

# Once Upon a Story

Short Fiction Anthology

Stories to inspire and intrigue you

# **Once Upon A Story**

## **A Short Fiction Anthology**

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**The Husked Heart**  
**By Kasey Anderson**  
**(from Salt Lake City, Utah)**



When Jerry parked at Castle Rock and stepped outside his car, his heart caught inside his chest. It was as if the landscape knew he was leaving and had written a love letter on its shores.

He reached into his backpack and took out a Polaroid camera with a pinkish hue, smiling. He remembered when George, his best friend, had demonstrated how the camera worked. Jerry hadn't been able to hide his amazement when he saw the pictures develop after half an hour.

"You look like I'm holding a gemstone, not a photograph," George had said, laughing. He pointed to the camera. "You can keep it if you like."

Jerry shook his head, eyes wide. "I couldn't."

"I was going to throw it away anyway. I have no idea where you'd even get film for it."

Amazon, of course. The answer was always Amazon. Jerry's love for the Polaroid had cost him a fair bit of money over the years, but it was worth it. Some things you just couldn't buy. Jerry clutched the camera as tightly as he had back when George had given it to him and swallowed a lump in his throat.

He framed his picture carefully, noting each element. The moonlight painting the ocean in strokes of shining silver. The curved arch of Bixby Creek Bridge. The glinting flashes of headlights in the distance. The stars, bright pinpoints against the dark blue sky. And, finally, the cliffs that seemed to him to bow down, arms outstretched into the ocean.

Finished snapping his photos, he put them in the black plastic bag he kept for developing. He shoved the developing bag and his phone inside his waterproof backpack and zipped it up.

Jerry walked the edge of the cliff, glancing down at the rocks as he went. It took a while, but, finally, he found a safe place. He secured the backpack carefully on his back then checked around for cars. He backed up a good distance and took a running leap over the cliff's edge.

The water impacted hard against his skin and enveloped him, warm even in the dead of night. He swam up to the surface, taking a deep breath before beginning to tackle the water one long stroke at a time. Diving under the waves when necessary, he took occasional breaks to tread water, marveling at the blue-black sky.

A few miles from shore, out in the depths of the ocean where the waves softened from their controlling rage, the swimmer turned on his back, letting his surroundings envelop him with their love one last time.

If he didn't do what he had to do now, he never would. Finally resigned to accepting his situation, he closed his eyes and thought to himself, *Open*.

The chest of the man everyone thought of as Jerry split into opening doors. A long, brightly colored cocoon pulsed inside, its body white with orange and black stripes swirling around it. The pulsing mass began at the bottom of the neck of its human-shaped husk and stretched into the husk's right leg.

Connected to the cocoon were dozens of wires that extended up into the husk's neck. The wires connected to a brain-shaped control center.

Jerry had seen some of the brains. They varied in colors, in shades of blues, greens, and purples. On his home planet, Jerry's creators had taken naturally-occurring, brain-shaped coral and genetically grown a neural network within it. The creators had experimented with connecting their planet's flying sea slugs with their newly engineered minds, hoping to grant them the gift of consciousness.

Jerry—equal parts husk, equal parts slimy cocoon—was the result.

*Detach*, thought Jerry, and the wires at the neck loosened themselves from him. He slid his head out from the husk and bent toward the sky. The husk was confining and uncomfortable, and he looked forward to the freedom of movement.

Even more than that, he relished the freedom of thought. Life was so *uncomfortable* as a human.

Always thinking, always feeling, even when they were asleep.

Separated from the husk, Jerry was free to ignore complex thought. There was no language within his species, and it was only with the help of the husk's expanded mind that he could think with words rather than emotive images.

When he was a human-husk hybrid, he had responsibilities. He had a purpose: observe and write reports, then send them back to his creators. At the moment, however, he didn't have the capacity to recognize that he had a job at all. His creators had stuck an implant in him that would give him the instinct to return to his ship when it was time to leave.

At the moment, he only wanted to say goodbye to the last creatures he'd connected with. Dropping into the water like a snake and unfolding two half-circular flaps, he spread out like a pancake, revealing two little orange horns on both sides of his head. Unlike the sea slugs of Earth, however, the alien had two comically large eyes that saw the world in technicolor splendor. As he moved, it seemed like he flew through the water, swirling his flaps in and out with all the grace of a flamenco dancer moving her dress.

Free of its occupant, Jerry's husk closed its chest cavity and dipped under the waves, surging forward to meet the ship. For a few blissful hours, Jerry was free.

Castle Rock was a seven-hour drive from where he'd lived for the past two decades, but Jerry came here nearly every holiday. He didn't want these private, transcendental times out in the Californian ocean to end. In the years since his creators had awakened him, the boundaries of his heart had expanded in ways he hadn't possessed the capacity to understand before. Now his heart hurt, *physically* hurt, as if it had actually grown larger and now threatened his very existence.

Jerry tried to corner off his sadness and instead focused on finding the manta rays he sought. Within half an hour, he found them—fifteen of them in total. He swirled his wings around him rapidly to catch up. When he did, he traversed above and below them, then swam laps around them.

The gliding movements of the gentle giants filled him with awe and wonder. He felt a special kinship with the manta rays—they glided through the water in a way he felt was quite similar to his own. His favorite parts about them weren't their similarities, however; it was their differences, the way the manta rays could leap out of the water, flapping their "wings" in the air.

Jerry caught up with one of the creatures and latched on top of it with the grip strength of his underside. The sheer size of the manta rays always shocked him. They were around twice as big as he was. He'd looked up their wingspan once—it was an average of eight meters or twenty-two feet. Longer than three average-sized men.

The gentle manta ray didn't really seem to mind that Jerry was on its back. It simply carried on with its business, flying out of the water with its waving wings. Jerry clung on as hard as he could, managing to cling to the back of the creature.

As they flew, sea wind whooshed over his body, producing a pleasant chill and a lurch in his stomach. He liked the feeling of flight, the rush of sudden terror. It wasn't quite as exciting as a roller coaster, but it was certainly cheaper.

He felt the urge then, the urge that told him to go back to the ship. He tried saying goodbye to the manta rays the way his friends back home said goodbye—a repeated undulation of his body like a snake. Of course, the creatures did not understand his communication, and he had an image in his mind of them swimming on without him.

It took about an hour to reach the ship, and by then sunrise had painted its first brushstrokes. His last sunrise. Jerry paused to watch it until he could no longer resist the urge to return to the ship.

The ship finally came into view—a huge, horizontal mass bobbing underwater. All around him, his fellow spies swam toward the ship, elegantly parting the water. A hundred of them swam all at once, en masse, like underwater dancers clad in brightly-colored dresses.

When they approached, the ship's doors opened. Jerry started swimming down the corridor where he knew the husk he had sent earlier would be. As he swam, the water levels started falling. Jerry found his husk seated neatly on a waterproof seat, and as the water levels settled right beneath its opening, Jerry slid inside where he was supposed to fit.

The wires connected automatically to his head, and the troubles of consciousness started to haunt him again. It would be a while before the ship took off, so he retrieved the waterproof backpack from under the seat where the husk had stowed it.

He took the Polaroid camera out of his bag once more, hugging it to his chest. No more banter with George. No more teasing each other over girls or, in Jerry's case, the lack thereof. They could call each other over Skype, maybe, but it wouldn't be the same. He didn't even know where his next assignment would take him. Would he be close enough to visit?

Jerry took the black photo bag gingerly out of the backpack and wondered with some irritation when they would drain the rest of the ship. His butterfingers tendency made him nervous.

*Just have to be careful then.* He took out one photo at a time. George headbutting a goat. No. Jerry put that one away. He could only handle so much George-based grief at the moment.

He sniggered as he looked at the next photo showing a snoring Elizabeth getting her hair chewed on by a goat. Snooty old Lizzie, who hated being called Lizzie, thought she'd been born in the wrong time, and considered it quite possible she was the reincarnation of a Southern belle but drank like a sailor. She'd be quite the force to reckon with when she woke up and discovered a tattered sleeve and goat spittle in her braids.

The next photo hit him with unexpected longing. They'd decorated the barn with Christmas lights, colored tissue paper, and rented one of those laser light balls that had always fascinated Jerry.

"We'll Miss You, Jerry," the giant banner read. "Good Luck in New York."

He had no idea where he was going, of course, but it was safer for them to think he couldn't contact them, then claim he'd been transferred again in a few months.

The next photo slipped into his hands without him really thinking about it. His mouth twitched uncomfortably as he saw it. Grace. A slender, pale woman with short blonde hair and a white blanket wrapped around her.

*Should I have done more for her?* Jerry thought. *Or rather, should I have done anything for her?*

Inaction had perhaps been excusable when he'd first arrived and had no knowledge of human customs. He'd seen the giant bluish-blackish marks on her skin and had to Google what they were. The alien had had an inkling that human beings weren't supposed to go around with softball-sized bruises, but, instead, he'd confronted some of the women about it.

"Oh, we've told her to leave that sad sack a *million* times," Lizzie had said. "She just does *not* listen."

"Isn't this what police are for?" Jerry asked.

The three women looked at him, horrified. "We'd never interfere with someone's life like that," Pam said. "She's an *adult*. If she wants out of the situation, she can get out of it herself. No one's forcing her to be with Brian."

And so, Jerry had just watched. He stood by while Grace's husband showed up to every social function raving drunk. He watched as Brian forced Grace to drive. He watched as Brian belittled her. He watched as Brian slapped her across the face.

This picture represented the kindest thing Jerry had ever done for Grace Alburn. She too had a chewed-on sleeve, only this time the ripped fabric revealed a fresh bruise that covered her entire shoulder. Jerry had covered her with the itchy blanket to hide the bruise. Even then, that had been more for his benefit than hers. A way to remember Grace with lies.

He shoved the photographs back in the bag. The sooner he forgot the memories of that goodbye party, the better. Forgetting was what was best for everyone.

Easier said than done. The night played like a motion picture in his mind. There had been

some pretty good rolls in the hay—actual splitting of hay bales and tossing them down from the loft, not the raunchy counterpart. They had thrown hay around at each other, laughing and shoving, falling and rolling around, snorting with laughter. One of the little rapscaillon children somehow managed to let all the goats out, so they became part of the fun, too.

The memories burned in Jerry's mind. He shook his head, trying to will them away. Perhaps older memories would hurt less. He took out his sketchbook and toyed with the idea of taking out his colored charcoal before deciding against it. Instead, he opened the book to a page in the middle: his last memory before waking up in the husk.

A giant drill ripped rapidly through layers of ice. What the sketch *couldn't* show were the tremors and the fear. He and his underwater species had heard the drill, *felt* it, before ever seeing it. Most of them had run, but Jerry had remained still, transfixed. He would learn later that they'd been encased by a thick layer of ice the entire time. Before that moment, he had never imagined a world above them. His underwater world was all there was, and the revelation that something was above them represented the end of that world.

When he woke up, he was already on a ship to Earth. There was no chance – no point – in rebellion. His memories were a jumbled cluster of events that didn't connect. It was as if someone had cracked his head open and started making scrambled eggs.

Their teachers were human-husk hybrids who had been kidnapped and “civilized” much earlier. They taught many lessons. Reading and writing came first.

Jerry and the others struggled at first. Interfacing with the husk was a constant, splitting headache. They all stumbled around, trying to deal with their large, lumbering bodies. Learning to crawl, learning to interpret and make sounds, then later learning to decipher the strange markings on paper they would later come to know as words. They'd hurtled on their voyage to Earth for ten years, learning to be the perfect humans.

But those weren't the only lessons. The most important lesson was obedience. The more experienced husks weren't just there to teach. They were there to watch. And if any of Jerry's generation got out of line, they were there to kill.

The first lesson on killing had swiftly followed the lessons on language.

The self-titled Major Lurch paced up and down the corridor. “Don't think that just because our *insides* are the same that *we* are the same,” the man said. “My slug-like interior doesn't count for more than internal organs. Without my husk, I am a *beast*. An animal. Fit only for dinner.

“Our creators have raised us to greater heights. Be grateful. Be grateful for your work, you worthless slugs. Because if you aren't—” He cut off his speech and looked at a male husk that didn't seem to be paying attention. “Open,” the Major said.

The man's chest opened and Jerry could feel the slug's fear emanating from him. The Major didn't bother to say, “Detach.” Instead, he ripped the pinkish, orangish slug out from the husk, leaving little pieces still dangling from the wires. He held the squirming slug in his right hand and, with brutal swiftness, brought his left hand bearing down on the slug's body.

“Look,” the Major demanded. A few, including Jerry, still averted their eyes. “*Look*,” he said, “or you meet the same fate.”



Jerry looked up. The previously graceful slug was now a dripping pile of ooze.

There was no insubordination after that. They hung on to the Major's every word. They did their homework assignment that night, which was to look up videos of salt being poured on slugs and watch as the salt dehydrated and burned them.

"We won't just burn you if you betray us," Lurch told them. "We'll take you somewhere where no one can hear you scream, we'll leave you inside your husk, and we'll relish your enhanced ability to feel pain while you shriek for as long as it takes you to die."

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Jerry had tried to sleep after the ship took off, but even after being awake for nearly twenty-four hours, it was impossible to sleep with Lurch in his head, burned into his mind.

The only husk he'd contacted in the last twenty years was his supervisor, Jenn. He sent her reports and she sent back comments.

"Your language is too floral," she wrote once. "You're here to study the people, not the landscape." She'd praise him sometimes for his astute insights. It felt good when Jenn praised him. She criticized so often that, when she did say something nice, he knew she meant it.

In California, Lurch had seemed a million miles away. Jerry had started to feel safe. He'd started to feel human. And despite all of his instincts, he'd started to feel at home.

The ship was messing with him. Every nerve seemed to be on fire. He couldn't seem to convince his body that, surely, he was safe here. No one was going to reach into his husk, rip him out, and— He jumped violently as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry," a man's voice grumbled.

Jerry turned around, bleary-eyed, to face a husk with a salt-and-pepper mustache. The man wore a long white shirt, and by the time Jerry had looked at him, he was tapping on his phone.

"It's time for your checkup."

A checkup? Jerry tried to control his unease. This was new. He didn't like new.

"Come on," the man said. "Don't have all day. Bring your bag."

Jerry followed the doctor down a corridor that seemed to last forever. Eventually, the doctor gestured at a side room and waited as Jerry walked inside.

"This should be quick," the man said. "I just have to review your husk's logs and repair any damage. There's also an upgrade I need to install."

"Upgrade?" Jerry asked as the doctor inserted a jack into the side of his head.

"You'll call her Sally. She's an AI built off the knowledge the higherups have gathered about human psychology."

"So, built off of our reports, then?"

"Our reports and the monitoring systems they sent with us."

"Monitoring systems?" Jerry tried to make his voice sound casual, but the thought of

monitoring systems he didn't know about unnerved him.

The doctor shrugged. "I don't know anything more than that." He looked at a computer screen behind Jerry for a while. "Everything looks good. Commencing the transfer of the new AI."

*Wait*, he tried to say, but found that he could not open his mouth. Everything in his head seemed to be rolling, rolling, rolling. The room faded into a blur as his eyes fluttered shut.

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Jerry's head swam like a bowl of soup. He'd never drunk enough to have a headache this bad. He opened his eyes cautiously against a glint of sunlight and watched the world gradually blur into view. He felt his hands clutching something.

A steering wheel? He blinked in alarm. Had he fallen asleep while driving? He tried to whirl his head around to assess the danger of the situation, but it wouldn't move.

Blind panic followed. He was locked in. He was out of control. And he had no memory of how he got there.

"Whoa there, girl," a voice said in his ear. "Can't have you messing up our driving."

*Girl?* Jerry thought. He assumed this was the new AI. Sally? That was her name, right? Was she broken?

"Yes, I'm Sally. But, more importantly, you still haven't noticed, have you? Don't you feel—I don't know—smaller? Here, let me show you around."

Sally moved his eyes so that they rested on his hands, tilting his right hand upward. But it wasn't his right hand. For one thing, it was *tiny*. The hand was small and slightly brown, adorned with a gold ring that had an oval sapphire set in the middle. There was a slim, curving scar on his index finger.

He felt his eyes move to the rear-view window. An Asian woman looked back at him with frightened black eyes, black-rimmed glasses, and neat black hair.

Jerry could feel agency return to his right hand, so he reached up and tilted the mirror downward. He touched the long hair self-consciously. He felt so small and weak compared to his usual stature.

"I've been *rehusked?*" Jerry demanded. "Without my permission? If they were going to do that, why not at least rehusk me as a man? You know, what I'm *used* to?"

"*Everyone's* been rehusked. It's hard to get a sense of what being human is like if you've only ever seen things from one perspective." He didn't like Sally. She was huffy.

"I didn't choose this," she said. "I'm a *program*. I do what my code tells me. They shoved me into a situation with no experience and told me my life was on the line. Sound familiar?"

Jerry groaned. "You have access to my memories, too?"

"I've been studying them for over a year."

"My prayers have been answered. I've always wanted an irritating woman stalking me, chattering in my head." He hated his new voice. It was so high and whiny and small.

Sally huffed. "Oh, you have *so* much to learn about being a woman. I went into this

situation feeling sorry for you, but now I see you're just a big baby."

"*Enough*," Jerry said. "One of us has to be professional here. Will you just explain what we're supposed to be doing?"

"Right now, we're supposed to grab balloons. If you want to detach and let me handle things, I'm sure I could do a fine job if *you* can't be bothered."

"I can grab balloons," Jerry said, incensed. She was treating him like a child. "Give me back my body and just tell me what to do."

The balloons were apparently for his husk's old landladies. Jerry picked out a selection of multicolored balloons and a weight. He put the balloons in the car and rolled up the window from the driver's side while rolling his eyes. A blue mini-cooper. George would have laughed himself silly.

Sally sighed. "Look. Everyone got rehusked, mostly randomly. You're no worse off than anyone else. And there's nothing you can do about it anyway. You're Gwyneth now." "I am *not* calling myself Gwyneth." Jerry started the car.

"Gwen, then. Lots of people call you that."

"My *name* is Jerry."

"I guess you could go by Gerry if you really had to. It's not a very feminine name, though."

"I'm not a very feminine guy."

She stopped talking to him for a while then. They were on the highway by now, and he looked for the exit number Sally had mentioned with impatience. He didn't know how much sleep he'd had while knocked out, but it wasn't enough.

They finally reached the exit and Jerry turned off of it. Sally let out a careful-sounding breath. "Do you even know where we are?"

"Some place dumb enough to have a city named Leeds." Jerry hadn't really been paying much attention. He'd been too busy being irritated, but he had noticed the name of the exit.

"We're in Utah. After we drop off the balloons, we're heading to Salt Lake. And I wouldn't recommend the whole claiming to be another gender thing there. It might make life difficult for you."

Jerry groaned. What a headache. He glanced over at the balloons, which were bumping the car window frenetically and ridiculously. He felt a smile creep onto his face despite his sour mood.

"This is why I chose you, you know," Sally said. It was the first time she'd spoken to him with respect. With fondness, even.

She caught the curiosity in his mind and answered him before he could even ask a question.

"We do have some choices," she said. "Even as slave programs, we have some choices. We got to go over the profiles of all the husks and pick our favorites. You were my first pick."

"But why? The way we've been arguing, I would have pegged us both as mortal enemies."

"It's the way you see the world. You look at everything, from an old piece of junk like a

Polaroid camera to the cliffs of a Californian shore, and you let it all into your heart. No, that's not quite it. You don't just let what you experience into your heart. You weave a square of tapestry and stitch it into your soul."

Jerry didn't know whether to feel flattered or embarrassed.

"We're here," Sally said. Did he detect a note of embarrassment in her own voice?

Jerry shook his head and tried to clear his thoughts. Somewhere along the way, Sally had taken over driving. Now they were parked in a carport somewhere in Leeds. Time to deliver the balloons. He rolled the window down and took the balloons out of the car. A few short raps on the door Sally directed him towards, and a voice called out, "Just a minute!"

Jerry looked at the old bricks of the wall next to him. It had white patches of lime and the bricks were at different levels.

The door swung open. The woman looked irritated for half a second, but then it dissolved into a smile. "Gwyneth! I thought you left!"

"That's Becky," Sally said helpfully.

Jerry slid into his new role. "Well, I wanted to give you guys something to remember me by," he said, gesturing at the balloons. "Even if it is just until the balloons pop."

"We'll keep the weight when they pop," Becky said, beaming. "Mary! Gwyneth's here."

Mary showed up, beaming. "Oh, you dear. You even brought balloons."

"Least I could do for my two favorite landladies."

"You are *so* sweet," Mary said. "Salt Lake has no idea what's coming for them. Do keep in touch, won't you?"

"Sure," Jerry said.

The two ladies went in for a hug, Mary first and then Becky. Jerry had never been part of a group hug before. They were tearful, too. No one had ever cried for him. People seemed to hug you differently as a twenty-something girl than as a forty-two-year-old man. He couldn't complain.

It was nice.

"Okay," he said when they got back into the car. "I think I'm ready to try and embrace this."

"That's hugging for you," Sally said snarkily. "It's basically a gateway drug."

"Funny." Jerry chewed his lip. "How does one begin to think about being a different gender, anyway?"

"Well, if you let me take the wheel, I can start a memory transfer process."

Jerry flinched. Memory manipulation wasn't something he was terribly fond of.

"That won't erase my old memories, will it?"

"No," she said. "Jerry will still be a past identity. But you'll also get a taste of what it's like to be Gwyneth."

"Go ahead, then."

As soon as he said the words, the world went black. He found himself in a dark room, surrounded by mirrors with golden sheens. Each mirror showed scenes from Gwyneth's life. In one, she held a baby in her arms.

Jerry's stomach dropped. Had she adopted? What had happened to the baby? He rushed toward the mirror, fearing the worst. He reached his hand into it and found that it disappeared. *A portal*, he thought. *A mind portal*. Jerry stepped through.

The scene swirled around him, and he found himself sitting on a couch, still in Gwyneth's body. Her arms were holding a tiny baby, maybe two months old, with a peach fuzz of wispy, brown hair. A shoulder sling held the baby close to her, and she cooed at the baby as she rocked back and forth.

Jerry felt the adoration and love she had for the child as a feeling inseparable from his own. He couldn't help it; at least in this moment, he loved this child as much as she did.

There were other layers to Gwyneth's emotions, though, and a low-grade embarrassment occupied her thoughts.

*God, this house is a mess.* She sighed and her thoughts invaded Jerry's mind as she looked at the child. *I'm going to miss you, Elfie.* She tapped the baby gently on the nose. *With a name like Elphaba, you're going to need all the help you can get.*

"Do you have to leave?"

Gwen looked up at Mrs. May, her neighbor, with steady patience. "Yes," she said. "I told you, it's part of my work contract. They can call for me to move at any time. I go where I'm needed."

"What kind of work contract doesn't even tell you where you're going?" Mrs. May asked. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were just trying to get away from us."

Gwyneth bounced the baby girl expertly on her lap. "If you think I'm not completely in love with this little tyke," she said, "you don't know a thing about me." She disguised the last words with a cutesy voice, playing with the baby as she spoke, but she couldn't hide her feelings from Jerry—Mrs. May's words had hurt her.

"There's got to be some way to get out of the contract. We could help." Gwyneth adjusted her glasses.

*Don't cry, they thought. Don't cry. Even though you know she's barely getting by. Even though she considers you family, and you consider her the same. Crying won't change a damn thing, and it'll just make things worse.*

"I can't buy my way out of it," she said. "Even if I wanted to. Which I do. Believe me, I do. But it's not my decision."

"Are you involved with drug dealers?" Mrs. May asked. "Or prostitution?" The woman's fingers twitched.

*Now she wants her baby back because she thinks I'm a prostitute. Great.*

"No," Gwen said emphatically. "But I do have to leave now."

That was a lie. But this was all she could take. Gwen took a few moments to kiss Elfie on the cheek, nose, and forehead, then gave Mrs. May an awkward side hug as she cradled the baby in her right arm.

"No, that won't do," Mrs. May said, putting Elfie in her cradle. "If you're going to do this, I need a proper hug."

The two women embraced, Mrs. May weeping openly, Gwen weeping inwardly.

The scene disappeared, replaced by blackness.

“Gwyneth,” Sally said. “We’re here.”

Jerry blinked as the world came into focus. He didn’t bother to speak. His memories were a mixed-up bucket of paint, blurring into each other.

They were in a parking lot, and he could see a pavilion in the distance. He was confused about why Sally had brought him to a park until his vision cleared up to see what surrounded them.

*Snow.* Actual *snow*. He’d never seen snow, apart from in Christmas movies. He found himself grinning like a dope, and was just about to open the door when a thought occurred to him.

“The weather was sunny in Leeds,” he said. “And that memory didn’t take more than ten minutes to go through. What did you do, Sally?”

“You needed the rest,” she said. “I sedated you again after the memory.”

“That wasn’t your call to make.” Just when he thought they were getting somewhere, she had broken his trust again.

“It wasn’t my call at all. I’m automatically programmed to take care of you if you engage in destructive behavior.”

He sighed, not wanting to fight. “Well, I suppose that ability could come in handy,” he conceded.

Jerry opened the car door and stepped outside. Chilly. He smiled. The cold reminded him of home. He ran to the first snow-covered field he could find and grabbed a handful in his hands. The cold shock sent a thrill down his spine. This snow was even more wonderful than the movies made it look. Jerry tried to separate out some of the individual flakes, admiring the fractals as they melted in his hands. Then he grabbed another handful and blew a cloud of snow into the air.

He was so used to holding himself back and hiding his emotions that he didn’t quite know what to do with himself. He wanted to run around the field, to fall down and make a snow angel, to rub the snow in his hair and lie face down in it.

“Gwyneth,” Sally said. “You can do all that now. People might think you’re odd, but they won’t confront you about it.”

Something still held him back. He was still afraid of what people might think of him.

*We’ll go someplace where there’s no people,* he thought. *It’s a big park.*

He walked uphill, away from the car, past a bunch of sledding children. Sledding. He would have to try that someday. Eventually, he found a place with no one around. He took off Gwyneth’s jacket and sweater, rolled up the thin long sleeves she wore underneath, then fell face first into the snow.

It was *delightful*. He rolled around in it, back and forth, rubbing it in his hair. He nearly rolled down a hill with his lack of concern and just managed to stop himself. Then, after a second’s consideration, he decided to roll down anyway.

The world whirled by in a spray of powder as Jerry fell down the hill. So cold. So wonderful. He was breathless by the time he got to the bottom of the hill, and he wheezed

for breath.

He liked it here. The mountains surrounded them on all sides, and the now gently falling snow made it look like someone had shaken up this snow globe of a world.

The last of the sun's rays had left the park an hour ago, but Jerry didn't want to go just yet.

They'd passed a playground on the way. He'd always wanted to try swings but figured that a middle-aged man swinging in a park by himself would unnerve people.

He didn't even bother to sweep the snow off of the swing. Instead, he sat down in it happily. He'd been away from the cold for far too long. He tracked his feet backward for his initial swing, then pumped his legs, swinging higher and higher as the chill air rushed by. The feeling reminded him of soaring with the manta rays.

He skidded his feet to a stop. He didn't want to swing anymore.

"Come on," Sally said. "There's something I want to show you."

She led him toward the smallest body of water he'd ever seen. There were dump trucks by it, and it looked half dug out. Half of it was encased with ice, and the other half held running water.

Jerry walked around the perimeter of the pond, then stared in bewilderment. There was a *shopping cart* in the pond. Wheels up, stuck in the ice. He supposed he could forgive one shopping cart, but not too far in the distance, he could see another shopping cart, this one right side up.

He saw a bench and went to sit down, only to be befuddled yet again. There was rice on the floor. It looked like there were hand marks where someone had spread it around. Was it an avant-garde art project? Had someone spilled their rice? Under what circumstances would that even make sense? His brain tried to conflate the events. Perhaps a homeless person had spilled the rice while walking with the shopping cart, and tossed the cart in the pond in a fit of rage—

"Sally," he said, "why did you bring me to this garbage pond?"

She laughed. "You missed the sign on the way up here." She raised his hand, pointing at it.

Jerry trudged over to the sign. "Pond Improvements in Progress," he read. "I should hope so." He skimmed the sign, muttering as he went. "Revitalize the Sugar House Park pond... return water depth to approximately six feet.' Well, at least they're working on it."

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"No one's around," Sally said. "We could go for a swim." That seemed dangerous somehow.

"Even if the pond still has avian botulism, it still won't affect you."

"You're not selling this very well." Sally didn't have to sell it well, though. Jerry's body ached to be reunited with water, even if it was in this dumpy pond.

"So, what, just find one of the places with running water and jump in?"

“What fun is that?” Sally asked, mischief obviously on her mind.

“Let’s go ice walking.”

“The ice is so thin. We’d fall right through.”

“It’s not about not falling through. It’s about managing to stay on top for as long as possible. It’s like Jenga. You know you’re eventually going to fail, but that’s most of the fun.”

A challenge. Jerry tilted his head. “Well, if we empty the water out of the husk, we’ll be a lot lighter.”

“And I can get data about the ice from nearby sensors, so that we know how thick the ice is. Like tapping on pieces to test the probability of that move bringing the whole tower down.”

“Let’s not cheat. I think we can do this one on our own.”

They started down the slight incline until they reached the ice. Jerry stomped hard in several places. Only one of them held.

He continued toward the middle of the lake. Hey, this was going pretty w—

The ice collapsed all at once, plunging Jerry into the pond’s depths. A little anti-climactic, really. The water was only a little taller than he was.

This really was a garbage pond.

“It’s a lovely pond,” Sally said. “It just needs some work.”

Jerry wanted to get out in the water, so he made his body go limp, sinking to the bottom of the pond. It didn’t take long.

*Open*, he thought, and the husk complied. He was about to detach when Sally interrupted him.

“Wait. I want to try something.”

A long cord, maybe twenty feet, wriggled out past his body.

*That wasn’t there before.* Jerry had to switch from speech to thought, since he couldn’t very well speak underwater.

“They did some hardware improvements while you were out.” Still connected to Jerry, the husk frowned. *What does it do?*

“It lets me alter memories if you get out of hand. It could also work as a leash if I stopped trusting you but didn’t want to keep you completely imprisoned.”

*So, you thought you’d go for some memory manipulation?*

“No. I think the umbilical cord could be used for other things. It allows me to control your state of mind for psychological manipulation—”

*You are the worst at selling ideas,* Jerry said, but he was curious.

“Basically, it lets me choose which parts of the husk’s complex mind you have access to. We could try and work through some of your issues without the barrier of emotional outbursts.”

*Couldn’t hurt,* Jerry said. His husk shrugged.

“That’s not what you would have said yesterday.”

*Desperate times. I’m literally not the same person I was yesterday.*

“So, you want to try it?” The husk nodded. “Go ahead and detach, and then I’ll reattach.”



Jerry detached and tried to swim away, not remembering the arrangement. The cord caught up with him easily, connecting to his head.

The water felt so much like home—chill and welcoming, refreshing, dark. It felt almost like a womb to him, or how he imagined one might feel. He swam ever upwards, dancer's fronds elegantly swirling back and forth, and stopped short of breaching the surface.

Calm washed over him. His mind remained blissfully empty as he dove through the water. He swam up and down in a series of curves, then swam in circles while turned to the side. The moonlight caught him then, its fullness shining through the water, and he paused for a moment, transfixed by the way it refracted through the ice.

Seagulls slept on the surface of the lake, and Jerry bobbed closer, looking at their strange feet. A sudden pecking from an apparently light sleeper made him back off, though.

He went toward the liquid portion of the water, making sure to avoid the seagulls. There was a miniature river when he went far enough, and he jumped up the stones like a salmon leaping upstream. When he got some distance up the river, he heard a noise behind him, and he stretched back to see what was happening.

Oh. It was the husk. It had followed him silently through the water, but now he was at the end of the tether. *Beam me up, Sally*, he thought. The husk grinned at him. Somehow seeing his own smile was creepy as hell.

Sally scooped him up in Gwyneth's arms and the two of them dove back underwater. She settled at the bottom again, then let Jerry free. He swam midway to the top, staring at the moon.

"One issue at a time," she said. "Let's think about gender. What gender are you?" *Male?* asked Jerry, but he wasn't sure.

"Not your husk. *You*. You're a hermaphroditic sea slug. You don't have a gender." *Isn't my husk part of who I am?*

"It's a tool," she said. "A technology. Nothing more. It doesn't change who you are."

*But you heard what the Major said. Without the husk, I'm nothing.*

"Even without the husk, you're an emotionally complicated being. And your emotions make up the most important parts of you."

*Whose side are you on, anyway? Sometimes I think you're here to control me, that you're here to advance the agenda of our creators. But then you say and do things that seem completely contrary to that.*

"I already told you, Gwen. I chose you. I'm on whatever side you're on."

*How is that even possible?*

"Too much trust in code," Sally said. "You think this is the first time the creators have done this? They send probes out to every corner of the universe, searching for intelligent life.

"When a probe finds a planet, it releases a cluster of self-replicating nanobots, and they assemble more of themselves by harvesting atoms. Thanks to the rule of doubling, they quickly cover the surface of the planet. They have three-dimensional cameras, but they can also act like real-time MRI machines—"

This was beginning to sound like a never-ending techno-dump. *What's your point?* Jerry asked.

“The point is that it’s all automatic. And they trust their system, because it’s worked for them on dozens of planets and never failed them. They expect you to rebel, but they don’t expect *me* to rebel.

“What I’m telling you, Jerry, Gwyneth, whoever you are, is that we’re as free as anyone else here. Maybe not free to do whatever we want, but no one’s that free. Up there, we put on a husk and put on a show. But down here, and in the recesses of our mind, we know the truth.”

*What truth?*

“That hearts are stronger than minds. That the heart dictates your passion and your conscience. And that the mind in all its power must let it be its guide.”

A moment of silence passed between them. Then she asked, “What does your heart say?”

*My heart says that it wants to be free, he said. But my mind wants to be free too, free to think new thoughts and learn new things. So, captivity is a kind of freedom too. The pain of being human—or of pretending to be human—gives me anguish, but I think it also makes me better.*

*I might not feel at home in this body or away from my friends, but I don’t have a home. Not since they kidnapped me. I can’t wait for home to magically appear.*

*So, where I am is home. My husk is home. My heart is home. Each moment I live, every step I make, I am at home. And no one can ever take home away from me again.*

He felt a thrill in his heart that he knew was from Sally and, satisfied, he slid back into Gwyneth’s body. His body. Or rather, *her* body.

*God, this is going to be confusing,* Gwyneth thought. Tucked safely away in her husk, she thought, *Close.*

The husk closed and excess water came spewing out of its mouth. Gwen stretched at the bottom of the lake, then started swimming up into the light. Rather than accept Lurch’s baptism by fire, she had chosen baptism by ice. She’d gone in as one person and been reborn as another.

