

My circulation is cut off. Tucking my arms close to my body, I prop my elbows on my hipbones and pull the straps of my thirty-pound backpack away from my shoulders.

"You're going to want to have most of the weight of your pack resting on your hips," Dave had advised as he tightened the hip and shoulder straps of my pack shortly before we began our hike. "Your legs can handle a lot more weight than your shoulders can."

My hips feel bruised, too. I try to look up, to trace the slope of the gently undulating mountains tenderly poking the sky with their peaks, but it's too much effort. Instead, I concentrate on the trail, on my slightly worn hiking boots, on the backpack with legs in front of me. I don't want to stumble, so I keep looking down, taking deliberate steps.

We hike slowly. I want to go faster, though I'm not sure why. We have nothing else to accomplish today except arriving at our campsite. But I'm restless. Why am I not enjoying this? I feel overwhelmed. There's so much to see and so little to do.

After hiking for a few hours, we set up camp on a flat ridge overlooking a narrow stream. I unstrap my pack, lowering myself slowly to a squatting position so I can more easily set it down. Here, barrenness is the basis of beauty. Rocks randomly salt the landscape; trees pepper the peaks. Mountains fade into mountains. The trail disappears as it snakes its way into a grove of trees. The slowly sinking sun wraps the mountains to the west in robes of gold, except where puffy white cumulus clouds cast their shadows.

I guess everything has its dark side.

"*Ain't* no mountain high enough! *Ain't* no valley low enough! *Ain't* no river wide enough! To keep me from you-oo!" my friends sing obnoxiously, making up for their lack of tone quality by executing dramatic arm gestures.

Usually, I would join in on the singing, but my mood is as dreary as the day. After spending the night squished like slices of bread in a four-person tent with five people, I just want to be alone.

I feel alone. I want to be a part of this wilderness, want to swallow the crisp mountain air without losing my breath and dip a bare toe in the stream without hesitation. But, still, I isolate myself; I distance myself from this beauty because I don't know what to do with it.

I think it's because I know that none of it belongs to me, that it will never belong to me, and that even if it did belong to me, I still wouldn't know what to do with it.

We hike past Lake Solitude on our third day. Completely entrenched, the lake devours the trees, mountains, and sky and disgorge them, distorted. Blurry and indistinct, the trees themselves have a sort of water-color appearance to them, like someone dipped a paintbrush in different shades of green and brown and made hasty vertical strokes against the sky. Ashley utters an awed "Wow." The rest of us say nothing.

Nothing needs to be said.

Suddenly, a sense of urgency comes over me. I want to write about this place, or at least tell someone about it. But nothing can describe what I am seeing. To describe it in words would splinter its intrinsic beauty, destroy its evanescence.

"Let's take a picture," someone suggests.

I had thought about that, too. I want to be able to hold this image in my hand and take it home with me. But photographs, like the lake's reflection, don't always replicate reality.

I can't feel my right arm.

I open my eyes, slowly, and roll over. I feel like I'm trapped in a straight-jacket. My sleeping bag strangles my legs as I struggle to free my hand and find the zipper. The warmth of my left hand dissolves as I grab my lifeless limb and shake it, gently at first, then furiously. The early-morning moonlight shining through the kiwi-colored tent casts an eerie glow as I watch my arm flop back and forth, clumsily, like the head of a bobblehead doll.

Lying there, listening to the deep, mellifluous breathing of my four sleeping friends, I feel strangely severed from my own body, a spectator to my own movements.

I grimace. The prickling sensation in my arm is painful, the tingling almost tangible. I knead the numbness concealing my pain, and, gradually, I begin to feel again.

Fully awake now and still suffering from an unexplainable restlessness, I slip on my damp hiking boots and reach over Ashley's sleeping body to unzip the tent, ready to begin my fourth day in the mountains. Shivering, I grab a sweatshirt, hat, and mittens from my pack lying against a rock near the tent.

A flaxen halo illuminates the horizon. I walk to the edge of the ridge and sit down against a large boulder. Tilting my head back, I close my eyes. I love the emptiness of morning. Empty stomach, empty mind. Empty. Lucid. The only time of day I do not feel rushed, like I should be doing more. I open my eyes. The sun ascends between two mountains, a golden host rising from the chalice of a valley. It baptizes me with its warmth.

Our fifth day dawns cool and cloudy. Today we are scheduled to climb over 13,000 feet to the top of Cloud Peak, which, round trip, was to take us eight and a half hours.

“Even though it’s cold, don’t dress too warmly,” Ashley’s uncle’s brother, Jon, had warned. “You don’t want to sweat. Once it cools, you’ll be a lot colder than you were to begin with.”

Jon leads us over a small ridge and points to a distant peak.

“That’s Cloud Peak,” he says, smiling. “Doesn’t look *too* far, does it?”

“Doesn’t look far at all,” my friend, Hannah, smiles back.

I am not so sure. Even though Jon is a cross country coach and my friends and I are all former or present cross country runners, eight and a half hours of constant hiking and rock climbing seems like an arduous and mentally exhausting task.

The first hour and a half is the worst. Knowing that I still have seven hours to go is discouraging. I just want to reach the top of the mountain, and I get frustrated when we stop frequently for breaks. Luckily, Jon is an experienced hiker and knows how important it is to rest. I soon figure it out when the dirt trails disappear, and we begin to scale mammoth-sized boulders.

I can tell my view of myself is changing. I feel tougher, somehow; more resilient. I expertly find footholds and pull myself up boulder after boulder. I feel like Spiderwoman would, if there were such a superhero. There may be less oxygen at 12,000 feet, but I am beginning to feel an inflated sense of spirit. Maybe I am an outdoorsy person.

We are moving more slowly now, but I don’t mind. We’re almost to the top. Ignoring the blister burning on my heels, I hardly even notice the abrasions on my palms from grasping the coarse boulders. I try to savor each step, memorize the feel of the crisp mountain air caressing my cheek with its gentle coolness. After almost four hours of hiking, I have finally discovered a rhythm to my steps. Breathing heavily, I feel the pulse in my palm reverberate against the rocks, almost as though we were one person, the Mountain and me.

