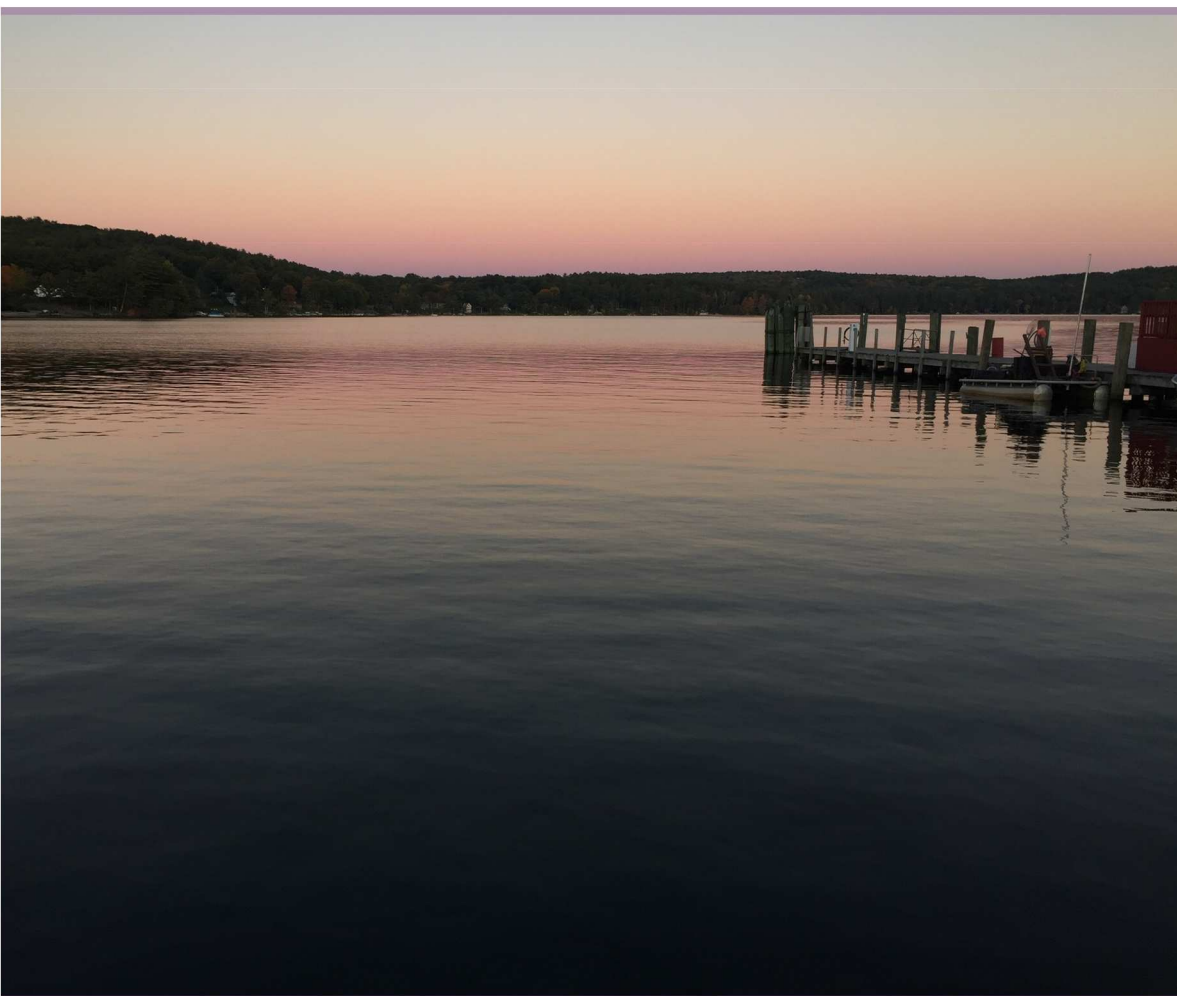


# CONCORD

# Writers' Night Out 2019

An Anthology of Writers and Writing



In conjunction with  
New Hampshire Writers' Project



# **Concord Writers' Night Out 2019**

## An Anthology of Writers and Writing

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### **An Anthology of Writers and Writing**

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The New Hampshire Writers' Project (NHWP) supports the development of individual writers and encourages an audience for literature in our state. We are a nonprofit literary arts organization funded by our members as well as by organizations and businesses that support our region's writers and literary heritage.

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# Concord Writers' Night Out 2019

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An Anthology of  
Writers and Writing





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## A Few Notes

**T**he Concord Writers' Night Out group is a loosely defined monthly meetup organized by the New Hampshire Writers' Project and coordinated by NHWP trustee Gary Devore. We meet at 7:00 p.m. at the Concord Books-A-Million on the first Monday of every month, though if you'd like to drop by you might want to email first to make sure we'll be there. See [nhwritersproject.org/writers-night-out](http://nhwritersproject.org/writers-night-out) for more information.

In cases where a work is excerpted from a longer, previously published work, information on where readers can find it is listed.

# Introduction

**Y**ou may know that Concord is the capital of New Hampshire or that the fourteenth president of the United States, Franklin Pierce, lived here for part of his life. You might even know that the first American alarm clock was constructed in Concord in 1787 by Levi Hutchins (I'll leave you to decide whether that last one is a good or a bad thing). But did you know that there is a diverse group of talented writers who meet regularly in Concord? It's true!

Once a month, this group comes together in conjunction with the New Hampshire Writers' Project for Writer's Night Out. Every meeting is a little different. We often share our knowledge of writing events and opportunities happening all over New Hampshire. We also learn each other's unique perspectives and styles as we share the different projects we're working on.

As you meander through these pages you'll see a reflection of the many styles that the Concord area writers bring to this anthology. Some works are nonfiction, and capture the challenges and joys of everyday life. There are moments of clarity, and choices made. In the end, we have to live with the impact of those choices.

Other authors use their unique imaginations to answer the question "What if?" They imagine whole worlds that lack the boundaries of ours. Their characters can do amazing things, yet they still have their own struggles and choices to make.

Whichever genres you prefer—reality, fantasy, or something else—this anthology contains a little bit for everyone. The following pages contain a mere sample of our work, and additional author information appears at the end so readers can find more from their favorite writers.

Concord has been a birthplace for so many great things. We hope you have fun imagining how it provided the seed of inspiration for the following works.

*Cheryl Barnhart*



# November

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by Cindy Shea

**W**e live among rolling fields fenced by stone walls and old sugar maple trees. In October the air shimmers with misty hues of red, orange, and gold. The air is crisp and clear, but still retains a certain warmth. Old logging roads and wooded paths beckon you along their winding way enticing you with what may be hidden just around the corner. Ducks and geese call to one another as they fly by on their way to warmer climates. Days are shorter and nights are cooler, making for perfect cooking weather, for this is harvest season and fresh food abounds. The daylight smells of fresh earth and dried leaves. In the evenings you may catch the hint of wood smoke in the air coming from a chimney or two as families sit by the fire chasing off the evening chill.