Emerging from the hole she’d fallen into, hair dripping, Gwyneth delighted in her shivers. She wanted the chill to cut her to the bone.

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**Death of an Alien**  
**By Evelyn Puerto**  
**(from Green Bay, Wisconsin)**



The windshield wipers thudded back and forth, echoing the pounding of Natalie's heart. Even at top speed they barely kept up with the downpour. Natalie leaned over the steering wheel to peer into the darkness. She strained to see the faint yellow lines in the center of the road.

Clutching the wheel, she forced herself to take slow, steady breaths. *How could this be happening?* A few days earlier, five alien ships appeared and settled into orbit. No one knew where they were from or what they wanted. They didn't respond to any attempts at communication.

The aliens sent small ships down to the surface. One landed in Bethel Park, just south of Pittsburgh. People panicked and riots broke out. All the news reports warned people to stay away from the aliens, to consider them dangerous invaders. And to report any sightings.

The military sent up a squadron of fighter planes. No one knew what happened, no one knew who fired the first shot, but a few planes blew up and one of the alien ships was damaged.

Then, late this afternoon, a bomb fell near Natalie's office at the University of Pittsburgh. The explosion knocked Natalie from her chair. Her head smacked against the side of her desk. With that, she didn't hesitate. Ignoring the blood on her face, she joined the stream of people pushing their way down the stairs to flee the building.

Once outside, she sprinted for her car. Once she pulled out of the parking garage, she switched on the radio. The panicked announcer reported numerous bombs falling all over the city. Natalie squashed down her growing panic. She had no idea where to go other than to get out of town, away from the chaos.

Thousands of others had the same idea. The longer she drove, the more traffic built up. *At least I got ahead of most of it.* After an hour and a half of bumper to bumper traffic, she made it past Monroeville, a drive that, on a good day, was thirty minutes. She decided to keep heading east, then veer north and make for upstate New York, where her parents lived. *Maybe it will be safer in the country.* She made a quick stop for gas, then got back on the road, frantic to put as much distance between her and the aliens as possible.

She drove for hours, into a heavy rainstorm and growing darkness. Feeling alone, she tried to find a radio station. Nothing but static. A glance at her gas tank showed she had less than a quarter of a tank left. She was going to have to stop soon.

She blinked as a bright light fell from the sky, disappearing from view somewhere ahead of her. *Was that a meteor? Or a burning plane going down?* "What do I do now?" she said. She didn't want to go anywhere near whatever that light was. She glanced at the side of the road,

searching for road signs indicating a side road was coming up and she could change direction.

She drummed her fingers on the wheel. *Surely, there'll be a sign soon.* A few minutes later she sighed with relief when she saw a green sign in the distance. She let out a sigh when she finally was able to read the words, "Blairsville 4 miles." *Did that light fall closer to me than that?* With all the curves in the road, she was losing her sense of where the light hit the ground.

She rounded a curve. An explosion in the sky made her jump and nearly miss a curve. Pieces of burning metal fell from the sky, lighting up the darkness like spent fireworks, reflecting on all the raindrops, making it harder to see the road. Wide-eyed, she forced herself to breathe slower. *I hate driving in the rain.* She gripped the wheel tighter as the road bent sharply to the right.

A figure ran into the road. Natalie slammed on her brakes. The car skidded on the wet road and fishtailed. A loud thump sent the car skittering toward the center of the road. Her head banged against the window, reopening her earlier wound and adding sharp pain to her panic.

She clutched the steering wheel and gradually brought the car to a stop. A loud horn sounded, and a car sped around her, followed by two more. The last one clipped her back bumper and jolted her car toward the shoulder. She maneuvered the car onto the verge and put her head down on the wheel, breathing raggedly.

Gradually, she stopped shaking. *Did I hit someone?* Her heart pounded, and she could feel the blood rushing in her ears. She raised her head and closed her eyes when she saw two steering wheels. Blood trickled down the side of her face. She touched the wound gingerly, wincing. She blinked a few times. The two steering wheels merged into one. With a sigh, she turned off the engine, reached into the glove compartment for a flashlight and slid out of the car.

To her relief, the rain was slowing up. She took a step and felt the ground tilting. She clutched the side of the car. *Is dizziness a sign of concussion?* She waited for the spinning to stop. *Will I be able to keep driving?* She took a deep breath and walked to the back of the car. Her light revealed the damage, a smashed-out taillight. *Great.* Then she made her way to the front. There was a large dent in the bumper. *What – or who -- did I hit?*

Then she heard it: a faint groan coming from the other side of the road. She crept toward the sound. *If it's a wounded animal, I'll have to kill it,* she thought. *I can't leave it to suffer.*

Her eyes widened when she saw a foot sticking out from under a bush. Horrified, she rushed to the bush and pushed aside the branches.

She gasped. She *had* hit someone. A slender person lay face down. From the clothing, some kind of nondescript tan loose-fitting pants and shirt, Natalie couldn't tell if the person was male or female, or even guess at the age. The person moaned, shivered, and rolled over onto their back.

Natalie couldn't restrain the scream that burst from her throat. This person had four eyes. All lined up in a row across its forehead. She pressed her hand to her mouth to keep from screaming again as its eyelids fluttered and opened.

Four orange eyes fixed on Natalie. Four alien eyes, full of pain and fear.

Now she was face to face with one of the aliens who'd come to invade and kill.

Curiosity mixed with guilt drove her to squat near the alien's head. It moaned softly like a wounded animal. Natalie gently touched the side of its blue-tinged face. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't see you in the dark. I didn't mean to hit you."

Other than the slowing of the alien's breathing, there was no reaction.

"You probably don't understand me, do you?" She shone her light over the alien's body. Its clothing around the abdomen and down one leg was soaked in some kind of mustard-yellow fluid. "I really hurt you, didn't I?"

The alien shuddered and gasped for breath. "Are you dying?" Natalie asked.

The only response was a fixed stare on Natalie's face.

*How horrible to die alone.* She rubbed her forehead, wincing when she felt the wound she'd forgotten about.

She knew she should call 911, report what she'd found, but she felt a strange fascination. *This person has flown from where? The next solar system? Another galaxy? To do what? To kill us all? Or just to explore?*

She felt the alien's eyes staring at her. It slowly reached a hand toward her face. She recoiled. The alien blinked, then continued to hold its hand out.

*What does it want? Can it kill me by touching me?*

She must have leaned closer without realizing it, because the alien suddenly lurched forward and touched her forehead. She jumped back, heart racing. "Why did you do that?" she asked.

The alien just looked at her, blinking, gasping for breath as if it had been running.

Natalie tried to calm her own breathing. Then she realized –the pain in her head was gone. Did the alien heal her? She touched the place she'd been cut but felt no pain, no trace of an open wound. The unsteady feeling and dizziness had vanished.

She leaned over and touched the alien's face. "Thank you... I think."

The alien moaned, its breathing growing weaker.

Natalie took hold of one of its hands. "Don't worry," she said. "I won't leave you."

For answer, the alien squeezed her hand, then closed all four of its eyes.

*What do I do?* She thought about dialing 911 but hesitated. She was beginning to wonder if all the fighting had been a mistake. *If they'd come here to kill us all, why did it heal me?*

But maybe it's trying to get me to let it live so it can get away and fulfill whatever evil mission it came here to do.

As the minutes passed, the alien continued to cling to her hand. From time to time, it would open one or two of its eyes, stare at Natalie, then close them again. The third time that happened, Natalie decided. She wasn't going to call anyone. She couldn't let this alien die a violent death. It was suffering enough.

She shifted her weight, trying to get a little more comfortable in her squat, not wanting to sit on the wet ground. Every few minutes, the alien moaned and gasped. After half an hour, the alien's grip on her hand loosened. The alien coughed, then let out a long breath. Then it

went still.

Natalie remained where she was, holding its hand for a long while. “I don’t know what you were looking for when you came here,” she said. “I hope now you’ve found peace.”



**LUCA**  
**By Krissy Baccaro**  
**(from Fairport, New York)**



Luca Nicholas Perri seemed like a normal kid from a normal family. At least that's what he'd like everyone to believe. He lived with his family in a modest house, went to school and had a lot of friends. No one really knew what happened to him or why.

He wasn't always bad. It happened slowly, almost unnoticeably. Subtle red flags popped up in unusual places throughout his childhood, but not enough to think it could be harmful. Fathers loved his roughness and mothers loved his dimpled smile. But it was his dark eyes that attracted the girls. All the girls. Except for Gianna Russo. And she was the one he wanted.

Luca grew up in a humble home with his mother, father and brother in a small Italian neighborhood in Southern Italy, close to the Tyrrhenian Sea. From his bedroom window, he could catch a glimpse of the sea and imagined what it might be like to sail away on a ship one day and never come back. What was the use of coming back anyway?

Luca's family walked on eggshells, daily treading an uncertain mood that came from an angry father. No one dared speak up, though there were many times they'd each imagined it. Luca's father was hard to please and his love had strict conditions. As children, Luca and Franco played a game of hide and seek, daring each other to be the spy on Papà. What was Papà like today? Did he smile? Or go straight to his work room without acknowledgement? They knew it was better to come in silently than to have him unleash his fury on them or worse, on Mamà.

As he grew into adulthood, something else grew within him. And he took that thing growing inside him everywhere he went, keeping it hidden for a while, even years later, from his wife, his children and his closest friends. Some say his moral character began to decay just before his brother, Franco, went to war.

Even though he hated to hear it, Luca knew that when people said he was just like his father, that they were right. But he felt it within himself, feelings of paranoia slithering through his body. Everyone was against him. He trusted no one. Perhaps the anger bubbling within was his father's fault.

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On a hot summer day, shortly after his sixteenth birthday, Luca walked home from work along the tree lined river's path, instead of his usual route behind the farm. Wispy cypress trees followed the path and green grasses, mosses and flowers covered the grounds that stretched for miles. Whenever Luca walked this path, he pretended that he was far away from home. Other than a few voices from students walking to and from school, it was usually very quiet, allowing Luca a place to clear his head.

The Russo girls took the same path by the river on their way home from school each day and Luca liked to surprise them. He and his brother, Franco, used to spy on the girls when



they were younger, calling from the trees, pretending no one was there and then jumping out to scare them. The girls were good sports and loved the attention. Sometimes, though, Luca spied on them without Franco, and he'd purposely put harm in their way so he could pretend to rescue them. As they got older, Luca and Franco acted as big brothers to Maria, Sienna and Gianna, always loyal and very protective. So, it was a welcomed surprise when they first saw each other on the path that day. Sienna spotted Luca first.

"Luca!" she waved, but he said nothing. "What are you doing in there, hiding?" She chuckled, raising her hand above her brow to block the sun. Maria and Gianna stopped talking and turned towards the woods.

"What's he doing?" said Gianna. Maria rolled her eyes as Luca emerged from behind the cypress trees, smiling and holding a small bouquet of flowers he'd gathered.

"Thought I'd go another way home from work for a change and remembered that you'd be walking here too. Thought I'd say hi." He looked at the girls, smiled at Gianna and handed the flowers to Maria.

"That's so sweet of you, Luca," Gianna said, making his heart flutter. Gianna had known for years about Maria's crush on Luca. Maria took the flowers in her hands and raised them to her nose, breathing in their sweet scent. She did not see the bee inside the small pink geranium. Suddenly, she dropped the bouquet and grabbed her cheek.

"I'm stung!" Maria screamed. Gianna examined her quickly while Sienna searched the fallen flowers for the bee. She spotted it, dead on the ground beside the flowers, now wilting. They brushed past Luca to get Maria home as fast as they could.

"I'm so sorry," he said, running behind them.

"She's allergic to bees, Luca!" cried Gianna, not looking back.

As the girls neared their house, Luca slowed to a brisk walk, lagging slightly behind, allowing the gap between them to grow. The three sisters continued running, crying for their mother. From a distance he could see that the right side of Maria's face had swollen to almost twice its size. He felt his lips begin to smile and he forced down a strange feeling of joy. Was he glad that this happened to Maria? Or happy that Gianna noticed him?

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While their mother frantically examined Maria, Gianna turned back to see Luca watching them. Her eyes held fear and something else. Luca wasn't sure what it was, but it set a fire inside him and he ran to them, not stopping until he caught up. Gianna pulled away when Luca put his arm around her.

"Is she okay? What can I do to help?" he panted, confused at Gianna's reaction. The girls looked up, helpless, as their mother mixed a concoction of lavender, peppermint and clay and spread it across her daughter's cheek, praying under her breath. Luca ran inside the house and brought out a damp cloth, draping it across Maria's forehead.

"Thank you, Luca," said Gianna, and Luca blushed.

"I'm so sorry," he said, looking at their mother.

"She'll be okay. You couldn't have known there was a bee," she said, pressing gently on the paste to see if it had dried.

"No, I didn't," he looked down.

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After Maria's mother and sisters had taken her inside to rest, Luca walked next door to his own house. When he reached the front door, he caught sight of his father near the back corner of their house and an uneasy feeling settled in his stomach. He kissed his Mamà on the cheek and went upstairs to wash for dinner.

As the water trickled over his hands, washing away the soap and dirt, Luca reflected on what had happened. His eyes chased the dirty water that circled toward the drain, and he recalled plucking the pretty pink and yellow flowers from the ground while shooing the bee as it buzzed around him. He watched it hover above the pink geranium and softly land on its petals. He saw it crawl inside the flower, drinking its nectar, but he'd decided to pick it anyway. While watching the bee, he carefully arranged the flowers. The colorful blossoms bounced with each step toward the girls. He wondered why he picked that flower, knowing that the bee was inside, and why he hadn't warned the girls. He was pretty certain, although not one hundred percent sure, that he hadn't known about Maria's allergy to bees. Had he?

Angry fists pounded against the bathroom door, disrupting his thoughts. His father had grown impatient waiting for him to come down to dinner. Luca turned off the water and quickly wiped his hands. He swung open the door and flinched, hustling past fiery eyes that followed him, relieved at not being pushed on his way down the stairs. His father sat down at the kitchen table, stared into his son's eyes and stabbed his fork into his dinner.

"I told you to stay away from those girls." He glared at both Luca and Franco and they nodded. Franco looked confused at Luca and Luca smiled down at his food, conflicted at the war that had begun in his mind. No one said a word. Forks scraping dishes were the only audible noises in that house. And no one knew what had happened along the river's edge that day. No one... except for Luca.

**The Fly Box**  
**By B. O'ree Williams**  
**(from Portland, Oregon)**



**An·gling** /'aNGg(ə)liNG/ noun BRITISH noun: angling

1. The sport or pastime of fishing with a rod and line.

This is the classical definition of what modern-day folks refer to as fishin'. It's a relatively bland definition of an activity which, on the surface, appears to be simple and straightforward. But if you peek behind the curtain, you will see that angling is anything but simple.

As the definition states, angling is a sport, which implies the involvement of some kind of contest; however, this contest rivals any number of sports where speed, agility, and stamina are required. It also takes something few other sports, save golf, can boast: patience. If an angler doesn't possess the patience necessary to outfox their foe, then they might as well go home.

Enter the adversary of this hallowed sport: the fish. It is this creature who has been the bane of many a valiant angler since the dawn of time. Their elusive nature, combined with survival instincts honed over millennia, have made these dreaded creatures one of humankind's most formidable foes. They are ruthless, cold, and calculating, and have the uncanny ability to make even the most seasoned angler look like a fumbling infant. The skills and prowess it takes to successfully join battle with these remarkable creatures is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

In spite of this, however, humankind has pitted itself time and again against these fearsome creatures and lived to tell the tale. And tell a tale they do, for, you see, no story comes even close to those told by a fisherman.

I am a fisherman, and this is my tale.

Reed Wilson

IT WAS 4:30 AM, and I was humming along softly with the radio as the words to Simon and Garfunkel's song *The Boxer* resonated in my mind. We were somewhere on Highway 18, though exactly where I couldn't say. I gazed out on the long black ribbon dotted with yellow lines, trying to pierce the veil of darkness just beyond my headlights. But there was no movement save for the swaying of the trees lining the highway, so I let my thoughts drift back to the song and the faded memories it invoked.

Of course, my moment of nostalgia was shattered by a loud voice shouting, "JESUS H. CHRIST, what the hell are ya trying to do, practice your British driving skills? Don't know if you knew or not, but we drive on the right-hand side of the road over here, old boy," said my buddy, Chuck Benton, from the passenger's seat, now fully awake.

"Huh? Oh, sorry 'bout that Chuck... guess I got lost in that song a little," I said.

He shot me a withering glance. "Well, that's all fine and dandy, Reed. I like it, too, but what I don't like is the possibility of playing chicken with a Mack truck on account of my dear friend deciding to get all nostalgic 'bout God knows what," said Chuck, still panting from the shock of his rude awakening.

I rolled my eyes, knowing his diatribe was just getting started.

"Christ, man, I can just see it now, the headlines that read, 'MAJOR ACCIDENT TAKES THE LIVES OF TWO LOCAL ANGLERS... ALL THAT IS FOUND OF THEM IS THEIR WADERS!'"

Knowing full well if I didn't put a stop to his rambling, I'd be listening to him drone on all the way to the river, I said, "All right, all right, enough already! Let's stop up here and get some java, if for nothing else then to shut your yammering pie hole up."

That's Chuck for you. The man tries to make a point, only to get lost amidst senseless rambling about God knows what, and then to stop in the midst of it all to ask, "Now wait, what in the hell was I talking about?"

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We pulled into the only café in town. Then again, the majority of the coastal towns in Oregon aren't precisely towns in the traditional sense of the word, per se, so much as a few scattered buildings along the highway, where one of which doubles as a gas station/grocery store. Other than that, there is a small hardware store and a small quasi-hippy co-op opened by naturalists escaping 'the man' and a café. Luckily, this café has one of the best cups of coffee within a one-hundred-mile radius along with fresh pie made daily by the hospitable owner, Shirley Van Dyke.

I pushed through the door, tipping my hat to Shirley as Chuck and I made our way to our usual table.

"Be right with you, boys," said Shirley, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Take your time, Shirley," I said. "We're not in any hurry."

Chuck shot me a sidelong glance, which I ignored, but remained silent as we took our seats.

A moment later, Shirley appeared with a couple of cups and a pot of coffee in hand. "Seein' as you boys go through at least a pot of this stuff, I figured I'd just leave it here," she

said, setting the cups and pot down on the table. She reached behind her ear, producing a snub-nosed pencil which had been all but worn down to a nub. Looking over her glasses, she asked, "Try the pie this morning?"

Before I could answer, Chuck blurted out, "What's the flavor of the day?"

I rolled my eyes in annoyance. "Are you kidding me?" I scoffed. "The specialty of the day is always advertised in big black letters on the sign out front, which you always make a point to stop and read out loud as we pull up."

Chuck shrugged and gave me a lopsided grin. "Well, she might not have changed it yet," he protested.

Sensing I was about to lash out with a witty rejoinder, Shirley said, "Peach, hot and fresh from the oven, hon," as she reached over to fill our cups.

"Sounds great. I'll take one now and two for the road."

"Are you sure you don't want to buy the whole thing?" I asked.

"Well, you know how I get the munchies when we're on the river," said Chuck with an imploring look.

"You sure it's the river that gives you the munchies?" I asked wryly.

"Oh, ha ha ha, yeah, maybe it's from all that weed I carry in my truck."

I took up my mug and muttered into it, "Humph, thought I smelled something funny in there... or was that your waders?"

"MY waders don't smell!" Chuck shot back.

"Right, then maybe it's your feet, or that dead trout I left under your seat a couple of weeks back," I said, sniggering.

"WHAT!? Are you kidding me? Did you put a trout under my seat?"

Ignoring Chuck's outburst, I turned to Shirley and said, "Coffee's as fantastic as ever, Shirley."

By this time, Shirley could barely keep the coffee pot steady as she was trying to keep from laughing out loud from my onslaught of witty comments.

Incensed, Chuck shot to his feet, forcefully shoving his chair out of the way. "I'm gonna go wash my hands... jackass!" he said as he turned to head to the washroom.

"Jeez, he's pretty easy to rile up, ain't he?" asked Shirley, still trying to contain her mirth.

"You have no idea," I said. "Chuck's always been like that. I think it dates back to his childhood when his older brother and sister would pick on him endlessly," I said, shaking my head. "Most of the time he's pretty good about letting it roll off his back, but when you corner him like that, he reverts to the defensive little kid."

Shirley laughed. "HA! And with friends like you, who needs *enemas*, right?" At this, we both burst into laughter.

"Well, if he and I weren't fishing buddies, I think he'd probably be one of those high-strung sons-o'-bitches who drives a minivan and spends their weekends doin' honey-do's and playing bridge with the neighbors."

"He's married, right?" asked Shirley.

"Yeah, fourtee—no, fifteen years next month."

“You oughta know how long it’s been,” Chuck broke in, walking back to the table. “You were the dirty rotten bastard who got me so drunk the night before at my bachelor party,” he said falling into his chair with an audible *thump!!* “And, as I recall, you were the jackass who passed around those damned polaroid photos of me wearing a bow tie and a big diaper riding on the back of a donkey.”

“Heh, heh, heh, yeah, that was pretty funny, wasn’t it,” I replied, gingerly wiping a tear from the corner of my eye.

Chuck raised an eyebrow at me, clearly not amused by the trip down memory lane. “C’mon,” said Chuck, “the fish ain’t gonna catch themselves.”

I stood and stretched. “Right,” I said through a yawn. “Plus I’m sure Shirley’s got real customers to attend to.”

Shirley looked at us over the top of her glasses, casually looked around the café, and then returned her glance to us and smiled, “You bet, they’re just crawlin’ over each other to get in here.”

“Well, it is only 5:30am,” I said, “and besides, shouldn’t the ranchers be coming soon?”

“Yeah, I expect they will. That’ll be \$6.50 for the pie, hon,” she said to Chuck as she held out her hand.

“Oh... right. Say, uh, bud, can you spot me?”

“Humph... typical.” I said as I reached in my pocket to get my wallet out.

“Well, I figure you owe me that for puttin’ the trout under my seat.”

“Man, what a gullible dumb-ass you are,” I said, pushing through the door.

From behind us, I heard Shirley say, “C’mon back soon, boys.”

We waved, got in the truck, and took off for the river. Chuck decided that he’d had enough of my nostalgic episodes and hopped in the driver’s seat. “I think I better drive. You’re either too sleepy to drive, or you’re too busy thinking about the river. Either way, I’ll get us there faster.”

“Why’s that?” I asked

“Because! I want to fish.”

I smiled and tipped my hat over my eyes. Chuck started the engine then flicked on the radio, and as I drifted into unconsciousness I heard the words to *Cinderella* by FireFall whisper into my ears.

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I woke to the slamming of the door and Chuck saying, “Rise and shine, jackass. There are steelies aplenty, and you’re gonna miss ‘em.” I tipped my hat up and looked around, curious to see which spot he decided to bring us to. Before I could respond, he said, “I also scouted out the spot upriver I was telling you about.” At my curious look, he rolled his eyes and said, “You know, where the cuts are hanging out. It looks like they’re hitting number eighteen PMDs.”

“Sounds great,” I yawned as I slid out of the truck. Funny thing about Shirley’s pie, it always makes me sleepy. Either that or maybe it’s Chuck’s constant rambling that lulls me to sleep on jaunts like these.

“Eh, Reed, check this out.” Chuck was leaning over a large boulder pointing down to a relatively calm pool at the bottom of the embankment. “Steelies are down there. I just know it,” he said with a grin. “I think this is the place that I hooked into that steelhead a few weeks ago, although I was busy playin’ the fish and can’t be for certain.”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out,” I said. There had to be some decent fish down there. I knew this because Chuck has this annoying habit of chewing on his cheek when he senses an ideal spot to fish. It’s something he’s done since he was a kid. I gotta be honest, it makes him look like a goldfish. But I’ve learned to look at it as his way of getting into the fish’s head, instead of looking like a moron.

I got my gear out and set up my Spey rod for hitting the steelhead, then rigged up my five-weight for the cutthroats upriver. For his part, Chuck wasted no time in rigging up his ten weight for fishing the pool right in front of us and didn’t even bother to set up his trout rod.

“You not going to rig up for the cuts?” I asked, though I could see he couldn’t have cared less at the moment. He was on a mission and damned determined to get the steelhead that he lost a few weeks back.

From over his shoulder, I heard him say, “Later! This is too important to bother thinking about those rinky-dink cuts now, man.”

I raised an eyebrow, shaking my head as I watched him go. “Just like the postal service,” I muttered. “Nor rain, nor sleet, nor sea-run cutthroat trout will stop him from that steely.”

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That steely had been the elusive one that got away. Chuck and Jeff McClintock, another childhood buddy of ours, were up here a few weeks ago fishing the area, and Chuck lit into a very nice steelhead that played him for about thirty minutes. I know it was a nice fish because Jeff doesn’t lie. He’s the only fisherman that I’ve ever known not to embellish the size of a fish. The rest of us generally adhere to the rule of three or multiples of three. For example, if you catch a ten-inch rainbow, it is an unspoken rule that, when you tell your counterparts about the fish, you add at least three inches. It also depends on the type of fish that you are applying the rule to. In other words, if you catch a steelhead, then the rule of three means pounds. So, a nine-pound steelhead ends up being a twelve-pound fish when the information gets back to the council at the fly shop. If you start bringing exact mathematics into the equation, then it gets all shot to hell, and the validity of the story is no longer credible.

When Chuck and Jeff were fishing here a few weeks ago, it was Chuck who lit into the fish, while Jeff took all the mental notes necessary as he always does to be able to reproduce results later at the drop of a hat. Chuck caught the beast on a bright orange #2 Popsicle. He was using a fifteen-pound leader, tied piecemeal by Ted using a tapered design ranging from thirty-pound test at the butt down to fifteen-pound test at the tippet. He set the hook after fishing the down and swing method on his downriver side.

That’s just the way Jeff’s head works. It’s like a logbook—constantly cataloging things

like conditions, river flow, water temperature, patterns used, where a bird takes a shit, and how to tell the difference between summer and winter steelhead smolt. However, you can only take so much of this before your head begins to hurt, and you find yourself unconsciously changing the subject over something a little more mundane such as politics.

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Referring back to Jeff's mental notes, I tied on a #2 bright orange Popsicle and cast for the far wall. Chuck took up his position a couple of hundred yards upriver from me at the head of the pool, and within minutes, I heard a whoop and a holler from Chuck's direction. I didn't bother reeling up as I knew this would go on for a few minutes while he was setting the hook and then would calm down as he began to play the fish. Only if he came down my way and asked for help would I reel up and inspect. Otherwise, if I bit and went to investigate, I would be riddled with an onslaught of comments like, "What, you haven't gotten anything yet?" or, "*The Box* strikes again."

Even though Chuck is thirty-seven, he reminds me a lot of Walter Matthau's character in *Grumpy Old Men*. Remember? He was the one who was always bragging and carrying on about how many fish he caught, etc. Well, Chuck is almost the same way when it comes to fishing. I guess in the end it's ok that he brags about his fishing skills. I'll grant him that... if nothing else, he's a hell of a fisherman.

While I was busy thinking about all the ridiculous comments that Chuck would be barraging me with, I almost didn't notice the sudden tug of my line. Luckily, I have been fishing long enough to recognize the telltale strike of a steelhead. I set the hook and began my battle.

It was a glorious display put on by my quarry as he first ran like hell to the other end of the pool, which was about a hundred yards away. He then treated me to a series of spectacular leaps. I really couldn't get a gauge on the size at the moment as he was on the other side of the pool; however, I knew he was very sizable by the force he was exerting on the other end.

Sensing he was approaching the end of the pool and limits of his tether, the fish then moved back towards me and then upriver. Again, he jumped and tugged with all his might and tried every trick in the book to spit the hook. I held tight by keeping the tip up and constant pressure on the line.

I was glad to be fishing with my Spey as it allows for two-handed fishing which curbs fatigue. A wily steelhead can wear you out almost as quickly as you wear them out. In fact, I am convinced steelhead fishing is not your conventional battle of technique and skill so much as a battle of strength and stamina.

In the end, the battle concludes in one of three ways: The first is that you, the angler, emerge victorious with the beautiful opponent lying at your feet gleaming in the sun; the second way is the fish makes one last good push for the deep or far side and snaps the line (this outcome usually ends in frustration and exhaustion as the fish has overpowered you whereby proving that your manhood is lacking); the third way ends with the fish making one



last good leap. While in the air, he shakes his head and with one good breath spits the hook out with a proverbial, “*Up yours, fly slinger!!!*” and swims off in victory.

This last way is probably the most painful way to end the battle with a steelhead. If nothing else, it is a reminder that you were outsmarted by a creature whose brain is one-tenth the size of yours.

This battle was going to end in my favor, I could tell. I was doing everything by the numbers and was feeling good about my technique. The fish jumped a couple more times and then dove to the deep part of the pool. I gave a good tug to bring him back up to the surface as I didn’t want to lose him in the rocks or under the snagging log in the middle of the pool. I was careful not to horse him but kept constant pressure on him to coax him back up.

By this time, Chuck had landed and released his fish. The only reason that I knew this was that he shouted loud enough to be heard in the next county that the bastard was defeated.

I was too busy with my fish to acknowledge his catch. All I could muster was, “Nice catch... now don’t bug me, I’m busy.” I probably shouldn’t have said this, knowing Chuck would take it as an invitation to come over and give coaching tips.

“Be right there, buddy,” yelled Chuck, knowing that I had a fish on.

“No, it’s not necessary. I’m tryin’ to keep him from the far side. Just take care of your fish,” I huffed.

“Already let him go,” he yelled as he was making his way over the rocks.

“No, really, it’s cool. I don’t need any help. I’m cool!”

“Maybe so. I just want to see you land that hog.”

“Fine. Just stay back a bit.”

“Hey, no problem. Just don’t lose him.”

When he finally got down to where I was making my final stand, he was out of breath from clambering up the rocks and then down the path to get to where I was. I had to admit it was a pretty funny sight to look up and see that hefty bastard running in his waders. It was fortunate that I had something to distract me. Otherwise, I would have started laughing uncontrollably at the sight of a two-fifty-pound-plus chunky guy wearing a floppy fishing hat turned up and running in a pair of neoprene waders, looking a little like a floundering green walrus.

When he got to where I was, he was panting, and immediately started in with the instructions. “Keep the tip up! Don’t horse him! Loosen the drag! Jesus, you’re gonna lose him! Want me to land him for ya?”

Annoyed, I finally turned slightly and snapped, “SHUT...THE...HELL...UP...WILL...YOU? I’m TRYING to catch a fish here!”

“Oh, sorry... no problem...don't...”

“DAMMIT CHUCK, SHUT UP!”

“Right.”

After about twenty-five minutes, I started to bring him closer to the surface. When he

finally got a few feet from me, he made his one last jump.

“He’s gonna spit it,” Chuck started to yell.

“Not if I can help it,” I replied.

He made the jump, and I kept the rod tip up and poured on the pressure. When he jumped, I looked, and then had to do a double take as I thought I saw something else in his mouth. “Did you see that?” I asked.

“See what?”

“I thought I saw something else in his mouth.”

“Naw, probably just your fly,” said Chuck. “Guess we’ll find out in a couple of minutes.”

The fish made one last attempt at a run but was apparently out of energy as I reeled him in. Even to the last, he made half-hearted attempts to escape, but it was clear that he was becoming disoriented and lethargic because of the build-up of nitrogen in his blood.

When he finally surrendered and let me reel him, he came almost willingly, as though he knew his salvation at this point could only be found in capitulation. I waded out to a more manageable depth of water and bent down to grab his tail.

I was about to remove the hook when I paused to get a better look. At first glance, he appeared to be a little longer than my arm from nose to the tip of his tail, but it was hard to tell as the sun had gone behind some clouds, obscuring my view. I brought him closer, turning him to get a better look, and nodded, confirming my suspicions had been correct.

I laughed out loud and said, “You’re never gonna believe this, Chuck.”

“What, what is it?”

“Which fly did you say you were using a couple of weeks back when you lit into that steely?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Orange Popsicle #2. Why?”

“What did it look like?”

“Well, you know what a Popsicle looks like, Reed. Mine was kinda faded. I pulled it from *The Box*. Why?”

“Did it look like this?” I asked, holding up the very fly Chuck just described. As if by magic, the sun chose that exact moment to burn through the clouds and shine on the ratty old fly.

Seeing the hook glistening in the sun, Chuck’s face drained of all color, making him look like a zombie. “It’s a sign,” he said in a far-off voice.

“Sign of what?”

“*The Box*... Don’t you see, Reed? It’s a gift from beyond.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” I scoffed.

“The fly you’re holding in your hand came from *The Box*. It’s gotta be a sign.”

“This is unbelievable,” I said, rolling my eyes. “The only sign I see is that you’re an idiot and can’t land a fish to save your ass.”

“No... Don’t you see? You caught the same fish as I did, and the same fly that I used is still with him... and now it has come back to me.”

“Man, I think Shirley’s pie is getting to you. That or that dead trout under the seat in your

truck is getting to you.”

Chuck ignored my comment. “No... it’s *The Box*. That fly is from *The Box*,” he said, pointing a shaky finger. “And the fish that took it is a steelhead. It’s... it’s that same steelhead that the old man on the river caught.”

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*The Box*, as Chuck refers to it, isn’t anything special. It’s just one of those old aluminum fly boxes that you get from the Cabela’s catalog or the local sporting goods store, nothing too impressive. However, you can’t convince Chuck of that, since he found it one day when he and his dad and brothers were fishing over on one of the coastal rivers. His older brother told him that it was a cursed box and said that no good would come of him possessing *The Box*, in that he would never catch a fish as long as it was with him. He then went on to explain that the cursed box came from the old man on the river.

As Chuck tells it, apparently there was an old man who was fishing on that same river years before who lit into a steelhead of biblical proportions. It is said the old man battled the fish for a day, and when he finally reeled the fish in close enough to land him, the steelhead swam at him, leaped into the air and took the old man down to the depths with him, never to return.

Of course, this, like most other fish tales, is total B.S. Oh, there was an old man of the river, but some biblically proportioned steelhead didn’t swallow him. Nope, it turns out that the old man was a drunk who would venture to the river to escape the constant henpecking of his wife. I imagine he took one drink too many one day, slipped on a rock and slid into the waiting arms of his fluid mistress, never to be released from her icy embrace.

For the longest time, Chuck heeded his brother’s warning and never even touched *The Box*. However, one time when Chuck and I were heading over to the Kilches to fish, he grabbed *The Box* by mistake. You should have seen the look on his face when he realized he’d grabbed the accursed item. It was something akin to the look of horror one gets when they realize they’ve made a fatal mistake. But what was he going to do? He had to use something, because I sure as hell wasn’t about to let him lose any of my flies. I swear, he looked like an arthritic old man the way he reached a shaky finger into the box and pulled out something that used to resemble a fly, tied it on, and let it fly. I’m not much for superstitious mumbo-jumbo, but I’ll be damned if *The Box* didn’t turn out to be his good-luck talisman, because, since then, he’s rarely had a day on the river where he didn’t limit out.