Spotting a tiny yellow flag only a few feet up, I realize I have reached the top of the peak. Jon had told us that there was a capsule containing a notebook for people to sign once they arrived at the top. My friends and I, overjoyed that we had accomplished this awesome task, rush over to the yellow flag and pull

the notebook out of the capsule. Waiting while my friends write, I, for once, am content to sit, see, *listen*. I absorb the silence, internalize it. Like the mountain itself, I am completely still. Tacit. Doing nothing at this moment is okay.

Hannah hands me the notebook, and my chilled fingers creak inaudibly as I grasp the pencil. I etch the date and my signature onto the page slowly, deliberately, then write:

“Always remember: it’s not about the destination, but about the journey you took to get there and the people who were there with you every step of the way.”

Placing the notebook back in the capsule, I walk slowly to the edge of the peak, awestruck by what I see. Mountains lie scattered below us, tiny and insignificant, as though a child had scooped up some rocks and placed them in piles at the foot of the mountain. I feel small, unimportant, but not irrelevant. I am a part of this mountain now.

I watch, mesmerized, as clouds eddy like incense out of the valleys in an ethereal mist, as though the mountains were breathing, or sighing deeply. I wonder if I am standing in a cloud. I think I am. I think I am finally connected to these mountains, this wilderness. Myself.

Anne Goedken

Claiming the Ocean

On the costal street in front of me lay the paradox of La Jolla, California. It was the perfect specimen of coastline with its palm trees, oceanic wildlife, sandy beach, and jagged coastline, but also a gross example of overindulgence and commercialism. Multi-million dollar mansions overlooked the ocean from “The Hills,” luxury cars cruised the bustling streets, teenage girls in Chanel sunglasses gossiped at outdoor restaurants, and only the ritziest jewelry and clothing stores lined the picturesque streets. Behind the appearance of perfection in La Jolla is an attitude of entitlement. Residents feel they’re entitled to a certain beach on the shores of their town, but the seals I encountered there have another thing to say about that.

Palm trees stretched taller than buildings. The crowded street wrapped around the Pacific Ocean in La Jolla. Stuck in the “beater Lexus,” I tapped my sequined flip flops in anticipation as we searched for a parking spot. It was my first up-close view of any ocean besides a quick glimpse the day before when our plane flew into the San Diego airport. My boyfriend, Matt, and I had come to southern California for our summer vacation to stay with his aunt and uncle, Rose and Gary, for five days. So far, everything was picture perfect.

The grassy area along the street could have been any park in America. Blankets, coolers, families, couples, sunbathers, and dogs dotted the almost unnaturally green grass. But surfboards and teenagers in wetsuits also sat among the picnickers, making the park distinctive to California. A metal railing divided the grassy area from the sharply sloping and rocky hill leading to the sand beaches below.

“Hopefully we’ll see some seals,” Rose said to interrupt the silent awe in the group. Her impeccable hostess qualities were apparent even here. I got the feeling she would feel like a failure if we didn’t see seals today.

“Seals, really?” I asked, trying to sound mildly interested, still distracted by my surroundings.

“They used to be all over the place down here. I heard the neighbors were complaining about their barking, so they were going to move them,” Rose explained. Sadly, I could believe it. Just across the street were extravagant homes and condos. I had only been in California twenty-four hours, but already the residents’ strategy was obvious – to be as close to the coast as possible. San Diego, including its village of La Jolla and other beach side communities, was

busting at the seams. Homes and condos were built nearly on top of each other, allowing for maximum use of space. But only ten miles inland, the land was barren and undeveloped; it was undesirable to live that far from the ocean. Part of the reasoning was logical – the further inland, the fewer ocean breezes and the hotter and more desert-like conditions. This caused massive traffic congestion as millions of people tried to share land meant for far fewer.

We shunned the steep cement stairs and walked toward the most prominent feature on the beach – a long stone sea wall. From the view above the crashing waves, the Pacific Ocean did not disappoint. I felt so small. Only a worn steel railing separated me from the blue vastness of water and sky. The sea wall jetted out from the rocky coast into the crystal blue waters, making it seem as though I was nowhere near land.

I leaned forward over the railing on the sea wall to examine the small black slimy sea creatures clinging to the rocks below. The view was clear and crisp, but I definitely couldn't say the same for the smell of the ocean. A hint of dead fish hung in the air. I wondered if the mussels on the rocks had any contribution to the putrid smell.

Massive black rocks poked through the ocean's surface away from the coastline. Some were rounded and porous, others were blanketed in soft green moss, and others were larger with more flat surfaces and plateaus. The water around these natural formations turned white as waves that looked small in the distance smashed against the obstacles. The sea wall formed one side of a small cove, creating a small beach secluded from the harsh waves.

* * * *

This beach is formally known as Casa Beach, but it is also referred to as the Children's Pool. Ellen Browning Scripps donated money to build the breakwater, or sea wall, in 1931 to create a safe place for children to swim. However, harbor seals also found the beach an attraction. The beach became a rookery, a place where seals could safely raise their pups each year. By 1997, the beach had to be closed for swimming because of fecal contamination from the seals. A rope barrier was erected and signs were posted to alert visitors of the seals' presence. Casa Beach quickly became a tourist and photography magnet, drawing 80,000 onlookers a month to watch the roughly 200 animals bask on the beach and the largest rock, known as Seal Rock.

* * * *

"Look on the rocks!" Matt's voice cut through the tranquil rhythm of the waves. "Can you see them?"