Just one month later the vision is drastically different. November brings shorter days, cooler temperatures, and that hint of snow in the air. The only leaves left on the trees are brown and dried. Forests reveal hidden stories that were once concealed by fresh green leaves. The skies are a cold steel gray most of the time, but even the sunny days do not bring much warmth. The only sound you hear is the howl of the wind, which can bite right through you.

If it wasn't for Thanksgiving, November would be a very bleak month indeed. While it can snow here in November, it often just threatens to, spitting down a flake here or there almost as a tease to those hardy skiers. By now, most people have their homes winterized, wood stoves are going strong, and anything related to summer has been stowed away until next year.

What we eat and how we cook changes drastically. Outdoor grills are replaced with indoor crockpots. Fresh vine vegetables have been canned or frozen and replaced with heartier squashes and root vegetables. Hearty stews fill the home with savory scents that make the mouth water. The smell of fresh-baked bread brings memories of days gone by.

Instead of meandering down wooded paths and taking in the beautiful scenery of October, we now stay indoors, watch football, and keep a lookout for that ever-promised snow so winter sports can begin.

Despite November's dreary appeal, it has its place on the seasonal calendar. We become so enamored with October that we might well forget that winter is imminent. November is here to remind us. She is stern and unforgiving, raw and cold, but there is beauty in her starkness. Because of her, we give ourselves permission to stay indoors wrapped in a warm blanket with a good book and a hot beverage.

As we come up to Thanksgiving and look for things to be thankful for, perhaps we should be thankful for the month of November. After a hectic summer cramming every outdoor activity possible into a few short months, November allows us to slow down, take a breath, and rest a while. It's that deep inhale and exhale before the holiday season begins and the craziness jumps into full gear.

This seasonal break between summer and holidays doesn't last long up here in the north. Give yourself permission to take a few moments to just breathe. Now is a great time to refresh yourself. It is also a great time to look at the world around us and appreciate it for what it is. Without seeing her dressed in her seasonal best, we should accept nature at her worst when all her scars are bared to us and she prepares to blanket herself in snow.

# Lost Gloves, Found Values

by Jay Haines

Standing in a large alcove with my back to the street this cold November afternoon, I take in the evidence of the building's earlier affluent life, its small black and white tiles covering the granite vestibule with geometric patterns. Just inside the doorway are four old-fashioned mailboxes and a dozen new ones. Each original apartment has now become four. The door to the street-level store retains its original stenciling for Sarah's Dressmaking Shop but now sells secondhand clothing and used furniture.

I'm brought back to the present by the sudden screech of brakes announcing the arrival of my bus. I sprint across the sidewalk to the opening door and scramble aboard, grateful for its warmth. From a look out the window I'm shocked to see my gloves on the vacated doorstep. As the bus accelerates through the changing light I know it's too late to get off. The gloves become progressively smaller and my emotions take over: Frustration, from momentary carelessness caused by the bus's sudden arrival. Embarrassment, because they are a recent gift from my parents. Regret, because they are really nice gloves: double-knit gray wool, leather palms, and lined inside.

To hop off at the next stop isn't an option. I'm running late and need to get back to the office to turn in the money collected from loan payments.

Had I thought to reflect on things on the ride back, they would have been hard to reconcile. It was 1962, and just three months earlier I and another counselor at a private summer camp had guided six boys on a two-week whitewater canoe trip in northern Maine. Now, having blown off my freshman year of college, I'm out of school, working as an outside collector for a personal loan company and awaiting the arrival of my military draft notice.

Setting the stage for my forthcoming experience was my good fortune to have lived a socially privileged life. Born white, a child of parents well educated, dad professionally employed, mom a homemaker with four kids to raise. I attended a private Quaker school and thus avoided the undesirable city public system. We lived in a generous three-floor, five-bedroom home on a quiet street in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia. From a Quaker education we learned that there was good in everybody, which is our spiritual connection to all people. We performed community service activities such as painting public buildings, volunteering at weekend work camps in what were at the time still referred to as Negro neighborhoods, and attending services in a Negro church. For the times, these were bold and enlightening experiences that I brought through the door the first day of my new job.

I had no idea how my world was about to change. My job title was Manager Trainee for a personal loan finance company. Tom, the manager and my boss, makes a point to announce that he is third-generation Irish, and proud of it. "The office makes loans to all manner of lowlife that infest the surrounding neighborhoods," he says. When referring to their black customers and the black population in general, Tom makes constant use of the "N" word. This group, I am told, makes up a modest percentage of loans made; however, they dominate the delinquency payment report.

My daily morning routine will be to review the past-due loan list to find those with no payment for sixty or more days who are in the same neighborhood. The Philadelphia public bus system is my means of transportation. This requires memorizing which numbered streets run north and south and which tree-named streets run east and west, a lesson to draw from for many years after.

However, the real lesson to come from this four-and-a-half-month job that opens my sheltered eyes is about poverty. The job made real to me what life is about for those who live in abject, hopeless poverty. This becomes a learned lesson from its constant inundation of my physical senses: smell (*exhaust fumes, stale tobacco breath, apartments of steaming squalor*), sight (*tattered clothing, matted hair, missing teeth, unfocused eyes*), hearing (*mumbled words, foul curses, piercing street noise*), touch (*sticky banisters and doorknobs, lifeless handshakes, icy winds on exposed flesh*), and taste (*bile that rises in my throat in fetid air-filled apartments*).

By the end of the first week I'm out the door each morning with a batch of fifteen to twenty loan cards. Borrowing money and not paying it back is difficult for my naive mind to grasp. By believing every excuse to not pay, Tom informs me, my collection performance is unacceptable. I need to get tougher and push back against excuses to

earn the people's respect. By returning every few weeks, nonpaying borrowers accept that I'm not going away, and reward my persistence with payments. My confidence level grows. From repeat visits acquaintances begin to offer light chatter and personal conversations. Thus, when a story about someone's inability to make a payment seems genuine, I accept it, write on the card NAH for *Not At Home*, and move on. I feel it's OK to occasionally make these unauthorized but personally gratifying choices.

It takes only a short time to feel at home with the job's routines. Street locations, bus routes, available bathrooms, and where to stop for coffee to catch up with card notes and organize the cash in my pocket have all become automatic. One garage owner who gets to know me says, "You know where it is, help yourself. Just don't fall in." These and other little social connections make the otherwise dreary work doable. At one stop, when the woman opens the door, out comes the delicious smell of fresh-baked cookies. She always rewards my compliment with a payment and a cookie for the road. I soon learn that eye contact and a warm greeting invites conversation and trust.