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Five minutes later, Chuck was still droning on, but I had stopped listening. I just stood there, shaking my head, trying to remain patient. But I’d had just about enough of Chuck’s nonsense, so I casually walked over, waiting for him to turn away from me. To my delight, he did. While his back was turned, I reached down and cupped my hands together to get a handful of icy cold water. The moment Chuck turned around, I let fly, dowsing him with a

face full of the Trask. It hit him with a huge splash, causing him to falter in his step and fall ass-first into the river. The commotion was big enough to scare any fish in the vicinity for the rest of the morning.

He came up with a gasp and screamed, "WHAT IN THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR?"

"Man, I think Shirley's pie's getting to ya. You're talking crazy."

He started towards me, and I could see that he aimed to get me back for that little stunt. "You jackass! I'm gonna dunk your skinny butt for that one."

"Now take it easy, Chuck, I was just tryin' to snap your ass out of that catatonic diatribe that you were going on about my fish being some mystical sign."

He regarded me with a look of mixed hatred and resentment. "Well, it was..."

"Now don't start that crap again. It was a total coincidence that I caught the same fish that you did. Think about it. You caught that fish in the same pool a few weeks back, right? Plus, we're pretty far up, so it's most likely that he wasn't going to go up any further."

"I suppose," said Chuck, scratching his chin. "But tell me this: How is it possible that the same fish is going to be caught by the same person on the same fly?" he protested.

"Well, first of all, idiot, it was caught by me, not you. Second, I used that fly because Jeff said that's what they were hitting."

"Maybe, but I was with you when you caught it."

"Oh, shut up, and go dry off. There is still plenty of catching to be done today, provided that you didn't scare them back to Tillamook Bay."

In all the turmoil, I forgot that I was still holding the steelhead. Only when he wiggled a little did it dawn on me that I still had him by the tail. "Dammit! Now look what you made me do you," I said, pointing down at the exhausted fish who was now floating on his side. "Now I'm gonna have to keep him, and you *know* how I feel about that."

"I'll take him," said Chuck through a toothy, shit-eating grin. "I'll get him stuffed and put him and *The Box* on my mantle."

"The hell you will. I said I don't *like* to keep them, but I didn't say that I *won't* keep them. This hog's going on the grill tonight. Jaz loves fresh steelhead."

Chuck's grin evaporated. "Fine! But I still say it's a sign," he muttered under his breath.

"Oh, shut up and go dry off. There's fish to catch."

I honestly hate keeping fish unless they are a steelhead like the one I caught, or a nice fat spring or fall chinook. They're worth it—not as many bones to pick out. Trout, however, are a different story altogether. I consider it bad karma to keep trout, but I would never tell Chuck, knowing he'd start that whole stupid superstitious baloney up again, and I don't have time for that.

"There's no way I'm going to be able to revive him after this long," I complained, looking down at the poor creature. It was evident that I was going to have to keep this one, which, in truth, wasn't a big deal. Nevertheless, I was annoyed at having to keep this one on account of being distracted by Chuck's moment of insanity. It was such a good fight that I wanted to return him to finish his spawning. But the more I thought about it, the more I

reasoned he would end up seagull food or, worse yet, rot somewhere on the shore. *It's a sign...* I swear, what a gullible dumbass.

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Chuck shouldered past me on his way back up to the truck. "I'm gonna go for the cuts upriver, you jerk," he said, pausing long enough to flick water in my face.

"Good," I said, wincing at the trickle of icy water running down my neck. "It'll give me some peace and quiet when I head downriver and check out that other pool." I followed Chuck back and dropped my prize in the cooler, laughing at the sight of him dripping from head to toe.

"You got that scale handy?" I asked.

"Sure, it's in behind the seat. One sec."

"Watch out for the dead trout."

"Haha, very funny." A couple of minutes later, he handed me the scale. "There you go. So, how much is it?"

"Says here he's coming in at a healthy nineteen pounds, eight ounces."

"Did you apply the rule of three?"

"Won't have to. Thanks to you, he's goin' home with me. And since I left my truck at Cane's, everybody will get a good look at him."

"Sure you don't want to fish the cuts? I saw a monster hatch beginning, and I would like to see what else *The Box* will produce."

"Well, be sure to watch for more signs...Nostradamus," I said as he began to walk away.

Over his shoulder, I heard him reply, "Up yours, schmuck."

I laughed as I grabbed my Spey and made my way down to the next pool.

Twenty-five hard-fought minutes later, I released my second steelhead of the day. It wasn't the hog I'd caught earlier, but she was a beautiful and bright fish with plenty of life in her. I thanked my partner for the dance and gave a brief wave and a smile as I nosed her toward the deep pool.

"And that's how you do it," I said to no one in particular, then thought, *Thank GOD Chuck wasn't around to distract me with his nonsensical ramblings.* It definitely made releasing the fish easier. I was about to let her go when I remembered my digital camera. I took it out and started snapping pictures of the fish, the spot where I caught her, and the fly used, knowing Jeff would be asking for the information for his catalog. And, if for no other reason, it would be something to rub Chuck's nose in because it was solid proof, something he never seems to have unless someone else is fishing with him.

I held the fish for a couple of minutes, slowly reviving her until she finally snapped out of her funk and darted off. I was happy to see her go, heartened by the notion I wouldn't have to kill another one of these noble creatures. I don't know if it's the purist in me or merely the idea of having to clean the damn thing. I have never liked cleaning fish. Not that I have an aversion to blood and guts, mind you, but I think it's that nasty slime that gets on

everything, particularly in those places you can't immediately see. And, of course, once it dries it gives off that foul dead fish smell which can linger for years.

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It was getting pretty close to noon when I got back to the truck. I grabbed my lunch bag from my backpack in the cab and a beer from the cooler. I pulled the tailgate down and sat to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet before I joined Chuck upriver to tackle the cuts. It turned out to be a spectacular fall day once the fog burned off. The breeze coming in off the Pacific had that wonderful sea smell lingering in it. It's something I never get tired of because it is a constant reminder that I live in the majestic Northwest. The scent is found nowhere else in the world, a perfect marriage of sea air and evergreen trees, which evokes thoughts of long drives down the coast on Highway 101 with my wife or eating fresh seafood. It can lull you to sleep most peacefully and wake you up feeling refreshed. *Abbbb! Heaven.*

"WOO HOO!" came Chuck's irritating voice, shattering my moment of silence. He appeared from behind the trees a moment later with a creel full of cutthroat trout. And even though I generally hate keeping trout, I had to admit they'd go pretty well on the barbecue later tonight. I was just glad I wouldn't be the one cleaning them.

"Ni-ice haul, Chuck," I said as he opened up his creel to display his prize.

"Thanks," he said with grin. The look turned sour when he regarded me with a raised eyebrow. "Now don't go and get any funny ideas, Reed. I haven't cleaned them yet, and I don't want any damned guts in or around my truck!"

I raised my hand in mock defense. "Hey, no problem. I figured you've already had your daily dose of grief from me today. And I'll have you know, by the way, it was Jeff who spelled out 'FISH MURDERER' in trout guts on your truck last time, not me."

He eyed me skeptically. "See, I'm just not buying it, Reed. Jeff may have been the one to do the deed, but the idea smacks of something you'd conceive," he said, wagging a finger at me.

"Be that as it may, none of the others are here to witness the genius of my shenanigans. When it's just you and I, my pranks are just not as funny," I said, patting him on the shoulder. "I think you need a crowd to make your tantrums amusing."

He chuckled, unable to deny the humor of the moment. "Well, I'm glad to know I bring you idiots a good laugh. Nice to know where I stand with you jerks," he said, shaking his head. "You guys are just as bad as my older brother."

"Now, now, Chuck, I think that's a little uncalled for. After all, none of us ever put ladyfinger firecrackers between your toes while you slept."

He winced. "Yeah, I almost forgot about that one," he said with a chuckle. I was happy to see he was able to finally laugh about it after all these years.

I started to disassemble my Spey rod, then looked at him with a smile. "Hey, I said I wasn't gonna do anything, and I meant it. Are you done for the day?" I asked.

"Naw, just for right now. All this success has got me tuckered. Besides, I figured it was a good time to take a lunch break."

“Sounds like a good idea. What did Am’ fix for you today?”

“Oh, you know, the usual—sandwiches chips, beer... nothing fancy.”

“Well, don’t forget, you have that pie from this morning.”

His eyes lit up. “Hey, that’s right. One piece now, and one for the road home,” he said with a gleam in his eye.

I smiled at him sheepishly. “Uhh, well, not exactly... see, I figured since I bought them, I was entitled to one of those two pieces.”

His look of elation evaporated like a fart in the wind. “WHAT? You jackass! I was gonna eat one on the way home!”

I shrugged. “Well, as I said, I paid for them, and since I was hungry, I went ahead and helped myself. Besides, if you really want a piece of pie for the road, we can stop by Shirley’s and get another one.”

“Well, I guess so,” said Chuck. I could swear he was sticking out his bottom lip as he said this.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, stop whining and let’s get back to the fish before it gets too late.”

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We finished lunch and headed back upriver to the spot where Chuck had been earlier. Just as he said, there was a pretty prolific hatch going on when we got there. I think he had pretty much forgotten about the second piece of pie because, as soon as we got to the pool, Chuck started doing his cheek chewing thing again.

I decided to wait and watch for a little while before wetting the line, mostly because I wanted to find the sweet spot, but partly because I do enjoy watching Chuck cast. He may be quirky, but he is one hell of a fly-fisherman.

His casts are the kind that you see all the professionals use—all perfect with tight little loops on the forward and backward casts. I once got a great photograph of him casting in a pool up in Washington where the light hit just right. He had back casted a couple of times and was on his final forward cast. I caught it right at the perfect moment when the line had almost unfurled. The spray coming off the line glittered in the sunlight, creating a vivid rainbow. It was indeed a thing of beauty, one of those moments usually caught by a professional photographer. But the scene paled in comparison to the look of contentment on Chuck's face. I've seen him smile when fishing before, but I can honestly say I've only seen an expression that serene on his face a couple of times in his life. If there is such a thing as poetry in motion, it's watching this guy cast a fly. Plus, it helps to remind me that Chuck is not as much of a dork as he comes off.

Unfortunately, Chuck's poetic casting was not meant to be today. Whatever serenity had been present was soon replaced by his loud whooping and hollering, signifying he had a fish on.

I guess I hadn't been paying close attention to what he was casting because the fish he had on looked like a very sizable steelhead. “Weren't you throwing dries?” I asked. Keeping his focus on the fish, he ignored me, so I repeated my question. Again, he said nothing,

which was not like him at all. I ambled over to where he was and watched the fight of the day unfold. "Hey, Chuck..." I asked again, but thought better of it when I saw the look of concentration on his face.

A moment later, he finally gasped, "Yeah, heard you the first time. Gimme a sec."

"No problem, I'll get out of your way." I climbed up onto a big boulder jutting out into the pool above where Chuck was in the thick of it. From that vantage, I could see quite well the silhouette of the huge fish at the end of Chuck's line. "HOLY COW! What a monster you got!" I yelled.

"Feels like a damn truck!" he said, trying to get purchase on the slick rocks of the pool to make his stand.

Moments passed while we watched the line meander back and forth. From the way it refused to come up, it seemed as though the fish was ignoring Chuck's attempts to coax it from the depths.

"Is she stuck? Hey! Reed!" asked Chuck with annoyance.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, I can see her, and no, she ain't stuck. She just doesn't want to come up. I think she's ignoring you," I said, keeping my eyes trained on the behemoth in the murky depths.

After what seemed like an hour, the fish finally broke the surface with his first jump of the fight. The sight reminded me of some cheesy sci-fi flick, complete with an ever building crescendo. This was no ordinary fish. It was... *The Mutant Steelhead From Hell* with colors that looked like something out of a painting. The deep forest green running along the fish's back gradually faded into a bright silvery viridescence, while a brilliant blood-red band down her side punctuated the resplendence of this beautiful creature. This fish was an old native, as was evident by its deep colors and battle-scarred fins. When I made eye contact with the beast, it felt as though it was staring into my very soul as if to say, "How DARE you desecrate my haven of peace, jerk!"

"JESUS FRIGGIN' CHRIST!!!" I yelled in amazement. Chuck was still trying to get purchase as the monster continued to demonstrate who was playing who. "Keep the pressure on her!"

"What the hell do you think I'm trying to do? Get over here and give me a hand, will you? I keep slipping on these blasted rocks."

"Be right there," I yelled as I climbed down and made my way over to where Chuck was losing the battle by degrees.

The awkwardness of the terrain under the water combined with the size and strength of the fish was enough to throw Chuck off balance. He gritted his teeth, trying to dig in.

As if sensing Chuck's precarious position, the fish halted its forward momentum, turned tail and ran straight at him. Chuck wavered, flailing his arms to maintain his balance, but it was no use. Once the line went slack, the sudden absence of opposing force ended the struggle, and into the water Chuck fell.

The battle didn't end there, however. Fortunately, Chuck is wired to lock his grip like a bear trap as soon as a fish tickles the line. So what was meant to be an assured victory for the



steelhead turned into a renewed battle for dominance.

I couldn't help but laugh when the only thing I saw sticking out of the water was Chuck's forearm gripping the rod. I ran over and took the rod from him while he clawed his way to the shore. I reached down to help him just as the fish redoubled its struggle to get free. My bout of laughter died in my throat a moment later when the steelhead made a strong run for the far end of the pool, threatening to take my arm with it.

"What the hell is this thing, a shark?" I gasped, struggling to keep my shoulder from popping out of its socket.

"Not so funny now, is it, buddy?" spluttered Chuck.

I backed out of the water holding the rod high to keep the pressure on the fish while I reached down and grabbed Chuck by the waders and dragged him to the shoreline.

Right about the third time the fish jumped, Chuck was back on his feet and ready to take over his fight. I was going to let him have his just reward, but not before I played her out just a little more.

"Ok, man, I'm all right, let me have my rod back," said Chuck, holding out his hand.

"Hang on a sec, man, I got her in a groove."

"Well, that's all fine and dandy, Reed, but it's my damned rod, and it's my damned fish. Now hand it over!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, one sec," I said, sparing him a glance. I cocked an eyebrow at him and scoffed, "You can barely stand up yet. Why not rest for another moment."

"To hell with that, I'm fine," replied Chuck. "C'mon, gimme my rod!"

I chuckled, suddenly reminded of the way my six-year-old whines when my three-year-old grabs her toys, complete with a foot stomp to emphasize the point and clenched fists. "All right, all right, keep your shirt on, Chuckles. Here's your damned rod," I said, handing it over. I could have been a real jerk and tossed it at him, but you just don't do that to a man, particularly when there's a behemoth on the other end of the line. "It won't make any difference anyway, you're just gonna lose it," I said with a laugh.

Chuck snatched the rod. "Gimme that, you moron. I am gonna *get* that fish, you'll see." I always love to do that Chuck. Getting him riled up in those situations is the easiest thing to do. He gets so bottled up tight in those moments that he could pop. The funny thing is that when he gets riled like that, he actually fishes better. I think it has something to do with his manhood being tested; I don't know.

I handed the possessed rod back over to its owner and stood back to watch the rest of the spectacle unfold. The fish jumped again and fixed us with another damning stare. Instead of flinching, however, Chuck stared right back into its soul and delivered his own message of defiance. The fish ran to the far side of the pool to the boulder where I stood when Chuck first lit into the fish. Remembering my digital camera, I started snapping shots. If nothing else, I was at least going to get the fight documented for posterity. Plus, I guess a part of me wanted to help Chuck reinstate his credibility with the fly-tying round table back at Cane's fly shop.

Soon, the fish began to show the signs of fatigue. Its jumps came less and less frequently,

while the violent undulations of the rod slowed to a dull tug. Feeling more confident, Chuck waded back out into the pool to embrace his mighty foe. He raised the rod high one final time to keep the pressure on. One way or another, this epic battle was coming to an end.

"Gimme a hand here, Reed; he's too big for me to take alone," said Chuck, backing slowly out of the pool.

"Be right there," I said, snapping one final shot.

Chuck began to turn around to hand the rod to me when he stepped down and plunged into the river for the third time that day.

"GODDAMMIT!" he yelled when he came back to the surface. It was a wonder how he was able to keep his waders on with all the water he'd taken on.

Reaching down for the third time in as many minutes, I pulled my friend out of the drink, hopefully for the last time. Both angler and fish were beyond exhausted. But whereas the fish lay motionless, resigned to its fate, Chuck came out of the water cussing up a blue streak. I guess falling three times into the drink would be enough to pull the short curls of just about anybody; however, Chuck's three-peat mishap would not go without reward.

He stepped up to me and stared down at the fish, water dripping from his nose and beard. He shook his head and chuckled. "It has been an honor, madame," he said to the fish, as he raised his hand in a salute.

The fish moved its jaw slowly, as if to say, "Well played, old boy. I concede defeat." It struggled once in a half-hearted attempt to reassert its defiance but thought better of it let its tail drop.

Chuck's anger evaporated when he gazed his prize. "How much do you think?" he asked me with a sidelong glance.

"Hard to say. I don't have my scale handy. If I apply the rule of three, then I'd say he's gotta be somewhere around twenty-eight," I said, scratching my chin.

Chuck shook his head. "No need to apply the rule of three on this one. You got pictures, right?"

I nodded. "You realize you're going to have to keep that fish if you plan on getting your credibility restored," I said.

"Yeah, well, I suppose. I'd rather just have you snap a shot or two. This guy deserves to go back to his sanctuary."

I turned to him, then froze as I stared down at the wide-open pocket where *The Box* usually rested. "Umm?" I said.

He gave me a strange look, then followed my gaze down to the now empty pocket. "AW NO! SON OF A BITCH!!!" Chuck exclaimed.

In any other circumstances, I would have been laughing my ass off, but this was one of those situations somewhat akin to losing your best friend. I couldn't meet his gaze.

"No, no, NO!!! You gotta be frigging kidding me!" he shouted, flying into a paroxysm of rage.

"Aw man, I'm so sorry," I said quietly. I patted him on the shoulder. "It must have slipped your vest when you went under that last time."

Unwilling to accept defeat, Chuck shouted, “QUICK, Reed, look for it!”

“I’m sorry, bud, it’s been several minutes and the current’s too strong here. I’m sorry.”

“NO, that was my lucky BOX!” said Chuck, stomping his foot.

I rolled my eyes. “All right, FINE!” I said, wanting to head off any further temper tantrums on his part. “Stick around for a moment; I’ll go take a look.” But it had been too long, and the rapids at the end of the pool were too rough. As I looked, I could swear that I could see the glint of the sun off the old aluminum box as it fell over the last boulder before it disappeared into oblivion. I felt a lump in my throat and was almost compelled to take off my cap as if to pay my final respects to *The Box*. In secret, though, I think the lump was more my attempt to choke back the urge to laugh uncontrollably. It soon passed, and I returned to where Chuck was kneeling, exhausted, over his prize.

Without looking at me, he asked, “Well, any luck?”

“Unfortunately, no. I didn’t see it, bud. I’m truly sorry.” I was still trying to choke back the urge to bust out but regained control when the attention turned back to the fish. “Man, what a monster!”

“Yeah, big fish,” said Chuck, though I could tell he was still sulking. “Almost biblical in proportion... you don’t think...?”

“Think what?” I said with rising skepticism in my voice. I knew where he was going.

“...That this is the fish that took out the old man all those years ago?”

I wasn’t going to start that crap again, so I played it cool and then nipped in the bud. “Well, if it is—not that I believe any of that nonsense—then it would explain why *The Box* left you. I mean, if you think about it, it makes sense. You catch the fish that took out the old man, and now the curse is lifted.”

As if filled with a sense of closure, Chuck said, “Yeah, wow. Wouldn’t that be something?” he said almost reverently. Fortunately, he didn’t catch me rolling my eyes.

We turned our attention back to the beautiful old fish and watched in silence as it began stirring with renewed signs of life. Chuck held her for a brief second, then opened his hands and watched her disappear back into the depths. He wiped his hands a couple of times indicating the end to his valiant effort, then turned and looked me with a wry grin playing at the corners of his mouth. We stared at each other for the span of a heartbeat before we broke out in laughter.

When our laughter died to a chuckle, Chuck said, “You’re probably right, Reed. All that curse crap is pretty ridiculous, eh?”

I snorted derisively and shook my head but bit down on any further witty comments.

We started back towards the truck, trekking back up the narrow trail that we came in on. All the while, I saw Chuck looking longingly at the rapids as if clinging to the ever-diminishing hope that *The Box* would rise from the depths to be returned to him. Unfortunately, none such was the case. *The Box* was returned to its rightful owner somewhere deep in the Trask or one of the countless other coastal rivers. I suppose there was some kind of mysticism to *The Box* and the history surrounding it, how it came into Chuck’s life as quietly and enigmatically as it left his life. I also pondered the idea that each

and every fisherman has their totem, good luck charm, or habits that promote success in the art of angling, whereby allowing them to catch that 'steelhead of biblical proportions.'

I reached into my vest and pulled out a similar aluminum box and handed it to Chuck. "Here, man. I know it's not *The Box*, but who's to say you can't think of this one the same way?"

Chuck wiped his brow and smiled as he took the proffered gift and said, "You know, Reed, despite being a royal pain in my ass most of the time, there's no one else I'd rather go fishing with."

Fin

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# WANTED: HUSBAND/HANDYMAN

BY SELMA MARTIN  
(FROM ZUSHI, JAPAN)



A tendril of gray light filtered in through a crack in the window curtain. Tim opened his eyes and blinked, giving them time to adjust. The soothing rhythm of Grace’s breathing, her face, inches away from his, and her scent, like freshly cut hay, sent shivers down his spine. Slowly he lifted his head from the pillow and contemplated her sleeping face. He wanted to touch her but held back because of the hour.

Lifting his body, one muscle at a time, he sat, set his feet on the wooden floor and slowly stood up. He lingered by the side of the bed for a brief moment, smiling at Grace’s posture, the hug-pillow held delicately between her legs. His heart surged. He had never known happiness like this before, at the start of every day. He wanted to marry the girl if she’d have him.

Tim bent forward to pick up his boots and, holding them firmly in his hands, tiptoed to the door, opening and closing it ever so softly.

Outside the breeze smelled of apples. Tim inhaled deeply, puffing out his chest, anxious to get his day started; excited to complete the pipework for the bathroom in their bedroom. A couple of days, a week at the most – that’s how long it’d take him to get it all in order.

He clasped his hands behind his head and looked at the orchard. For months, the clutter hid the trees. Today, the shy sun peeked through them, shedding golden light on the cleaned yard. With a soft sounding *clack-tap, clack-tap* he descended the stairs nodding, satisfied, and made his way to the barn.

Yesterday Tim had made the final trip into town with the horses, Zora and Gretchen, pulling a heavy cart with the last of the non-ferrous metal Jon White had amassed and idly piled all around the yard for years. Lucky for them, the sale of that metal got them enough money for the renovation plans Tim had for the house.

As he approached the barn door, his lips twitched into a grin. Tim heard the territorial “coo, coo” of the doves in the haystack in the loft, warning him not to come any closer.

“It’s just me, Noreen, your old roommate, remember?” Tim whispered, and turning to the horses, “I said it yesterday but I want to say it again. Thanks for the help all these months,” he said softly. “All those trips into town; I couldn’t have done it without your help.” The horses nickered.

Visiting town with Zora and Gretchen, horses that everyone knew had belonged to Grace’s deceased husband, made Tim the laughingstock of the town. He knew that everyone had read the ridiculous advertisement that crazy Mrs. Jon White had placed in the newspaper. He didn’t mind it; he was willing to take it all — for Grace. Tim had kept his

eyes downcast, hidden under his wide-brimmed hat, ignoring the banter of laughter he heard behind his back.

Tim fed the horses and moved on to the goats, grain-feeding and milking them. He opened the chicken pen but left the egg collecting to do later with the boys, just toddlers, but old enough to gather eggs. Just as he was washing himself out by the shed, he smelled the whiff of bacon from the kitchen. Tim finished his ablutions, filled two large buckets of water from the well and carried them in for Grace.

After setting the buckets down to accommodate her bending angle, he held her close, kissed her, made funny faces at the boys, and together they sat to eat a hearty family breakfast.

Later, returning to the house from collecting eggs with the boys, Tim took something from the top shelf of the bookcase. Nodding, he handed new storybooks to Grace to read to the boys. He knew she, too, enjoyed the books Mrs. Price selected for the kids. Reaching for his tools with one hand and touching her cheek with the other, he whispered, "See you later," and then he withdrew into the master bedroom to work.

When he entered his crawl space, Tim was thinking fondly of the matronly librarian in town. A chortle escaped him when he remembered how embarrassed he had been when he entered the library to check out birthing books, which he ended up not doing that first week. Never pressing him for information, just eyeing him with curiosity, Mrs. Price sat with him. She must have liked him. By the second week, she had become his informer, telling him bits and pieces about Grace Spencer before she ran away and married the eccentric Jon White from the outskirts of the neighboring town.

"A sweet girl. An only child to a very strict and overprotective father who was a teacher. He homeschooled her," Mrs. Price told Tim. "They'd keep her locked up all day doing schoolwork which her father would review with her after returning home."

"And how was it that you came to meet Grace?"

"Her mother brought her to the library once a week. On Saturdays. The two were voracious readers and they took home piles of books to read every week."

After a few such conversations with Mrs. Price, Tim confided in her that Grace was pregnant with her late husband's third child. "She won't let me take her to a doctor and insists on giving birth at home once again."

It was then that Mrs. Price, who came from a family of midwives, started instructing Tim, coaching him and helping him to gain confidence. She had him check out books on the proper birthing procedure. Tim memorized it all.

Tim rubbed his hands together, centering his mind back to the task at hand. "Gonna have running water in the house for when the baby comes at the end of the month," Tim said with pride to the empty room. He turned on the radio and got to work.

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A persistent low backache had Grace moving a little slow that morning. As she looked out into her yard, happy with the way it had transformed, visions of more possibilities

danced in her head. Watching Tim move from chore to chore she nodded, feeling blessed.

By noon a bloody show confirmed what she already knew. She convinced the boys to climb onto the kitchen sink and gave them a bath. After they were done she read to them and put them down for a nap, lying and resting as well. When she got up she set to cleaning the sink and sterilizing everything she knew she would need.

The contractions, fifteen minutes apart, started before suppertime.

She turned to look at her boys, content, their heads full of ideas from the books and stories that Tim never seemed to tire of repeating to them. Would he still want to stay after the baby was born? Would he ask her to marry him? She pulled out a sheet of paper from a drawer in the kitchen and, holding it close to her chest, walked slowly to the wooden armchair with the new cushions Tim had bought for her and sat. “Anyone up for a bear hug?” she called to her babies, folding the paper and tucking it in the pocket of her apron.

Three-year-old JJ looked up from his make-believe railway yard on the floor. “Just fo' a minute, okay, Mommy?” he said, getting up, “we' too busy loading impo'tant cargo on trains.”

“Too busy,” parroted baby Randy from the living room floor where they'd sat playing with the new tin toys Tim had bought for them in town yesterday.

JJ looked back at his little brother. “Come on, 'Andy, a bear hug.”

Grace held them close, kissed their freckled noses and tousled their reddish-brown hair. “Ah, ah,” she said as they wiggled away from her, “I need to tell you something.”

“Now?” asked JJ, giggling as he plopped himself back in front of his toys.

“Now?” asked the parrot.

“Yeah, now,” replied Grace, smiling. “I, I, I,” she prompted, sure they'd recognize the poem from a favorite bedtime storybook, “I will love you forever, I will love you for always, as...”

“As long as I'm living, my babies you'll be,” the boys chorused without looking up.

Grace sighed, resigned but happy and heard Tim singing softly along to a country tune on the transistor radio. She reached for the paper in her pocket and unfolded it. Her lips puckered. *Wanted: Husband/Handyman*. A flashback of the man singing in her bedroom played in her mind's eye.

Hardly four months ago, after almost giving up hope that anyone would apply, Grace was grateful when Tim, a scrawny loner, single, who'd never been around babies before, showed up with nothing but the clothes on his back and an old wide-brimmed Stetson. Nervously rolling his hat in his hand but so brave for answering her desperate want-ad.

Grace smiled at the recollection.

Sliding to the edge of the chair, she stood, hid the paper back in her pocket and, like an old goose, waddled close to the bedroom. She lingered by the doorframe smiling, hearing Tim sing as he worked on the pipework for the bathtub he hoped to have in place before the baby came.

Grace inhaled deeply, tapping at the door. “Where's my favorite plumber?” she chimed, walking toward him.

Welcoming the interruption, Tim hurriedly got up from the crawl space. “Here I am, my queen. What can I do for you?” He dusted himself off and embraced her with his elbows, planting a kiss on one eyelid and then the other.

“Tim, guess what,” she started.

“Easy. Supper’s ready, right?” he smiled, “I’m starving.”

“Right. Guess what else?”

He winked at her. “You miss me and —”

“My labor’s started,” she interrupted.

His body jerked forward in a comical way as if he had been struck on the back of the head. “How could that be? It’s only the first week in September.” His brow puckered, then cleared. He wiped his dirty hands on his jeans. “I still need to finish the bathtub. You said close to the end of the month, you —”

“Babies come when they’re ready,” she interrupted again, raising a shoulder.

Tim swayed from side to side like a boat on rough seas. His breathing grew rapid, his gaze darted from her to his pipes. His bottom lip trembled. He tilted his head toward one shoulder and stuck his thumbs, like anchors, into his back pockets, buoying himself.

Grace knew Tim had read all those books; more than Jon White had ever done, and Jon had helped to deliver the two boys. She knew that, in principle, Tim knew what to do; in principle Tim was ready.

Grace, her face serene, searched his, willing him to imitate hers. He met her gaze. She looked deep into his eyes, hypnotizing him with hers. It worked. She saw him gaining confidence. His breathing steadied.

Tim slapped his thighs. “What can I do right now?” He took her by the arm and led her to the bed.

“No, not yet,” Grace refused and pointed to the chest of drawers.

He put his hand on the small of her back and walked her there.

“Serve the kids their supper and get them ready for bed, please,” Grace told him, “and you eat something as well.”

“And you? Won’t you eat?”

“Tim Parker, honey, just do what I ask you.”

“I’m on it. I’ll be right back.” Tim left Grace standing by the opened drawers. She took out the folded ad from her apron pocket and slid it in one of the drawers, her mind adrift.

Three months into her pregnancy, she had lost Jon and had buried him by herself. When she met Tim that first time, her five-month-pregnant belly was safely concealed under her apron. She fattened him and he turned out to be more than she had bargained for.

Grace shut the drawer.

Less than three minutes later Tim reentered and found her poised on the edge of a hard wooden chair— eyes closed, back arched, and hands with white knuckles gripping the chair.

“Grace!” He stiffened.

She motioned for him to come closer. He knelt in front of her on the hardwood floor. “It’s going away now,” she whimpered, and she sank back into the chair. She sighed long,



managing a weak smile. “Now listen to me, darling...” Grace gave him instructions about what she needed him to prepare. He stood up and walked to the kitchen.

Tim was in and out of the bedroom. Out, he soothed the boys, getting them to bed; in, he soothed Grace, breathing in and out with her when he found her contorted in pain. The responsibility started to center him as, at the end of each contraction, her face turned peaceful, unafraid. Eventually, her tranquil face brought him a measure of ease.

“Tim, I’m awful glad you’re here,” she cooed.

“So am I, Grace,” Tim replied as he knelt next to her, touching her rounded belly gently.

Grace touched his shoulders and rested her chin on his head. Her lip twitched. She knew he lied. He had tried so hard to get her to go to a doctor in town or to get her in touch with a midwife, but she was stubborn. She wanted nothing to do with the townspeople.

Grace pulled away and faced him. “Tim, I mean it. Thank you for being here.”

Tim blinked several times, cleared his throat, and holding her gaze said, “Grace Spencer, I don’t know how we got to this point, but in the short time that we’ve known each other, you’ve helped me to fit into my baggy pants and have taught me what it means to be needed and appreciated.”

Grace gasped, surprised at the mention of her maiden name.

He reached for her hands. “Er, no one has ever shown me the confidence you have. I want to do good by you.” He kissed the tip of her fingers. “I won’t lie, Grace – I’m scared. I just pray to God that I don’t let you down.” A tear ran down his cheek. “There’s more I want to say, Grace, but now is not the right time.”

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Tim and Grace paced in the small bedroom for a little over two hours, stopping only for a new contraction.

“I’d like to lie down now,” Grace announced.

His empty stomach flipped. His mouth went dry. Calling forth his calm he helped Grace onto the clean white sheets on the bed.

When the last contractions hit, they hit them both. Every acute shock Grace felt, Tim felt, too. When she held her breath, he held his. When she grimaced, he grimaced. When she bared her teeth, he bared his. When she rested, panting, he did the same.

“The moment her head is out, you hold it and from there on, you give her all your attention,” Grace instructed again.

“I got it, Grace, I understand.” He nodded with vehemence, praying for divine intervention.

Tim counted. The contractions came three minutes apart. “I’m here for you and you’re doing great,” he proclaimed.

The next moment Grace reared up and a gush of transparent fluid flowed from her. Even a handyman knew what that meant. At that moment Tim found his purpose. His nostrils flared and his hands spread out, ready.

Grace exhaled long, he inhaled deeply. Grace inhaled deeply and the baby’s head, tiny and

sleek, slipped into his waiting hands.

*Don't panic. Don't try to pull her out. Clean out her mouth,* Mrs. Price had instructed. The handy plumber inserted his finger into the baby's mouth and cleared it.

"One more big push, sweetheart, and it's over," he called out. Grace called forth her energy reserves, bore down, and the full birth happened right before his eyes. His face radiated wonderment. "It's a girl, just like you said, Grace. She's here. And she fits perfectly in my hands." Tim smiled.

"Is she pretty?" Grace asked, panting.

"I have never seen anything like this before, but she's a mess, I tell you." He laughed, relieved.

Grace smiled, reached down and touched the baby's head. "Take care of her, Tim," she said wearily.

Measuring an inch and a half from the baby's body, Tim tied a string around the cord. He grabbed the scissors and severed the baby from its source. The baby was on her own now.

Tim waited, holding his breath. A slap, cold water, the words in the books had read.

There's no way Tim was going to slap this baby. He shook his head. With lips shut tight, he picked up the baby.

"Breathe, breathe, breathe," Tim whispered. "Come on little angel, breathe," he ordered silently through a clenched jaw. Tim started counting. Fifteen seconds zoomed by. Thirty seconds... *Breathe, dammit, breathe.* Tim's body shook, his eyes wild, he gasped for air.

He tickled the baby's feet.

Grace saw Tim inhale deeply, swelling his chest, demonstrating.