"What?" I squinted towards the direction of his finger. The salty wind kept pushing strands of my hair over my eyes. I could barely make out the black blobs camouflaged on the similar colored rock. Even though the rock was a distance away, I could see there had to be four, maybe five, seals lounging in the perfect

72 degree California sun. Another one awkwardly flopped up out of the water and onto a flat section of the rock, doing the best it could without any limbs to speak of but fins. They looked somewhat like giant slugs with their slimy skin and solid bodies, but their playfulness made them much more appealing. One peeked his smooth charcoal head out of the water below us and quickly dipped back under, as though playing a game only he could win. His whiskers gave wisdom and character to his otherwise youthful-looking face.

* * * *

In 2004, a group of citizens campaigned for the beach to reopen for swimming. They argued that the original purpose of the beach was for children to swim, and denying them the opportunity was a misuse of Scripps' donation. Some environmentalists and residents also maintained that the contamination from the seals' waste was a potential health hazard, not only to Casa Beach, but to neighboring beaches. On September 12, 2004, not even a year before our patronage to La Jolla, the San Diego City Council voted to remove the rope to allow seals and humans to share the entire beach together. Although swimming is still not recommended, the city of San Diego plans to dredge the sand in the cove. This will drive the seals out of the area and further into the ocean, improving the pollution problem.

Animal activist groups argue that this violates the California Fish and Game Code and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Harbor seals need a safe place to have and raise their pups. A strong wave is all it takes to separate a seal from its pup during the first six to eight crucial weeks. Without the safety of the beach, seals will be forced to give birth to and raise their pups out on Seal Rock or even further out into the Pacific Ocean, greatly increasing the chances of separation and decreasing the survival rate of the pups.

* * * *

I needed to touch the ocean, to have wet sand beneath my toes, to pick up sea shells, and to do the rest of the clichéd ocean activities. A stairway farther back on the sea wall led to the sheltered beach I would later come to know as Casa Beach.

"Can we go down there?" I asked Matt. The sand below was smooth, undisturbed, and devoid of people and animals.

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" He grabbed my hand and we raced down the chipped cement stairs, stopping at the bottom for only a second to discard our flip flops. Matt waded right into the moving mass. Its constant motion was so much different than the lakes and streams I grew up near. I imagined how far out in the nothingness these waves must have started and how long it took them to make it to the spot in front of my feet.

Matt's facial expression tipped me off to the water's chilly temperature. Still, I stuck my big toe in the clear water and suddenly understood why surfers wore wetsuits. How could anyone swim in this water? Gary later told me the

water temperature was about 55 degrees and that about 25 minutes was about as much as most people could take swimming.

Our excursion onto the otherwise deserted beach inspired other tourists. After enlisting a man to take an off-centered picture of us with the ocean as backdrop, we reluctantly joined everyone else back on the sea wall. Time was precious. Rose and Gary told us we needed to leave by 1:30 to avoid rush hour traffic.

* * * *

The results of last year's integration of humans and seals at Casa Beach have been controversial. Groups such as San Diego Animal Activists claim disastrous consequences have occurred. An article on their website offers a two thousand dollar reward to catch two men they say stabbed a baby seal on the beach and then threatened a witnessing couple. The seal died at SeaWorld the next morning. However, of the same situation, police reported a man was seen beating the seal with his baseball hat and throwing the witness' cell phone into the ocean. SeaWorld maintained the seal died from a gill net around its neck. Regardless of the specifics, all sides admit abuse has occurred and more seals have died since the rope came down. The battle for the Children's Pool beach has drawn very bitter battle line between animal activists and the millionaire residents of La Jolla.

* * * *

Back on the sea wall, we snapped pictures of each other and the landscape. Through the viewfinder of Matt's digital camera, I zoomed in on Seal Rock. About fifteen seals were now sprawled out on the rock. A few more swam in the shallow waters around it, their backs arched and tails in the air. Matt nudged me and pointed to the beach below, the spot where we had just left. A curious seal had nudged itself onto the edge of the beach and was staring straight at a family further up on the sand. The child pointed excitedly, probably seeing his first seal outside of a zoo. Beaches in southern California were plentiful, but this was the only place I knew of to watch seals.

I wanted to go back down to the beach for a closer look at the brave seal, but an impatient Gary warned us we were already going to be stuck in traffic. Grudgingly climbing the stairs back to the street, I again noticed the condos stacked on top of each other along the oceanfront. It struck me that these places were the closest available real estate to the ocean; there was nowhere left to build next to the water.

The culture of wealth and excess has spread even more since the rope on the beach came down in La Jolla, California. Urban sprawl has now overflowed into the Pacific Ocean as residents have claimed it for their personal recreational use. After the sand is dredged, the seals will move out, and the people will have an ocean suitable for swimming. There is ninety miles of coastline in San Diego alone. This beach inhabited by seals is a fraction of a mile that residents of La Jolla are not willing to give up. That is, if it was even theirs in the first place.

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Anne Goedken

First Sunrise

“Can’t I just stay at Grandma’s? You guys can go without me,” I suggested helpfully while carrying a burgundy sleeping bag up the dimly lit basement stairs. My whining pleas never landed success, but that didn’t stop me from trying every time the topic of camping came up. Like most ten-year-old girls, I would have much rather escaped the humid July days in Iowa with a visit to the town swimming pool. Melting around a campfire and reeking of bug spray for two days didn’t sound as refreshing. Already wiping the sweat off my forehead with my free hand, I followed Dad out the creaky door on the landing to our driveway.

“Nope. We’re going as a family.” Dad’s stern tone told me I shouldn’t press my luck any further. The box of cooking supplies he carried clanged as he dropped it next to our powder blue Buick. At only ten in the morning, he was already frustrated after spending the better part of an hour clearing a pathway amidst all the Christmas and Easter boxes in the basement. Every summer, the camping supplies stored underneath the basement stairs got a little more difficult to access.

Mom appeared from the kitchen with a grocery box full of camping essentials – pancake mix, marshmallows, bug spray, hot dog buns, peanuts, and Peppermint Schnapps.