The north section of the territory is the toughest, with block after block of brown-stone structures, four or five stories up, and four or more apartments to a floor. Building numbers are often missing, so I search for one with a number, then count up or down, odd or even to reach the needed address. Front doors are never latched. I walk through the vestibule into the hallway when it hits. The smell is unbelievably awful, a mixture of raw garbage, stale air, urine, animal feces, and decaying animals, all baked in the building's overwhelming heat.

After rechecking the card for floor number and apartment letter, up I go. Floor numbers are not marked so it takes a mental count of right turns made for each stairway climbed. To walk in the middle of each step is important because trash, garbage, and whatever else collects on the edges. I never again touch a bannister after witnessing a tenant urinate on one.

Always present is the constant ultra-loud noise of TV and radio volume, but what affects me the most are the arguments. In my home, with my family, I've never witnessed people talking to each other like this. Screams, yelling, curses, sounds of things being thrown. The worst, however, are the tearful pleas, loud door slams, choked sobs, soft crying.

When I finally arrive at the address on the card, I knock, get no response, knock again, then wait; footsteps, a turning lock, the door opens with the chain in place.

The apartment air that escapes from the open door is more powerful than when I first entered the building. It causes a gag-choke reaction from which it takes a moment to recover before I can explain who I am and why I'm there. The person turns away and

shouts, “There’s a man at the door, he wants money.” The words reverberate through the building inviting other doors to nudge open for a look.

With business settled I make my way back down the stairs, again careful to avoid the trash and banister. With a push through the door, having finally acclimated to the oppressive heat and smell, I’m hit by another shock, this one a cold blast of fresh air. Then it’s out come the cards and with a quick look to confirm the address, I turn and head to my next call.

It’s a love-hate job. Tom’s foul and bigoted mouth constantly talking about my bums who don’t pay balanced against my many new acquaintances in a world I never knew existed. My bums, I think. He made the loans, not me. Thankfully it lasts only four and a half months: my notice has arrived, and it’s time to move forward with my military obligation.

Years later I’ve long forgotten about this job until a story about a lost pair of gloves, central to a minister’s sermon message, flashes through my memory. Back my mind goes to my own lost gloves on a vestibule step. I recall the full story: the loan collections; Tom’s unconscionable bigotry; the sound, smell, sight, touch, and taste of poverty; its hopeless blank looks; the humorless conversations; the minds that never know optimism; all burst back to life.

Fifty-five years ago those four-and-a-half months were imbedded in my mind without my ever knowing, guiding my thoughts, sensitivities, and actions forever afterward.

About my lost gloves:

Two weeks later, walking along the same collection route, I approach the infamous doorstep with thin hopes. Yup, they’re gone.

As I proceed down the block he’s walking toward me, an older, stooped-over, African-American gentleman, wearing a tattered oversized overcoat. He shuffles along in an old pair of galoshes and on his head is a winter hat with a flap out to the side. But on his hands he wears a brand-new pair of gloves, gray knit with leather palms. Without a doubt I know they are mine.

As we draw closer, I stare at my gloves, then his face. My gloves, his face, which now takes on a decided look of angst. I’m in angst myself and wonder what to say about my gloves.

I knew nothing about my Higher Power back then and how to trust in its presence. Thus I’m amazed when, as we get within three or four steps of each other I smile, look him in the eye, and say...

“Nice gloves.”

His face softens and in passing he says, “Yeah man.”

**from *Pantheon*:**  
***A Novel of the Greek Gods***  

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**by Gary Devore**

*Pantheon is a novel of the ancient Greek gods. When humans stopped believing in them as divine, they came to earth and have now lived among us for centuries. In this excerpt, Poseidon, the former god of the sea, meets a compassionate human in the modern-day Windy City.*

Poseidon could no longer recall exactly why he was in Chicago at that point in his long life, wandering down anonymous avenues, but it was around two in the morning. He saw Alex standing in the deserted plaza before a tall building of steel and glass—the national headquarters for an anonymous Banking Corporation.

Alex's body was powerful. Muscles bulged across his chest and under the sleeves of his too-short shirt. His face was long, with a chin the shape of his native Wyoming. Tight brown curls clung to the sides and top of his head. Everything about him, from his face to his eyes to his hands, was oversized. In one massive hand he clutched a net attached to a stubby handle. In the other he gently held an open, clear plastic garbage sack full of paper bags. Each bag was inflated and sealed with a neatly folded top, looking like it held fragile pillows of air.

As Poseidon watched, Alex gingerly sat the garbage sack on the pavement. His eyes quickly scanned the ground in front of him. Grasping the net firmly, he tiptoed forward, head down. He inched closer to the doorway of the skyscraper, and Poseidon finally saw

what he was looking for. At the base of one of the high windows lay a small sparrow. It chirped softly, puffing its body out in fear and confusion as it rested its head against the cold cement.

Alex bent down, placing his left hand on one side of the sparrow and the net on the other. The sparrow did not seem to know he was there. In a quick, graceful move, he scooped the wounded bird up onto his wide fingers. The little creature seemed merely stunned. Alex pulled an empty paper bag out of a pack on his belt. He slid the bird gently inside and folded the top closed, poking a few breathing holes in it with a pen stored behind his ear.

When he was done, Poseidon approached him to question what he was doing. In a gentle voice that seemed incongruous with his size, Alex explained that by day, he was trying to convince the corporations to turn off their lights when dark. He had written letters and gone to meetings...The birds get confused, he told Poseidon. They navigate by the stars, especially during the months of migration. They are disoriented by the lights left on in the downtown buildings. So they fly straight into the huge windows. By night, he assisted as many of the injured animals as possible.

Fascinated at this simple kindness, Poseidon walked with him on the rest of his rounds through downtown. They scanned the bases of the titanic office buildings for birds and found a few more. The ones that were simply stunned from the impact, hopping and chirping in confusion, Alex caught with his net and slid into paper bags with his delicate, oversized hands. He explained this was so they did not see anything that might further scare them. A few times, he and Poseidon only found a cold lump lying on the sidewalk where it had fallen. Alex took those ones too.

At one point, in front of a downtown department store encased in massive clear glass, Alex bent down and scooped up a quivering little bird with gray feathers. Attracted by the bright lights left on in the store, it had flown into the pane with such force that its beak had been smashed back into its tiny skull. He gave it to Poseidon to hold. The little bird was making a sound like a pathetic chirp, the only sound it knew how to make. What was left visible of its beak was just opening and closing. Its eyes were bulging, but there was no telling whether it could still see. Its feathers were puffed out on its body, which contracted and expanded with each minute, labored breath. Finally, the noises stopped, but the beak remained in motion. They were unconscious spasms now. Poseidon felt the little kernel of pain in his palm. The creature's thoughts were nothing more than instinct, but there had been a consciousness. He saw the breathing slow and then stop. The feathers wilted. The muscles in the beak contracted. Alex took the dead bird from him, placed it in a paper bag, and wordlessly marked the bag with an 'X.'