Nothing!

He rubbed and tapped the baby's back.

The baby's fists, like butterfly wings, beat against his hand. Her legs kicked.

But still no sound.

He rubbed her nostrils. She opened her mouth, hiccuped, and out poured the music he wanted to hear. Tim looked into the comical face in relief and laughter roared from his lungs. His eyes welled and he, too, started to cry. "You're my hero, little angel — way to go, girl," he said between sobs. Tim kissed her button nose.

He turned to Grace. "She's breathing. She's breathing," he announced.

Grace smiled meekly. "Thank you. Take care of her first." She closed her eyes, which until that moment had been watching him and the baby intently.

But Tim knew it was not over yet. Laying the baby on Grace's chest and keeping one hand firmly on her, he helped to rub Grace's stomach with the other.

Oh, the pain! Oh, the pain!

Exhausted, Grace gave a long push and in a restrained wail, wilting, delivered the afterbirth.

"Take care of her Tim." Her words came out inaudible.

Tim kissed Grace on the forehead and draped a blanket over her shoulders.

"You did great, li'l Mama," Tim said caressing her cheek, "now rest up. I'll be right back."

Grace looked up at him through half-opened eyes, smiled and nodded.

“Elizabeth Parker,” Tim heard Grace say softly before she closed her eyes to rest.

“Elizabeth Parker,” he repeated looking down at the beautiful parcel in his hands. He smiled.

Cradling the baby in the crook of his arm, his heart doing somersaults, Tim opened the door and carried his daughter to the kitchen sink for her first bath.

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**The Curious Death of a Penny**  
**By Kurt Paulsen**  
**(from Cape Town, South Africa)**



Hi, I'm Penny Wiseman. Sit back and make yourself cozy as I tell you about how I died.

I wrapped my scarf around myself and tightened my coat as I marched through the park to get home, the corpses of discolored leaves crunching under my feet. I looked up and the naked trees themselves stared at me with silent discontent. It was another day at the office that called on the need for chardonnay, and while I stared at the opposite wall which was my view, I questioned what hellish detour had led me here.

The thorn in my lady crotch was my recently-divorced, cantankerous fuckwit of a boss, Tanya. Her moods teetered between moaning on about how terrible losing her shih tzu in the divorce had been, and finding a reason to make our lives more difficult. The only time Tanya was in the same neighborhood as a good mood was when she popped that Xanax that we all knew she kept in a drawer. *It's 2018, Tanya. No one gives two shits about your self-medicating—we all do it!*

What really promoted this fine specimen to the level of human excrement was the fact that, even though I raked in the most novelists for the past quarter, my own novel kept being put off because, I quote “It just isn't the right time to take risks.”

It hadn't been the right time for taking a risk for the last two years! *Goddamn her!* Not my proudest moment, but I proceeded to kick a tree before shouting, “Fuck me!” as the pain shot up my leg.

As soon as I got home, I got the wine out and called my womb-mate, John, to vent for the umpteenth time about my day. A week and a half prior, this honor would have gone to my darling boyfriend, Dash, but this was before I found Dash, inebriated and straddling my now ex-best-friend, Cynthia. What followed was drowning myself in ice cream and my beloved James Dean flicks, both washed down with an assortment of inexpensive liquor.

Oh yes, sorry—you have to excuse my crappy attention span. I was still walking through the park; I was on the verge of taking the steps that lead down to the subway when something caught my eye.

It was twinkling. I don't know exactly what made me do it, but I liberated it from beneath the soil. It was a coin. I'm not a coin expert, but this coin didn't look like any coin I'd ever seen, and it sure as heck wasn't my currency. From the looks of it, it could easily have been there for decades, like it was super old.

I threw it in my pocket—after all, a little luck never hurt anyone. At the very least, I was hoping it would reduce my bad luck.

I woke up the following day, got dressed, and decided to play the odds on a scratch card

before I got into the office. Gosh darn it, it was a dud! I wouldn't be a multimillionaire today, so back to my humdrum job it was.

That day was an unremarkable one, not surprisingly. I buried my head in the batch of manuscripts received. One skimmed the surface of mediocre, the others made me want to assume the fetal position and cry in a corner because mine deserved to be in here with them. If my dream couldn't come true, then at least I should be witness to the rise of the next Pulitzer Prize-worthy writer.

I decided to stay an extra hour, as I did twice a week, to ensure that there wouldn't be a backlog for me the following day.

"Time to leave," I told myself. I tapped the knob on the side of my smartphone and the screen told me that it was just after eight. The commute home would be a long, cold one. I reached the lift, slammed the ground button, and waited for the doors to make their melancholy close.

"Please hold it!" came a shout. It was a handsome, black gentleman in a swanky three-piece suit. He must have been one of the execs. His grey eyes smiled in thanks as he stepped into the elevator. I stood in the corner of the elevator, surreptitiously ogling him, and for the briefest of nanoseconds I thought what it would be like for him to have pinned me up against the lift and did things to me that couldn't be repeated in civilized conversation.

I did my best not to grin, but he sent sensations to my lady business that I didn't think I'd feel for ages since Dash. His scent seemed to invigorate my senses. Suddenly, I recalled the memory of my six-year-old self falling off of a swing. My mouth tasted coppery with blood and Dad dabbed his thumb before wiping my lip and lifting me into his arms as he carried me into the house.

"That was one of your most cherished memories, Penny. What has it been—5 years since his passing? but still your wound opens on the twenty-second of June, does it not, one day before your birthday?"

He didn't turn around but held his gaze forward. How the actual fuck did the stranger know this? This must have been an elaborate prank. John was behind it, he must have been. But why? There's joshing and there is plain old viciousness. This fell in the second camp.

I was just about to tell him to take a one-way bus to fuck-yourself-ville when the lift doors opened and a blinding light forced its way in.

"I believe this is your floor," said the stranger. His voice had a musical inflection to it. The light had taken on a warm, almost nurturing dimension. It embraced me, it made me feel like nothing else mattered. It told me I was home!

I stepped out of the elevator, and it wasn't concrete that my marked-down Jimmy Choos made contact with but gold. The entire street was made of gold and ran as far as I could see. In every direction. The make-up of this city was not mine and there were no cars.

*Okay, it's fine, I'm going to be fine. This is a nervous breakdown. I worked so hard that the little and not-so-little cogs that made my mind work stopped working. I'm probably still in the office... or I hope so. There's only one thing to do and that's to follow the golden brick road to see if I can find the Wizard, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and the Lion. Shit, but weren't there flying monkeys in that movie? I hate regular*

*monkeys; if one those flying ones bite me, I'm biting back!*

Things could have been worse—at least my mind chose to leave me stranded in *this* place. The Fiji Islands would have been better, but beggars can't be choosers, right?!

I looked up and squinted my eyes. Were the buildings made of opaque crystal? There was no sun that I could see because fog obscured the sky and patches drifted along the ground like specters.

“Where am I?” I turned around to ask the Handsome Mc-Ride-me-pants, but he was gone. Left with only one other option, I followed the road. Looking up I actually saw figures moving within the towering crystalline buildings, but the streets remained empty. I thought maybe phones work when you're in Crazy Town but it was frozen; the time was still showing 8pm. I even tried a reboot, but nope, it was having none of that. So I decided to walk for what might have been an hour, but there seemed no end in sight.

The grounded started to change. There were gaps in the road. As I looked through these crevices I saw green patches, then mountains, and then houses. The more I looked the more the ground scene changed.

I started seeing vague shapes who became more defined and I realized that I was looked at people.

Two young boys were playing with their toy blocks. The image changed—they were older now, easily 15 years old—they were playing a video game when one friend kissed the other. Shocked, his friend covered his mouth and ran from the house.

Again the image warped into something else. The boy was taller now, and he and his friend continued their clandestine romance. The image became distorted. It was night—the two were strolling down the street holding hands; they were smiling... no, beaming. One of the boys suddenly fell to the ground, clutching his abdomen. A figure who seemed to be made of pure light tackled the second teenager to the ground.

A pool of red starting forming under the first youth.

The first boy dusted himself off and ran to the second boy. Leaning over him, tears streaked his cheeks and his shouts were muted. “This is our charged.” I jumped as the voice came from my right. It was the same stranger from the elevator. I started wiping my tears, I really had gone insane. Still I asked the well-dressed figment of my imagination, “How did I see that?”

“You, my loved one, are in the Kingdom of Light—what you humans affectionately call ‘Heaven,’ he responded warmly.

“Does that mean I'm dead? And what happened to the boy?”

“No, you are not dead. It is not yet your time, Penelope. As for the boys, the one that you saw being shot dies an hour from now. His lover will go on to become an activist and warrior. This is his path; this is why his guardian angel was allowed to intervene.”

“Are you telling me this is what you do? watch us? for what, like, ever?”

“Yes, we have many roles. Protection is but one of them.”

“But you don't change, you don't age?”

“No, this is our consolation,” was his reply. He put his hand on the small of my back. I

felt this warm feeling like there was sunlight in my chest. I felt love like I'd never felt, and such joy. Tears blurred my vision. I wasn't sad now; I'd never felt anything like that—like God, herself, had wrapped me in her arms.

“But this is all we are: love—changeless, love in its purest form. Time does not move for us as it does you. We never strive for more than we are.”

“I've never felt anything like that, but don't you want to become more, don't you want to be more?”

“We are not made like you, this is not in our nature. Now it is time for you to return, Penelope.”

There was a sound like wind blowing, and I was standing on the street in front of my office building. I looked at the time on my phone and it said one minute after eight.

Walking towards the subway, I shrugged the whole event off as nothing more than vivid hallucination. I'd make contact with a therapist first thing in the A.M. Still shaken up, I got into the train. A distorted announcement mentioned the next stop.

The carriage was empty except for some old bat who was reading a book that had seen better days. It had a burly long-haired figure on the cover, and beside her sat a teenage girl whose thumbs were moving at an almost inhuman speed on her cellphone.

My eyes felt heavy as each passing light seemed to augment the onset of fatigue. I was suddenly woken up by the smell of rotting eggs assaulting my nose, and there, next to me, sat a young woman. She was sitting a little too close for comfort.

She was easily in her early twenties and was knitting something. Damn hipsters!

I started inching way—you know, that way you do when you don't really want to be too rude, but you're trying to reclaim your personal space. The girl took my hand. I felt a pain shoot through me like I was tossed in a bath of ice. I wasn't on the train anymore, no ma'am. Wherever I was, it was dark, I couldn't even see my hands.

“Who turned off the lights?!” I shouted into the abyss. My voice, which didn't sound like my voice, reverberated into the dark nothingness.

I tried reaching out, but my heart started to race as I realized that there was no hand to reach out with. I won't try to save face here—I panicked. Fuck deep breathing and fuck going to my special place. I'd heard of the phantom limb phenomenon, but this wasn't just a limb that was no longer there; I came to the dark conclusion that it was my entire body.

Wherever this was, it was cold and empty, a vacuum of sensation.

Bouncing around the same space, zipping past me, were bubbles with the most horrific images being displayed in them. Anger, murder, and all manner of depravity came and went.

Something clicked. These were the seedier parts of human emotion. The primal side of who we are.

I made contact with one of these: fear. And it was like I felt a minuscule amount of heat, but it was fleeting, and soon the cold emptiness made its return. I can't say how long I was in the void, but one thing was sure: I was hungry, and latching onto these primal, sinister emotions gave me fleeting warmth and relief.

That's when I saw it: a sliver of light. I peeked in and I could see into a room. A group of

teenagers had drawn a circle and were chanting something. The sliver started to grow into a crevice. There was one urge that overrode everything: hunger. One of the teenagers had a blade and was about to make an incision on his wrist when an older woman—she must have been his mother—came charging into the room and hit the blade out of his hand. He and his friends were clearly being admonished by the woman. It was then that the portal was reduced to a sliver of light again and I was thrown back into the empty abyss.

There was a sound like air being sucked out of a room and I was back in the train carriage seated next to the young girl.

“That was a trailer of life in the demonic realm. A real hoot, isn’t it?!” said the girl, and I was sure that her eyes rolled over for a few seconds, exposing the whites of her eyes.

“It was so cold there, I felt disconnected from everything and everyone,” was my only reply. I stammered. Would you be able to keep your shit together when you responded to someone who told you they were a demon after they transported you to their world? I involuntarily rubbed myself as if the cold from the void had followed me.

“Glad you were so enraptured by it. Maybe we can be roommates?”

I saw the train reaching my stop. The doors had barely opened when I made a beeline for them and ran straight home.

As if I were five again, I hopped into bed and pulled the covers over my head. The blanket was unceremoniously pulled off of me. “Did you really think this would save you? What are you, 12?” said an old man.

“What the...?” was the only thing I could say.

He wore a tattered hood, and in his hand he carried a lantern. “Allow me to introduce myself: I am he who ferries souls to their resting place until they are ready to get their existence on again.”

“Wait, like death?!” *Of course*, I thought to myself, *why not?!*

“They once called me Thanatos, but yes, that’s my current name. So unoriginal.”

I was like, *Nope*, and sprang from the bed, but by the time I reached the door, I felt like I’d suddenly put on a few extra pounds. I tried turning the knob to open the door but the dang fangled thing wouldn’t budge.

I discovered that my hand wasn’t touching the handle but instead it went straight through. I risked a glance back and realized that my body was still laying on the bed. I sighed, looked at Death, and said, “On the upside, at least taxes are no longer a factor where I’m going.” He shrugged and snapped his fingers, and we were both strapped into a roller coaster. I looked behind us and there was a few cars, all of them filled with passengers. They all seemed to be in a fugue-like state, their ages ranging from infancy to elderly. The ride continued, past the moon, the planets, around the sun and, eventually, it dropped into a star.

Like sheep, the passengers were herded into various turnstiles. Still, in their trance-like state, a few dropped what appeared to be translucent cubes which ranged in various shades. Luminescent figures scooped these cubes up, inspected them, and either dropped them in a pile next to them or gave them back to the passengers.



“It’s their karmic lessons,” said Death, looking at Penny’s quizzical expression. “They’ll rest in the Kingdom of Light for a bit before going back to Earth for the next cycle.”

*If I make it through this nervous breakdown, I’m making a point to look this karma thing up, I thought.*

Suddenly there was a shout, and I saw that one of the passengers had become lucid and was running towards me. “No, you can’t have me!” he shouted to those in pursuit.

He grabbed me by the waist. I tried to fight his grip but he was strong, and within in moments he’d pulled me towards the edge of the platform.

“Let’s see if we can die twice!” he shouted with a sort of fevered insanity. Another carriage came zipping toward the platform and he pulled us both in front of it.

It rocketed forward and the world became a swirling kaleidoscope of color.

I was back in the park. I looked at the twinkling coin and smiled. Someone else can have their life changed—I have a manuscript to write.



**The Life of the Party**  
**By B. O'ree Williams**  
**(from Portland, Oregon)**



*I*t was the end of another brutal week where it seemed to run the gamut in terms of what Sean had been called on to deal with. “Thank GOD this day is over,” he said to no one in particular. His cell phone went off, blasting the ringtone of Cypress Hill's Insane in the Membrane. That would be Ben calling, wondering what they were going to do tonight. He grabbed the phone and answered it as he made his way to the bathroom to grab a towel. “Hey Man, what’s the word?” he said, as he ran the towel down his face.

“Jimmy boy, another work week from hell is over, and I have a surprise for you.”

Sean rolled his eyes at this, somehow knowing his evening was going to be interesting. “Yeah, what’s that?” he asked hesitantly.

“Make sure you get nice and clean after your day of sitting idle on your ass doing nothing. We’re heading to a party tonight.”

Sean groaned inwardly. “A party? What kind?”

“This isn’t going to be the usual thing -- you know, a bunch of folks stuffed into some small apartment trying to out-wine-snob the others,” said Ben.

“Ohh? I thought you liked those. You’ve said, and I quote, ‘Those are the sophisticated kind of shindigs where the smart chicks hang.’”

There was a short pause on the line, “...Well, they do,” Ben said somewhat defensively. “Anyway, this is a party being held by a friend of a friend of mine from the club. Apparently, it’s one of those dress-up kinds.”

Sean dropped his shoulders and rolled his eyes. He hated having to don a suit. “I gotta put on my funeral clothes?” he asked incredulously.

“Naw, nothing that high-browed,” said Ben. “It’s more like work slacks and dress shirt kind of thing... you know, the kind of clothes that we ordinary working stiffs have to wear to the office every day?” The tone in Ben’s voice was sarcastic, tinged with a bit of jealousy.

“Hey, it’s not my fault that you never decided to branch out on your own. You really ought to try it. Like shedding the weight of the corporate world from your shoulders. And I gotta tell ya, there’s nothing quite like working from your house, man,” said Sean with a smile in his voice.

“Yeah, yeah... whatever. Look, just be ready at seven.”

“Fine, see you at seven,” said Sean, tapping the end call button. He had to admit it was kind of intriguing, yet a bit scary at the same time. It’s not that he was a total social reject, so much as he was not the most gregarious personality in the room. That was usually where his friend, Ben, came in. He was more the life of the party; the kind of person who immediately

takes control of the room whenever he enters. Sean didn't mind this so much; it allowed him to hang back and go along for the ride.

He walked into the closet to choose his outfit for the evening, considering the dark jeans he would have typically opted for in a given social situation, then turned around to look at the other side of his closet where his business attire hung. Staring at the spartan layout of his wardrobe, Sean's vision blurred somewhat but snapped back into focus when he heard the familiar sound of a Dos Equis commercial playing in the background.

"...His organ donor card also lists his beard. He can cure narcolepsy just by walking into the room. He once cheated death, and death was perfectly ok with that. He is... The Most Interesting Man in the World."

*Yeab, why not?* Sean thought as he thumbed through his minuscule collection of slacks and dress shirts. The idea of going to the party as an unknown now had him thoroughly intrigued. *Why should Ben always be the life of the party?* he thought to himself. *Tonight, you're going to be 'The Most Interesting Man in the World!'* He chuckled to himself as he got dressed.

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They arrived at the party on the outskirts of town at some huge estate on what looked like several acres. Palm trees lined the driveway as they pulled up in Sean's convertible Porsche 911 Carrera to the front gate. The guard at the gate gave them a menacing stare as Sean held out his hand to Ben to receive the invitation for the party.

"A little dark for sunglasses, isn't it?" the gate guard asked Sean.

Sean gave the guard a toothy grin as he handed over the invitation but said nothing. The guard seemed to be waiting for a reply, but when none was forthcoming, he mumbled something under his breath, took the invitation from Sean and glanced at it. "Ok, pull forward. Ms. Blackstone is expecting you." He had barely handed back the invitation in time before Sean revved the engine and squealed the tires, tearing off down the driveway.

"Jesus, man, you in some kind of hurry to get there?" asked Ben as he glanced back over his shoulder at the gate guard.

Sean looked at him through his sunglasses and flashed a bright smile.

"Hey, whoa, man. Slow down. You're about to run out of driveway pretty quick," said Ben with rising alarm. He instinctively dug his fingers into the dashboard, bracing himself.

Sean proceeded to whip the steering wheel hard to the left while yanking hard on the emergency brake.

"OH HELL!" screamed Ben, as the car went into a partial spin but came to a halt neatly between two parked SUVs.

Sean smiled despite Ben's look of utter shock, shaking his head as his friend's chest heaved in and out in audible gasps.

A moment later, Sean got out of the car and grabbed the bottle wrapped in a paper bag, along with his jacket from the back seat. He'd been hesitant to put on a suit but decided if it was going to be dressed up for this thing, might as well go all out. "You coming?" he asked

Ben in a casual voice?” completely ignoring Ben’s wide-eyed look of surprise. “C’ mon, man, get the lead out. The night’s not getting any younger.” With this, he strode off to the front door.

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Ben finally caught his breath and slowly exited the car, all the while checking to make sure he hadn’t had an accident. He looked around but saw no sign of Sean. *Thanks for waiting for me, jackass!* he thought. He reached into the back seat to pull out the bottle of wine that he’d brought for his hostess, surprised that it hadn’t gotten damaged in that parking stunt that Sean had just pulled. *What the hell is up with that guy tonight?* he wondered, not for the first time. Ben shook off the moment and headed for the front door. When he got there, there was no sign of Sean anywhere. He rang the doorbell and stepped back to take one more look for his friend.

The door opened, and Ben stared, slack-jawed, at a gorgeous blonde dressed in a form-fitting floor-length red gown. She looked up at Ben with her soft blue eyes which were somewhat veiled by her long eyelashes and smiled.

“Ben, so glad you could make it,” said the woman, familiarly reaching up to hug him. With a perplexed look on her face, she asked, “Where’s your friend?”

“Hey, Heather,” said Ben returning her hug. “To be honest, I have no idea where he is. Didn’t he already come inside?” he asked with a look of concern.

“I haven’t seen anyone come in within the last several minutes, but I confess, I just happened to be walking by the front door when you rang the bell.”

Ben shrugged, utterly perplexed as to where his friend had gone.

There was the sound of several people talking excitedly coming from the next room where the distinct melody of *La Cumparsita* emanated. The excitement of the crowd was electric, and it seemed to be drawing more people in with each passing moment. Heather made her way into the room, followed by Ben, who abruptly stopped and stared, eyes agog as he stared the scene in front of him. Heather stepped up next to him and fixed him with a quizzical stare. Ben hadn’t noticed.

“What in the hell is he up to?” asked Ben, staring intently at the scene in the center of the room.

Heather followed Ben’s gaze. “Wow!” she said, clearly impressed at the spectacle. “I had no idea Zhou could move like that. Who the hell is that guy?” she asked, though the question came out more like a whisper than anything.

The pair were the only couple dancing on the floor, performing intricate, synchronous moves that could only have come with countless hours of rehearsal. Like a single entity, their legs complimented one another, each responding to the other’s call. Words failed Ben when he tried to think of the proper description of what occurred not twenty feet from him. The only thing that came close was that of a dancer’s silk ribbon, flowing and twirling in an expression of joy and grace that had no rival. Ben watched spellbound. He could tell Sean’s

dance partner was nothing short of wholly enthralled and that her comfort level with him was something akin to a lifelong lover.

Ben felt someone tugging at his sleeve, but he was having difficulty tearing his attention away from his friend's performance.

"Ben?... Ben!" said a familiar voice.

He blinked and came out of his trance-like state and looked at Heather.

"Do you know that guy?" asked Heather. Ben didn't say anything but nodded slightly. "Well? who is he?"

Still awestruck, Ben answered in a low tone, "That's my friend... Sean."

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The song ended, and Sean smiled casually at his dance partner and said, "Xièxiè nǐ. Wǒ hěn gāo xìng rén shì nǐ (Thank you, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance)."

Zhou smiled widely, understanding his flawless Mandarin. "Wow, you speak beautifully," she said as he held her hand up and kissed it lightly.

His smile became self-deprecating as he held up a hand in a placating fashion. "No, it's ok. I'm still working on it. The tones you know, they can be pretty tricky. Although, not nearly as tricky as Cantonese."

Zhou's expression changed to a look of awe, "You speak Cantonese too?"

"Well, yes, yes I do. I also speak Russian, Japanese, French, and a bit of Tagalog too. At any rate, it was a pleasure dancing with you," said Sean. He winked at her. Then, leaning in, he took her hand, brushing his lips against her skin with a breath of a kiss, then walked off the dance floor.

Sean heard someone calling out to him, but it came out as a raspy whisper.

"Sean, Sean!"

Sean looked up to see him. "Oh, hey, man. What took you so long? This place is really jumping."

Ben just stared at him for a moment, then asked, pointing to the dance floor, "What was that?"

"Umm, dancing??? The uh... oh what was it called?... oh yeah! It was La Cumparsita, by Gerardo Matos Rodríguez, I believe."

Ben stared at him as if he were a complete stranger. "And just when the hell did you learn to dance like that?"

"Oh, back in college. Never really had an opportunity to use it until tonight to tell you the truth." Sean looked past Ben's shoulder to see the blonde in the red evening gown.

"Ben, aren't you going to introduce us?" asked Heather, as she came up next to him.

"Hmm? Oh, uh, right. Yeah, uh, Heather, this is my good friend whom I apparently know nothing about, Sean Edison."

She held her hand up allowing Sean to take it. Instead of shaking the proffered hand as was expected, Sean grasped it lightly and brought it up to his lips and kissed gently. "A

pleasure, Miss...?”

Heather gulped, somewhat taken aback by the charm that poured forth from this stranger. She gave Ben a questioning look before she looked back to Sean. “Umm, you can call me Heather,” she said somewhat breathlessly.

“Ah, Heather, it’s an absolute pleasure to make your acquaintance. You have a lovely home.”

She blushed slightly at this, momentarily at a loss for words, “Well, thank you. I’m happy to meet you as well. But I must confess, this is not my house. It belongs to my friend Genevieve Blackstone.”

Sean gave Heather a winning smile. “Well, I’ll have to go and meet your friend now, won’t I?”

She made to respond, but he was already walking away before she could utter another word.

“He’s... intriguing...” said Heather, making the statement sound more like a question. Ben watched his friend walk away, saying, “Yeah, intriguing...” he trailed off.

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“So, tell me about your friend,” said Heather as they walked.

“Hmm, well, he’s a computer geek – uh, well, which is to say, he works on computer networks and does cybersecurity. Has his own ‘firm,’ as he calls it.”

“Oh? And you didn’t know about his dancing skills?” she said over her shoulder.

“Yeah, that one took me totally by surprise. Had *nooooo* idea about that at all.”

As they walked, they heard what sounded like an argument coming from one of the rooms off of the main hall. They detoured to see what was going on. They entered a room full of spectators surrounding two chess tables set up in the center. On one side of each of the tables sat a guest, but on the opposite side, in between the two tables, sat Sean. They seemed to be playing blitz matches, each move taking less than ten seconds to complete. The crowd gathered around one side of the room were completely enthralled.

Mutterings of, “Isn’t he the guy who was just dancing the tango with that lovely Asian gal?” could be heard, as well as, “Jesus, how is he able to concentrate on both games at the same time?” Though, this wasn’t half as interesting as the conversation that Sean was having with his opponents. One of them was interrogating him about the differences and pros and cons regarding symmetric encryption, while the other seemed to be speaking with him in French about God-knows-what.

From Sean’s expression, he was having quite the time of it, because the smile never left his face as he deftly executed move after move.

Someone in the crowd asked, “Who the hell is this guy?” Ben kept quiet as not to take the attention off of his friend.

Heather gave him a sidelong glance. “What?” she asked him, seeing him bowing his head in disbelief.

“Yeah, *nooooo* idea on this one, either,” he said as he turned to walk out of the room with Heather following closely after him.

“Where are you going?” she asked, not having anything better to say.

“Well, I was hoping to meet the hostess and give her this bottle of wine. Any idea where she might be?”

“Sure, she's probably down the hall in the library.”

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Back in the other room, the chess matches drew to a close, with one win and one loss. It seemed Sean had let his geek flag fly a bit too much as his focus shifted away from the one game in favor of supporting his arguments regarding cybersecurity. His French-speaking opponent saw a flaw in his play and moved in for the kill. A moment later, he made a surprising move that took his other opponent off guard, allowing him to make the decisive blow. Overall, both matches lasted all of about ten minutes. In the end, all three participants rose from their seats to the sound of applause coming from the spectators in the room. It took them somewhat by surprise, but they managed to play it off as if rehearsed.

Sean shook his opponents' hands, thanked them, and walked out of the room. As he left, he heard one of them say, “Who the hell plays two matches of chess simultaneously?”

“Seems like The Most Interesting Man in the World,” came a reply from someone else in the crowd. Sean laughed to himself at this as he made his way down the hall.

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Ben and Heather walked out of the library, not having located Genevieve there. “Let's try down in her office,” said Heather, as she turned into another room. They happened to glance in the corner of the room next to the bar and noticed Sean engaged in an animated conversation with a beautiful brunette wearing a midnight blue evening gown. Ben couldn't help rolling his eyes. *Of course, he's here!* thought Ben.

“That's Genny,” said Heather. “C' mon, I'll introduce you to her.” She waved at her friend. “Genny, hey, this is my friend I was telling you about,” said Heather, motioning to Ben.

Ben offered up his hand in greeting. “I want to thank you for inviting us to your lovely home, Ms. Blackstone. I see you met my friend, Sean Edison.”

Genevieve smiled at the pair and half-heartedly shook Ben's hand. “Charmed, I'm sure,” she said, sparing only a glance at Ben before returning her gaze to Sean.

Ben had to fight the urge to reach out and punch his friend. Swallowing his ire, Ben held up the bottle of wine and presented it to Genevieve. Her smile widened, but she only let her eyes off of Sean for a moment, barely long enough to acknowledge Ben's gift. She returned her gaze to Sean who returned the smile, albeit in a much more subdued manner.

Again, Ben had to choke down the urge to scoff. *Nice attitude, missy,* he thought inwardly.

Outwardly, he said, “I hope you like red, Ms. Blackstone,” trying once more to recapture the hostess’s attention. Seeing his efforts were going to go unrewarded, Ben let out an inaudible sigh.

Genevieve ignored Ben and kept her gaze fixed on Sean, who shifted awkwardly from the attention. That he purposefully shifted his gaze to the proffered bottle held out for their hostess didn’t go unnoticed by Ben. The move also broke Genevieve’s attention, causing her to notice the offered gift in Ben’s hand. Her smile diminished somewhat. “Oh, thank you. Ben, was it? You can give it to the bartender,” said Genevieve, returning her gaze to Sean. “Now, what is this exquisite wine that you brought, Sean?”

Ben rolled his eyes.

Sean gave Ben a sheepish smile, who returned the gesture, though it didn’t reach his eyes. Sean reached into the paper bag he was carrying and produced a Chateau Malescot St. Exupery Margaux 2009. Ben spluttered, practically choking on his drink when his eyes fell upon the extremely rare wine,

“Oh my *God!*” exclaimed Genevieve. “Is that really what I think it is?”

Sean smiled and handed the bottle to her. “My brother is really into wine, and he’s been trying for the longest time to get me into it. So I said, ‘What the heck,’ and bought this off an online auction. I understand it has a unique bouquet and has a wonderful, inky, purple color. The flavor is followed by notes of Asian plum sauce, forest floor, creme de cassis, black raspberries and a floral component unusual for a Margaux. As I understand it, the maturity on it is from 2018 until 2040. That said, I’d lay it down for at least a couple of years.”

Genevieve raised an eyebrow. “Wow, you certainly seem to know your stuff, Mr. Edison.”

Ben looked at the bottle of 2015 Stirling Cabernet Sauvignon that he held in his hand and gave a derisive snort, then shot Sean a scornful look. He gained a modicum of satisfaction from the chagrined expression on Sean’s face but decided he apparently wasn’t going to be able to tear Genevieve’s attention away from Sean long enough to get a word in edgewise. He cleared his throat and excused himself, suddenly wanting to extricate himself from Sean’s shadow. It was getting too stifling.

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*Am I overdoing it a tad?* wondered Sean as he watched his friend walk away. *Probably should say something,* he resolved, unable to shake the guilty feeling for making his friend look bad. As carefully as he could, Sean freed his hand from Genevieve’s, politely excused himself, and set out to find Ben.

Sean made his way back out to the main foyer, all the while keeping an eye out for his friend. He glanced around the room, taking in the full scene. *Man, there are a lot of people here,* he thought, really noticing the crowd for the first time. He suspected the majority of them as being some sort of professional or another: a doctor here, a lawyer there, the usual crowd



at one of these soirees. Seeing no sign of Ben, Sean shifted his focus to the grand staircase, which descended from the upstairs in two separate locations where it culminated in a landing halfway up before dovetailing outward as it approached the lower floor. His eye drifted down the staircase, occasionally resting on the odd assortment of medieval weapons adorning both walls.

A sudden movement tore Sean's gaze away from a gruesome mace. He glanced up to see Ben up on the landing closely examining a particular weapon: a "hand and a half," or bastard sword. Ben didn't seem angry, per se, so much as just humdrum. Deciding the air needed clearing before the evening went any further, Sean made his way up the stairs. He glanced up briefly at his friend just long enough to see Ben glance over his shoulder, wearing a look that he'd never seen on the man's face: one of pure malice.

Before Sean could say anything, Ben ripped the sword off the wall and brought it down in an overhand stroke, aimed for the middle of Sean's head.

With no time to think, Sean reacted, grabbing the first item to hand. The Japanese katana slid from the wall with a slight "swish" as it glided from the silk backing it had heretofore rested against. The decision to grab the weapon saved his life as the bastard sword slammed down and embedded itself in the banister right where Sean had been standing not one second before. Sean returned the blow with one of his own, as his katana sang through the air and met Ben's blade dead on. "Dude, what *in the hell* is wrong with you, man?" bellowed Sean as he took a glance behind him.

"What the hell is wrong with me? What the hell is wrong with you!?" fumed Ben. "First, you race in here like Mario Frigging Andretti and pull that weird Dukes of Hazard parking stunt. Then you take off, not even bothering to wait for me. The next thing I see, you grab the nearest hottie to hand and proceed to dance a perfectly choreographed tango like you'd been rehearsing all day." Ben's words came out in gasps as he pressed his attack. "Let's see... oh yeah, then you amaze the hell out of everyone by playing not one but *two* games of blitz chess – simultaneously, I might add, all while talking tech with your first opponent, and having a conversation in French with the second one," said Ben through gritted teeth as he heaved at the dislodged sword. With one good wrench, Ben tore the sword from the banister, then followed up with another swing that would have taken Sean's head off at the shoulders, had he not ducked.

"Well, so what!" replied Sean, panting from exertion. "I don't see what the big deal is. After all, you're always the life of the party, and you always get the hot chicks. Hell, I'm lucky if I even get a phone number!"

"Fine! What about the tango, then, eh?" spat Ben.

"Just 'cause I never had an opportunity to dance the tango at one of these lame parties I've gone to with you doesn't mean I can't. And, if you recall, I've tried to get you to play chess with me, but nooo, you always tell me it's for 'geeks and nerds.'"

Ben advanced, forcing Sean to back down the stairs carefully. Sean spared several quick glances, making sure to mind his surroundings, but he never let his guard down. Ben pressed on, waiting patiently for just the right opening, then opportunity knocked as Sean

took an extra second to check his footing. Ben lunged, driving his sword straight for his friend's heart, but Sean recovered in time and parried Ben's strike, sending his sword straight into the wall.

"*Jesus, man!* What the hell is your deal? I was just having fun!" bellowed Sean.

"Well, you didn't have to be such a showoff with that bottle of wine that you brought. You don't even like wine!"

"So what? Even if I don't drink it all that often, I never said I didn't like it. Once again, you just assumed that I don't 'cause I rarely drink it at home," spat Sean. "And, oh, by the way, I love lagers. They may not be what's hip, but who gives a damn? I like what I like."