“Mom will stay home with me. I know she doesn’t want to go.” Looking back, I realize my mother would have jumped at the chance to sleep on her king sized bed instead of a thin layer of foam, but in the spirit of family bonding, she always sided with Dad.

“You’re going. End of discussion.”

Camping was Dad’s idea of the perfect summer getaway. Mom’s was a Holiday Inn. Did I mention I take after my mother? Every family vacation we took involved at least two nights of camping. Partly to save money by limiting hotel stays, but I think mostly to let Dad torture us. At least we didn’t need the car topper on this particular day for the hour drive from Dyersville to McGregor, Iowa.

Pike’s Peak State Park served as our family’s summer retreat for fifteen years. Sitting high on the bluffs over the Mississippi River in Northeast Iowa, the park is a nature lover’s heaven with plenty of camping, picnic areas, trails,

and views of the river below. We never stayed for more than two nights at a time, but many years we made the trek north multiple times in a summer. Most of my early memories of the place come from the family photo album. There's a shot of me as an infant, perched on a warped picnic table, the dirty brown river winding behind me. The leaves show up as dull shades of fall colors clinging to trees, the image distorted by the cheap Polaroid camera. Mom stands next to me smiling. Long brown hair cascades to her waist. For some reason, my parents thought this place was special enough to take me there before I would ever remember it.

My favorite picture is of me at age four with my dad and brother. It was taken in the same place as the picture with Mom, on the trademark overlook 400 feet above the Mississippi River. But three years later, it appears a small chain link fence was erected to separate the bluffs from the unthinkable fall below. This time it's summer, my two-year-old brother's white short overalls and Dad's yellow polyester shorts presented as evidence. The sunlight squeezes its way through the full, brilliantly green oak trees to cast speckles of light on our faces. The Mississippi looks more blue than brown in this photo, obviously taken earlier in the year and with a much improved 35mm camera.

One of the first memories I have at Pike's Peak without the aid of pictures is of a crisp Sunday afternoon in the early fall when I was six years old. We had packed a picnic snack of hard rolls, wine, and sharp cheddar cheese. I remember the park feeling different than it did on our summer camping outings. The grass crunched instead of bended now. An eerie quiet had fallen over the picnic area, even though plenty of people strolled under the mature trees, which were preparing to hide for another cold Iowa winter. Gone were the rambunctious kids of summer throwing Frisbees around picnicking families. In their place were couples enjoying the fall splendor of the park in silence.

My brother John and I sipped Pepsi from plastic cups, careful to cover the tops with our palms between sips to keep the swarming bees from taking a dip in our soda. Finally tiring of the conversation at the picnic table, four-year-old John received Mom's permission to explore the area more, within a ten-foot radius of our table anyway. He entertained himself, examining each stick in his path, looking for one important enough to keep. Not even two minutes passed before he reappeared at Mom's side, rubbing his eye. A red welt had already developed below his eye, the result of a bee sting. Mom sprung to action, packing up any remnants of food or drink at our table that bees would be attracted to. Her paranoia of bee sting allergies had us back on the road in five minutes.

One early August morning when I was twelve years old, I lay awake in the tent and listened to the chorus of birds practicing their songs even before the sun

was up. I had chosen to go on this camping excursion with Dad and John, but now I was second guessing my change of heart. Intense thunderstorms had kept me wide awake in a state of panic for the previous two hours. My air mattress had partially deflated overnight, leaving my body very little protection from the hard earth. As much as I rolled over and tried to find a comfortable spot, I couldn't tune out the birds that grew louder and more confident in their song by the minute. Unable to sleep, I carefully unzipped my sleeping bag and quietly put shoes on. Dad and John slumbered on the other side of the tent. Their chests rose and fell rhythmically, obviously still asleep. The last hurdle was opening the tent zipper, which I did quickly like ripping off a band-aid.

Outside, the sun had yet to rise, but it was close. Stars were disappearing and the sky was fading from navy to a lighter blue-gray. Something was missing from the smell of wet grass and fresh early morning. This was the first time I had awoken before anyone else. Usually by the time I emerged from the tent, hair matted to my face and eyes struggling to adjust to the blinding sun, Mom and Dad had a pot of coffee on the small gas camping stove. On some mornings, there would also be pancakes and eggs, but in recent years they had been replaced by donuts from the nearest gas station.

I started walking quickly towards the east, where the source of the lightening sky appeared to be. Never before had I witnessed a sunrise and on this day I was going to watch one over the Mississippi River. I reached the overlook with only a few minutes to spare. This, the same overlook featured in my childhood pictures, had changed drastically. A multi-level stone platform was surrounded by a matching railing, a much safer device than the chain link fence to prevent disaster. I had been worried others camping would have the same idea as me, but the entire area above the river was deserted. Standing, arms folded against my body for warmth, I waited. I never even heard the footsteps behind me, only my dad's voice as he approached the overlook.

"Annie, what are you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep," I said, staring straight ahead at the beginnings of orange peeking out behind the trees in Wisconsin.

"Me neither. That storm kept me up. I thought about waking you guys up and getting in the car. I just kept thinking about lightning hitting a tree and knocking it onto the tent. We'd be goners then." My dad was always so optimistic.

"Yeah, it was loud." I wasn't really in the mood for talking; I had been hoping to watch my first sunrise in peace.

"I heard you get up. Thought you were going to the bathroom. But when you didn't come back, I figured I better find you. You never know what kinda crazies are out at this hour."

"Daaaad," I groaned. "I'm fine."

“I know.” Later, we’d recount this story on holidays, laughing about how tired Dad was from having been up worrying about the storm all night. He had just gotten to sleep when he heard me getting out of the tent. Despite his exhaustion, he followed me to the river to protect me from “crazies.” He never stopped worrying, even after that morning.

In silence, we watched the sky grow orange. From the minute the first sliver of sun snuck out from behind the trees, the whole world was bathed in a soft glow. The glow became more brilliant with every inch of sun that appeared. Even the mud brown water of the Mississippi shimmered like gold. After the sun had taken its usual place a little higher in the sky, the glow faded; my eyes had become used to the light.