They drove in Alex's tiny car to the outskirts of the city, to the suburbs. They walked through the wet grass of a chilly public park just as the sun was peeking over the tops of the trees. The air was filled with chirping and tweeting. One by one, Alex and Poseidon opened the paper bags. Recovered sparrows and thrushes and robins leapt out and flew away. Each bag was like a magician's trick, opened to release the birds on flickering wings. Both wore smiles as they stood on the dewy lawn freeing the little creatures far away from glowing skyscrapers and mile-high windows. The birds fluttered off with newfound strength, and their suburban friends welcomed them home with sweet songs.

*[Pantheon by Gary Devore is available on Amazon and at independent bookstores in six compact volumes or one omnibus edition. Visit <http://www.garydevore.com/pantheon>]*

# The Changeling

by Piper Tallis

A swirling, multicolored vortex pierced the dark. The forest went silent. In the hush, an adolescent fairy stepped through the open portal followed by a hulking rock troll.

“Go,” Carraig urged, poking at the tender spot just under the fairy’s wing.

Pellin moved forward. His long feet slid silently through the leaf litter. He stopped where the trees ended and the land dropped into a broad sloping field. Droplets of dew sparkled across the rolling landscape.

The young fairy took a deep breath and inhaled the heavy medley of nighttime perfumes before turning to watch the glittering lights behind him wink away with a soft pop. His doorway home was gone. Once the passage closed the woodland returned to life. Toads resumed their trilling calls and possums again foraged for supper.

The rock troll rested a massive hand on Pellin’s shoulder and gave a squeeze. “No worry.”

Carraig and Pellin stepped out from the protection of the woods. Overhead, the sky had turned a deep cobalt blue. Only a few of the brightest stars were still visible. The pair waited in silence until a glimmer near the horizon signaled the coming day.

The troll drew a tumbled, pale purple stone from his satchel. He raised the amethyst high over his head so that the fractured rock caught the rays of the rising sun. Carraig’s flat, onyx eyes studied the whirls dancing across the gem’s curved surface. A portal could open on any human place or time. Rock trolls read the keystones and identified the entry point.

“Luck be with you,” Carraig said. “Human times one, eight, four, eight. North America. Summer solstice two weeks.”

“Why is that lucky?” Pellin asked.

“Belief almost gone. Never strong here. Few protection charms. Easy pickings.”

Pellin couldn’t resist another look back the way he had come. “This is so old-fashioned. Why can’t we just go home?” *Do I really have to do this?*

“Not the way.” Carraig’s shaggy head bobbed back and forth. “You find bebe. You bring bebe. You grown-up. Full magic.”

“Stupid rule.”

The troll shrugged in response before his hand again tightened on the young fairy’s shoulder.

“Ready?”

Pellin gave a nod and moved toward a massive half-rotted log. He sat facing the meadow with his back toward the troll. Carraig’s thick lips pursed and he drew a deep breath. His barrel-shaped chest expanded as he pulled in the surrounding nature’s earth-force magic. The fairy shuddered and closed his eyes.

Pain wracked through Pellin’s body as Carraig began molding. The faeling’s long, slender bones were crushed, compacted, and reformed under the rock troll’s sturdy fingers. Pellin became shorter. Carraig’s solid fist hammered at Pellin’s graceful fingers and toes until they were an appropriate human length. The rock troll used his thumbs to collapse Pellin’s high, delicate cheekbones. The young fairy tried to fade into unconsciousness. Under Carraig’s skillful fingers Pellin’s face broadened. There was a moment of respite when the troll repositioned himself to rip off the fairy’s beautiful teal wings. Once removed, the silky material faded to a chalky color. Pellin could feel most of his juvenile fairy magic seeping away.

The troll wadded the wings into a putty. He broke off small pieces and partially filled Pellin’s wide, luminous eyes. The fairy lost his special sight. More pieces were used to reconfigure his ears. Pellin lost his acute hearing.

Carraig ground several twigs between his thick teeth and spat the mixture on to a portion of the clay. He kneaded the material until it turned a dark brown color, then pulled and stretched it to fashion several pieces of human clothing that he secured around Pellin’s form.

The end result was a somewhat nondescript adult human male, slightly taller than average, with sandy-brown hair and deep-set hazel eyes.

The troll carefully smoothed the final scraps of the fairy wing material into an egg-

shaped lump that he secured inside Pellin's leather pack. Sweating and shaking, Pellin spoke toward the sound of the panting troll. "Please tell me we're done." His eyes flew open when he realized his voice no longer sounded like rustling grass.

"Yes," Carraig said.

Pellin looked around but his now-limited sight could no longer distinguish the rock troll. Carraig's voice seemed to come from an oblong stone leaning against a maple sapling.

"What's my time allotment?" he whispered, hating the noise these lips and mouth made. *How long do I have to live worse than the lowest animal?*

The rock form slid to the bottom of the small tree. Pellin heard a grunt before he saw the bit of purple rise again toward the sun. "Strange. Next lunar eclipse three months."

"What's strange?"

"Never see so long." His voice faded as he spoke. "Lucky faeling. Much time to find the bebe. Remember, male, green eyes, born full moon."

Pellin nodded, hoping Carraig could see the movement. *Why do rock trolls always repeat the obvious?*

With that, the hulking rock seemed to fold into itself until it appeared as no more than another rounded, moss-covered boulder. "I wait." Carraig's voice came from deep within the stone. "Bring bebe here as soon you find and we go home."

Pellin turned and scanned his surroundings. Off to the west he saw a few wisps of smoke. The fairy started toward these signs of man; that was where he would find the baby.

Within a few steps his foot snagged on a runner-root and he pitched forward. Thick grasses cushioned the worst of the blow as he smacked against the ground. "Hey! Fairies don't fall!" Pellin yelled as he spat errant bugs from his mouth.

A chuckle that sounded like spilling gravel rolled down from above. "But humans do," Carraig called in a sleepy voice.

*It would have been nice if someone had explained human physical frailties,* Pellin thought. He stood and scrutinized the ground ahead before lifting and placing each foot. With slow, exaggerated steps, he moved down the hillside, where at the bottom he found a cleared earthen pathway. It ran east to west and was pocked with deep wheel tracks. Pellin looked over the churned earth. Easier travel, he nodded in approval. But, wait. The fairy shook his head as if to clear confusion. *This land's been marred. Who cares if it's easier?*

Pellin made his way over the ruts to the far side of the path where the ground was smoothest. The morning sun warmed his back as he moved. Open hay fields contin-

ued on his left. He watched swooping swallows catching their breakfasts as he mulled through bits and pieces of conversations he'd overheard before his departure.