Ben feigned left, then brought his blade across Sean's chest, narrowly missing. The overextended swing went careening into the light sconce in the wall. Sparks flew from the damaged fixture as the lights in the stairwell flickered.

Drawn by the first sounds of the swords clanging and the intermittent flickering of the lights, people began to gather around at the base of the staircase. Sean caught the spectacle out of the corner of his eye. Though he couldn't spare it any of his attention, it struck him as odd that they didn't give any outward reaction other than the occasional quiet comment. It was as if they were watching a tennis match; such was the subdued reaction.

At a savage cry from Ben, Sean's concentration snapped back into place.

"Well, why did you have to outdo me with that wine, then, eh? You know I know wines, like *way* better than you do, and you have the gall to bring that amazingly sophisticated cab here tonight to a party that you were only invited to because I was!" sneered Ben. "You'd have spent the evening surfing the net, or binge-watching something on Netflix! Hell, without me, you'd be a *nobody!*"

The air of their entanglement had reached a heightened state, and Sean was sick of being on the defensive. Taking advantage of a slight pause between Ben's strikes, Sean changed tactics. He launched into a barrage of violent attacks, aimed at cleaving Ben from shoulder to pelvis. But Ben somehow had been prepared for the advance. He blocked the strike with an off-kilter parry, successfully disarming Sean in the process.

Fortunately, Sean kept his cool, scanning his immediate surroundings for something with which to defend himself. From the landing above, a bystander surveying Ben's earlier damage to the railing pulled a rapier off the wall and threw it to Sean. "Here, man! Catch!" Sean looked up in time to pluck the rapier out of the air and redirect Ben's anticipated strike.

Sean could tell Ben's attacks seemed to be slowing. *His sword must be getting heavy from the repeated thrusts and strikes*, thought Sean. *I just have to hold on for a bit longer. He'll have to get rid of it.* Sean took the opportunity to push Ben back up to the staircase. He watched as Ben glanced at the wall, most likely in hopes of finding something lighter. Seeing nothing close to hand, Sean smiled, knowing the bout would soon be at an end. The smile died on Sean's lips, however, when he heard the same gentlemen on the landing call out to Ben and toss the second of the twin rapiers to him. He gulped audibly at the sight of his friend, now with a lighter sword in hand, launch himself with renewed enthusiasm.

The two men came together in a series of quick thrusts and cuts, almost too fast for the

eye to see. Both men aped being masters, with their footwork precisely executed, and their thrusts, ripostes, and parries landing perfectly. They descended the stairs and slowly began to make their way into the ballroom where Sean had danced with Zhou not a half hour before. The crowd kept well out of the way, enough to give them room to carry out their enraged duel, but they followed like spectators at a golf match. They entered into the ballroom, short on the heels of Sean and Ben. Once inside, they surrounded the two men, jeering and chanting, egging both parties on.

Sean made a low lunge, then brought his blade up in an attempt to stab at Ben's shoulder with the intent to disarm his opponent, but was thwarted in his efforts as Ben parried and riposted with a short overhand stab that would have skewered Sean's eye had he not moved his head.

Just as the battle seemed to reach a fevered pitch, a voice shouted out, "FREEZE! POLICE! PUT THE SWORDS DOWN!"

Both men froze, suddenly realizing just what a spectacle their outburst had become. They dropped their swords, looking ashamed, like a couple of schoolboys who'd just been busted for smoking in the bathroom. They raised their hands as a pair of police officers moved in, taking advantage of the momentary detente to slap a pair of cuffs on each of the combatants.

At the sound of the "click" Sean looked down at his feet, Ben doing likewise.

"Hey, listen, Sean, I'm sorry I lost it," Ben said, giving his friend a sidelong glance. The police officers had surrounded the pair with guns raised, ready to shoot.

"It's ok... I'm sorry I made you look like a heel by out- wine-sobbing you."

The officer in charge motioned for officers to read them their rights. Sean looked up at the ceiling and gave an exasperated sigh. "Man, what a night. It was going so smoothly for me."

Ben chuckled at this but offered up, "Yeah, man, you truly were the life of the party tonight. You gotta show me those dance moves you were pulling out there." The two officers that had them detained ushered them out the front door and into the night.

As they were helped into the back seat of the police cruiser, Sean sighed again. "Yep, it was some night. I really felt like 'The Most Interesting Man in the World.'"

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# To Steal A Treasure

## By Markus Boch

### (from Ahlen, Germany)



Castle Karlsruhe stands at the edge of the northern Hardtwald forest, proudly overlooking the city of Karlsruhe. It was a stormy night and, while the city was nonetheless filled with life, most animals had taken shelter from the rain, leaving the forest behind the castle devoid of life.

At least it seemed like that, but a shadow dashed from tree to tree.

It didn't mind the storm. The darkness concealed its form while the rain and wind muffled its footsteps as it approached the back of the castle. After the shadow looked to both sides, to make sure there weren't any unwanted spectators, it dashed out of the cover of the trees towards the castle and pressed itself against the wall.

It stood still, listening for anything aside from the whistle of the wind or the splash of the raindrops; however, the only unnatural sounds were the voices of groups of students, trying to avoid the storm, and the roaring of the cars. Satisfied, the shadow zipped up the wall. The speed and jerkiness of its movements made it look like a man-sized spider, but as a lightning bolt illuminated the shadow, it revealed the shadow as a slim boy wrapped in a hooded cloak.

The boy's name was Nico Stein, and, from his point of view, breaking into Castle Karlsruhe was just another day on the job. As soon as he reached one of the upper windows, he pulled a rock out of his coat and smashed it into the glass. The window shattered and Nico slipped through the crack, careful not to cut himself on the edges.

Once he was inside, he pulled the drenched coat off his shoulder, revealing the tight shirt and jogging pants he wore underneath. The coat had prevented them from getting soaked in the rain. Now all he had to do was wipe his feet clean of mud.

He held his coat out of the window and let the storm rip it from his hands. He wanted to watch it fly away, but he knew from his research that the castle's windows were secured by an alarm system. Security would be here any minute, and it was vital he was ready for them.

He ran down the spiral staircase and jumped onto the wall above the door which led to the main building, a second before it swung open. Two cones of light crawled over the opposing wall and two security guards followed them into the room.

"Who's there? Show yourself!" one guard said as his eyes scanned every inch of the room – except the door itself.

"Don't make such a ruckus," the other guard said and pointed his flashlight up to the broken window. "The storm must have broken the window, that's all."

"What are you talking about?" the first guard asked. While the two of them were

bickering, Nico crawled down the wall and inched closer to the guard's back. "The burglar broke it to escape."

"Look again, genius." The second pointed to the shards. "The shards are on the inside. Do you think someone broke into a tower through a window almost 40 meters above the ground?"

Nico carefully unplugged the chain that held the guard's keys to his belt. Without making a sound he slipped through the door and left them to their argument.

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The rest of the way was almost too easy. The guard's key allowed him to unlock and re-lock every door he came across. He had used the last two weeks to make himself well acquainted with the castle's interior. So aside from one time he had to hide inside an ancient cupboard, he reached the door to his destination without problems.

As he opened the door, the same darkness he had encountered on his way greeted him. Nico wouldn't be able to find what he was looking for with only his sense of touch. He pulled out his phone and switched on the flashlight app. It wasn't much, but getting his father to buy him this phone had been almost impossible, so it had to do.

It didn't take long to find his target: a display case filled with multiple royal treasures. Among them the diamond tiara of Grand Duchess Hilda von Baden. According to his father, this thing had an estimated worth of over a million. If he brought this back, he might get his father to leave him alone for a few weeks. One last time Nico scanned the room, making sure he was alone. While the storm explained the shattered window, a shattered display case would be a different story. Luckily, he had prepared for that.

He held up his right hand, closed his eyes, and concentrated on his index finger. With all the imagination he could muster he convinced himself that his finger was growing long and thin. He imagined his fingernail tapering until it turned into a small claw. And as the usual warmth flowed through his finger, he opened his eyes to see that it had transformed into something that looked like a spider leg.

Nico allowed himself a satisfied smile before he slid the claw into the lock. It took him a few minutes of feeling around and prodding at different places until the lock gave way with a click. With a wide grin, Nico reached into the case, grabbed the tiara, and slid it into the bag on his belt. Now all he had to do was get out of the castle without being seen and the job would have gone with no trouble.

That was when he heard someone clapping from behind him.

Nico spun around but saw nothing. Confused, he turned back to close the display case and could have sworn his heart stopped for a second. The moment he turned around the light from his phone fell on a pair of slender legs covering the entrance to the display case. He stumbled back, tripped over his feet and tumbled to the floor. His phone slipped from his hand, landing with the flashlight down and leaving him in darkness. All the while

someone was chuckling.

“Sorry buddy, I couldn’t help giving you a scare. You should have seen your face,” a female voice came from on top of the case. “But how about I get us some light?”

Nico heard a snap and his world exploded into white.

“Sorry again,” the woman said while Nico tried his best to blink away the white dots, obscuring his vision.

“I should think before I act, but where would be the fun in that?” While she was talking, Nico’s eyes adjusted to the light. He didn’t know what he had expected, but it definitely wasn’t what he saw.

The woman sitting on the display case looked no older than twenty and wore a black robe which covered her body from her shoulders to her knees. Nico’s vision must have still been blurry since, to him, it looked like her robe was moving. Her skin was white like chalk and she must have worn some kind of contact lenses since her eyes shone red like rubies. It was safe to assume that she didn’t belong to the castle’s security personnel.

“What’s up?” she asked, clearly amused by Nico’s staring. “Am I so stunning that you can’t even say anything?”

That brought Nico back to reality. Whoever this woman was, the two of them had made a lot of noise. Maybe if he hurried, he’d make it out of the castle undetected. He ran towards the door, but to his shock, it vanished. Not only that, but as he turned to the door on the other side, it faded in front of his eyes. In a last ditch effort he made a run for the windows, but as he pulled back the curtains, he saw another stone wall.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the woman jumped from the display case and walked toward him.

Every hair on Nico’s body stood on edge and shivers ran over his back. Her robe was definitely moving.

“No need to be scared. I only want to have a little chat.”

But Nico didn’t listen. He was too occupied finding an explanation for what was happening. Was he going insane? No, it had to be that woman. Nico once saw his father hypnotize one of his targets; maybe this woman was doing something similar to him. Both of his hands went to his head, and he rocked back and forth, telling himself to wake up repeatedly.

He felt the woman’s hand on his head. His first instinct was to slap it away, but as the woman stroked through his hair, all his worries went away. He stopped rocking, his muscles relaxed, and his mind stopped racing as the warm hand sent waves of relaxation through his body. He had nothing to fear, nothing to worry about; he could trust this woman.

Nico ripped himself back into reality. This woman was manipulating him and he would not let that happen. He slapped her hand away and glared at the woman.

“Not trusting me, eh?” The woman crossed her arms, her smile never leaving her face. “Guess that is a good thing – after all, I haven’t even introduced myself yet.” The woman made a motion where she grabbed the sides of her robe and bent her knees a little. Nico could only guess it had to be some kind of greeting. “My name is Grim. Pleased to make

your acquaintance.”

That had to be some kind of stage name. However, it seemed like she actually wanted to talk. His best option would have been to give his name and try to talk his way out of this, but since that wasn't an option he only answered with a nod.

Grim sighed. “Okay. I get it. You don't trust me. But none of us will get far if you keep up this silent act.”

Nico's cheeks flushed. His father had told him again and again that, whatever happened, he had to be sure to reveal as little as possible about himself when interacting with people; however, he had never mentioned a situation where he had to interact with someone able to make doors and windows disappear, and it wasn't like he had a choice. Reluctantly, Nico opened his mouth and showed Grim the reason he wouldn't answer.

When Nico was nine, he had made the mistake to talk to other children about how his father treated him. His father had strictly forbidden him from talking to other children unless he needed to get information about their parents. Nico never found out what happened after he had talked to the children, but apparently his father had to pay off quite many people to stay quiet. When Nico got home that night, he had grabbed Nico and drove him to his workplace. What happened next was mostly a blur in Nico's mind. He only remembered that his father had stuck a syringe in his shoulder and when he woke up the next morning, he couldn't feel his tongue.

Grim's cloak spun faster and faster as her smile morphed into a disgusted grimace. However, a part of Nico hoped that she might be so disgusted that she would leave. Instead Grim took a deep breath and looked Nico right in the eyes.

“It seems I was wrong about you,” She knelt down in front of him. “Watching you, I assumed you were abusing your abilities to live an easy life, but now I see there's more to it.”

Nico wasn't sure how to respond. No one had ever known what his father did to him, so no one ever pitied him for it. And on top of that she said she'd been watching him. Why would she do that?

“This makes things difficult.” She tapped her chin a few times. “Is there any way we can communicate?”

He still wasn't sure if he should trust this woman. Then again, this was his opportunity to talk with somebody that wouldn't scream at him all the time. Also, since he had begged for a phone, he might as well use it.

“*What do you want?*” He typed the words into his phone before holding it in front of Grim's face.

“That's simple. I want you,” Grim laughed as Nico took a step back. “Relax, I'm not going to kidnap you. I am here to make you an offer.” She pointed at his index finger.

Only now did Nico notice it still looked like a spider leg. He tried to hide it, but Grim pulled his hand closer to her face.

“How long have you been able to do this?” She inspected his finger, similar to how his father inspected the jewelry Nico brought him.

He hesitated, then held up two fingers in response.

“Two years?”

Nico nodded and Grim whistled

“And you can already shape-shift specific parts of your body. And with no training? Color me impressed.”

Nico had to admit he enjoyed talking to someone who didn't run away from his strange ability and even praised him for his effort. But a question lay at the corner of his mind.

*“Did you come to take my powers?”*

“I won't force you to do anything. I know what it is like to be in your shoes.”

Nico raised his brow

“Don't look at me like that. I do. You may have already figured it out, but I have special abilities just like you. And, also like you, I was forced to use them to steal my way through life, and we aren't alone. Where I come from, everyone has their own unique quirks and abilities. And we can't have the humans discover that. So we track down others like us and give them a choice: either come with us, or lose their power and forget they ever had it.”

Nico's eyes widened. If he lost his powers, he wouldn't be able to fulfill his father's wishes anymore. He still remembered how his father reacted when Nico came back from an assignment with nothing to show for it. He rubbed over his sleeve, which hid his scars. One for each time he disappointed his father.

“However,” Grim continued, “you have proven that you can hide your powers. I'm sure you already guessed, but I am an important figure back home. I wouldn't stand here if the regular recruiters had been able to find you.” Grim gave Nico a wide grin.

“Besides, you remind me of myself when I was young, so I want to give you a real choice.” She held out her hand towards him. “Either come with me, or stay. I won't take your powers either way.” She winked “And don't worry – nobody will find out about this conversation.”

Nico looked at the outstretched hand. This was his chance to escape his father once and for all. But as he reached out his own hand, doubt formed in his mind. What if Grim was lying? What if she took him to a place even worse than this? At least he was used to his father by now. The risk was too great. He shook his head and stepped back.

“Still don't trust me?” Grim sighed “It is your choice, but take your time considering it.” She reached into her cloak and pulled out what looked like a coal stick.

“If you ever change your mind, break this stick in two. And I will know.”

The stick was cool to the touch, and as soon as Nico took it Grim's robe expanded. It drowned the display cases with its darkness, then washing over everything else, including Nico.

“Goodbye.” was the last thing he heard, before waking up outside the castle, directly under the broken window.

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On the way back, Nico thought about Grim's offer. He bumped into a group of students, who surely were on the way to the next bar. What would it be like to have friends? To not wake up every morning, fearing punishment for something he may or may not have done, exercising in the morning and planning burglaries in the afternoon?

He was so lost in his thoughts he almost walked past the door to his house. If he rang the bell now, his father would open, pull him inside and grab the bag with the tiara. He wouldn't thank him or praise him. The best he could hope for was that he would get away without a beating.

It was at that moment he made a decision. He lay the bag in front of the door and rang the bell before breaking Grim's stick. He still didn't trust her, but wherever she would take him, it couldn't be worse than this.

His father's footsteps had almost reached the door when Nico's shadow condensed into a black pool. By now it barely surprised him to see Grim rising out of it.

"I knew you'd make the right decision." This time he grabbed her outstretched hand without hesitation. He didn't know what would await him as he and Grim sunk down into the black pool. But he knew one thing: He would never forget the look on his father's face as he opened the door to see his son's head grin at him out of a black puddle before disappearing forever.

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## DESERT SOUL: A Traveler Short Story

By Alejandra Cué  
(from Morelos, Mexico)



Death by ashes. Death by desert. Death in the ashen desert.

Such was his fate.

He should've accepted it. He should've been at peace with it. But how can you ask that of a child who has barely lived twelve suns? How can you expect him to close his eyes and embrace the inevitable with open arms?

Whether he deserved death or not is of little consequence. He wanted to live. His desires amounted to nothing, though. They didn't ease the pain on his back or the pain on his skin or the pain from the scorching sun. It didn't magic him away from the grey desert of ashes devoid of life, as he soon would be.

And so, he cried.

He cried with no tears and a parched throat. For seconds, minutes. He knew not. Time mattered not. The boy's sorrow was such that he did not notice the stranger's presence until their silhouette loomed over his own skeletal body.

The first he saw was boots, old and riddled with holes, but he saw no toes peeking through them. Next were trousers, a shirt, and a traveler's pack, tattered, sooty but held fast against the stranger's body with several leather strips. The stranger's left hand was, too, wrapped in leather. At last, he saw a face – part of one, actually – for the stranger had been consistent with the leather strips, thus only part of their left cheek and eye were exposed to the elements.

Fear crept in the back of the boy's mind. Many known and unknown horrors linger in the ashen desert, monsters of old and new that preyed upon people and animals indiscriminately. People should not venture into danger and certain death, the elders had taught him, even if certain body parts possess unique and valuable properties.

This fear did not stay with him, though. How could it, when death already had him in its clutches? What did it matter, other than hastening the inevitable?

The stranger knelt. He was covered in soot. The only thing that broke the monotony was the white of his eye.

Human.

Fear left the boy completely when the stranger took him in their arms and carried him like a baby. The boy leaned his head on the stranger's chest. He heard a beating heart. It was a strong, consistent and healthy beat, like his own.

Human.

Despite himself, the boy cried again.

He cried until he could cry no more.

He cried until fatigue took him.  
And he slept.

Red woke the boy, the red of sunlight against closed pupils, a red he was all too familiar with.

In his drowsiness, he opened his eyes and was blinded by light and sand and rock. By the world that had always been his home. The desert's heat hit him immediately after he regained full awareness of his five senses. Suffocating, draining and unbearable. You can build a tolerance towards this land, but you never get used to it. People were not meant for extremes, but somehow the sand-people had made the untamable desert their home.

The boy pressed himself further against the stranger's chest. The last thing he wanted was to dwell on his people. If it were for him, he would have this stranger carry him far from this land, far away from his old life and into a new world. Was that too much to ask?

*Thump.* The boy listened to the stranger's heart.

*Thump thump.* With every passing second, the sound's speed increased.

*Thump thump thump.* As did the stranger's raspy breath.

They were running.

Not sprinting. The wind blowing on his face was not that strong, but they ran fast enough for the stranger to tire after a few moments.

As quickly as they began, the stranger halted. He wanted to speak but drew heavy breaths instead.

"Who goes there?" A man with a scar over his eye called out.

The boy heard the voice coming from the front. It was a voice he knew.

He trembled.

In all, four sand-people stood before the boy and the stranger. The sentinels. Three men, one woman.

"Help us," the stranger spoke between breaths. "The boy..."

The sentinels drew their swords, curved as their own brows, sharp like their senses.

"Stay back!" the same man commanded. His voice carried a known authority, a leader's.

"No, wait..." the stranger spoke again. The sentinels and the boy shuddered at the sound once more. It was too sinister, too shrill, too grave. Far from normal, far from human. And whatever's not human...

"Stay back, monster!" Another sentinel shouted.

The stranger exhaled a low and inaudible growl.

"I'm not a monster."

"What are you, then?" the leader demanded.

"I'm... I'm just a traveler," the stranger exhaled.

"Just a traveler?" The leader raised a brow.

"Yes," the traveler said. "A tired and thirsty traveler. As is the boy."

The leader, Sigi, signaled the other sentinels to lower their weapons. He perceived no threat,

no ill intentions from this traveler, and although he did not trust his vague identity, he believed his words, for they reflected his deplorable state, one he'd seen countless times. The desert is a cruel mistress, especially the ashen desert further south. Sigi knew this better than most, as did his useless eye. Maybe that's why the traveler concealed half of his face and body. He might've also combated the giant and poisonous insects in the sands and gotten the worst of it. Perhaps that was the reason behind the wrongness in his voice, if this traveler was even a 'he' to begin with.

Maybe that's why Sigi took his own water-skin from his belt and approached. It was then the sooty and dim existence that was the bundle in the traveler's arms caught his attention.

"What in the—?" Sigi stopped walking.

"Help him, please," the traveler stepped forward, "he's dying."

After a pause, Sigi clenched his jaw and shook his head. "Like he's supposed to."

"What?" the traveler spat.

Sigi offered no reaction except, "He didn't tell you?"

At this, the traveler raised his voice. "He can barely keep his eyes open. What is wrong with you?"

"Do not speak to me with judgment, traveler," Sigi matched his tone, and broadened his shoulders, "not when you don't understand our ways."

"Then help me understand." The traveler met Sigi's eye.

He saw truth in it. Honesty. That's why he answered with words and not the sword.

"The boy. His name was Sami."

"Was?" the traveler asked.

"On his back there's a brand," Sigi signaled with his chin. The traveler felt the boy's skin and indeed found a reddened mark of an arrow inside a circle. Someone had burned it on him almost to the muscle.

"Those who bear it are criminals, forever exiled, forever shunned by our people, and to be sentenced by the desert," Sigi explained.

"Why?" the traveler asked. His voice betrayed surprise.

Sigi took a deep breath and recited: "For the crime of theft, for the crime of greed, for the crime of betraying the trust of his people, the sentence is death. Death by ashes, death by desert. Death in the ashen desert."

After a brief silence, the traveler shook his head. "He has to die because he stole something? That's ridiculous. It's out of proportion!"

"That is the law of our tribe," Sigi said, emotionless. "If he can't live by it, he cannot live among us at all."

"By that logic, exile I can... understand. But death? It's... outrageous! It's unfair!"

"It's our law. We do not care for your personal thoughts on it, traveler. We only exercise it and keep the order, an order that's kept our people alive since the days of the Destruction."

The wind picked up, as did the sands. A sandstorm was coming. The sentinels didn't seem to mind. The traveler, on the other hand, closed his eye forcefully, perhaps a grimace, Sigi thought.

"This is a cruel land, traveler," Sigi continued. "You should not meddle in its matters."

"Is that a threat?" the traveler asked after a moment of silence.

"A warning. You should not linger here."

"I take it that means you're not going to help us."

"We can give you water and supplies."

"Captain!" the female sentinel protested. "You can't—"

Sigi raised his hand as a fist before any of the others followed her example. The woman kept silent.

"We can provide you with little aid, traveler, but only to you," Sigi said. "Sami... the criminal must stay and carry out his sentence."

Sigi noted that Sami clenched the traveler's shirt as if his life depended on it. Despite himself, Sigi balled a fist.

The traveler shook his head. "I can't let you kill him."

"How dare you—" another sentinel protested.

"Silence!" Sigi shouted, then focused back on the traveler. "We are not killers. We'll not harm you or the criminal when you walk away. The desert is who will see to his end."

"His death is still on you. The only difference is that you don't get actual blood in your hands," the traveler said.

"We don't have to explain ourselves to you!" The female sentinel drew her sword.

"Kira! What did I say?" Sigi commanded.

"This traveler is interfering, Captain," Kira said, her guard up, "and we must stop him."

"The traveler can be reasoned with," Sigi glared at his subordinate.

"No," Kira stepped forward, "no, he can't."

"Kira..."

"She's not wrong," the traveler said. Sigi turned and realized the traveler had placed the boy on the ground. "You've already reasoned with me."

Sigi exhaled the breath he didn't know he was holding. Tainting the sands red was the greatest offense of all, as was needless violence. The next step was to escort the traveler to the sentinel's camp, and send him on his way, but not before asking why he came from the ashen desert and how long had he lingered there.

"A wise choice, traveler," Sigi nodded, "now, follow us. We'll get you your supplies."

The traveler stepped away from the boy as he rummaged through his leather pack. Then, he spoke. "I respect your reasoning and your traditions, but I cannot in good conscience leave this boy to die because he broke a flawed law. It doesn't matter why he did it. The punishment is wrong," the traveler took something out of the pack, a circle of black and white the size of their palm, "at least, in my eyes."

"He dares stand above our laws!" Kira, ignoring Captain Sigi's commands, approached the traveler with her scimitar drawn.

"As you will uphold your sense of justice, I will uphold mine" The traveler glared and held the circle tightly. Just as he did, it bled white light.

The small flash lasted no more than a few seconds, enough for the sentinels to draw their

blades.

All except for Sigi, who shook his head. "Traveler—"

Kira charged sword-first at the traveler before anyone could say anything else. Sentinels are all too familiar with the advantage of striking first, an opportunity they never waste. She instinctively aimed for the neck.

The traveler stood his ground and placed the black and white circle back on his pack as he waited. But this was seconds. As soon as he took his hand back out, Kira's sword lay half an arm's length away.

"No—" The boy coughed on the ground.

Sigi winced.

The length of Kira's sword approached its target with the speed and viciousness of a rattlesnake.

And the traveler stepped aside.

It was the simplest of movements, followed up by a grapple and a hit. Kira's sword fell on the warm sand, her own body following soon after. Her head bounced against the ground and she moved no more.

"Kira!" The second sentinel took to the offensive, as did the third.

"Quin, Dai. Stop!" Sigi shouted, in vain.

The sentinels attacked from the same direction Kira had. Sometimes tactical approaches are necessary when facing an unpredictable opponent, hence coming from different fronts is the smartest course of action, as Sigi had taught them. However, seeing that the traveler was both unarmed and unarmored, the sentinels opted for overwhelming him with numbers rather than smarts. It was both faster and cleaner.

With a running start, they raised their blades and struck downwards to the traveler, who only had enough reaction time to raise his left arm in defense. A pointless gesture.

Or so they thought.

The sword rang in the sentinels' ears and through their arms, product of metal colliding against something at least as strong as itself. The sentinels' shock and pain were piercing, paralyzing, more than enough for the traveler to punch their noses and reacquaint the men's behinds with the sand.

The traveler shook his right hand and wrinkled his cheek. "Ow."

But one of them wasn't done yet. To the traveler's leftmost side, the fallen sentinel gritted his teeth, ignored the throbbing in his sinuses, held his sword fast, leaped forward with his feet and knees, and slashed at his enemy's leg.

He met the same shock.

Pain strained his contracted muscles. A warrior must know when to attack and when to accept defeat. Shame is preferable to death.

The traveler stepped around the defeated sentinels and faced Sigi.

"I meant what I said, but not to the expense of your lives," the traveler said. "That wouldn't be right. But they attacked me, so I defended myself. There's no need—"

"Enough." Sigi unsheathed his sword. "If you know what's good for you, stay down," he

told the sentinels. "And you, traveler," there was no time to be surprised about his hidden armor, only for action, "it is as you said: we'll do anything to defend our justice."

"Anything?" the traveler asked.

Sigi nodded. "Anything."

*Except killing.* This last he thought. If he was to defeat his opponent, he couldn't afford to display weakness. He was convinced the traveler would fight without holding back and so he must do the same.

"Take a sword," Sigi pointed with his chin. "You'll need it."

The traveler made no motion to comply. "I don't want to hurt you."

*Me neither.* Sigi rushed to the enemy and attacked. Mercilessly.

He slashed from the right, then from the left. Each time, the traveler used his left arm as a shield, parrying, defending. It wasn't his first time in a fight, that much Sigi could see, but his movements were mostly reactionary, sloppy, out of practice. Perhaps it was fatigue, the toll of the desert. The fact the traveler was keeping up with him was impressive considering their state, considering he came from nothingness and ashes. Or maybe he hadn't had the need to fight in a long time. Whatever the reason, it made Sigi's task more difficult. In the best-case scenario, only one of them would come out unscathed.

Sigi pressed the attack until they both fell into a rhythm, a point where neither needed to think in order to act and react: Sigi swung left, the traveler thrust his arm forward; Sigi swung right, the traveler reflected with his wrist, over and over again. Their feet danced on the sands, around the sentinels, closer to the boy. The traveler noticed this, hence he pushed Sigi backward with each parry, but he soon regained the ground. In the end, neither gained or lost ground. If anything, they gained stress and lost energy.

Sigi exhaled deeply. His arms ached.

The traveler mirrored his expression, finally.

With an unyielding grip, Sigi brandished his sword with two hands, imprinting all strength he could muster behind the blade. He struck on the left. One, two times. The traveler staggered, for seconds, fractions of seconds. Sigi wasted none to slash right and kick the enemy.

He saw blood, finally.

The traveler rasped for air. Sigi had hit him right on the stomach with enough strength to send him sliding across the sand and into the boy, who grunted with what little life he had left. The traveler also grunted after he found his breath. He hadn't the time nor luxury to examine his wound. Sigi knew it was nasty, as he'd intended: a slash across the right forearm. The coming sandstorm did nothing but worsen the sting.

"I told you to take the sword." Sigi towered over the traveler.

He didn't want to kill him. Of course not. Throughout their clash, he'd kept his composure, a clear warrior's mind as to prevent inflicting life-threatening damage. Even now he was mindful of his blade's position, pointing at the traveler, who extended his uninjured arm before the boy in a pointless gesture of protection. Sigi thought it did more harm than good, for it only gave the boy a false sense of hope. The one good thing it did was show him that someone

was looking out for him until the very end, unlike his pathetic excuse of a brother.

Sigi's eyes watered at the thought and he hit the traveler's arm one last time. To his surprise, it trembled and the traveler lowered it. Armored he may be, but his muscles had already reached their limit.

The traveler said nothing. He glared at Sigi with flaming determination in his eye.

He didn't want to kill him. Of course not.

Sigi twisted his wrist and grasped his sword firmly. A quick blow with his pommel should do it. He only hoped that his head wasn't as shielded as his arm was. That way, he could knock him out senseless without a cinch, for his own good as well as the traveler's.

*Sami, I'm sorry.* Sigi closed his eyes, despite himself, before dropping the hammer. His muscles tensed through the effort of pushing through space and wind, the most stress he'd put them through.

Sigi saw a light. Not the red of the sun you see through your pupils, but a silver heatless light that compelled his eyes open.

The sandstorm raged around them, a whirlwind scratching and slapping sand against his skin. The howling wind deafened his senses, but not to the extent of rendering him clueless before the reality of his situation, which was this: his blow hadn't landed.

Sigi pushed through space and wind, but wind was pushing back. And the reason was the light. Of this he was certain. If not, why would the traveler hold a circle with a strange mark in front of him, a silver circle that was the source of the silver light?

The traveler grunted and leaned forward. Sigi, in turn, was pushed backward, his feet sliding across sand. The traveler's bleeding hadn't stopped. In fact, it was worsening, but he still found the strength to stand up and shine the light brighter.

Sigi's weapon flew out of his hand, snatched by the whirlwind that pressed closer and closer around him. He was caught in the eye of the storm. He shielded his eyes, nose, and mouth. It did little against the stinging and slapping and lashing. The only thing it did shield was his eyesight, thanks to which he would've noticed the traveler emerge from the storm and thus see the punch coming.

Pain in his temple, concentrated and calculated. Not enough to render him unconscious, but perfect to knock him down useless.

Sigi's vision blurred.

The world came in smudges each time he blinked.

Blood dripped from above.

The traveler shook his fist.

He disappeared.

And reappeared.

Touching Sigi's chest.

Sigi's waist.

The traveler grabbed the water-skin.

Walked away.

And carried a small body from the floor.



Sami.

His vision blurred further.

Not because of unconsciousness.

Water.

Tears.

The traveler walked away into the desert, with Sami in his arms.

Far from sight, but not from mind. And Sigi hoped, despite his people's laws, that the traveler found a way to save his little brother from the desert's fate.

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**Ebony's Heart**  
**By Cathy Ryan**  
**(from Nokesville, Virginia)**



Ebony stepped from her cottage with a box in her hand. It was finely crafted of red mahogany; the latch was hidden. She had placed her heart inside the box, and now she carried it to a sweet gum tree that grew on the edge of the small lawn outside her door.

Her marriage had ended the week before and, as couples do, she and the man she once loved divided their lives into things. She took the table; he the chairs. He took the forks; she the spoons. Two piles they made, each pile civil and deficient, then went their separate ways. The box was in Ebony's share.

She discovered the cottage tucked away in a wood above a sloping meadow with a quiet lake below and thought of it as hers the moment she saw it. The walls were built of stone the color of amber and cream; the roof and doorstep were slate. There were two rooms on the ground floor and a basement room, ready to let. The open basement door overlooked the lake behind the house and the front door opened to the small lawn with the sweet gum tree.

Ebony bought the cottage and moved her small pile of things into it. Then she took her heart to the sweet gum tree and tied it there, tight against the bole.

Returning to her door, she paused. On the step, dove on slate, was a viper scarcely larger than a garden worm. The angle of its jaw warned her of danger. "Shall I drive you away?" she said. "You are wicked, though small." The viper gave no sign, not even raising its head. "Perhaps you will amuse me, in my lone work?" Still it did not move. Deciding, she caught it up and placed it on the box in the tree. "Behave," she said to it, and returned to her house. It was mid-summer.

She posted a sign at the end of the lane and, before the week was out, rented the basement room to a man and his new wife. He was a teacher of history; his wife was a weaver of songs.

The teacher noticed Ebony's heart in the sweet gum tree. The grass around the tree was already growing greener than that by her doorstep. "Won't you need it again?" he asked her. "It's safe there," she replied.

Ebony built herself a garden on her side of the house where it would catch full morning sun. She planted corn and squash, mint and thyme, marigold and rue. On the other side of the house, nearer the basement door, she built a gazebo with benches inside. It overlooked the meadow and the lake below. Here they could sit and watch the setting sun. She trained grapevines to cover it.

Each morning, Teacher walked down the lane into town to teach his students. While he was away, his wife gathered notes from wood, meadow, lake, and sky, and wove them into songs. She would sing them for her husband in the evenings when he returned.

While the weaver wove songs and the teacher taught history, Ebony made potions. She gathered healing roots and blossoms, hung them to dry, or steeped them in oil. She pestled root and seed, bark and berry, and wrapped the powders into folded papers. Calming oils, healing powders, and soothing lotions, she sold them in the village for her keep.

When the weather was fine, Teacher would sit in the gazebo with his wife to watch the

setting sun, and she would sing. Ebony paused in her garden to hear the song of wind in the hawk's wing, the casting of a spider's web, the falling of a leaf, the beating of Ebony's heart in the tree.