“Gonna go back to bed now?” Dad asked, probably anxious to catch some sleep himself.

“Nah, I think I’m going to take a walk,” I said, captivated by the wonders of early morning. My dad probably wondered what had come over me. They usually had to drag me on hikes. He walked with me through the park, apprehensive about leaving me alone in the early hour. By the time we arrived back at camp at eight, we had spotted seven deer, also just beginning their day.

The morning of my first sunrise is the last time I visited Pike’s Peak, with my family or otherwise. Every couple of years, my parents still go there to watch the leaves turn, but these days, they prefer the shorter drive to the river town of Guttenberg. Someday, I’ll go back to rediscover the beauty of the fall colors and maybe even another sunrise. I might even take my own kids to Pike’s Peak, despite their protests, to show them what nature has to offer. I’m glad

Pheasants In the Mist

The October sky darkens and melts into the horizon, hovering, briefly, between shades of cobalt blue and gray. Barren fields, pocked and ridged like a nuclear wasteland, stretch out on either side of the truck as we speed through the twilight, tires singing on the four-lane highway.

In the dim truck cab, I peer closely at the map.

“The Wahpeton exit should be the next one,” I announce to my husband, Bob. “We get off there, and then we head west, pass through three little towns, and follow Jerry’s map to their place. Won’t be long now.”

After ten hours on the road, Bob hunches over the wheel, squinting for the green exit sign, relief on his face. Our destination is close.

But Jerry had neglected to tell us that the “towns” comprise a stretch of another fifty miles of North Dakota landscape. Heading west now, this land is different. Rolling prairie on either side is intersected at regular intervals by long tree lines that run perpendicular to the road – windbreaks bending eastward, but refusing to break under the relentless Dakota west winds. Water mirrors the slate sky – small ponds, larger waterways, and immense lakes – incongruous and everywhere. A Northerner by birth, I expect lakes to be anchored by long stretches of sandy beach dotted with stones and driftwood, cradled by tall pines. Here, prairie meets and meshes with lake with no introduction, no small talk. An outsider might be walking along in the field and with his next step find himself immersed in water – water that has risen up, level with the prairie, right before his eyes.

We coast slowly into Wyndmere, the last dusty town on our map. A tavern, feed store, and gas station cluster around the T of its main road and the highway. We decide to call Jerry and give him our whereabouts, in case we get lost in this strange land – sucked into a waterway or simply driving endlessly west, unable to find more civilization. Having no cell phone of our own, we notice, with sinking hearts, that the ancient payphone outside the tavern parking lot is swinging, back and forth, from its base. Inside, friendly tavern folk assure us that the map is accurate and we’ll have no problem. You’re not far away now, they tell us. They return to their beers, smiling through a haze of blue smoke and country music.

Bumping along the gravel road, heading south now, we clock the miles on the odometer until we should, according to the map, come to the next gravel

road. These roads have no markings, no signs. Along here, the water meets the road frequently – comes right up to the very edge, with no shoulder, no incline, to warn unsuspecting night travelers with bad eyes. I tense up with anxiety. Any moment we could pass from gravel to water, from life to death.

“I think we’ve gone too far. Maybe we’re lost.” I lean over, trying to see the odometer.

Bob is unconcerned.

“Nah, we’re doing fine. And we can just stop and ask someone if we need to.”

I look at him, hard.

“Do you *see* anyone, anywhere, that we could stop and ask?”

We drive on in silence, surrounded by darkness, the truck headlights our only beacon in the encroaching fog. Tires crunch as we make the last turn, and finally, in the distance, we see it.

Rising like a giant phoenix in the night, amidst five thousand acres of Dakota prairie, the three-story Victorian house welcomes us with lights ablaze. Our hosts are silhouetted in the warm glow, standing at the back porch, door ajar as they look out into the darkness.

Deerfield Farms is a game preserve, owned and operated by our friends, Jerry and Sandy, who live in Wahpeton, North Dakota, for part of the year and spend the remainder of it here at the preserve. Their business—construction and land development—fits neatly with their dream of restoration and preservation.

Our dogs groan and stir when the truck comes to a halt. Their last pit stop was several hours ago, and they bound out of their crates, albeit stiffly, and circle the damp grass, squatting with relief. They stretch, then run about, and suddenly stop, noses uplifted, twitching, in the heavy, wet night air. One step, then another...they freeze...trembling with excitement.

This is pheasant country.

In the fall, the smell of burning leaves heralds the harvest. Folks hustle about, choosing pumpkins and apples for pies and cider, and gathering cornstalks, straw bales, and Indian corn to decorate their yards. Kids get ready for Halloween, and woodpiles are stacked high for winter fires. Storm windows are put on. Hatches battened down. Folks draw together, and gather at autumn bonfires, toasting the harvest, pressing close for warmth and reassurance.

There is another fall ritual. One that begins much earlier in the year. The bird hunter polishes his shotgun, oils his boots, conditions his dog with exercise. Conditions himself. In the evening, after a long day at work, he sits in the armchair, the dog at his feet, dreaming of the fall hunt as he pages through his bird dog magazine.

We train pointing dogs for a living, here at our kennels in northeastern Iowa, and are well acquainted with this ritual of fall—this rite of passage, often passed on from father to son. Over the years, some great hunting dogs and many interesting folks have entered our lives—among them, Jerry and Sandy.

Deerfield Farms is their dream realized.

The sprawling Victorian farmhouse sat on a desolate tract of land several miles away—empty and neglected, nursing memories of years past. With the “good bones” necessary for successful renovation, the house was resurrected, moved to its present location, and set on a new foundation—where it breathes renewed life from the painstaking, loving restoration it has undergone.