The middle of his new body began to feel strange but he ignored the sensation and continued walking. The feeling grew stronger; it was turning into pain. *Did Carraig make a mistake? Is the human-realm magic not strong enough? Is there something wrong with this construction?* An odd fluttering overlaid the pain for a moment. Pellin considered turning back and waking Carraig. If the troll had made an error when converting him, they would have to go back. It wouldn't be his fault. Pellin felt a smile forming. Undo the damage to his form and wait for another doorway signal. Maybe he could get this rite of passage nonsense delayed for a couple of decades. Maybe the rules would change in the meantime.

It was pain, and it kept increasing. Pellin's head felt funny, and his stunted feet stopped reliably following his instructions. He wobbled to a grassy area and sat on the damp ground. He looked back along his path. Something was definitely wrong. He tried to summon the strength to return to Carraig.

An earthy, sweet scent wafted toward him. It caused Pellin's center to lurch. In a kind of fog, he twisted onto to his knees and crawled toward the enticing aroma. In the dappled sunlight just along the tree line he found bunches of small, red berries clustered under fuzzy leaves. *Strawberries*. Without thinking, the fairy began snatching at the plump balls. He stuffed as many as would fit into his mouth and ground his teeth together. Glorious sweet and sour flavors burst over his tongue. Cram, chew, swallow, repeat. He wasn't sure how long he kept it up before flopping onto his back. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. The pain was gone. In fact, the body felt—his mind sought the word—satiated.

*Ugh*. Pellin realized then that there was nothing wrong with the body; it had just required nutrients. He supposed this was something akin to the fairy consumption of baneberry nectar, though fairies only drank the sweet fermented liquid on new moon night festivals, after which, those who'd been invited would dance through the night in intricate quadrille patterns.

Pellin wondered how often this body would need intake; he hoped it was not often. He didn't need the distraction from his mission. His face grew warm and his chest tightened. Every one of his relatives had separately spoken to him before he'd left for the human realm. Each had instructed him to "take the baby." Not one of them had bothered to make sure he understood how to sustain a human body. *Typical*.

Feeling much revived, Pellin piled more strawberries into his bag before again heading down the road. He stopped when he saw a crude sign that read *Town of Newfane*.

He stared at the small white rectangle with its crooked black letters and his jaw tightened. His home village was announced by a kaleidoscope of fluttering butterflies. This looked like a bad joke.

Just a little further down the pathway Pellin's stomach dropped when he saw the human settlement. It was worse than he had imagined. Instead of large, fanciful structures constructed of strong spider-silk that glowed softly at night, all he saw were hovels constructed of chopped trees and stone. There were no wide lawns sprouting tall, dewy flowers scenting the air; rather, there were streets strewn with manure and corners piled high with garbage. Pellin raised his sleeve and pressed it against his nose to block the stench. *Even goblins don't live like this!*

He picked his way forward through the filth, and after several minutes he found himself in an open square. Lanes and alleys led from the space. Some wound back up the escarpment and others led down toward an expanse of water glimmering in the distance.

The plaza was a hub of activity for the humans. Pellin looked around, but no one seemed to take notice of him. He saw an opportunity. The young fairy inched back and leaned against a grimy building marked *Post Office*. His assimilation abilities were really just a passive, defensive magic. Even though it was less effective while he was in a human form, it was one of the few magics still left to him. For the first time he was grateful to be more practiced than most.

In the shadowed corner Pellin focused his mind on the scene before him. He would be able to mimic any social behavior he observed. He listened to the snippets of conversation from men entering and leaving the building and learned information: a convention in several weeks, disruption "overseas" that might affect shipping, something about a new free-soil party.

Pellin could see, but not hear, the adult men chatting across the square while they loaded and unloaded carts pulled by horses. Women in strange long skirts that hid their legs and caps that covered their hair hurried by. Men, women, and some children carried parcels from a large building marked *General Store* that dominated one side of the plaza. It was all bustle.

*Unbelievable.* A weird frizzle tingled down the back of Pellin's neck. The humans were doing for themselves what the Fae did with magic. They really did labor like animals! He didn't want to stay here any longer than he had to. He was ready to find the baby. *Where do they keep them?*

As the sun dipped lower in the sky the streets began to empty. An odor of burning flesh drifted toward him and he rose from his semi-stupor. The smell didn't repulse him.

Oddly, he found the aroma enticing. His new mouth began watering and he realized the empty sensation was back in his middle. Pellin followed the scent.

He wound around the village common and made his way down the darkening streets toward the lapping water. Turning a corner, Pellin found a brightly lit stone building sitting alongside a row of sturdy docks. A giant wooden fish with two large dorsal fins and a yellow eye was mounted above the entryway. Its flank was painted in olive and gold tones that gave way to a white underbelly. Neat black letters stood out against the white: *Walleye Tavern*.

Pellin peeked through the doorway. A powerful scent of fermented grain joined with the roasted flesh. The room was packed with tables. Sweaty men sat close together devouring plates of steaming food. The tavern buzzed with conversation that was punctuated by an occasional raucous laugh. Pellin inched forward so that he stood just inside the threshold. His transformed human stomach gurgled.

“Are ya eating or watching”? An amused voice sounded from near his elbow.

*That’s the biggest pixie I’ve ever seen.* It only took him a moment to realize that it wasn’t a misplaced pixie, just a small human female. He found the new voice: “Eating.”

Her smile broadened and dimples formed on both cheeks. The woman pointed toward a barrel and an empty, backless stool near the front corner before bustling away through the crowd. Pellin made his way across the sticky floor to the makeshift table where a young boy delivered a frothy mug of amber-colored liquid that was clearly the source of the fermented grain odor. The others around him merrily gulped the fluid. Pellin took a small slurp and fought against the urge to retch. He dribbled his drink back into the cup and pushed it away. He tried to concentrate enough to gather information from the nearby discussions, but the gnawing sensation from his middle distracted him. Pain was jabbing at his insides before the raven-haired woman reappeared and dropped a fragrant plate in front of him. “Sorry so long. Lotsa schooners docked today. We’re full up.” Piercing lapis-colored eyes, a few shades darker than her well-worn dress, travelled over Pellin. “Did you come in on one of the ships?”

Pellin shook his head, “No.”

“New in town, though.”

“Yes.”

Her responding laugh was musical, almost fairy-like. “A talker. Something wrong with the beer?” She indicated the mug perched near the table rim.

“It’s awful.” The words were out before he could stop himself.

A gruff voice shouted from the back, “Celeste!”

She winked and leaned in to whisper, "I'll have em bring ya a cider." Then she whirled away, weaving her small form between the cramped tables toward the summons.