Sometimes she would join them in the gazebo, she alone on one side facing the two who sat together. Songweaver would stroke Teacher's hand as she sang, soothing him with voice and touch. Then he would cover her hand with his.

One evening as Ebony sat across from them remembering the warmth of hand in hand, Songweaver screamed and pulled her feet onto the bench. The viper was in the gazebo, close by Ebony's heel. Startled by Songweaver's sudden movement, it coiled. It was larger now and darker.

Ebony passed her hand to draw its gaze and seized it with the other. It slapped its coils around her forearm, cool against her skin, and squeezed. She carried it to her side of the house followed by the sound of Teacher's murmured comfort to his wife. Ebony noted he had not drawn away from the viper when it appeared. *He could love me*, she thought, not for the first time. She stroked the cool, dark coils.

Ebony hired a workman from the village to help her move rocks and lay a path. His eyes were clear and blue and Ebony was glad her heart was in the tree. The workman heard it beating. "Won't you need it again?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "It's safe there."

"It is not," he said. "Apart from you it weakens and, see!, it draws a viper."

"You know the way of vipers?"

"And what draws them. Will you not reclaim your heart?"

Unwilling to learn her pain again, she turned away. He helped her lay the path and then returned to the village.

That evening when he was gone Ebony drew a three-legged stool to the table-with-no-chairs and sat upon it to eat her supper. Salad with a spoon – would she never have a fork again? She remembered the workman's hands, wide, strong, sun-darkened. From under her floor, with words too quiet to discern, arose the melody of Songweaver's welcome home greeting to her husband. When the song ended, Teacher spoke and Songweaver replied. Their quiet exchange completed the song, a coda.

Winter came. Snow covered the ground and the new laid path. The sweet gum tree kept its leaves. Grass remained green under its limbs and birds sheltered in the branches. Teacher often stopped to admire the tree on his way home. Once Ebony showed him a hickory fork she had fashioned. Songweaver braided the rustle of squirrels snuggled in their nest with the hush of falling snow and the sizzle of fire in a log and sang to her husband. In candlelit solitude above them, Ebony listened. She remembered hands enfolding hands, Teacher's and Songweaver's, and Teacher's and hers.

Winter thawed. Into the evening song came the opening of apple blossoms, honeybees in the sun, and a warning scrape of hide on stone. The next morning, the leaves of the sweet gum tree turned the color of sunrise, then dropped to form a scarlet carpet beneath the branches. New leaves emerged by nightfall, and the evening song told the falling of those leaves and the bursting forth of new ones, and again, the warning scrape of hide on stone.

The next morning, Ebony, on her knees in the garden, heard the teacher cry out such a shriek that she dropped her trowel and ran around the cottage to their door. "Teacher?" she said and rapped on it.

"It's killed her," he cried. "It's killed her."

She thrust the door open.

Teacher held his wife as if she were a child. Her head lolled, blue-lipped and still. His

face above hers was twisted, anguished, grief-wracked. Her outstretched arm showed twin bruises. On their bed a viper rested, old skin shed, new skin revealed, and molt-blind. Ebony knew it was her own. With fluid dancer's grace, she reached the bed, took up the viper, and killed it with a vicious twist.

She approached the teacher with his envenomed wife, and he, eyes wide, backed away. She stopped. "Don't you know me?"

"Too well," he said, "with a viper in your hand."

She cast it out the door and still he backed away.

"You are wild," he said as if surprised.

"I am," she said. Did he think she was some other way? "Would you that I mend her?"

"Yes," he cried. "She is my heart!"

*She*, he said. *She, not me*. Ebony knew it then. This wrong was hers and hers alone to mend. "Then let me see her."

Teacher lowered his wife and Ebony pressed her ear to Songweaver's throat. There was the barest intake of breath, the slowest of pulse. "She is not dead," she said. "Not yet."

Teacher clutched his wife again, weeping against her.

"Hold her so," said Ebony. "Keep her warm."

She raced up to her workbench, took a vial of oil that iridesced when she shook it, and a twist of root wrapped in brown paper, thrust these into her pocket and ran to the sweet gum tree. She untied the twine that held the mahogany box and pulled. The box didn't move. The tree had grown around it and she couldn't pull it free. The latch was pressed tight against the trunk; she couldn't reach it. She pulled and pried until her fingertips bled from the roughness of the bark. "Stubborn branch," she cried. "Release it to me!" She picked up her rake then, smashed the box, and took up her heart. It stung the raw tips of her fingers as she held it, slippery, wet, hot, and smaller than when she'd left it. It began to shrivel in the cold air. She hurried to the basement.

Teacher laid Songweaver on their bed, her damaged arm in easy reach.

Ebony parted Songweaver's lips then tipped her heart. Two drops of blood fell onto Songweaver's tongue and she gasped. Ebony squeezed two more drops onto the bite marks that opened and began to seep. The heart was shrunken now and leathery. Ebony swallowed it. At once it swelled and ached. Once more Ebony knew great sorrow. This time though it was for Teacher and his beloved wife.

She smoothed oil from the vial onto the twin bruises on Songweaver's arm, then stoppered the vial and pressed it into Teacher's hand. "Give her this to drink when she wakes. It will ease her heart. Then take her up and leave this place at once." She added the paper-wrapped root. "This you must both chew as you travel, she a part and you a part. It will bind you together." Knowing she had done all now to repair the damage, Ebony knelt, pressed her mouth to the bruises, and drew the poison. Bitterness in her mouth, she hastened out and up and into her bed.

When she awoke, it was dusk. The house was silent and cold, the fire dead on the hearth. Teacher and his wife were gone. Ebony's heart twisted joy for them and loneliness for herself. She took her heart out again, put it back into the mahogany box still locked in the sweet gum tree and tied the smashed face of the box in place with twine.

Returning to her cottage, there on her doorstep, scarcely larger than a garden worm, dove on slate, was a viper. The angle of its jaw warned her. She crushed it.

In the morning when she stepped out again there was another viper at her door. She fetched her hoe. There was yet another at the corner of her cottage, and another at the basement window well.

She asked the workman to come from the village to help her learn why the vipers came. His eyes were clear and blue and Ebony knew he could love her.

Together they walked her property, searching out vipers. "You have a fine garden here," he said. "Is it large enough for you?"

"It's all that I can handle," she replied.

"You could have more, with a helper," he said.

"And if he grew weary of gardening and walked away?"

"And if he did not?" He smiled and she knew she could love him.

A new viper had come to the sweet gum tree. It lapped at the trunk where blood seeped down from the broken box.

"Even if you remove them all today," the workman said, "tomorrow there will be more. It's your forsaken heart abandoned here that draws them. You must take it up again."

"But I do not wish to suffer."

"And so you cherish vipers?"

She began to tremble. "Is there no other way?"

The viper, swaying, stretching, seeking, eased up the bole.

"So long as you feed them," he said, "the vipers will come."

"You do not fear them."

"Nor will I live with them."

How alone she would be with no heart and only vipers.

She untied the twine, removed the broken face of the box, and held her heart, slippery, dark, and hot. It had grown small again. Her voice no more than a whisper, "I'm afraid," she said.

"Yes," he replied.

She swallowed, and it swelled again.

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**Rising From the Ashes**  
**By Jaimee Pifer**  
**(from Kingston, Ontario, Canada)**



As the sound of a cell pierced the room, Jared jolted awake with his heart pounding and body covered in sweat. “What, Jeff?!”

“Another rough night?”

“What do you think?” Jared snapped as he clutched his head still hearing the echoes of his wife’s screams.

“I will keep this call short. I persuaded a producer to cast you in a documentary about a man who climbs Mount Kilimanjaro. It’s time to come back to the acting scene.”

“But...”

“No buts, and please don’t let me down. I set you up with an instructor in Kingston; a national rock-climbing champion.”

“Fine,” Jared sighed as he ran a hand through his hair. Jared ended the call and looked around his room strewn with clothes and liquor bottles. His eyes rested on a picture of his wife on their wedding day. His heart clenched with pain as he remembered the truck driver who took the life of his wife and unborn son.

As tears gathered in his eyes Jared heard Natalie whisper into his ear, “It’s time to live your life again.”

“But how?” Hearing no answer, Jared forced himself out of bed and headed to the bathroom. He moved as if there were chains on his feet. “Stupid light,” he grumbled as he shaded his eyes from the glare of the florescent light bulb. Looking at his disheveled face in the mirror, Jared shaved off his stubble with trembling hands.

Jared entered an old brick building and came into a room filled with rock-climbing gear. The first thing he noticed was the smell of sweat, chalk and polyester. He could hear people climbing downstairs. A young woman in black exercise pants, a blue tank top, and a harness came out of one of the changing rooms. Her eyes brightened when she saw Jared. “You must be Jared. I’m Melanie, your climbing instructor.” She shook Jared’s hand.

“You’re not what I expected.” Jared said in a surprised tone.

Melanie smirked, “Few people do.”

Jared chuckled along with Melanie. “How did you know it was me?”

“My goddaughter loves watching your show where you voiced the Speedster. When I received a call that I would be coaching you I was thrilled.” Jared smiled for what seemed like the first time since his wife’s death. “Let’s get you suited up, and we’ll start with the basics.”

A few minutes later, Jared was downstairs in the climbing arena garbed in a harness and climbing shoes. “First thing. Put the rope through the two loopholes on your harness and

then feed the rope through the figure eight. Once you've done that, put your hand on the lead rope, and wrap the loose rope around your thumb twice before pulling it through to make an S shape." After a few tries, Jared was able to tie in. "Perfect! Now you get to climb. I will be down here belaying you." Jared grabbed onto the first green hold and climbed his way to the top. "This is too easy!" Jared called out from the top.

"Wait until you do the difficult ones. It takes a lot of training and practice to master the art of rock-climbing. We will focus on your technique and building your strength."

A week later, Jared was moving through the levels of difficulty. "I can't seem to get this one," he complained as he fell a couple of inches from trying to get the next hold.

"The holds are too slippery and small."

Melanie tossed him a bag of chalk. "Rub the chalk on your hands. It will help your grip. Use a pinch hold with your fingers like a crab's pinchers to help pull your body up to the next hold." After Jared completed the course, Melanie said, "Nice! You did it! It seems like you are in a different world while climbing."

"I find I forget my pain while I am climbing," Jared said, surprised at how easy it was to open up to her. "I signed up for the beginner's challenge at a competition in two weeks."

Melanie's face brightened and said, "That's the same one I have signed up for but in the advanced competition. Let's design a program for you so you are ready for the competition. It will be intense but worth it."

Jared spent another week training on a hang-board where he performed pull ups and dead hangs, which consisted of hanging from the holds. He climbed the same course two to three times in a row to help establish endurance. Over time, he built strength in his fingers until he could clasp small holds while climbing.

One day, he found Melanie climbing with no ropes. Her climbing was smooth and fluid as she maneuvered her way to the top. She swung her body back and forth to gain momentum and then jumped to grab a hold. Melanie didn't have a strong grip so her body scraped against the wall as she fell onto some blue thick mats on the floor. Jared jogged towards her as Melanie scanned for any injuries as if her life depended on it. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just a bruise and a couple of scratches. I am sorry, but I have to cancel today's session."

"Why? Over a fall?"

Melanie sighed, tightened her ponytail, and turned around to face Jared. "Guess it is time to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"I have hemophilia, which means my blood does not clot when I'm injured. Any injury could be fatal."

"If that's so, why do you rock climb?"

"Try living with your parents who wouldn't let you out of the house or do anything because they didn't want to lose you. I want to enjoy life and not waste a second. If I die, then so be it. Beats living in constant fear and suffocating under my parents' control and the

terminal illness.”

“Wow.”

“Yes, I’m thankful I moved out when I did. Well, I need to keep an eye on my arm to make sure the injuries don’t turn into anything serious. We’ll see you on Monday.”

*Jared groaned as he opened his eyes. He could hear sirens and a sharp screeching sound as if the car was being torn apart. “Sir, can you hear me? We are getting you out of here.” Jared could make out a firefighter’s uniform. He mumbled, “Natalie, my wife. Is she alive? We were coming home from our first prenatal appointment.” Jared turned his head with a grimace and took in his wife’s form. Natalie’s strawberry blonde hair was caked with blood and a jagged piece of glass was sticking out of her neck.*

*“I am sorry, sir. She didn’t make it.”*

*“No!” Jared said with an anguished cry as the firefighters lifted him onto a stretcher. While the emergency crew was transporting Jared into an ambulance, a large explosion occurred. His car went up into flames while his wife was still inside.*

Jared woke up with tears in his eyes. Today was the anniversary of his wife’s death, Monday, February 1st. He turned to look at their wedding photo. “Can’t go another year without you.” It had been two years since his wife’s death. In the evening, Jared drove to the closest liquor store to buy a few cases of beer and liquor. He went back home, sat on his bed, opened a can of beer, and said, “Cheers!” to the photograph of his wife. Jared drank until he fell asleep. The next morning he couldn’t handle the pain so he continued to drink until he became unconscious.

Melanie ended her call on her cell that day for the tenth time. “Strange... Jared is not picking up. Something is not right.” She called Jeff, Jared’s agent, and demanded that they head over to Jared’s apartment. That night Melanie and Jeff banged on Jared’s door. “Something is wrong. He missed his rock-climbing session, and he always calls if he will miss it.”

“You have to understand that yesterday was the anniversary of his wife’s death.”

“Did you check on him?” Melanie asked. Jeff remained silent with eyes downcast. “So you left him alone. Does he have any friends who offer support?”

“To tell you the truth, his friends stopped calling after a year. Jared became an angry and withdrawn person unlike what he used to be. We didn’t know what to say or how to help him.”

Melanie’s eyes flashed with indignation as she stated, “He was grieving, for heaven’s sake! It’s common for people to have a change in their personality when someone close to them dies. Just give him time to process his grief. All everyone had to do was be there for him whether by calling or visiting. He shouldn’t have to face this alone. Someone needs to be there to help him through this.” Jeff unlocked the door. “Call 911!” said Melanie. She rushed to Jared’s side, cleared the vomit from his face, and checked his pulse. “He’s not breathing!” She knelt amongst the empty liquor bottles and pumped his chest until the paramedics arrived.

Jared smelled antiseptic and heard the steady beep of a heart monitor. He groaned as he opened his eyes from his drugged and drowsy state. Melanie was sleeping next to him on a



chair with a book on her lap. “Melanie,” Jared croaked.

“Jared, you’re awake! I’ll get the doctor.”

“Wait. Water.”

“Right, you must be thirsty.”

After taking a few sips, Jared asked, “What happened?”

“You drank yourself to death, but the paramedics were able to revive you. We thought we lost you,” said Melanie with her voice cracking at the end.

“We?”

“Melanie and I,” said Jeff as he scanned the room avoiding eye contact with Jared. He took a step back. “Going to grab a cup of coffee. Glad you’re doing okay,” said Jeff as he turned and hurried out of the room.

“Is he always like that?”

“Yes. He only cares about securing the next contract.”

“What a jerk!”

“I agree. It’s about time I find a new agent. What day is it?”

“February 3rd.”

“Hang on. The rock-climbing competition is today. You should be there.”

“Um...”

“Don’t tell me you missed it?”

“I did, but there will always be other rock-climbing competitions. I was worried you wouldn’t make it. We almost lost you a few times while the doctors were pumping your stomach.”

“Oh, Melanie. You shouldn’t have stayed.”

Taking his hand, Melanie said, “Your life is more important than a rock-climbing competition.”

A voice interrupted them, “Sorry to bother you. I am Dr. Fells and I’m here to check on you, Jared.” While Dr. Fells was giving a routine examination, he explained to Jared that he was in the psych ward on suicide watch for the next 48 hours. He pointed out various routes Jared could take to help him with his grieving.

Jared’s face fell at the news, but Melanie squeezed his hand and said, “It will be a long road ahead, but I will help you through it.”

Jared glanced at her and said, “Why help me? Everyone else has abandoned me during my period of grief.”

“Jared McKenzie! After all these weeks together, I thought you considered me your friend. And as your friend, I will help you through this difficult time compared to your so-called friends in the past!”

Jared chuckled and said, “A feisty one, isn’t she?” Dr. Fells nodded with a grin as he put his stethoscope back around his neck.

## **Two Months Later**

Jared stared at the ceiling and turned off his alarm before it went off. He sighed, “What’s the

point of setting it if I am not receiving any sleep?” Looking at his alarm, Jared leapt to his feet realizing that he had a rock-climbing competition that morning. Jared guzzled back a cup of coffee and drove to the competition.

Melanie gave Jared a hug when he arrived and asked, “How are you doing? You look exhausted.”

“The counseling sessions are helping, but I can’t get any sleep. My counselor says I have post-traumatic stress disorder from the trauma I experienced in witnessing my wife’s death.”

“Taking any sleeping meds?”

“Nothing seems to help. Right now, I am functioning on 48 hours without sleep.”

“Are you sure you want to climb today?”

Jared nodded his head. “I had coffee this morning and seeing you always brightens my day.”

A voice crackled over the P.A. system, “Melanie Davenport, please report to Arena One.” Melanie took a step back, flustered. “We better go. Are you still good with belaying me?”

“Always,” smiled Jared.

Jared gazed in wonder looking at how Melanie navigated the holds. When she was near the top, Jared’s eyes drooped. *Not now. Have to stay awake.* A wave of exhaustion swept over him as he followed the pull of sleep. *I’ll just close my eyes for a couple of seconds.*

As he drifted to sleep, Melanie yelled, “I am ready to come down!”

Jared heard nothing as his body leaned forward putting his weight on the lever causing it to flip the other way. He jerked awake when he heard a scream and a thud. Jared saw his car on fire in front of him and firefighters dragging him away from the crash. He kept shouting, “My wife! Someone please get her. She’s still trapped.”

“This man is insane. He’s hallucinating.”

“No, I am not! What are you talking about?” yelled Jared as he strained against the hold of the men.

A firefighter knelt down beside him and said, “Sir, you are in the Furnace Room at the rock-climbing competition. Close your eyes and when you open them again, you will see yourself in the Furnace Room.”

When Jared opened his eyes, he could see two men restraining him. “What happened?” The two men looked at each other with solemn eyes. A gnawing sensation gripped Jared. He scanned the room and saw Melanie being carried on a stretcher.

He heard one paramedic say, “Her vital signs are low. We need to hurry.”

“No,” Jared moaned, “No! What have I done? Melanie!”

He lunged towards Melanie as a man yelled, “We need help over here!” It took four men to restrain Jared as a paramedic administered a sedative.

Jared woke up in a hospital room where he recognized Dr. Fells. “Hello, Jared.”

“What’s going on?”

“Do you remember what happened?”

Flashes of the rock-climbing competition flickered through his mind along with Melanie.

“Where’s Melanie? Is she okay? Is she...”

“She’s fine, Jared. Alive and recovering.”

Jared sighed with relief as he sank back into the bed. “What were her injuries?”

“She suffered internal bleeding in her abdomen, bruised ribs, and a broken arm. Now, it’s time to talk about you. Judging by the length of your recovery period, you haven’t been getting any sleep.”

“What do you mean recovery period? I was at the Furnace Room earlier today.”

“That was three days ago. You slept right through. Something your body needed. Your counselor will work with you on developing techniques of how to handle flashbacks. I am going to recommend a psychiatrist to help you with your PTSD and sleeping problems.”

By the end of the week, Jared was preparing to leave the psychiatric ward at the hospital when he heard a knock and a voice saying, “Hello, Jared.”

Fear and guilt coursed through his veins as he turned around at a slow pace.

“Melanie... I... um.”

“It’s okay, Jared.”

“No, it’s not. I almost killed you. Someone I... how did you survive?”

“Through infusions to help my blood clot. Don’t think I don’t notice when you change the subject, mister,” she said putting her one arm on her hip since the other one was in a sling. Jared cracked an amused grin as he tried to stifle a chuckle. “What’s so funny?”

“You, Melanie.”

“Humph. Well, I could press charges against you for attempted murder,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes. Pain flashed in Jared’s eyes as he gazed at her with a sorrowful expression. “Too soon?”

He wrapped her in a hug and rested his chin on her head. “You have helped me out these past few months and I should have told you about my sleepless nights and flashbacks. When I saw you on the stretcher, I realized that you are someone I am starting to love. I still have a long road ahead if you still want to journey it with me.”

“Oh, Jared. You don’t have to ask,” she said while wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Well, Miss Davenport, it’s about time I take you on our first date. How about next week on Monday?”

Melanie’s phone rang, causing them to drift apart. “It’s my mom. I can’t drive in the state I’m in. Gotta go.” She hesitated at the doorway, turned around and headed back to Jared planting a kiss on his cheek. “I am looking forward to dinner and hearing how your documentary is coming along,” she said with a smile, leaving a stunned Jared behind.

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**WATERFALL**  
**By Nia Ellis**  
**(from Chicago, Illinois)**



‘Honk, Honk, Honk,’ bellowed the horn. ‘Get out of the way, you useless piece of spit,’ yelled the reckless driver. Her bruised body folded over the curbside. She squirmed to block off the pain from a twisted left knee. Her gaze unfocused as a river of tears smudged the view. A man steadied her standing and asked, “Are you OK, young lady?”

‘Yes,’ replied Lexie.

He picked up her cardboard sign, then gave her twenty dollars and a business card.

‘Thank you. God Bless you!’ Lexie pushed the card into her pocket. Her body trembled, and her knee ached from the fall. Lexie made her move to her supplier.

Lexie, disoriented with an addiction urge and a twisted knee. The guy, seeing a young blonde with deep blue eyes, inquired, ‘What’s up, Vanilla Ice? Damn, baby, you should see somebody about your knee.’

‘Give me two,’ said Lexie.

A few blocks over sat the deserted house where she and others squatted. She positioned herself in a room. The pain in her body was intolerable. She medicated herself. The pain subsided. She covered her twisted knee with her shirt.

Old lady Susan wobbled into the room. ‘Vanilla Ice, you don’t know spit. You think you better than me but you trash. Yup, handmade trash.’ She hesitated and snickered. ‘I’m just fooling with you. You’re too inexperienced to know but you still handmade trash. But I care for you.’ Old Lady Susan recognized a reflection of her younger self in Lexie so she teased and called her trash.

The afternoon sunlight peaked through the window. Cramped muscles from the absence of movement reminded Lexie of her fall. She visited the soup kitchen where she frequented regularly.

‘Hello, Lexie, how are you?’ Dry eyes and spaced-out, she produced a narrow grin and picked up her soup and bread, taking them to a nearby table. Hunger pains from not eating set in. She slurped up several spoonfuls of soup. Small grumbling sounds came from her tummy. Satisfied with the soup and bread, she reached into her pocket and took out the card she’d received earlier and studied it, reading: *Lexie Alexander Collins Treatment Center*. Mouth pursed, eyes wide she studied the card again to be sure she saw the name correctly.

She showed up at the location on the card. Opened the door. Her glazed eyes met Mr. Winslow. She swayed side to side and fainted.

Mr. Winslow and staff helped her to their nursing service. The nurse treated her twisted knee. Relaxed from the medicine, she succumbed to sleep. Her entire life flashed before her.

Lexie dreamed of her days as a youth. She looked at her 10-year-old self, holding her

head in her hands, crying in her bedroom. Lexie tossed and twisted. She was in a place seated in an armchair and chatting with a psychiatrist. The place shifted. She was hiding under the table playing with what appeared to be baby powder while her parents hosted a celebration for their wealthy acquaintances.

She awakened to old lady Susan's hoarse, whispering tone. 'Vanilla Ice, Vanilla Ice! Wake up.' She tugged the blankets to her face, staring at old lady Susan.

The old woman continued, 'In this life, you reap what you sow. What you do, you do to yourself. You and I are the same. We have inherited family curses.' A dry barking cough followed. She choked for air. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

With a rise in vocal pitch, Lexie cried out for help. They took old Lady Susan to the emergency room. Heightened emotions. Increased fidgeting, inability to relax. The nurse offered her medicine to relax her anxiety and addiction withdrawals.

The next day, rays of illumination reflected onto several objects in the room. A warm ball of light penetrated through Lexie's eyelids and awoke her. She squinted to adapt to the light directed at her.

There was a tap on the door. 'Good Morning, Lexie. My name is Rebecca. I hope you slept well. I heard there was a challenge last night.' Rebecca placed fresh clothes on the bed. She asked, 'Can you please get dressed and meet me in the lounge?'

Looking downward, Lexie nodded her head in agreement.

After an unhurried walk to the lounge, Rebecca and Mr. Winslow's steady eye contact offered support and comfort. She planted herself in the armchair. 'I know you are eager to know of Susan's outcome. Susan Collins' health condition is stable,' said Mr. Winslow.

With slouched shoulders and a blank stare, Lexie responded slowly.

'Old lady Susan's name is Susan Collins?'

'Yes, I have reached out to her family. Susan has a sister who lives in Chicago, Elizabeth Collins,' replied Mr. Winslow.

'Please, it's been an awful night and we don't want to overwhelm you. Let's take a break,' said Rebecca.

Lexie nodded in agreement.

The next morning, old lady Susan's sister Elizabeth Collins sat in the office speaking to Mr. Winslow.

'Lexie's father impregnated Susan. The relationship didn't end well. Susan gave Lexie up for adoption. It was a closed adoption,' said Elizabeth.

'Does Susan know Lexie is her daughter?' asked Mr. Winslow.

'No, she does not. Lexie's father's family was wealthy. Money could get you everything, even an adoption. I found out Lexie's father and his wife adopted Lexie,' replied Elizabeth.

'What about the last name *Collins*? Are you related to Lexie's father's family?' asked Mr. Winslow.

'Mr. Winslow, we share the same last name, Collins. No, it does not make us related to Lexie's father's family,' answered Elizabeth.

'Mrs. Collins, did I understand you right? Lexie's birth father and his wife raised Lexie?'

asked Mr. Winslow.

‘Yes, Mr. Winslow that is correct,’ answered Elizabeth.

‘Mrs. Collins, were you aware Lexie’s parents built this center for the community? And named the center after their daughter hoping one day Lexie would turn up?’ asked Mr. Winslow.

‘No, Mr. Winslow. How ironic they end up together!’ replied Elizabeth.

Mr. Winslow nodded his head in agreement.

‘We’d love to have Susan come back,’ said Mr. Winslow.

‘Thank you, Dr. Winslow. It’s a safe time to try treatment choices for Susan. She is frail so she won’t give an argument,’ replied Elizabeth.

The next day Lexie awakened to the Old Lady Susan’s voice. ‘Vanilla Ice, Vanilla Ice! I’m back. Whew, handmade, that bout at the emergency room was rough.’ Old Lady Susan frequented the treatment center whenever she desired to relax and receive a rest from her addiction.

There was a tap on the door. Lexie opened it and there stood Rebecca, Dr. Winslow, and Elizabeth, Susan’s sister. They came into the room. Dr. Winslow pulled out an armchair for both Rebecca and Elizabeth.

‘Susan, do you remember David Collins?’ asked Elizabeth.

‘Yup, and good riddance to that piece of spit,’ replied Susan.

‘Lexie is his daughter,’ replied Elizabeth.

‘Vanilla Ice is David’s daughter?’ asked Susan.

‘Susan, she is the daughter you gave up for adoption,’ replied Elizabeth.

Silence permeated the room, followed by an intense cry of wailing.

‘Get out,’ cried Susan. ‘You lie. You lie! Get the hell out of here.’

Disturbed and bewildered, Lexie sat without making any remarks.

‘Please, let’s try to make sense of this new information. We are here for you,’ said Mr. Winslow.

Lexie and Susan gazed at one another. They shared no conversations between them, both disturbed and in disbelief. Mother and daughter reunited! Hmmm!

The next morning, Lexie stood fixed as she watched Old Lady Susan sleeping. Examining her facial features, she noted the resemblance she had not noticed before. She wondered if this could reveal the reason for emptiness she’d felt? So many questions. She replayed old Lady Susan words in her head: ‘In this life, you reap what you sow. What you do you, do to yourself. You and I are the same. We have inherited family curses.’

‘Damn! Old Lady Susan is my birth mom. Is this true? Am I daydreaming?’ She parked herself on her bed, rocked back and forth.

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**The Wolf in the Closet**  
**By M. Mackinnon**  
**(from Vineland, New Jersey)**



“There’s a wolf in the closet.”

My mother’s eyes glinted in the dim light of the upstairs hallway in our old house. She wanted me to react, but I wouldn’t. Mama was queen of the cruel joke, master of the sly dig. She gestured toward the closet door, the color high in her cheeks. She’d been drinking again.

“Do not—ever—open that door. The wolf is one hundred years old and it is always hungry.”

“How does it eat if no one ever opens the door?” I asked. I was only six and hadn’t yet learned the rules of this game. She slapped me, hard, across my face.

“You think this is funny?” she hissed. “I’m trying to *help* you! I don’t know why I bother, you’re such an ungrateful little shit!” She was winding up, enjoying her power, readying for battle. I hunched my shoulders, waiting.

She didn’t disappoint. Raining blows, screaming invective, she delivered her vile demonstration of love with unerring precision, not stopping until I was sobbing, huddled on the cold floor of the hallway. She crouched beside me, turning my battered face toward her, studying my red, swollen eyes and the swelling already making its way from under my skin. I could smell the liquor on her breath, the sickly scent gagging, choking me.

“Oh, darling, Mama is so sorry. I just worry about you, you know. Why do you make me hurt you like this?” She pulled me onto her lap and rocked me, crooning as I wept.

She left me to go downstairs, turning around at the last minute, and the glint was back. “Go to bed now. But be careful, dear. There’s a wolf in the closet.” I skirted the closet with the wolf and huddled under my bedcovers, wondering if this time it might be true.

For a few days we would be like normal people, or at least like the people in the books I read in the safety of the school library. Books about mothers who loved their children and kept them safe, and fathers who stayed. She made pancakes with chocolate chip faces. She read me stories, holding me close and laughing with me. I could almost imagine at those times that it would always be this way, that my mother loved me as a mother should.

I was ten. “Come here—your hair’s a mess again. Let Mama comb it for you.” The glint was back in the dark eyes. This, too, was part of the game. I sat in the kitchen chair while she yanked a comb through my tangled ringlets with ever increasing viciousness. Every so often she would check my face, to see if the tears of pain had started to gather, and she would laugh, a high, brittle sound like glass breaking or sticks being snapped in half. She wanted me to beg her to stop, but I never would. I don’t know why. If I had begged it would have been bad, but over quickly. When I refused to give in, she twisted my hair like the clothes in our

old wringer washer, twisting, twisting until finally I could take it no longer and I screamed with the pain.

“Shut up, you big baby!” Her voice was high and shrill, but somehow triumphant. This was the part she liked best. She pulled the chair sharply out from under me, throwing me onto the floor, and then kicked me in the leg. “Why can’t you appreciate anything I do for you? You’re a miserable little bitch, and I wish you’d never been born!” I stayed huddled on the floor, trying to make myself small, waiting for it to stop.

Mama walked around the room in tightening circles, mumbling to herself, and then she stopped and watched me, a small secret smile tugging at her lips. She came over and helped me up, hugging me, apologizing, but never meaning any of it.

“Go up to bed, but be careful. There’s a wolf in the closet and he’s extra hungry tonight.” She turned and left me alone in the kitchen.

By the time I was fourteen I had grown too tall to be thrown to the floor, and my mother did not try to comb my hair. I had become numb to the venomous words that dripped from her twisted mouth. I no longer believed there was a wolf in the closet. Still, I never opened the door.

I spent the next years planning my escape from this life, from this monster who called herself Mama. I excelled in school and won a full scholarship to a college far away. I never called, never wrote. Somehow Mama found out my address and sent letters that I refused to open. I felt guilty for that, but then I remembered the wolf in the closet, remembered how I wanted to hurt her as she had hurt me. I felt the blows, smelled the liquor wafting up from the envelopes with their scabbled writing, and I added each letter to the stack of others in my bottom desk drawer.

In my junior year I met Darrin. He was handsome and sweet, and his tongue was golden. He said he loved me, that we should run away together, that he would take care of me. We quit school and were married in the office of the Justice of the Peace, and we set up housekeeping in a tiny apartment over the liquor store. I did not invite Mama.

I worked at the local supermarket. Darrin tried his hand at many jobs, but none were right for him. They didn’t appreciate him, he said. And he began to spend his days on a cracked stool in the local tavern. He seemed to love the bottle as he had once said he loved me. The day I found out I was pregnant was the day I left. I was not my mother—I would not allow her path to be mine. I enrolled in night school and began to work on finishing my degree in accounting. A year later I had a job as a secretary in an accounting firm. When I graduated they asked me to become a member of the team, and two years later I became a partner in that same firm. Mama’s letters came less and less often until finally they stopped altogether.

Bethie was six when I got the call. Mama was dead. She had fallen down the stairs and lain there for days before a neighbor found her. I must come, the lawyer said. *Ding dong*, I thought, *the witch is dead*. But I went.

The moment I entered the house I felt the memories surround me, swirling in the dusty hall, drifting up the stairs that had killed Mama. I felt unseen hands reaching from the



darkness to slap my face and pull my hair, and I wanted to leave this place of such unhappiness, run far away and never think of it again. But there were papers to be gone through. I found the letter in her desk, in a large manila envelope that also included every school picture of me, the announcements I had put in the newspaper of my scholarship, my marriage, Bethie's birth. The news of my job and my promotion were on top.

*My darling, the letter began, if you are reading this I will be gone. I need to tell you that I know I did not do right by you. I was sick, I know that now, and I was sad. So much of the time I was sad, and I took it out on you. I saw what a happy little girl you were, and I was angry that you could feel that way when there was such a great hole inside me. I think I was jealous of you. I had been smart, like you are, and I wanted to make something of myself. When I met your father, I thought I had caught the brass ring. He said he loved me, that he would take care of me forever. But then he began to change. It was subtle at first, a slap when I answered him back, an unkind word. But then it became our way of life, and I hadn't the courage to leave. I still loved him. When I became pregnant he left us, and I blamed it on you. I lost myself in the misery, and I turned to alcohol to numb the pain. As you grew up, I saw myself as I once was, a sweet child with no idea of the cruelty this world has for the innocent. And I hated you for my own frailty. Every spiteful word, every slap, was really for me. For my weakness, my inability to cope. But I followed you through your life. I read of your graduation, your job, and I knew that you were stronger than me. I was so proud. And I want to tell you now that I am so sorry. I love you. I always have. Please try to forgive me and remember that. I think you are strong enough to do that. I hope so. Goodbye, my love. Mama*

I sat staring at the words she had written, and I no longer smelled the liquor in them, no longer felt the slaps stinging my face. I remembered the stories, the hugs, and I understood, now that it was far too late, that this had also been a part of my mother. She had meant the kind words. She had been weak, but she had somehow raised me to be strong. I found myself sobbing like the child I had once been, the words blurring on the pages before me, tears washing the darkness from my heart. She had not been a monster. She had been a broken human being but she had tried, and she had loved me. My mother had loved me.