Inside, we tour the rooms decorated in Victorian flavor, rooms that whisper of days gone by, ghosts smiling in the corners, nodding approval at our awe. We have our choice of seven bedrooms, each a welcoming, cozy combination of patchwork quilts, soft colors, and antique furniture. Our bathroom, across the hall, features a clawfoot tub and a toilet with an overhead tank and pull chain. After a late supper, we settle in our room, the North Dakota wind whispering, gently tonight, at the windows.

In the morning our indoor tour concludes with a look at our hosts’ bedroom, occupying the entire third floor, with window seats for dreaming nestled into secret dormers that overlook the endless prairie. But we have not seen it all.

“Look at this.” Jerry is beaming as he pulls down a handsomely crafted wood staircase from the ceiling. We look up. Above us is a tower, surrounded by glass windows—a “widow’s walk.”

“Go on, go on...” He nearly pushes us up the stairs, one by one.

The four of us fit comfortably into the square walkway above, careful to avoid the space open to the stairway. The view leaves us silent.

The land goes on forever. In all directions. An L-shaped stand of young pines shields the house on its two sides that face the corner, bordered by two gravel roads. The long driveway runs along the third side of the house, and beyond the drive a field of standing yellow corn, brittle now, rustles in the wind. An expanse of faded, brown switchgrass butts up against the cornfield, and, beyond the fields of dying grass, a random cluster of trees gather. Directly behind the house, in the cleared lawn area, sits an old smallish schoolhouse, soon to be converted into a dog kennel for future guests’ hunting dogs. To its left stands an odd little metal building, an old bank, also moved here by our enterprising host—destined to be a bunkhouse for those who can’t bear to sleep without their hunting dogs close by. Just beyond the smaller buildings, an opaque pond rises from a fringe of swamp grass, an oasis for dogs to cool and clean off in between hunts. Pastureland abuts the pond’s swamp grass on three sides and sweeps in a grand gesture far back to the windbreak rows that begin the long dissections of the bean fields.

Off to the west is a tree stand, or more accurately, a lookout house—high up in the huge, lone tree that has divided at its base and become not one, but several, towering trunks. A family of trees now, reaching skyward, supporting the stand in their close embrace. Both the stand and the tower that we occupy contain telescopes, Jerry tells us.

But what would one look for in this sea of grass? I wonder out loud.

“Antlers,” Jerry answers. “When the buck stands up, his antlers will appear above the grass.”

Of course. We are, after all, at *Deerfield Farms*.

But we are bird hunters, not deer hunters. What’s more, we are bird dog trainers. For us, it is about seeing the dogs working a bird in the field, doing what they love and have been bred to do—not how many birds we can bag.

Earlier that morning, before anyone else rises, I go out to care for our dogs, moving slowly through the dense fog. The roosters start to cackle, heralding the approaching dawn. They taunt the dogs—a cackle here in one direction, a cackle over there in another. No matter, the dogs don’t hunt with their eyes and ears...the roosters should fear the dogs’ noses, from which no secrets can be kept.

Inside, I sit down in the back hallway with our hosts’ dogs—the “Spice Girls”—Cayenne, Pepper and Cinnamon. Cayenne spent two summers in training at our kennel. She wriggles in my lap, vying for attention – her dark eyes crackling with anticipation. Like our dogs, she is a flashy white German Shorthaired Pointer, sprinkled with spots and patches the color of dark liver. Pepper, cloudy eyes and graying muzzle belying her years, is the matriarch. Next to her, a chunky, golden brown Labrador retriever, Cinnamon, stands out from the group—a bull in the china shop. Like an awkward, overweight girl, she is anxious to please, and captivates me with her enormous brown eyes. They are bottomless, ringed with black, as though she has put on morning eyeliner.

After coffee and a light breakfast, we get ready for our morning hunt. Unseasonably warm for late October means shirtsleeves, maybe a sweatshirt, under our hunting vests. The fog has risen, absorbing into the wet blanket of gray overhead. Breezy and warm, droplets spatter our faces, threatening rain, and the vistas in the distance fade into a haze. Ethereal and damp—weather fitting for a setting in a gloomy English novel—not the weather we’d hoped for.

Hunting pheasants in the mist.

“The birds won’t fly today, not in this weather.” Jerry voiced our disappointment with his prediction. “They’ll sit tight, or run.”

We set out with the dogs. Overwound alarm clocks, they’re ready to explode. They shoot out into the field, gears in overdrive. We head past the pond and through the pasture, to the bean fields beyond. Harvested now, these

fields make for easy walking, stripped beanstalks littered across the black earth like corpses. Every three hundred yards or so, the fields are bisected by the long stands of trees, the windbreaks—called “belts” by the Dakotans. These belts are about fifty feet wide with dense undergrowth and grassy cover bedded around the trees, and they stretch for miles in either direction, as far as the bean fields go.

We separate, but stay within sight of each other. Jerry and Bob are on one side of the belt; I am walking the other side. Far ahead, the dogs course back and forth, intermittent flashes of white and liver.

Point!

My dog, Schatzie, is motionless—tail pointing upward, ramrod stiff—her little body still, quivering imperceptibly. All that moves is her dark eyes, as she watches me circle around her and walk into the cover in front of her. Here he is, she seems to say, as her eyes flicker from me to some unseen spot, and back to me again. Flicker...and back...slowly I kick the brush, my little 20-gauge ready – held upright in both hands, safety off.

Whoosh!

Up goes the rooster, cackling wildly.

Boom!

Folding, the bird falls, heavily, a flash of brilliant crimson, green, and golden brown. The bird is retrieved and tucked into my vest. A lucky shot, for me.

We walk on in the mist. The men take the next two roosters, in the same manner. By lunchtime, we have our limit and head back to the farmhouse.

This Dakota is not like its sister, South Dakota. There, the pheasants congregate in groups of hundreds. They are everywhere. They will blow the dogs’ minds with their sheer numbers. Hunters, like the birds, flock in droves to South Dakota, ready for the slaughter. Some hunt in drive hunts—men will spread out in a line and walk, “driving” the birds to the other end of the field, where shooters are stationed, with waiting guns. This hunting is not for us.