Pellin examined her gift: a dead fish roughly the same shape as the sign above the door, coated with a crispy brownish substance, nestled on a bed of potatoes. The whole thing was topped with a dollop of melting butter. *An animal!* part of him screamed even while his mouth watered again. He silently apologized to his fellow creature before picking it up by both ends and tearing a huge hunk from behind the head. It was surprisingly delicious, but prickly. Small bones jabbed at his tongue and cheeks, and he frantically pulled at the offending splinters while peeking at his fellow diners. Internally, he chastised himself for forgetting to watch how they ate, though he now saw they were using their fingers and the pronged utensil to separate each piece of cooked muscle from bone. His meal proceeded more pleasurably after that. He resolutely put from his mind that his meal had once been alive because whenever he thought about it his throat constricted and he had difficulty swallowing.

Pellin enjoyed what the human female had called cider. It reminded him of baneberry nectar, although it turned out to be created from fermented apple. The food and drink made him feel heavy and relaxed. With a quiet burp he stood and started to make his way to the door.

"Where do ya think you're going?" Celeste's tiny hand gripped his wrist.

"Finished," he replied, pointing to the pile of bones.

One hand remained clamped on his wrist while the second hovered under his nose, palm up. Pellin looked from her flashing eyes to the hand and back again.

"Twenty cents," she said. Pellin's mouth dropped open and Celeste's eyes narrowed. "You don't have any money do ya?" She sounded more disappointed than angry.

"No," he replied. His face felt a sudden warmth. Something else he should have noticed. The stomach pain had preoccupied him more than he had realized.

Celeste took a deep breath, eyes shifting from side to side. A few of the closer patrons were watching the interchange while pretending not to. Then she nodded her head once, as if responding to an internal dialogue. "Come with me." She pulled Pellin through the crowd and behind the tattered curtain that separated the cooking and dining areas.

Pellin gasped. The odor that hit him alternated between that of delectable meals and rank decay. What served as a cooking area looked as though a banshee had blown through it. The surface of the plain oak table was a jumble of flour piles, egg shells, and potato peels. Just behind the table along the exterior wall was a large sink and metal drainboard. Crusted plates and utensils rose in a mound above the rim. Next to the

sink a red-faced, beefy man stood sweating over a huge metal and brick stove. Clouds of steam billowed from boiling pots while more battered fish sizzled in heavy iron pans. Pellin unconsciously backed away from the skillets until he remembered that in the human body the iron wasn't likely to affect him, or at least it wouldn't affect him as much.

"What?" the man roared at the sight of Celeste.

She yanked at Pellin and propelled him forward. "Dishwasher."

"Don't need no dishwasher."

Celeste looked at the mound and then back at the cook.

"You ken—" he began.

But she didn't give him a chance to finish. "Nope. That's not the deal, Uncle James." Celeste's eyes skittered to a shadowed corner before returning to her uncle.

James frowned. "Not payin' him."

"Fine," she nodded, pushing Pellin around the table toward the sink.

Pellin stopped before the tub and stood unmoving. He didn't know what she expected him to do. James snorted loudly through his nose.

A soft "Hrmmpf" escaped from Celeste before she reached over for the long stick protruding from the side of the sink. She worked the darkened piece of wood up and down until cool water partially filled the rusted tub. Moving lightly on the tips of her toes, like a sprite, she added some of the boiling water from the potato pots. From an adjacent cubby she pulled out a small box marked *Lye*, a jar of sand, and a bit of grimy cloth. Celeste sprinkled powder from the box into the now lukewarm water. She quickly demonstrated what she expected Pellin to do and then left him to his task.

The fairy's stomach roiled. The lye stung at his eyes and burned his hands. Bits of food quickly made the water look like a rancid stew. James didn't speak, but when the sink drain became gummed, he stuck a broad hand through the mucky water and sloped the goopy contents into a small pail. *These humans are even more disgusting than I thought.* Pellin again fought the urge to retch.

Celeste swept through at regular intervals delivering soiled plates and taking out full ones. All the while, Pellin watched for an opportunity to escape. He just wanted to find the baby and get back home.

After several hours the din died down. The outer room grew quiet. Pellin's pile of scrubbed plates grew into a tall stack.

"Well," Celeste said, pulling the dividing curtain closed, "that's it."

"How'd we do?" James asked.

She smiled and shook her bulging apron. Coins jangled merrily against one another. James grunted in response and turned back to scraping gunk from his utensils. Celeste

carefully deposited the night's profits into a metal strongbox she pulled from a hollowed-out space behind the stove before moving to inspect Pellin's work. "Finish those," she pointed at a few remaining platters, "and you can go."

Pellin's body somehow felt lighter; he wasn't being held prisoner. He worked energetically at the last plates. Just as he finished, Celeste emerged from the darkened corner between the kitchen staircase and the storeroom door. Her head was bent over a wrapped blanket cradled in her arms. Pellin stilled. His skin tingled. He held his breath.

"How's he?" James asked without turning around.

"Fine," Celeste cooed. As she looked up she found Pellin staring at her. "Never seen a baby before?"

"Sorry," Pellin stammered, averting his gaze. Inside, he was itching to get closer. A human baby. He had to see.

"His name's Garvey. For his father," Celeste said.

"God rest his soul," James replied.

A boy!

Celeste smiled and tilted her head to meet Pellin's eyes. "Can ya hold him a second?"

Pellin stepped forward with his arms stretched out. This he knew how to do. His family had made sure he knew how to hold a baby safely. After all, "take the baby" also meant "bring us a live baby." He glanced toward the dining room and wondered whether he could make it out before James caught him. Probably not. Celeste had likely secured the front door.

Stepping forward, Pellin carefully accepted the bundle and reminded himself to breathe. He had spent time with some of the ancient fairies, the ones who barely moved anymore but whose voices were strong. They had told him it was best to wait until everyone was asleep. Steal the child in the night and leave the changeling behind. Where did the baby and Celeste sleep?

The baby was swaddled, and a loose bit of quilt had fallen across its face. A tight sensation bound Pellin's chest. When Celeste turned away he gently lifted the scratchy bit of fabric. A pair of bright blue eyes, like his mother's, stared back. The binding across his heart popped and in its place a heaviness settled across his shoulders. *Well, it wasn't supposed to be that easy.* It had been ridiculous to hope he would just immediately stumble on the right baby.

Pellin took a deep breath. The portal had opened here. The correct baby was somewhere close. He needed a plan.

Celeste pulled out a tall stool and gestured for Pellin to return the infant. She

settled Garvey against her chest. In a few moments the sounds of happy slurping filled the room.

"You can go," James said.

Pellin nodded at the older man and untied his borrowed work apron.

"Do ya have somewhere to go?" Celeste asked quietly, looking up from the dark fuzzy head at her breast. Pellin hesitated, unsure how to answer, and Celeste's eyes softened. "The storage room. You can use the burlap sacks for bedding."

"Celeste," James said.