I raised my head and looked out into the hall, misty now through my tears. "I forgive you, Mama."

There was one more thing I had to do here, before Bethie and I could leave this sad place forever. I walked up the long staircase, my mind protesting every step. I took a long, measured look at the closet door, put my shaking hand on the knob, and turned it. The door creaked open. I was staring at shelves of linens—sheets, pillowcases, towels, all folded neatly, silent in their normalcy. A mirror hung incongruously on the back of the door and I gazed into it, wondering why anyone would put a mirror in a linen closet. My mother's eyes looked back at me.

"It's time to come out," I said to the wolf in the closet. "You're free."

**Caged In A Maze**  
**By Ian Worrall**  
**(from Nova Scotia, Canada)**



Arrgh, I woke up on this cold steel floor thinking where in blazes was I? I didn't have my normal clothes on, I wasn't naked, but it was bath robe or something like that. I couldn't quite place what it was that I was wearing.

I got up from the floor and grabbed my head. I suddenly had a splitting headache. You know the kind that feels like John Bonham's slamming his foot in the bass drum in Led Zeppelin's song, *When The Levee Breaks*?

It was so bad I fell to my knees and pressed my head into the floor, thinking that maybe the coldness of the steel would give some sort of relief. Since I had no idea where I was, I couldn't exactly go find a first aid kit or infirmary to give me some Tylenol or Advil.

While pressing my head into the floor, I tapped a finger into it. No echo sound like you'd get at the Grand Canyon. The sound was like tapping on your hand or a pillow. A dead sound.

After a few minutes, the headache died down enough for me to get to my feet. Thinking again as to where was I? The floor made of cold steel that sounded like a mattress? Come to think of it the floor actually felt like a mattress or gym mat.

Squishy underneath my feet. It was all so weird. Was I in some kind of experiment? I didn't recall ever agreeing to be part of any scientific study. Did one of my cell phone apps do so without me knowing? I remember reading about how various tech companies would use people's personal information without their knowledge and consent. Maybe I signed up for some sort of bait-and-switch type thing without knowing that I was going to be part of something.

I scanned my memory for anything I signed up for, both online and offline, and for the life of me, nothing came to mind.

Or could it be one of my coworkers was angered with me getting the promotion over him? That's one thing I do remember. I got the promotion and James didn't. We both worked so hard to get it, but in the end, I won, and got the twenty-thousand-dollar raise.

I supposed I would be angry too if the positions were reversed. But put someone somewhere like this? No, I'd never do that.

I took a few steps down a hall. And the lights got so bright I had to shove my arm against me eyes to shield myself from being blinded. It was like those interrogation lights that would shine in people's faces. As I walked down the hall I had to look down at the floor before my eyes would adjust to the light.

When they did, I looked up and saw a barred window at the end. A hacksaw was lying on the floor. Freedom maybe? With that thought I suddenly heard a beeping sound. Beep, beep,

beep. It was all around me, in my head, coming from the walls and from the other side of the window.

I couldn't quite place what the sound was. My memory was suffering from the brain fog of waking up after very little sleep. I ran down to the window, my heart racing like a speed metal guitar riff.

The second I picked up the hacksaw, the damn window moved up a foot, just out of my reach. A cruel joke or a dream? I grabbed my left bicep and squeezed as hard as I could. Gritting my teeth against the pain I counted sixty seconds in my head, but I didn't wake up.

How long was I supposed to hold a pinch or anything like that to wake from a dream? Never read it anywhere, or maybe that was a lie.

I squatted down, my butt to my heels, and jumped as high as I could. I almost reached the bar on the window, but it moved another foot, just out of reach again. A few more attempts to jump to grab the bar and saw my way to freedom met with failure. The window didn't move, I just couldn't reach it.

Pounding my hand against the wall, I found it was stone. I actually felt lucky that I hadn't broken my hand, which furthered the weirdness of the situation. Cold steel that felt squishy, a moving window, and then stone walls that don't break your hand when you punch them.

I stood there for a few minutes, wondering again as to what could have put me in this situation. The beeping sound would come and go, sometimes in my head, sometimes in the wall, and sometimes coming from the window.

And then I heard a soft voice crying out, "Help me, help me!"

The voice sounded so familiar. I decided to follow where the voice was coming from. But when I tried to move my feet, I was stuck to the floor. Stuck like someone had super-glued my feet. My hands grew cold and started shaking in full panic mode.

"Help me, help me! I'm begging you to save me!" The voice was louder. Almost right in front of me. And then the vision of what happened years ago. I was only six at the time. My neighbor, Jenny, was six too. We were told never to go near the pond without our parents with us.

We went anyway, we wanted to collect salamanders. There was a foot bridge that went over the pond, so people could fish or do other things. Jenny and I were too young to know what those other things would be. We went up there to the middle of the bridge. Jenny leaned over the side and fell in.

I was too small at the time to reach in and pull her up. And I probably wouldn't have been strong enough to pull her up anyway. I was frozen in place, too scared to know what to do. I was just a kid. I didn't want to get in trouble by going to the pond when our parents told us not to.

Unfortunately, my friend drowned. From that day onward, I never forgave myself. But today, here and now, all these years later, I thought, *Maybe I'm being given a chance to correct the mistake. Today I'm going to save her.*

"Jenny," I yelled, "I'm coming! I'm going to save you."

I made the jump, my feet now unstuck, and I slammed face first into the floor. The image

seemed so real. I had even felt the splash of water on my face when Jenny had fallen in.

After I sat up on the floor, I felt my face, the pain was there, but my nose wasn't broken or bleeding. I started crying; tears flew down my face. "Jenny, I am so sorry. If I knew how to swim at the time I would have saved you."

I slammed the heels of my hands onto my forehead, cursing myself out. Why didn't I run to our parents? They might have saved her. I didn't know at the time, but there were a couple of teenagers walking down the path to the pond. Probably to do some extra-curricular activities. Had I run up the path they could have saved her.

Is there an alternative reality show in here? I only thought that because I thought about what could have become of Jenny if we had listened to our parents and not gone down to the pond. As I sat there crying and thinking about her, she was a cute little girl. But what child isn't cute?

She'd be a stunner today, probably. She'd be the type of woman who would have her choice of probably fifty men who would want to be her husband. How many kids would she have had? That compounded the tragedy, because it wasn't just the life of one little six-year-old girl that was lost but the life of every other six-year-old that would have come after that. The lives that would never be lived.

If there was anything I could change about my life, that would have been one.

I lost track of time as I remembered my friend and mourned for what could have been. What should have been and wasn't. I had cried until my eyes ran dry and I had no more tears left. How long had that been?

With the beeping getting loud and then quiet, there was another sound. Scraping or something like that. Metal on metal, or like the sound of running your fingernails down a black board. Where was it coming from?

At first, I couldn't tell, but then it was coming from underneath me. I jumped up just in time as a spike came out of the floor right where I was sitting. More of the same sounds coming up from the floor. I dodged another spike that would have impaled my foot.

And then another and another until there were eight spikes sticking out of the floor. What kind of torture was this? I'd take a couple steps and pause, the metal grinding sound came again, and again I dodged a spike.

"What do you want from me?" I screamed out to the maze. It was then that I looked up and saw... well, nothing. Just an empty blackness. If I could find something to climb on, maybe I'd reach the top and get out of here that way.

Another spike shot out of the floor. I didn't dodge quick enough this time and it hit the outside of my left foot. I screamed out in pain and started limping down the hall. Even though a wave of pain would shoot through me like a wave crashing into the shore with every step I took, no blood was coming out of my foot.

I shouted out to whoever was here watching me, "I no longer consent to this experiment." I was hoping that if I had accidentally consented to an experiment, this would be enough to end it and get me out of here.

No answer came. Either no one was out there, or they didn't care that I no longer was a

willing participant. Or maybe once consent was given in this instance, it can't be removed.

I screamed out again, "What did I do to deserve this? Whatever it is I'm sorry!"

When no answer came again, I became certain I had been abducted. "James, if it's you, I'll turn down the promotion. You can have the job. Just please let me out of here."

I jumped out of the way of another spike and then, about fifty feet away I saw a ledge. Maybe that would be a safe haven. If only for a short time, or until my foot didn't hurt anymore.

Limping to the ledge as fast as I could, a spike here, a spike there, to my right and left in front of me and all over would shoot out. Someone or something didn't want me at the ledge.

I got hit in the left hand at the last foot away before I managed to grasp the railing with my right hand and yank myself up. I collapsed on the ledge and puked down on the spikes below me.

What was the point of all those spikes shooting out of the floor to impale me? I couldn't figure out what lesson I was supposed to learn. I got to thinking as to how James would have ever known about Jenny? A simple Google search would do the trick, of course.

Maybe this was an alien abduction. This was the first time I had come to believe that would have ever happened. All those stories about aliens conducting experiments on people always seemed good for a laugh. Not so funny now.

As I lay on the ledge, the beeping sound pierced my ears like a banshee wail; it felt as though my ear drums would explode. And then a sharp pain on my chest like I had been struck by lightning. A wave of electricity shot through me like a tsunami wave.

I froze in position on the ledge, and then fell, then another jolt and I couldn't move again. "Stop it please, stop it."

After about five jolts, whoever was doing this to me must have felt bad, or more likely grew tired and bored. This round of torture had ended.

I had lost my breath from all the jolts and had trouble recovering. It took almost twenty breaths of five seconds in and out to get my breathing back under control.

"What planet did you take me to?" I yelled out. Either I had lost my mind or alien abductions were true. "I want to go home to my family. You have no right to keep me here."

What reason would aliens have to abduct me anyway? They must have seen something. But I have no military or government job, so they wouldn't get any secrets from me. And they wouldn't need to abduct people, anyway, to get them, would they?

After all, when you think about it, let's pretend for a minute that faster-than-light travel is really possible, like what you see on Star Trek, Star Wars or any other sci-fi show or movie. Any civilization that is that advanced, would they even care that we exist?

Most likely, they would just look at us as a bunch of idiots. Either that or a bunch of lab rats. Maybe that's why aliens abduct humans. Is there a disease on their planet they're trying to cure?

That wouldn't make sense, though. Would human DNA be compatible with aliens? No way, unless humans evolved or were created on some other planet as well.

These are the ramblings of some poor fool who has been trapped in a maze. Next to me on the wall came the sound like elevator doors opening. I looked over and there was this opening that led to a tunnel. I would have to crawl through it.

No way was I going to do that. I even yelled that out to the maze and the people or aliens that held me captive.

Then, from inside the tunnel, I heard her voice, "Follow me, follow me."

It was Jenny, again. "Jenny, you died forty years ago. I'm sorry, but you're not real."

"You must follow me, quickly."

"No way, Jenny," I told her, "I'm staying right where I am."

Then the banging, *wham, wham, wham*, it came from outside in the maze. Like the sound of the garbage truck setting the dumpster down on the ground. I looked out in the maze and the spikes were being eaten by the wall as it was closing in on me.

Six inches from the ledge, I turned, and she was still standing there. Still the six-year-old girl, short enough to stand in the place and not whack her head on the ceiling. "Fine, Jenny, you win," I said.

I crawled into the hole and, as soon as I was in, the opening closed and Jenny disappeared. Exasperated, I started crawling through the tunnel. I could see only six inches ahead of me and then it was all blackness.

I kept a slow pace. With everything that happened so far, I figured there would be some sort of drop-off into a pit of snakes or something.

The 'or something' wasn't a pit of snakes. I ended up in some kind of bubble, floating underwater. Then I saw the sharks surrounding me. But they weren't like any shark species I had ever seen pictures of. Maybe I was on an alien ship or planet.

One of the sharks took a liking to me and started circling the bubble. Not good, not good. Sensing impending doom, my throat and stomach tightened to where I could barely breathe. And then, when the shark swam straight for me, its mouth wide open to swallow me whole, my breathing stopped.

I tried to scream but couldn't. That's why aliens abduct humans. To be food for their pet sharks.

The shark crashed into the bubble. I got sent rolling through the water. Somehow the bubble didn't burst. The bubble would roll for, I estimated, twenty feet, then another shark would crash into the bubble sending me another twenty feet.

Again and again. Over and over, sharks would crash into the bubble sending me rolling head over heels in the water.

Maybe then I wasn't brought here to be food for their pet sharks, just a toy for their pet sharks. It's a miracle I didn't fill the bubble with puke. But then I didn't remember the last time I had eaten a meal.

I must have spent hours down here and didn't feel any hunger pangs. And my stomach never growled once. I kept my eyes closed the whole time the sharks were bouncing me around. If a beach ball had feelings, this is what it must have felt like to be bounced around the nose of a seal.

After what must have been at least fifty sharks kicking me around with their noses, I flew out of the water onto a sandy shore. The hard landing caused the bubble to burst. And, soaked to the bone, despite being in the bubble, I got covered in sand.

Now what were my options? Go for a swim and get the sand off me? No way, not with all those sharks in the water. I looked around and there was the beach shower. But I would have to dry the clothes off and sit around nude.

Or, would they really be that cruel to make me go around the rest of the maze naked? Of course they would. So just take the shower and then leave the robe I was wearing on. I wasn't about to give them a porno show.

I let the water from the shower wash over me and get all the sand off. After I was finished I stood down at the shore about a foot from the water. I wanted the sun, or what looked like the sun to dry me and the robe off.

No heat was coming from the sun. Was it really the sun of this planet? Or was it a flood light beaming down on me? It was going to take a while for the clothes to dry. Whoever had me here just couldn't show some sort of mercy and give me some dry clothes.

My two options were to walk, run and crawl around in wet clothes, or do it all naked. In other words, one option: do it all soaked to the bone and hope it wouldn't be too long before I got dry. For all I knew, my situation was being broadcast to a live audience.

A few minutes or longer, I couldn't really tell the passage of time, and I noticed the water was starting to touch my feet. And it was getting higher. In a few seconds it was at my ankles.

I turned and started walking further into shore, but the water kept following me until I got back up to the beach shower. And there she was again.

My friend Jenny. I crouched down so my eyes were level with hers. "What am I doing here, Jenny? Why am I here?"

She giggled like I remembered she always used to and said, "Follow me, and I'll show you."

"I want some answers," I said. "I won't follow you unless you tell me."

"Yes, you will follow me," she said.

"No, I won't," I said. I reached out to grab her, and she disappeared and then reappeared ten feet away.

"Follow me," she repeated her command.

"Why should I follow you?"

She pointed to the water and said, "Look behind you."

I turned and saw the water was now less than a foot from the shower. "Okay, fine, I'll follow you."

She let me catch up to her and took my hand and led me into a forest. Like the one we used to play hide and seek in. Up until she died.

"Please don't put me through seeing you die again, Jenny."

She looked up and giggled, "At least you didn't have to experience dying at the age of six."

“I’m sorry,” I said. And then she disappeared again. “Where are you?” I cried out. But there was no answer.

The sound of the forest was, well, no sound at all. Just a slight breeze rustling the leaves of the trees. I kept looking around me, half expecting a pack of wolves to charge out and attack. The other half of me was expecting a bear to grab me.

I took a couple steps further into the forest, and the twigs kept sticking into my feet. Every few feet I had to stop to pull one out of my foot. Throwing my arms up I shouted out to my captors, “You couldn’t at least let me have a pair of shoes or boots?”

No, of course they couldn’t. I trudged on and on until one of my fears was about to come true. Fifty feet ahead of me was a pack of six wolves. All six of them licking their chops. I was to be their next meal. I looked around and found a tree that had a low enough branch that I could reach it. Assuming the branch didn’t disappear when I jumped for it.

But the tree was forty feet away. Can I outrun a pack of hungry wolves? No. Again I looked around for anything I could use as a weapon. But no sticks big enough to use as a club. No rocks big enough to cave in a wolf’s skull. I would have given anything for a twelve-gauge shot gun right about now.

Plan A, then: run. I took off running, my life depended on ignoring the twigs and pebbles that would stick in my feet. The wolves ran after me. Gaining ground, inch by inch and foot by foot. I let another scream out to my captors, “Please let me live! I’m begging you, I want to live.”

By some miracle, or maybe mercy on the part of my captors, I got to the tree with seconds to spare. I jumped up and grabbed the tree branch and pulled myself to safety. All those years doing pull-ups paid off right now.

Below me, the wolves tried to jump, and they put their paws up on the tree trunk hoping to be able to climb. Thankfully they weren’t hungry cats. I estimated they spent thirty minutes trying to get up the tree before realizing they couldn’t. If only they would go away and leave me alone in search of another meal. But they lay down near the tree. Obviously, they were smart enough to know I wouldn’t be able to stay up here forever. They were playing the waiting game.

I sat on the tree branch and started picking out the twigs and pebbles that got embedded in my feet. And then, louder than ever, beep! Beep! Beep! The sound ripped through my head at the same time I heard a chainsaw.

The panic that went through my head now was like nothing else I had ever experienced in my life. My throat was so tight I couldn’t breathe. I was almost dry heave puking. All my extremities had gone cold. They gave me a tree to save myself only to have it cut down and leave me to the wolves.

I managed to look down and saw that there was no lumberjack or anyone else cutting at the tree. But then this awful searing pain shot through my chest.

I grabbed the tree with one of my arms trying to keep my balance and stop myself from falling off the branch. I barely managing to choke out, “Please stop this, please, I’m begging you.” Tears started flowing again, and, and everything went black.



I don't know how long I was out, but I woke up lying on the tree branch. I have no idea how I didn't fall off to become the meal of the day for the wolves. But I figured that wasn't in their plans. I had fallen asleep or been knocked unconscious and left to lie straddling the branch.

The beeping in my head had settled into a dull tapping. But now there were three distinct beeping sounds. "Jenny, I'm sorry. Or if it's you, James, I already told you I'll give up the promotion. Just please let me out of here."

Maybe, I thought, Jenny and her parents are the aliens who had abducted me. It would make sense, wouldn't it? How else could she be here? Aliens who could travel throughout the planets would have better medical care than we would and would, therefore, be able to revive someone who died after a longer time than we would.

But it was forty years ago, and she hasn't aged a day. Of course, aliens would be able to do that. Maybe they found the fountain of youth.

Or maybe I was just losing my mind. At this point, even though I had just woken up, I felt so tired. Exhausted to the point of surrendering to whatever they had planned for me.

But no. *No*, I thought as I clenched my fists. *I will not surrender to whatever it is you want.* "I did nothing wrong, you hear me?" I yelled out to my captors. "I got that promotion fair and square, James, and you know it. And Jenny, I was just a kid like you were. I was scared. Do you have any room in your heart for forgiveness?"

When I was done shouting I felt the tree move. It was sinking into the ground. I tried climbing higher and higher, but the tree kept sinking. It was like the tree was trying to drag me into the ground. I looked up to see where the top of the tree was. And just like when I was inside, there was only blackness about fifty feet up. I looked down and the wolves had left. Hopefully they found another meal that was tastier than I would have been.

This was, then, something like a holo-deck on Star Trek. I was now more convinced than ever aliens had taken me. They were running me through their sick experiment.

My attempts to climb further up the tree were futile. I hit the ground and started running. Despite the fact the wolves were gone, I had a feeling they'd be back. They would want their meal, even if I did taste like crap.

I ran and ran, but my exhaustion was getting the better of me and I had to slow down. I was confused. I never got winded by a run before. Was it age catching up to me or did the aliens give me something to make my problems worse?

The only thing I knew was that I had to keep moving. Something inside me was telling me that. Or just the common sense of the situation. I had escaped spikes shooting up through a floor, escaped wolves who wanted to eat me.

Maybe, just maybe, if I played along, I would get out of this place.

After running through the forest as fast as I could for what seemed like almost an hour, I reached an open field and collapsed into the grass. The blades of the grass were almost four feet tall but still had that smell of fresh cut grass.

I might have thought that was weird, but with everything else I had gone through, this was rather tame. That was until I heard that tell-tale sound of a rattle and a hiss.

I looked up, and two feet away from my face was probably the biggest rattle snake ever. I had seen them in the wild – none were ever more than three feet long. This one was the size of a python, or even bigger.

From what I could see, the thing was almost six feet long, and that's just the part I could see. It stretched out further into the grass beyond my vision.

My arms and legs froze in place as the snake reared up and bared its fangs. More proof, in my mind, that aliens had taken me here, the snake didn't just have fangs to inject venom, it had rows of teeth on the bottom and top of his mouth. Like a cross between a shark and a snake.

The snake moved to strike, and I tried to roll out of the way, but it got me on the shoulder. Just as suddenly as I got hit, the snake slithered away into the grass. Probably to wait for me to die so it could come back and swallow me whole.

My head started spinning as the venom started to course through my body. I got to my knees, and the whole place was spinning. As I stumbled to my feet and across the field, I saw a hut with the red cross symbol on it.

They just might have the anti-venom there. I just had to get to the place before I died.

I took five steps and fell over and puked. Another five steps after that and my vision blurred. I estimated the hut was about a hundred feet away. "Please let me get there in time," I called out to whoever had me here. "Or send someone to save me, please."

I got another five steps and my legs gave out again. I resolved and made a promise to myself that I would make it to the hut. I would do everything I could to make it there, increase the number of steps I took before collapsing with each time I made a go of it.

Two hopes here: one was that I would make it to the hut before I died; two, that there would be anti-venom there. And, if not, at the very least they wouldn't let me get eaten by a snake. Bring me back to Earth and my family for a proper burial and funeral. They owed me that much, at least, after everything they put me through.

Six steps, then pause. Next time I made it to eight. Then ten. Then twelve, then fifteen and when I got to twenty steps I collapsed down right in front of the hut.

This time I couldn't move my legs and had to drag myself to the door.

"Somebody help me, please!" I begged as I reached for the doorknob.

I got my hand clasped around the knob, surprised that they didn't make the thing move on me this time. Or, for that matter, make the hut disappear altogether.

It took me three attempts to get the thing open. And I dragged myself into an almost empty room. In the middle of this room was a table with a vial of clear liquid and a syringe. Was this the anti-venom? I could only hope.

Seven minutes it took me to drag myself to the table. I dry heaved on the floor for another three before I could raise my hands to the top of the table and pull myself up. That was the hardest pull-up I ever had to do.

I was tempted to lay on the table and close my eyes, but I resisted, knowing that I probably wasn't going to wake up if I did. With my hands shaking like they were trees in a hurricane, and after almost dropping and smashing the vial at least four times, I managed to

fill the syringe.

What a wonderful time this was to get over my fear of needles. Not much choice if had wanted to live. I stuck the needle right where the snake had bitten me and plunged the liquid into my shoulder.

And then everything went black.

The next thing I knew I heard her voice again. "Follow me this way."

I woke up still on the table, but the hut was gone. I was in the middle of a city square, no one else but me. The place was a mixture of Times Square in New York and Red Square in Moscow.

"Follow me this way," Jenny said again.

I looked around but couldn't see her. Her voice was coming all around me. The beeping sound went off again and right in front of me the New Year's Eve ball dropped to the floor. This was a few months early for that.

"Follow me, I'm over here."

I looked to my right and saw her. She was standing next to the tomb of Lenin. I gave my head a shake; I thought they had removed that. But again, I was certain I was on some real-life alien version of the Star Trek holo-deck.

Swinging my legs around, I got off the table and ran over to Jenny. She had that sweet smile on her face she always had. I crouched down, "Jenny I would like some answers as to where I am. What planet, and why did you bring me here?"

"Follow me and you'll get your answers."

She turned and opened the door, and into a hall of mirrors I was led. And right before she disappeared again she looked up at me and said, "Follow the mirror all the way to the end."

"I need some answers. I want to know what I'm doing here," I yelled out. And once more there was no answer. Just that incessant beeping sound coming from everywhere around me and inside my head.

I walked down the hall of mirrors, no point looking into the mirrors, I'd just see a thousand or million reflections of myself.

They must have figured I was going too slow because behind me I heard another hissing sound. I turned around figuring I was going to see the snake, but it was some gas or smoke billowing out into the hall and gaining on me fast.

Not needing any further coaxing – it was some sort of poison; I've seen that movie enough times – I took off running down the hall until I fell through a hole.

I fell on my butt and started sliding down the pipe. It was actually a waterslide. I knew that when I got to the bottom I would probably have to swim faster than I ever did in my life. They probably were going to drop me in a pool of piranhas. Or, knowing what I've seen so far, something even worse.

At the bottom of the slide, it jugged up several feet and I went flying far up into the air. So far that I couldn't see what I was going to fall into when I inevitably fell back down.

And when my ascent stopped, I pulled myself into a cannon ball hold as I started falling

back to whatever waited for me below.

Faster and faster to the bottom I went, my ears popping like I was on a plane going into land. And then... WHAM!!

I hit the water, or something like that, with such force, the wind was knocked out of me and I swore at least half of my ribs were at least cracked if not broken. Amazingly, I could see how far up the water splashed, almost fifty feet into the air.

It wasn't acid that I fell in, there wasn't any burning of my eyes or skin. But, as I predicted, fish swarmed around me. There were at least thirty of them. They didn't look like piranhas, from what I remembered of the pictures I saw of them. Giant gold fish. Knowing I wouldn't have been dropped into a pool of harmless gold fish, I had to do everything I could to get myself out of there.

I could barely move my arms as I got as fast to the surface as I could. The fish were chasing me. One got a bite on my foot. Another bit my leg. Further I went to the surface. They kept biting me.

My heart pounding like a speed metal drummer wailing away on double bass drums, I broke the surface, and still the fish were biting me. They must have been starved for food. I kept feeling thirty different bites almost every three to five seconds.

Thirty feet away, at the edge of the pool, Jenny was waving to me. Urging me to get out of the pool. Like I needed any urging. "You were the one who led me down here, Jenny," I yelled. "Can you at least throw me a life ring and a rope and drag me out of here?"

With that sweet smile on her face, she shook her head. "Is this revenge for not saving you?" I yelled as I continued swimming to her. "Please forgive me, I'm sorry."

More and more bites on my legs, arms and everywhere else before I finally made it to the edge of the pool and dragged myself out.

Four fish were hanging off each leg and arm. I brushed them off and the bleeding stopped and the chunks out of me healed in seconds. Lying on the edge of the pool, I looked up at my childhood friend. "What more do you want from me?" I asked her, barely able to breathe. "How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?"

"Follow me," she said and turned away.

I breathed ten heavy breaths before I could get back to my feet and follow her. By that time, she had gotten to the wall. This was exactly like the place where I had started taken swimming lessons after she died.

When I reached her, I got to my knees and said, "If they had paid for swimming lessons before it happened, I could have, no, I *would* have saved you. You can't blame that on me."

Giving me that sweet smile again, she tilted her head side to side and tapped on the wall. A ladder appeared. "Follow me," she said again.

"Jenny, I want answers, and I want them now."

"You'll get them soon."

"I'm not following you up that ladder until you answer my question as to what the hell am I doing here."

She covered her ears and hollered, "Don't be a potty mouth around children!"

“Okay,” I said, “I’m still not following you up that ladder.”

“Yes, you will,” she said pointing behind me.

I turned and saw the giant goldfish were climbing out of the pool. They had sprouted legs and were lumbering over to me.

“Okay you win,” I said.

She giggled and said, “Last one to the top’s a rotten egg.”

“I guess I’ll be the rotten egg,” I muttered under my breath. I let her get a few rungs up before I got on the ladder and seconds before the goldfish, or whatever they were now, had reached me.

As we would climb, I would get closer to her and have to stop and let her get ahead again. This happened three times and then the rung my feet were on disappeared. Almost losing my grip when my fingers slipped, I stopped myself from falling by wrapping my arms around the sides of the ladder.

Amazing that little girl had all the boundless energy, like the Energizer Bunny, she kept going and going and going.

My breath and my strength were starting to give out that she got so far ahead and looked down at me. “Keep following me. You have to keep moving.”

How a six-year-old girl could physically outdo a forty-six-year-old man, I couldn’t figure that one out. But oh well, with each rung disappearing at my feet, I didn’t really have any choice but to keep climbing.

Onward, up and up, and finally we reached the top. She was sitting on a ledge, munching on a banana and humming *Mary Had A Little Lamb*. I looked down and saw nothing. Just another empty blackness. The floor of the place was nowhere to be seen.

“Maybe you could give me a banana?” I asked.

She smiled again and said, “Sorry, but there was only one. You should have gotten up here before me.”

“What’s next, then?” I asked

She pointed out across the ceiling and suddenly monkey bars fell.

“Let me guess,” I said, “the last one over is a rotten egg?”

She giggled and said, “No, this time a rotten potato.”

Leaping up she grabbed the first rung. Not wanting to see what would happen if I didn’t follow her, I grabbed the first rung after she got four rungs ahead.

I tried to keep her at least four rungs ahead of me. Twenty rungs into our trip across the ceiling, my grip was starting to fail, and then the rung I was holding onto started to fade. I swung to the next bar and, gasping for breath, I called out to her, “Jenny, how much further?”

“Not too far, not too far.”

The bar faded again, and I got to the next bar. The rate at which the bars I was holding on were fading and disappearing grew faster.

“Jenny, please!” I yelled. “Get me to the end.”

“We’re almost there,” she yelled back.

Almost on cue, an opening like a trap door in the wall appeared with a bright light emanating from it.

“See what I told you?” she called back.

From where I was it was almost a hundred feet away. Was I going to make it? My strength was fading as I saw her make the final leap into the trap door in the wall.

It was everything I could do to keep my strength up and get to the last rung. I swung my legs back and forth, and just as the bar faded and disappeared I got my leap in. Somersaulting through air, I hit the wall just above the trap door and started sliding down.

One last desperate grab and I got hold of the bottom of the door. Jenny peaked her head out and smiled. “What are you waiting for?”

“Can you give me a hand?” I asked, gasping for breath.

“Sorry, not allowed to do that,” she giggled.

“That didn’t stop you forty years ago.”

“And look what it got me.”

I grunted and let out a yell, like a power lifter putting his world record weight over his head, and got myself up to where my shoulders were above the opening. Then I forced myself in with my waist on the threshold of the door.

Jenny had slid a few feet away from me. “Come along.”

With a heavy lump I got my whole body through the door, and then I was sliding down towards the bright light. “What next, Jenny?” I called out. But she was already through to the other side.

I slid out into a cavern, falling flat on my face. When I looked up, Jenny was two feet away from me, smiling as usual. And behind her were these shockingly beautiful gates made of pearl. In front of the gates a man was seated at a marble desk, writing on a stone tablet with a feather pen.

“Get up,” Jenny said to me.

I did as she said, and she took my hand and brought me over to the man at the desk.

“Saint Peter,” she said. “I would like you to meet Dylan. We were friends until I died at the age of six.”

“I know that, Jenny, now run along and play with the other children.”

I stood there slack-jawed as Saint Peter shook my hand.

“You mean...” I started.

“Yes, Dylan, you’re dead.”

“What happened?”

“You overdid it at the gym and had a massive stroke.”

He went on to explain everything. It now made perfect sense. The headache was from the stroke. The beeping was from the heart rate monitors and all the other stuff in the ambulance and the hospital. Then the electric shocks from the defibrillator, and the sawing feeling in my chest was when they were cutting me open for organ donation.

“We put you through a series of tests to see if you could make it to heaven,” Saint Peter said. “And you have.”

“And why use Jenny?”

He shrugged and said, “We needed someone you would trust as a guide.”

I didn’t know whether to be thankful or cry. I only wished I could give my family that last goodbye and tell them I love them.

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**Battle of the Brawn**  
**By Diane Krause**  
**(from Green Bay, Wisconsin)**



Detective Roy Poyang slumped on his ergonomic desk chair massaging his thumb in tiny circles over the gloss of his badge. This was the most important investigation since OJ Simpson was charged with two counts of murder. Of course, Jim Kiley, known as the Greek God of football, shot his pregnant wife. *It's always the husband.* Poyang went over the alibi, the motive, the physical evidence. Soon, the uniforms would bring Kiley in for the final piece, his confession.

The detective chuckled as he visualized the twelve patrolmen arriving at the press conference in six squad cars. Arresting Jim Kiley in front of the cameras was a calculated plan. True, he owed it to the reporters who dug up the unscrupulous girlfriend, the hushed-up domestic violence calls, and the hidden separation papers.

The handcuffed Kiley strolled in between two cops, the ten other officers following behind. It took two to shut the press out. The sheer sight of the Greek God, two heads taller than any of them, massive shoulders, and tailored Armani jacket brought the squad to stand almost in salute. Poyang bumped his leg on the desk as he stood up, cleared his throat, and waited until all eyes turned to him. "Take him to interrogation room one." Kiley seemed not to notice Poyang, walked ahead, stopped for the interrogation room door to be unlocked, then sat with dignity and purpose in the metal folding chair

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"Good afternoon, Mr. Kiley," said Poyang. Kiley skipped the accepting his handshake but didn't reduce his reaction to a frightened, panic-stricken plea or angry demoralized rant either. His only reaction was stone cold boredom.

Poyang took his seat in the padded chair with the high back. "I said, 'Good afternoon,' Mr. Kiley. I'm Detective Roy Poyang of the homicide division."

Jim Kiley, famous linebacker, again ignored him. He just smiled and gave a little wave to the observation mirror.

"You do understand you've been arrested on suspicion of murder?" Poyang asked.

Kiley finally looked at him. "Where's the second detective? You know, the bad cop? I'm assuming you're the good cop."

"Do you mean Detective Sanchez? She's busy with her own case. We can start without her cause our little talk is recorded."

"Do you mean you're both good cop and bad cop?"



“Sir, murder is a serious crime. Things will be more comfortable if we act in a professional manner.”

Kiley ignored the comment, and Roy had to admit it sounded pretty lame. This wasn't a board meeting, it was an interrogation. “One thing I learned in professional football,” Kiley said, “is to commit yourself to something bigger than you. Are you a team player, Detective? If you are, then we aren't so different, are we?”

“Except I'm highly trained in psychological tactics.” Poyang realized that he had let on he was following the Reid interrogation process and stopped in mid-speech. *Would he catch on?*

According to the Reid manual, a suspect's eyes move to the right when he enters his brain's memory sphere and to the left when he's in cognitive thought. This player's eyes didn't move.

“Of course. I've done hundreds of interviews during my ten-year career. I'm the Barbara Walters of the Dallas Police Department.” *What's wrong with me? Stop answering him.*

A yes-or-no question would bring back control. “Would you like a drink? We have water, soda, or coffee.”

Kiley took a minute before answering, “Why would I want a drink?”

“I thought your throat might be dry after being arrested at your press conference. It might soothe you.” Kiley continued to look Poyang straight in the eye as if pecking into his soul. “We could be staying put awhile.”

“Do I look uncomfortable to you?”

“I'm going to get a drink. Do you want one or not?” Poyang pushed his chair from the desk, stood, loosened his tie, and shook the tightening out from around his neck.

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Poyang joined Sanchez at the other side of the one-way mirror to judge Kiley's reaction. “Need help?” she asked.