Watch a pointing dog hunt, using his nose and the wind to search for the bird. Watch him slow...stop...freeze, motionless—if the bird sits tight for him. Watch the hunter come slowly around, kicking the cover and flushing the rooster. Watch the clean shot, the drop and the retrieve. Stand back, relax, and take pleasure in a good dog. Shoot what you will eat, and no more. This is hunting.

The afternoon finds us exploring across the gravel road, in the prairie to the west, where the deer stand beckons. Jerry insists that we climb up there, as well. Like the widow’s walk, this stand is surrounded by glass, but its windows slide open, to allow a rifle to slip noiselessly through. It seems higher to me than the

tower. The wind, stronger now, whistles below, above, and around the stand. But it is a fortress within—containing a heater, chairs, even a couch to lie on, should one get tired of the endless vista.

A spot of white winks in the distance, through the swaying prairie grass. I point it out to Jerry.

“It’s a grave.”

“A *grave*?”

“Yup,” he answers, enjoying our disbelief. He tells us, then, of Claudine Wilson, whose family used to own this land, years ago. As a child and a young woman, she spent many hours sitting beneath these strong limbs that now hold the stand—perhaps it was just one tree then, before it divided and multiplied.

We descend from the stand and head to the grave to see for ourselves. A lone white cross rises from the yellow-brown grass. Her name is inscribed in black letters. I look at the tree, in the distance, and back at the cross. Then around me, slowly, at this lonesome land. Its emptiness would drive, has driven, some people mad. But for Claudine, the winds that whistle through the prairie grass, that bend the belt lines, and dart around loose windows, whining in the night—these winds must have whispered *home* to her, deep inside. For in her seventies, when she died, this is where she wanted to return.

“Yup,” Jerry is saying, looking back at us with one arm slung over the seat—the other carelessly draped over the steering wheel—as he races through the pitch black night, a driving rain slashing sideways across the glow of the headlights.

“Yup, more people move out of North Dakota than into it. And most of the people that are here are in Fargo or Bismarck.”

In the back seat, I close my eyes, cringing, hoping he will look back at the road soon. We have been driving for hours, it seems, at breakneck speed through this sideways downpour. We are treating our hosts to dinner—a small gesture in return for their hospitality.

“Pick someplace special,” we say earlier. “The nicest supper club around.”

Finally we arrive at a town, and Jerry careens into a parking lot next to a big shed. By the time we run to the door, we are soaked. Inside, we see Indian blankets, hides and stuffed game animals arranged against the backdrop of dark, muddy-looking log walls. No one is dressed up—plaid shirts and boots seem to be the required dress. Heavy-set waitresses smoke behind the counter, and then swing out and around to their tables, smiling genially and greeting folks by name. We order steaks and fish. I ask for coffee to ward off the chill, but I don’t drink it when it arrives, bitter and oily and speckled.

Later that night, we draw our patchwork quilt over us, the lamp on the nightstand dim in the creamy blue room. We munch on Tums from my purse, and giggle over our dinner at the best supper club around. The rain has stopped, and the wind is quiet now, resting. The fog has returned.

Tomorrow will be another day of hunting pheasants in the mist—in this large, lonely place called North Dakota. Our hosts are upset that the weather isn't better. They tell us that we can't properly appreciate this place without a clear October sky and a snap of chill in the air.

But they're wrong.

This wild and desolate country has taken hold inside of us. The people are few but without pretense. The land has a pull all its own.

Walk with me, whispers the wind. Walk over this prairie and look. Listen. Feel.

Come back.

Like Claudine, we will.

Robin Kennicker

Revisiting Life

I hate dusting. No one ever says, “Wow! What a particle-free Television” or “Gosh, that entertainment center could pass a white glove test.” As much as cleaning is unnoticed, filth is condemned. I knew when Wesley, my son’s good-time teenage friend, examined one of my picture frames smirking, “A little dusty, huh?” I could no longer continue in dust denial. Nothing ignites ambition like raw truth and, I vowed vengeance on the little lying particles for betraying me a lazy housekeeper.

Surveying my living room, I realize my dusting job has grown in recent years from simple to complex. Picture frames have accumulated on every wall and shelf, differing in age, material, and condition. Some of the frames are simple in construction with a square metal design, others a complex boast of scrolling flower borders and shiny thick brass sides. A few years ago, I promised my husband that I would quit purchasing frames once all my crucial photos were displayed. But where does one draw the line of cruciality? My “line of cruciality” has been redrawn, rethought, as my awareness of a photo’s significance has grown, partially I admit because of my profession as a photographer. Photographs record an existence, lock time by defying change, and trace a life in a way that words can never describe. All my photos seem crucial, and my old cardboard storage box overflows with ones yet to be framed.

Starting my cleaning, I carefully grab from the shelf a frame that hinges together three separate 4x6 snapshots. Time seems suspended. I hold it and gaze into the faces so gently preserved by the frame and savor the reconnection, as my fingertips linger the cleaning process, revisiting the past. These three pictures, taken it seems but yesterday, overpower me with emotions of joy, happiness, and sadness. How could time have passed so quickly? The girls were then just three years old, my daughter Raven and her first cousin Melody.

My baby sister, Lenora, was thirteen when she snapped them with one of those cheap self-winding cameras. Lenora had not planned to take the pictures, but couldn’t resist after watching the girls at play out the back yard window. The pictures, un-posed and natural, put shame to anything I have accomplished as a professional studio photographer. Most of my customers tend to want their children to smile perfectly un-faked smiles, in front of a fake background while looking directly into the camera, and sitting perfectly still. Although this type of photograph looks great visually, I cannot help but wonder if something isn’t lost.