"In payment for his work, uncle," she responded, standing and heading toward the tight, curving stairs. Celeste stopped just before the first step and turned back toward the disguised fairy. "What is your name anyway?"

"Pellin."

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That night Pellin learned about cold. While the day had been pleasant, the dark was not. His toes, fingers and nose all numbed. He found it helped to bury himself under multiple layers of empty bags. He shivered and waited for the dawn. At some point the body fell into a kind of unconsciousness, then Celeste was there, shaking his shoulder. "We have work to do."

Pellin stirred and felt an uncomfortable pressure in his abdomen. The side of Celeste's mouth quirked up. "Outhouse through the rear and around the side." She gestured toward a massive wooden door that slid along a metal rail in the floor.

He was grateful for the empty stomach as he stepped into the small, rank wooden structure. The plants growing along the exterior did little to mask the odor. The body knew what to do and he was grateful to be alone for this humiliation.

When he returned inside Celeste handed him a chipped enamel bowl filled with water and a rag. "Just splash your face. We have to go."

The fairy did as he was told and followed Celeste out the door. She carried a sharpened knife in the basket hanging from her arm. Dawn was just breaking. Birds sang from trees and roofs. The air held a cool humidity that promised to warm as the day progressed. Celeste wound her way through the warren of streets to where a dirt trail led into a field. She began scanning the ground as Pellin watched. After a few minutes she gave a small cry and dropped to her knees. With her knife she began hacking on the bottom of a fibrous, burgundy-colored plant.

"Look for more, Pellin," she instructed. "Have you ever had rhubarb pie?"

“No,” he replied as he searched for more of the same plant.

“James has a wonderful recipe. We harvest, he bakes. If we find enough, we can make extra to sell.”

It took only a few hours before Celeste’s basket was overflowing. The pair made their way back to the tavern in the warming early morning air, where the table was loaded with prepared baking tins and steaming pots bubbled on the stovetop. James grinned when he saw their harvest. Just before dinner service Pellin received a piece of one of the pies from Celeste, who smiled and nodded as he took a tentative bite then quickly devoured the rest. Pellin heard his throat making soft noises as the sweet-tart flavors swirled through his mouth. When the piece was gone he was startled to find himself licking every stray crumb from his fingers.

After that, Pellin became part of the tavern routine. It dawned on him that Celeste could still be an asset. She might lead him to other babies. Living on top of one another the way they did, surely human women with babies would know each other.

He learned quickly, and as the days passed he got fewer and fewer curious glances for things he said or did. Celeste expected him in the kitchen no later than noon, but the mornings were his to do as he wished.

Pellin realized this was going to take longer than he had hoped when after the first week he still wasn’t sure where the babies were kept. He found that while children were everywhere, especially once the schools stopped, the babies were not. He didn’t worry; somehow he had wound up with three whole months to complete the task.

Afternoons Pellin spent with Celeste. The two sat perched on stools set between the thick oak table and the dilapidated cabinets preparing for dinner. They mixed batter, peeled potatoes, gutted fish, and plucked chickens—anything that James needed. On the fifth day a stout man delivered thick slabs of pork, and James became energized. He scurried around and generally got in Pellin and Celeste’s way as he examined cupboards and muttered about recipes.

In the evenings the fairy worked alongside James in the kitchen, scrubbing at greasy plates and cutlery until his arms felt like lead.

Whenever he felt the urge to flee he reminded himself that here he was fed and had a place to sleep, absolute necessities when dealing with a human body. *Is surviving this discomfort part of the price for full fairy magic? Why hadn’t anyone told him about that part?*

June proceeded toward July. The summer was hot and frequent rain kept the air humid, but the oven had to be kept active. James explained that it wasted too much coal and took too much time to fire up the stove again and again. Even dampened down, the behemoth cooking apparatus emanated heat. The kitchen was sweltering, and fetid

odors collected in the cramped room. Celeste opened the filmy window over the sink so that occasional refreshing lake breezes wafted through. The more he worked the less disgusting it all seemed.

It was during Pellin's second week, when they were working on prepping the morning's fish delivery, that Celeste suddenly broke the quiet.

"The first time I saw Garvey I knew I was in love."

"You knew?"

"Oh, ya know," she replied, tossing a handful of stinking fish innards into the pail at her feet, "when your insides feel like they melted and dropped to your toes. Your face gets all warm and ya can't speak two words to save yer life."

Realization flooded through Pellin. All these random physical symptoms he'd been experiencing, they were human emotions! Just one more thing no one in Fae had told him: while in this guise he would also *feel* like a human. His face grew even warmer. Maybe in the midst of one of their "take the baby" speeches someone could have mentioned this to him—or had they kept it a secret on purpose?

"Can't say I do," Pellin managed to reply while his mind raced. Fairies decided how they would react to any given situation. They never had this jumble of sensations he'd been experiencing. He felt out of control, like the body, instead of his mind, was dictating his responses. He didn't like it. Did humans really have to deal with this all the time?

"Oh, Pellin! You've never been in love? We'll have to do something 'bout that," she winked. "There's lotsa nice girls in Newfane."

He shook his head, only half-paying attention as his quicksilver mind processed this new information. Enjoyable sensations related to good emotions. Celeste gave him nice sensations. He became warm and relaxed whenever she was around. Happy? Was that happy? Celeste made him happy? What did that mean?

The uncomfortable symptoms, like the ones he had whenever he worried about his deadline, were related to unpleasant emotions.

Sometimes though, he experienced both good and bad sensations at once. Even his mind stumbled on that one. It was confusing. Were human beings more complicated than he'd been told?

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That day signaled a shift. The two no longer worked in silence but chatted all the time. It wasn't anything like the formalized fairy conversations he was used to. Instead, Celeste seemed to talk about whatever entered her head. He found not knowing what she was going to come out with next oddly exciting.

Over the course of a week, Pellin learned Celeste's husband had worked on a barge ship in the new canal system until an unfortunate accident took his life shortly before Garvey's birth. James was Celeste's mother's brother. Childless and unmarried, he had asked the young widow to come and help him run the tavern. James had been well-rewarded in his choice.

Pellin watched Celeste slide back the wide rear storeroom door. Sunlight glinted off the water and illuminated the normally dim space. Tradesmen pulled their wagons, heaped with goods, alongside the opening. It was Celeste who greeted them and Celeste they had to deal with. She had a wide range of tactics. Pellin watched from his perch at the kitchen table.

Sometimes Celeste batted thick eyelashes and ran a finger along her plump lower lip. Other times she stood ramrod straight and met the peddlers with an icy stare. Whatever she did, Celeste managed to keep her targets off-balance. Pellin shook his head at the display. *Celeste's skills would put any elf to shame.* Her slick bargaining stretched James's budget.

It wasn't just haggling for supplies; Celeste also had a head for business. It was her idea to upend used barrels and squeeze them into the dining-hall for extra seating. "More seats means more profits" was her motto. Pellin realized that all of Celeste's toils were for one thing: her young son. Garvey was her world.