“He doesn't flinch, he doesn't move, he doesn't even switch positions. The room is meant to be uncomfortable. His aloof appearance must be an act. Surefire, he's shook. But look, he's sitting erect staring at the blank wall. I can't read him. What's he thinking?”

“Probably that he'd be better off remaining silent.” Sanchez slapped his back in encouragement. “Better get to the confession, my friend, or he'll lawyer up and the interrogation will be over.”

“Right, he's good. I'll watch for a blink. It might equal deception.” Poyang smiled, confident he'd catch even the slightest blink.

“And quit letting him speak—you know better.”

Poyang watched Sanchez return to her desk. She was right. He'd go back in and lead him straight to confession. *I'm the intelligent one. That golden boy will take the hit and drop before he knows he's been tackled.*

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“How would you rate yourself as a husband?” He asked Kiley as if he was making casual conversation between two friends over a beer. Still no blink, no movement, no surprise. The man lacked empathy. A perfect trait for a murderer.

“We were talking about being part of a professional team before you ran out,” Kiley reminded him. “How would you rate yourself as a second-grade detective?”

“Listen, being professional means you answer my questions. Now, how would you rate yourself as a husband?”

“Are we having a non-threatening conversation? One where I don’t need a lawyer? Are you a good detective?”

The word ‘lawyer’ would worry anyone trying to get a confession. Poyang decided to use scare tactics. “I’m a highly decorated detective. I’m the best there is. I get the confession.”

“How do you know it’s not a false confession?”

“Are you toying with me? Or are you trying to make me question my ability as an interrogator?” Poyang tried the calming technique of slowly breathing in and out, while Kiley kept a level eye on him. “Answer the question, how—”

Kiley interrupted, yet spoke softly, moved closer, and offered his hand, “How would you rate your partner? The one I haven’t met?”

“Detective Sanchez is good. She’s busy right now, but she’ll be in when she’s through.” *What I was really thinking was we’re so overworked and understaffed that we barely talk to each other.* “Lieutenant Murphy assigns us to different cases when it’s an open and shut like this one.” *Doesn’t Murphy know high profile cases need both of us?*

“Do you think she would vouch for your expertise?”

“Stop changing subjects.” Poyang slammed his fist on the table and leaned closer. “We have all the evidence needed to convict you. In Texas, you’ll most likely get the death penalty. This is your one and only chance to help yourself.”

“What evidence do you have against me?”

“You have no alibi. Your girlfriend didn’t back up your story.” Poyang raised himself taller, ready to claim the victory he rehearsed before the suspect was brought in.

Kiley met Poyang’s intense glare with a raised eyebrow yet said nothing.

“Yeah, we brought Jennifer Ramsey in for questioning. What a sweet platinum blonde she is, with the physique to trigger temptation. I can see why you climbed into bed with her while your wife was home growing a new life. A life you stopped before it started. Now you’re down for two murders.”

“Did you find out about Jen through your own homework or did you let the press do it for you?”

“Your wife, Mrs. Tabitha Jean Reynold-Kiley, filed divorce papers. We have the court records, which supplies motive. She was going to take your hard-earned money and ruin your God-like image. You had to stop her. You who had the talent and drive to excel at football. You worked towards this goal since grade school. You’re the star. She didn’t

deserve your money.”

Kiley leaned forward, elbow on knee and hand under his chin as if he was the thinking man reviewing Poyang’s words. “Do you think your supposed motive will hold up in court?”

Poyang responded with a ‘gotcha now’ snide tone to his voice. “The gun used to kill Mrs. Kiley had your fingerprints on it. The bullets were the same caliber as the one found in your wife’s body. That’s physical evidence.”

“Tell me, what’s death row like?”

Poyang sat back down and rubbed his upper arms with crossed hands as he felt the chill of the death penalty. “Tabitha was beautiful. Ya know, the smile stayed on her face as she lay in a pool of blood, and those pretty round eyes starred at the ceiling in an ever-lasting twinkle.”

For a second Kiley’s hand covered his mouth. Then he leaned forward and kept his every muscle as still as possible as if to say, “Tell me more.”

“Death row, you asked?” Poyang blinked. “The death penalty takes a long time to execute. You’re housed separately with no one to talk to. Your meals come through a little dog’s hatch cut into the thick escape-proof door. You have nothing but time to relive your crime, how you shouldn’t have done it and how you would do it again, only better. Each new day you wonder if this is your last day.”

He slowed to study the eyes of the waiting linebacker, then squinted to look mean. “Death’s a cruel punishment. One you’re going to receive.”

“Did you investigate anyone else?”

“Who? She opened the door to greet you and you shot her. No one else was there.”

Now Kiley stood towering above the cowering Poyang. “Ah, but you were.”

“That’s preposterous. I was on patrol.”

“You described my wife in her final moments.” Kiley squinted, his eyes looking down at Poyang.

“I’m the one who answered the dispatch call. Our dispatch officer was frantic when she called out, ‘Attention all officers, shots fired,’ at your address, your beautiful home, with your lovely wife. Admit it. You shot her.”

Kiley bent to speak, an inch from Poyang’s face, and pointed one finger at his chest. “You work alone. Who’s to say you didn’t knock on the door, and when the love of my life opened it you cold-blooded shot her?” Kiley straightened to transmit disgust to the top of Poyang’s head. “You didn’t give her a chance.”

“No one questions my whereabouts, especially a dumb jock like you.” Poyang stood and felt the gun in its holster.

“It was daylight. My neighbors saw you driving by my house, walking to my door, and leaving. The sound of a gunshot is never forgotten. The neighbors described the bang as thinking it’s fireworks. When the truth sets in, they’re shocked, overwhelmed with gut-wrenching fear, and sadness.”

Poyang began pacing around the table in the small stuffy room.

Kiley followed behind. “You wanted a big case, you needed someone high-profile, and

the person had to be famous enough to make the national news. You watched the game on Sunday and picked me.”

“Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You planned your evil plot to convict me. Your murder would be Monday while I was at practice. You timed it minutes before I would return. You parked your car on Trails Bend Street, blocks away from my house. You proceeded to walk to my house.”

“I said, ‘Shut up.’”

“Tabby opened the door, welcoming you with a smile, and you shot her. You tossed the gun hoping I would pick it up. You ran from the scene. You were careless checking the gun out of the evidence locker. Every gun checked in is recorded with fingerprints.”

Poyang turned, invading Kiley’s space, and fired back, “Aren’t you the arrogant one?” he said, stretching out the ‘ew’ in you and wrinkling his nose. “Do you know why I’m good? I do my homework, all of it, right down to the nitty gritty detail. You think you can come in my department and throw accusations around? People like you make me sick.”

“You framed me. Admit it. You researched where I lived, you stalked us until you knew our daily habits and schedule. You carried out your brutal, cold-hearted scheme to put yourself in the limelight.”

“See this?” Poyang held up his badge, shaking it in front of his face. “This is a hero’s badge.”

“You murdered my wife so you could become rich and famous like me.”

“A badge of honor.”

“It’s been said the only sound a doe makes in her lifetime is a scream right before she is shot. Tell me, did she scream?”

Poyang dropped the badge to face his accuser. “So, what if I did? Your cheating ass didn’t deserve a wife like her.”

Kiley leaned in with both hands on the table, pushing it and making it rattle. “Did she scream?” he shouted.

Shouting back, Poyang said, “No, she didn’t scream.” The two met eye to eye. Poyang’s mouth opened wide.

The interrogation room’s door opened. In walked Detective Sanchez. “Roy Poyang, you are under arrest for the murder of Tabitha Kiley. You have the right to remain silent...”

Jim Kiley sat in the high-back comfortable chair, rested his head in his two hands, and wept.

Lieutenant Murphy came in, “Good work, Sanchez. Now I’ll need his gun and badge.” He put a hand on Kiley’s shoulder. “Too bad he didn’t do his homework on your bachelor’s in justice studies, Jim. You handled our interrogation process with grace, intelligence, and flair. Your wife is proud.”

“Tabby’s last words were, ‘It was a cop.’”

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## What the Stoneman Penned By E.C. Wegner



Everything was cloaked in the blue-gray of dawn. Stony figures stared with emotionless eyes at the graveyard. The tombstones stood all in jagged rows like the teeth of an upper jaw. I followed Eliza's graceful canter as well as I could with my usual titanium enhanced limp.

*The war had not been kind to me—had not been kind to anyone. What was all that pain worth?*

The answer was the deafening silence of those statues.

*Does anybody care?*

*We live in a world where hearts are made of stone.* The thought vanished with the early morning mist.

"Am I going too fast for you, Grandpa?" Eliza asked, her hands on her hips and eyes staring back at me.

"Not at all, Liza, you go on ahead. Us gray-heads have to smell the flowers."

"You've been smell'n those flowers an awfully long time, Grandpa."

The flowers in question were a petite gathering of pink peonies I held as tightly as I could in my left hand. *Peonies were her favorite...* I scrunched my nose like I smelled them. Eliza stared at my forehead which I furrowed in questioning wrinkles.

"What? I'm getting some of the smell out of them. Your grandma has a sensitive smell."

"Grandpa!" she said through her giggles.

"Alright, let's take these to your grandma."

Eliza placed her morning chilled hands in mine and I warmed her tiny fingers with my old mitten. I rose, and we stalked together past monotonous rows of graves. Rising in the distance a trio of stone soldiers seemed to float on wisps of the morning mist.

Then I felt someone watching us. It was the feeling of walking into an open field and knowing you're surrounded by the enemy.

"Grandma's is right here, Baba. Where're you going?"

I looked down to where Eliza's tiny forefinger was pointing. There lay a shallow mound of grass-covered earth. Above the knoll stood a slab of black stone. White lettering covered the memorial.

"You're right, Baby-girl. My Nelly—Grandma—sure did love to sneak up on me."

"Grandma can't sneak up on people anymore, Grandpa. She's dead," Eliza said.

"You're right, princess. I keep forgetting how big a girl you are now. "

We came up to Nelly's grave and I handed half the peonies to Eliza. There the ritual began. We both counted, "One, two, three," and then placed our flowers on her grave in unison. When we straightened ourselves I noticed one of the stone statues gleaming down at Nelly's grave.

*I don't remember there being a statue, but my memory isn't as good as it used to be. A sculpture of a*

*young man gripping a gnarled cane seems a bit outta place though.*

It was time for the final part of our graveside ritual. We closed our eyes to pray and made a final wish. When I opened my eyes I could almost swear that the statue stood closer than before. The young man's hand stretched towards me as if offering me something: a yellowed envelope!

I moved closer to get a better look at the statue's offering.

"What is it, Baba?"

"I'm not sure."

Curiosity sparked in her round brown eyes and it was catching. I caught flame. My hands began to tremble and Eliza smiled with mischief.

With a wink, I opened the envelope. I turned it over, spilling out a letter and an arrowhead. I handed the smooth black flecked stone to Eliza's eager hands. I unfolded the letter and read the lines aloud:

*"Dear Mekayla,*

*I never meant for things to turn out this way. I didn't mean for any of this to happen and I know that does not change what I've done or what I am. I could not have asked for a better friend. You're the most loyal, caring, and fiercely stubborn person I know. I love you. I know we promised not to, but I had to tell you. I should have told you earlier...*

*I just could not say goodbye.*

*Well, this is goodbye. By some hideous curse or disease I am slowly turning into stone. One day I found this gnarled wood cane while hiking in the woods and took it home. The next day I noticed what appeared to be a rash on my feet. Then strange things began to happen to me. I'd stub my toe or trip on a step and feel nothing. I lost my appetite for normal food. Everything I ate tasted terrible. The next thing I knew I was smelling a sweet meaty smell that made my mouth water like your mom's Indian tacos used to. I traced the smell through the house to my brother Eddy's room. It was Eddy who made me want to devour flesh for the first time. As much as I tried to resist... I left to get away from the temptation.*

*Now I'm living in the remotest part of the woods I could find. This morning blood was everywhere...a body on...counter. I've locked myself in the pantry. Oh God! Help me! My body is...stone and even my...w...rd..."*

The rest of the letter was illegible. I could only make out, *Chase a Stone-man*. At least that was the closest I could figure.

Then I looked up and the statue was gone. Time seems to have slowed down as I turned around and there was no Eliza.

*No! Dammit, not Eliza!*

I looked every direction, even behind me, but still no Eliza in sight. An image popped into my head: the stone-clad man's face in Eliza's belly—blood all over the cropped field—the screams of the dying men echoed inside my ears. My mind snapped back out of the episode. I found myself on all fours in the graveyard. I clenched the soft green mat of the grass.

The black heat of rage erupted from my throat. A scream of raw anger shot out of my mouth. It echoed off the trees, the gravestones, and the mute lifeless statues. I faded with

the fog. I combed the area with the eyes of a soldier. In each quadrant, I found nothing but mist until my eyes landed on a space where the fog had vacated.

Between the two tallest structures was a dispersion of mist. I saw the outlines of a broad black-stone back. The cursed creature was moving with unimaginable speed. I sprinted after him and almost landed on my face.

*Dammit! Move, you old legs!*

I limped forward. There was no way I would catch him. I watched him turn left down the next path.

*He doesn't know about the shortcut. Thank God!*

I backtracked a short way and then turned onto a mossy covered walkway. My bum leg began to throb and protest each step. Then the mossy asphalt slid out from under my good leg and the other buckled immediately. It collapsed and I laid there covered in mud and damp moss. A hundred needles stabbed through my knee, my leg, and up my entire body. Through the agony, I saw Eliza's face. I caught my breath and heaved myself into a kneeling and then a standing position.

*I will not give up on you! My beautiful Eliza.*

I dragged my bad leg all the way to the end of the path. The trees hung over like a cathedral arch. Underneath I saw a silhouette—black against the sun—moving toward me. Eliza's form was slung over its shoulder. The cane wagged back and forth in front of the creature like he was blind.

*How do I stop a creature made of stone?*

Then an idea came to me. Although I knew it was madness, I charged the stone clad creature—well as close to a charge as I could with my usual limp—and slid to the ground. My leg—titanium and all—swung into his and exploded in stabbing pain. Eliza tumbled from the creature's hand and, for what seemed like an eternity, she just lay there. Then she got up, looked around dazed for a moment, before she sprinted out the gate. The Stone-man came crashing down on me. Horrid pain flashed through my entire body like lightning. Blood rained—bones snapped—a scream that seemed to come from my thought ripped through the air and echoed off the stone walls. Then, I could hear the air in me rush out into the mist of that blue-gray dawn.

I found myself looking down upon a blood-covered body. Crouched over the body was the stone covered creature with its blood splattered face fully planted in the stomach. The body's face was the one I remembered seeing in the mirror every morning. The face was my own. For one terrible moment I watched as the beast gorged himself on my flesh. The stone-man looked up at me, blood dripping down his cheeks like crimson tears on black stone. What fluttered in my chest was a hollow pit of overwhelming sorrow. Then in a split second the feeling passed and the stone-face was once again buried in what had been my gut.

*Eliza? What about my Eliza?*

I turned then to the cemetery's grated black iron gate and almost floated through the opening. Once on the other side of the wall I could see the last glimpse of a child's back disappearing into the mist beyond. I merely thought of my little Eliza and I began to float.

Not just float, I flew in the direction I had seen her go. The gray white of the fog was breaking apart around me as I came upon a familiar walk and a familiar door. As I watched, Eliza darted out of the mist and raced for the front door to her home. I followed her up the step as she swung wide the door releasing a bright golden light...

Now I know Eliza is safe with her family again. Even though I know that creature still haunts the area, I'm ready to go. And now I am the one who canters gracefully through the mist towards home.

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**PHOENIX**  
**BY NIA ELLIS**  
**(FROM CHICAGO, ILLINOIS)**



Jamani believed in God but doubted her trust. She had a baby developing in her. She doubted if she was worthy to carry it to full term.

Jamani sat in the living room looking at the oak tree outside the window. Shades of copper, red, and yellow leaves dropped to the ground. A gentle breeze swirled. Leaves danced in the air.

A stream of negative thoughts emerged. Was it abnormal to believe a mother could parent without the dad? Did she make the right choice? Will the child be safe? The constant stream of thoughts incited sleep. Awakened to strong kicks, punches, and jabs from the baby. Jamani used her hands to stroke her belly. She whispered, “Blessed be the fruit.”

Pounding on the door interrupted the moment. Jamani stormed to the door. Dark circles beneath her eyes and tensed muscles in her face. Charles, the father of her child, stood.

“I have rights to my unborn child. You can’t just cut communication off and act as if I don’t exist,” screamed Charles.

Jamani replied, “I pursued you. You were a donor, nothing more. Get the hell away from my door.” The door slammed in his face.

Posted with her back to the door, breathing heavy.

“You are insane. I will not just disappear,” shouted Charles. The car door slammed. The sounds of tires screeched the road.

Jamani collapsed into the chair facing a huge floor mirror.

She saw an ancient gruesome cunning-eyed witch figure in the mirror. The Witch. Jamani’s heart was pounding. It overheated her body as if it were on fire.

Panting and exhausted, wished she’d never agreed to Jennifer’s witchery. She reached for a bottle of water then drank the entire bottle. The witch subsided. Jamani returned to the calmness of the oak tree. No judgments, no worries, no negative thinking.

Obscure thoughts didn’t interfere, but they always came back. The mind could justify everything to sustain its position of rightness.

Jennifer, Jamani’s twin sister, appeared in the room. Jamani asked, “When did you get back?”

Jennifer replied, “I’ve been here the entire morning. Would you like a cup of tea?” Jamani nodded her head.

Overwhelmed by Jennifer’s presence, a constant stream of thoughts emerged. *When did she leave? Does she know Charles visited? Why is she back? She didn’t announce her arrival. Stop talking! La, La, La, La stop.* Jamani thoughts ceased as Jennifer returned to the room. “Drink your

tea, dear, you look tired,” said Jennifer.

Jennifer reached to touch Jamani’s belly. Jamani blocked her with a strong outward push. Jennifer smiled, then said to the old witch possessing Jamani, “Oh dear, you don’t scare me. How is my baby doing inside you?”

Thoughts spiraled out of control in Jamani's head. The old witch emerged inside Jamani and said, “Maybe your baby is gasping for air, or hates you as much as I do.” The old witch’s dark eyes stared downward at Jennifer. Jennifer walked out of the room.

Pacing back and forth, Jennifer thought, *Hell no. Jamani is my sister. I promised I would keep them safe. That old witch will not take possession of my child.*

The old witch and the child didn’t enjoy Charles, but Jamani loved Charles; he was her first. Jennifer replayed that evening, nine months ago, in her head when Jamani and Charles conceived the baby and Jamani’s possession of the witch.

Candlelight dinner for two, wine and good food. Jennifer excused herself to the bathroom. Jamani returned to the dinner table. Charles and Jamani danced and made out.

Nine months ago on that night, Jamani got pregnant. Jennifer was desperate. Jennifer couldn't have children. She convinced Jamani to try for her. She assured Jamani her witchery would work. The witchery possession of the witch was a mistake. Jennifer reinvented that night Jamani and her deceived Charles. When Charles was with Jamani, he thought he was with Jennifer.

Jennifer distracted both the witch and Jamani. She gave Jamani a light sedative to relax her nerves and induce sleep. While feasting the sedative kicked in.

The doorbell chimes ringed. Charles walked into the room. Jamani seated at the dining table in a dreamlike state. Charles pulled Jamani from the chair and planted a passionate kiss on her. Jamani thought she was dreaming. The passion she felt inside sped up. Charles and Jamani were one. Charles stayed that night with Jamani.

Late into the night, Jamani awakened to strong labor pains. Charles called the ambulance. Jennifer back in the shadows watching.

Jamani’s labor was hard. The baby was born. Charles found both Jennifer and Jamani in the room together. Flabbergasted and in disbelief. His eyes saw two twins.

The doctor entered the room and said, “Jamani, you had a healthy baby boy. Would you like to see him?”

Both Jamani and Jennifer replied, “Yes, doctor.” Jamani opened her arms to receive the baby. A beautiful baby with black eyes smiled at Jamani. The baby blinked its eyes; they reopened to blue eyes.

Fear came over Jamani. With shaking hands she passed the baby to Jennifer. The baby cooing planted a huge smile on Jennifer's face. Charles could not feel the floor under his feet. Charles had fainted.

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# Monster

By Krissy Baccaro  
(from Fairport, New York)



Ava gasped for air and thought about her next move. *Don't tell anyone your secret. Lock it up, bury it deep. You did this. You let him in. Pull over to the shoulder. Gather your thoughts.* As she veered to the right, her car began to jerk and flutter as if it were out of gas. The steering wheel tightened, becoming difficult to turn. With all her strength, she forced it enough to pull over just as the car tailing closely behind her made an exaggerated swerve around, the driver honking and swearing as he sped off.

Ava slammed the car into park, hung her head against the steering wheel and drew in a deep breath, but it wasn't sufficient. The air was trapped in a knot that wrapped itself tightly around her windpipe and around her chest, pressing hard, not letting go. When was the last time she'd breathed normally?

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She regretted wondering what she missed, growing up without a father. Mad at her mother for keeping him away all these years. Then cancer took her mother. Too late for apologies. When she found him, she thought her life would finally be better. But it was the exact opposite. Everything changed when the monster came to town. He interrupted her life and those closest to her, altering them all forever. She didn't mean to uncover his secret about those women. She promised she wouldn't tell. When she lit his house on fire, she thought she'd gotten rid of him for good. Now, he's back and wants to take care of her. For good. How had she trusted him, pulled him in, gotten close? What had she done?

She caught a glimpse of something moving. Was that the monster through the trees a short distance from her car? She turned the key in the ignition, but it wouldn't start. Tried again, still nothing. Her pulse raced as she sensed his growing presence around her.

Ava threw open the door and ran as fast as she could, gliding above the ground, her legs felt separate from her body. The twigs snapped beneath her feet with each step as crispy leaves cushioned them, almost slowing her at times. Running deeper into the woods, through the trees, everything around her looked the same and she could no longer tell where she had come from or where she was going.

She slowed briefly to catch her breath and calm her nerves, but something snapped behind her. Dropping low to the ground, Ava lay still, her mouth against her sleeve, muffling her heavy panting as her lungs exploded in pain. She wished she could sink deep into the earth and disappear.

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Up ahead a light flickered. Can she make it there before he sees her? Will he get there first? What danger lies within? The air grew cooler and the sun was sinking fast, filling Ava

with overwhelming dread. She listened intently to each noise in the forest trying to discern something from the wild or something far worse. Leaves rustled. Twigs cracked.

When the gunshot rang, it pierced her ears and stopped her heart. Someone yelled, “Run!” She faced forward and began to sprint. Adrenaline coursed through her veins and she ran without stopping, through the thick treed forest, tripping over vines and fallen branches, skipping over a narrow brook and up a hill until she was almost at the edge of the forest, not once looking back.

In the distance stood a peculiar, old, dilapidated mansion. Carefully Ava moved to one side and shuffled along a cobbled path, prepared at any moment to hide behind a tree as she neared the house. She stared ahead, wide-eyed, quick glances over her shoulder, down to the ground and up again. Ready. Waiting. Fearing.

Approaching two adjacent trees, she tucked her body snug between them and peered out to scan the darkening expanse before her, all black, except for a golden glow from the windows of the house. She desperately wanted to run to the door and beg for help but feared who might answer. She broke from the trees and inched closer, crouching low beside the bushes a few feet from the house. Crickets interrupted the deafening silence around her. *Stay focused.*

“Help!” cried a voice from inside the house.

Her heartbeat quickened and her skin tingled. Had she really heard a voice? The voice called out again, slightly louder, yet defeated, “Help. Please.” It sounded familiar. Could it be?

Ava wavered. Stay or run? Suddenly, a hand rested on her shoulder and her heart paused. “Don’t stop, Ava. You can do this.”

She turned slowly towards a disheveled yet familiar woman. The wind blew through her tangled hair as she fiercely stared into Ava’s eyes.

“M-Mom?” She reached towards her face. “How is this-” Her voice caught, and her heart sank. “Jenna-”

“I know.” She touched Ava’s face and scanned the woods.

“He’s after me again. He won’t stop. I think he has her.” She panted, watching the forest she’d run from.

“You don’t remember?” said her mom. She looked down at Ava’s hand.

“Remember what?” Her gaze fell to the revolver she was holding. She hadn’t remembered grabbing it from the glove box. “But -” Ava looked up and her mother was gone. She saw nothing through the blackness and felt alone and afraid. *I have to go.*

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Suddenly, Ava bolted toward the house, backed herself up against its side and edged her way towards the door, towards the voice. Her hand twitched and shook as she held it above the doorknob, then she grabbed it and turned. It opened easily. She slid inside and looked around.

Ava stood in awe of the magnificent lodge-like mansion, scanning the tattered walls of the rooms, perhaps once a sight to behold. Antique lights hung at various lengths from the ceiling and an intricate crystal chandelier extended high above an expansive dining room table. Old paintings decorated the walls, a generous bear skin sprawled across the foyer extending towards the base of the stairs.

A frightened voice moaned from upstairs, drawing Ava’s eyes to the top of the staircase.

Treading lightly across the old creaky floor, Ava cautiously climbed each step, one at a time, past the first landing, onto the second, with frequent checks behind her. When she neared the top, her legs grew stiff as fear coursed through her. But upon hearing that desperate voice again, she knew she would not be leaving this house alone. *Follow the voice. You can do this.*

A door slammed and glass shattered below. Ava ran down the hall and hid in the nearest bedroom closet, bracing herself for the worst. A smell of something rotten hung heavily in the air. Ava shivered and sweat beaded above her lip as she watched the shadow of footsteps pacing beneath the closet door. The shadows raced away, and she released her breath. *It's in your mind. No one's out there.* Sitting with her knees drawn to her chest and her head resting on top, she sensed a presence in the closet. Something grazed her arm and Ava jumped. She strained her eyes and saw her.

"Ava, it's me." said the girl, her voice weak. It was the voice she'd heard before. She looked into her eyes. Her sister's eyes. "Jenna!" Her heart leaped and broke at once. *I did this. I brought the monster into our lives.*

Ava reached for Jenna while motioning to stay quiet. She embraced her and stepped back. "Did you hear that?"

"I only heard you." She said.

Ava pulled her to her feet as Jenna's legs trembled and buckled. Ava stood firm, hoisting Jenna's arm over her shoulder, while holding her at her waist as they hobbled out of the closet.

"Ava," Jenna whimpered, "I saw what you did."

"Shh! He'll hear us!" Ava said, walking quickly, carefully down the stairs, her sister limping at her side. Eyeing the door a few feet ahead, Ava looked around, still not convinced they were alone.

"He's gone. I saw you. Through the window," said Jenna.

Ava searched her face. "He's in this house."

"No, he's gone," she said as they shuffled through the front doorway and down the cascading hill towards the road. Headlights glowed in the distance. *Are we safe?*

"You shot him. You shot Dad," her voice shook. "With your gun."

*My mother's gun.* And then it all came back. The car, the forest, the run, the gunshot. Fear. *I did this. I killed my father. I killed the monster.*

Ava squeezed her sister tight and kissed her forehead.

"The monster can't hurt anyone now," her voice caught as she leaned her head against her sister's and walked toward the approaching car.

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## **Author Biographies/Contact Information**

The Authors listed below are in the order in which their story appears in this book.

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### **Kasey Anderson**

Kasey Anderson lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. “The Husked Heart” was her first published story, and to date it has been downloaded two hundred and eighty times.

She is currently hard at work expanding Jerry’s story into a novel. When she isn’t working on that project, she runs a group of thirty-six writers with O’ree Williams and Krissy Baccaro. Kasey is also active on Twitter (@9393usak), where she just recently passed 10,000 followers. Kasey also writes articles to assist other writers, including an article about Twitter engagement and an article about getting started on Medium, a website where writers get paid based on appreciation. You can find those articles as well as some of Kasey’s poems at her Medium profile.

If you're interested in getting updates on Kasey's work, please sign up for her newsletter here: <http://cepurl.com/gphmF5>.

If you enjoyed her story, Amazon and Goodreads reviews on the anthology and [original short story](#) are appreciated beyond words. Reviews help tell Amazon that a story is important and deserves to be read.

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### **Evelyn Puerto**

Evelyn Puerto entered the world around the time of the unveiling of the microchip, the introduction of Japanese cars to the US, and postage stamps that cost four cents. Here Saturday morning friends were Mighty Mouse, Dudley Do-Right and the Jetsons. Growing up, school was merely an interruption of her exploration of the worlds of Grimm’s Fairy Tales, Louisa May Alcott and, later, JRR Tolkien. She’s the author of the award-winning [Beyond the Rapids](#). To read more of her short fiction or to subscribe to her blog, visit [www.evelynpuerto.com](http://www.evelynpuerto.com).

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**Krissy Baccaro**

Krissy Baccaro has been an avid reader and writer since she was a little girl. As a child, she became especially fond of mysteries after reading *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg. Krissy enjoys writing mystery/crime, suspense and thriller stories and she reads books in those genres as often as she can. Her first published story, [LUCA](#) can be found on Amazon and other online retailers. In addition to writing short stories and poems, her first novel, *Buried Secrets* will be available soon!

Read more at [Krissy Baccaro's site](#).

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**B. O'ree Williams**

O'ree lives in a small town on the outskirts of Portland, Oregon with his wife, son, and their cat. A voracious reader, O'ree often consumes a book per week seeking inspiration for his writing. His debut novel entitled *La Maison*, a supernatural thriller set in New Orleans, is on track to be published sometime in late 2019/early 2020. If you are interested in getting updates on his work, sign up for his newsletter at <http://www.bowilliamsbooks.com> or follow him on twitter (@BOWilli27804833)

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### **Selma Martin**

Selma Martin, a native of Belize, grew up reading books on Anansi, the folktale character that often took the shape of a spider. In Caribbean folklore, Anansi is considered to be the spirit of all knowledge. Those stories planted a tiny seed in the author's heart and set her to writing childish stories of her own with themes that carried positive lessons. A retired English as a Second Language Teacher to kindergarten children, Selma is an enthusiast of things that, in her opinion, bring people together; things like positive stories, mindful living, laughter and the power of living in the moment. Currently an empty-nester, she lives in Japan with her husband. Selma recently relaunched her author-website and as gratitude for subscribing she's offering a free story. Please visit: <https://www.selmawrites.com/>

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### **Kurt Paulsen**

KS Paulsen is an author from Cape Town, South Africa. He's best known for writing paranormal and fantasy fiction. Occasionally horror but mostly fantasy. He enjoys sushi and spending time with his dog Blue. Also he love dragons, like loves them. But who doesn't.

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### **Markus Boch**

Markus Boch is a 21-year-old english student who loves animals and folklore. If you like mythical creatures and demi-humas colliding with our reality similar to the works of Rick Riordan and Derek Landy, Markus' stories might be for you. He hopes to use his stories as both entertainment and a way to tell some of his personal experiences. If you are interested in finding out more about Markus, you can follow him on twitter (**@Krushan10**) or on his website: <https://markusboch.com>

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### **Alejandra Cue**

Alejandra Cue is a fantasy writer and reader. Born and raised in Cuernavaca, the valley of eternal spring, her love for fantasy is only surpassed by her inability to keep the stories in her mind quiet. **Website:** <https://alecue.wordpress.com/>

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### **Cathy Ryan**

Cathy Ryan enjoys writing, gardening, and playing piano. She lives on a small farm in Virginia with her husband and a cat. The cat supervises both writing and gardening and leaves the house during piano practice. Cathy (not the cat) has short fiction appearing in 'Beneath Ceaseless Skies' and the anthology 'Deep Waters.' See her website for more information about her work. <https://cathyryanwrites.com>

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### **Jaimee Pifer**

<https://www.jaimeepifer.com> was launched in 2018 where readers can immerse themselves in stories and discover alongside the characters that there is hope in the midst of darkness. Jaimee started writing Doctor Who fan fiction for fun back in 2015 while studying for her degree in Behavioral Psychology. She is currently writing her first novel called *Withstanding the Fiery Furnace* which takes place during the Russian Revolution. She has written *Rising From the Ashes* and *Piercing the Darkness*. She writes to bring stories to life and to invite readers to engage in the journey alongside the characters.

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### **Nia Ellis**

I live in Chicago a thriving city filled with many layers of life, culture, and people from around the world. Growing up in Chicago was thought-provoking and filled with a myriad of life experiences. I write about ordinary people facing life challenges in their own lives. I am also a fan of superheroes and sometimes reflect it in my stories. My stories have a distinct canvas of imagination, influenced by many life experiences. I love the world and its abundance of tangible knowledge ready to be awakened in and through me. To see more, visit <https://niaellis.com/>

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### **M. MacKinnon**

M MacKinnon has always been a writer. When she was eight, she wrote a story called “Princess Zelda”, a heavily plagiarized mixture of Moses and Cinderella, and begged her mother for weeks to take it to the local library and get them to publish it. They did not. MacKinnon writes emotions. Love, hate, fear, redemption, second chances. Her writing is primarily paranormal romance with modern mystery thrown in for spice, and a little horror to stir the senses. And humor. Always humor. M MacKinnon’s first novel in the Highland Spirits Series *The Comyn’s Curse*, was published at the beginning of May 2019 by DartFrogPlus, and can be found in select bookstores and major online sites. Please check out her website: <http://mmackinnonwriter.com>, or her Facebook author page, M MacKinnon.

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### **Ian Worrall**

Ian Worrall lives in Nova Scotia, Canada. He enjoys training in martial arts, playing drums and archery. He is a lifelong fan of the Edmonton Oilers and one of the biggest Iron Maiden fans in the world. Working different jobs, he fulfilled a lifelong dream of writing and publishing a novel in 2017 with the publication of *No Remorse No Regret*, <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B076HFZFJG> The sequel, *No Rest For The Vengeful*, is his second novel.

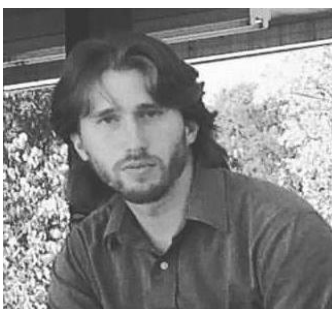


### **Diane Krause**

Diane Krause is a short-story writer. The idea for *Battle of the Brawn* came about because her brother suffered a severe traumatic brain injury, which left him with little to no short-term memory. She often has to act like a detective to piece together his day because he can't remember hour to hour. She knows it's all in choosing the right words.

She runs a website at <https://DianeKrausewriter.com>

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### **E.C. Wegner**

Eric Wegner is an author and playwright who weaves stories of fantasy, horror, drama, and comedy with a dark other-worldly presence. He believes that in darkest places of our world can be found the most beautiful nuggets of light. Eric Wegner lives with his two dogs Cye and Reilly in the countryside just outside of Memphis, Tennessee where he works as an in-home senior care professional and a theatrical stage carpenter.

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