As I hold the photos, I am impressed at thirteen-year-old Lenora's photographic artistry. Clearly, these three photographs were taken within minutes of each other; they connect with the same clover field background and lighting, and together form a scene of childhood innocence. The first picture side views Raven and Melody holding hands with raised legs, as the camera has stopped their skipping in action. With mouths agape, both girls give sound to an otherwise muted photo. I have often imagined them singing something like "Ring around the Rosie," but cannot be sure as to what the song actually was, because I was not physically there.

In the second photograph, both girls are hugging, arms wrapped in embrace. They have turned slightly from their previous position and Raven's back is towards the camera, hair flowing down, topped with a pink-yarned bow. With arms squeezing Raven, Melody's face is fully shown with an illuminated smile. She looks like an angel with her cascading blond curls and expression of joy.

The third photograph captures their surprised faces at realizing they were not alone. Both girls gawk facing the camera, wide-eyed but still holding hands lovingly. After close examination, I have noticed that both of them have dirt-smudged noses and cheeks. Their clothes verbalize the enjoyment of, perhaps, "All fall down." Although it is not the most visually perfect photo, I would never change it, never touch it up.

These three photos can never be retaken, their innocence remains unmatched, and their beauty, timeless. They document from the beginning the sisterly love shared between Raven, my only daughter, and Melody. They shared their lives, their hopes and their dreams with the hours spent in one another's company. They were as inseparable as bread and butter.

Normally cousins don't spend a great deal of time together, but because my sister, Renee, lived in a small apartment in town, Melody spent many weeks of summer at our farmhouse. Kids love the country; they love to run where the only thing moving is an occasional tractor. If the two weren't outside, they could easily be found upstairs engaged in a "Barbie" conversation. Melody usually brought a suitcase of her own Barbie dolls that included Skipper, babies, and of course, Ken. The two of them spent hours engaged in their make-believe world. Sometimes, I would sneak up to check on them and just sit to listen.

"Raven, you can't do that."

"But Melody, why not?"

"Because you just can't."

"I am going to any way, Melody, so too bad."

Their emerging dispositions were revealed in conversation. Melody always wanted to play everything exactly by the rules and Raven always wanted to break them.

Funny how some things never change. I will never forget the Christmas of that same year when the girls were three. They were both spiffed up in their holiday dresses playing “dollies” in Lenora’s room. When Lenora discovered them there, she inquired sternly, “Girls, what are you doing in here? This is my room.”

“Were playing dollies,” Raven bluntly replied.

“Well, you have to get out now; you are making my room a mess.”

Raven kept on playing, ignoring her presence while bouncing her dollie up and down on her bed while Melody just stood there watching bug-eyed.

“I said, get out!”

“No, I think I’ll hit you with my dollie!”

So young and yet so determined, she juttied out her chin, holding her ground against a teenager twice her size as if she actually expected to win. Lenora gave her a push towards the door, never expecting a three-year-old attack, but Raven quickly spun around in defiance, raised dollie above her head, and started swinging it furiously like a bat. Lenora instantly crouched to the floor in defense, covering her face with her arms. The whole scene reminded me of a little kitten attacking a dog. After I grabbed Dollie from Raven, I helped a Lenora up off the floor.

“Raven, you can’t hit your aunt Lenora. You’re not supposed to hit anyone,” I explained

“Me and Melody were only playing dollies, Mom.”

“Still, you’re not supposed to hit.”

“But I told her, Mom, that I was gonna.”

“Raven, time-out and into the corner.”

Later when the two girls resumed their play, I overheard Melody say, “It’s bad to hit, Raven.” With the girls removed from earshot, Lenora even laughed at the sheer comedy of crouching from a three year-old and quickly forgave her adorable niece Raven.

Both girls were different and yet so dependent on one another. The three photographs remind me of this fact with their adjoined in hands signifying their dependence on one another but different and unique in facial appearance. They also differed in personality as Melody served as conscience to Raven and Raven served as Melody’s strength. Together they balanced and could survive anything, even Grandma’s geese.

During the same year the photos were taken, my mother decided to add a touch of authenticity to her ten-acre hobby farm by adding some live geese. Little goslings sure are cute and fun to raise, but the drawback is that they grow up. I am convinced that these geese were in-bred with attack dogs, mean, and evil honking creatures that would chase anyone or anything that entered their backyard domain. Many times, I had to defend myself by swinging my leg at them. One afternoon, during a visit to Grandma’s, the girls decided to venture out the back door, forgetting. I immediately jumped up from the table to the

backyard window, when I heard terrorized screams and saw Melody standing up on the hill with her hands covering her face and Raven running, shouting, “Run, Melody, run, run, run, run!” Grandma flew out the door ahead of me to save Melody, who was still standing on the hill screaming from the pecks to her arms and legs by the vicious creatures. Afterward, Grandma decided to make stew of the geese, and Melody eventually recovered.

All these memories from three little snap shots. Just a month ago, I had them copied for my dad as a special birthday present, just for him. He loved them and thanked me for the portraits of his two precious granddaughters, the way they were, and the way he will always remember them. Raven doesn’t have many pictures of the both of them together, so I thought I’d make her a copy also. I inserted them into bright golden frames, to protect and to honor. She thanked me quietly while tucking the 8x10’s away into the corner, behind the glass in her entertainment center. Maybe I should have waited; maybe I should have kept them for her. Melody’s death is still too painful. We can’t even talk about her without crying, I should have known.

I know it is inevitable that someday, somehow, everyone will return to the ash or dust from which the Bible says we came from. Though I know this, Melody’s death still haunts my dreams, happening but a few months ago and will always remain as an “it didn’t have to happen,” in my mind. She was so young, just nineteen years old. I had always taken for granted that I could just pull out some more pictures from my box and insert them into my frame collection. Forever will I cherish these three photographs, but I cannot deny both the joy and the pain they bring. Placing the cleaned frame and sparkling photo back in its place of honor, I return from the memory. Thankful that they were taken, only sorrowfully wishing there were more. But one never really knows when the supply will end.

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