At the beginning of the third week James brought up Sunday services. By then Pellin had figured out what the older man was talking about and did not feel enthusiastic. Sitting on a hard bench and listening to someone drone on in a strange language did not sound like fun. On the other hand, Pellin could tell from James's tone that demurring was not an option.

That Sunday he entered the cool chamber and saw Celeste and James sitting by themselves on the far side. Several couples stood chatting near the front. The fairy grinned when he saw what the women held. *Babies!* he thought. *They were here!* There was a bounce in his step as he made his way over to sit with Celeste and James. Several pairs of eyes watched his movements.

Pellin found it difficult to sit still through the chanting, but somehow he survived. Afterward, several women who looked to be about Celeste's age sauntered toward them.

"Who is this, Celeste?" a plump redhead with toddler in tow asked.

"Pellin is our new dishwasher," Celeste replied.

The redhead halted her forward progress and narrowed her eyes at Pellin. A second young mother, cradling an infant, continued forward.

"I'm so happy ye finally got some help," she said with a lilt.

"Ooh, how old is he?" Pellin asked, pointing toward the baby with an eager smile.

Color rose into the pale blonde's cheeks. "Almost four months."

"A March baby, then," Pellin replied. "A luck child! May I?" he held out his arms.

The young mother's color deepened as she handed the swaddled baby over.

Pellin's heart skipped a beat. The infant had a pair of leaf-green eyes. Pellin cooed and fussed over the baby causing more women to drift over. *I have to calculate the night of March's full moon*, he reminded himself.

About halfway back to the tavern Celeste broke the quiet. "That was...different."

"The service?" Pellin asked. He was surprised; it had been about what he had expected.

"Not that," she said, not explaining further.

Now Pellin was curious. "What was different?"

Celeste sighed. "You know how it is," she said wearily, then sighed again. "But then again, you're a man, so maybe ya don't. If yer a woman and your husband dies, everyone is very concerned about ya. For the first week. After that, every other woman around is convinced yer out to steal her husband. Those women haven't spoken to me in months. Before today I hadn't even seen Patrick yet."

Pellin felt a quick flush of anger, followed by a deep emptiness. He knew what it was like to be left out. Memories of new moon festivals and the quadrilles he watched but never danced pulsed through his mind. Pellin changed the subject. "Which one was Patrick?"

The comment earned him a half-smile from Celeste. "Alma's baby, the first one you held."

"The March baby. Do you know when he was born?"

"Hmmm, oh yes, it must have been March thirteenth, because she said something about it being only four more days until he would have been born on his patron's feast day."

Pellin didn't understand the reference but was saved from asking by Garvey's sudden fussing. He took the baby from Celeste and with a conspiratorial smile pulled an object from his pocket: a woolen ball decorated with a few bright feathers. Pellin soon had Garvey cooing and gurgling, reaching with his small fists to grab the colorful object.

That night Pellin lifted the bolt to the storeroom door and slipped out into the moist dark. Odors of fish and seaweed rushed at him. He dropped to the pebbly surface below and then sat with his back propped against the building.

An unpleasant squirm twisted through his chest when he thought about the young Celtic mother, so he avoided thinking about her. Fireflies blinked and danced over the scrubby grass as he made his sky observations and scratched his formulas in a patch of damp sand.

Pellin never thought he would be in the human realm for so long. This had to be the baby he was searching for, but he worked through the calculations twice just to be sure. Disappointment, mixed with a weird sense of relief, flooded through him.

It was clear that little Patrick had been born about a week before the full moon. He wasn't the right baby. Pellin had to keep looking.

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It was already midway through July. Somehow, six weeks had come and gone, and Pellin found himself no closer to identifying the right baby.

Early summer corn had come in the day before on one of the barges, and piles of tangy husks were neatly stacked along the sturdy table. Whatever Celeste did not use for storage and cooking she would try to sell. As they peeled the cobs, thin strings of corn silk became stuck to their fingers, hair, and clothes.

"You know all about us Pellin, but you're a mystery. Where ya from? How'd ya get here?" Celeste asked.

An embarrassed shyness overtook Pellin. No one had ever asked him about himself, at least, not anyone who cared about a genuine answer.

"It's a long story," he replied, eyes remaining on his task.

Celeste's musical chuckle bounced through the kitchen. She gestured toward the bulging sack propped against her ankle. "I'm not goin' anywhere."

"I'm from far away."

"Ooh, a foreigner? You don't talk funny, though."

"I suppose I am," he said, ignoring the speech comment. "My family told me that I was old enough to contribute to the family fortune."

He remembered the hushed conversation in more detail than he wanted to:

*I am uncertain that your recommendation would utilize this portal opening to its full potential.*

*I understand your trepidation, although I seek to remind you that he has reached the age of qualification.*

*(A loud sigh.)*

*Under other circumstances I would feel justified in questioning the age calculation.*

*I believe I conveyed to you at the time the ancients' admonishment against conception after consumption of baneberry nectar.*

*The community must be mindful with respect to the grant of full magic.*

*On that point we concur. Full magic conveys much responsibility.*

*(A silence.)*

*I understand our Queen is in need of adult guards at the outer posts.*

Celeste interrupted the memory, her wide eyes revealing a few golden specks floating in the deep blue irises. "A *fortune*?"

"Well, not so much a fortune," Pellin amended. "Probably better to say it was my time to contribute to the family support." It was a necessary bending of the truth. Supposedly, the procured baby's life force would activate his full magic and re-energize his family's magical reservoir. "I didn't want to go, but they sent me anyway."

Celeste lowered her eyes and laid a hand against Pellin's shoulder. Gratitude washed through him. After a short silence Celeste spoke in a light teasing tone. "You know, that didn't take so long. I think I'm owed a story."

Pellin shot her a sideways glance. She was an interesting human.

"So did ya plan to just pass through Newfane?" Celeste asked as she turned her attention back to the pile of corn in her lap.

"I thought I would find what I needed here."

"In our tavern?" The fairy-like chuckle erupted again. "We can't build your family's *fortune*."

"Not here necessarily, just somewhere in town."

She nodded, "There's jobs where ya can earn better then my thirty cents a day. Most of 'em are working on the ships though. You're not a sailor." It was a statement, not a question.

"That's true," Pellin agreed.

"What skills do ya have?"

Pellin smiled. "I can wash dishes, and now—" he lifted a cob "—I know how to shuck."

Then it was August, with cool mornings that spiked into warm afternoons and days that grew shorter. One Sunday, Celeste hummed and moved about the room. She cradled baby Garvey in one arm and worked a straw broom with the other. Pellin was fascinated. Her life was more difficult than that of the lowest fairy slave, but she was happy. He didn't understand. Humans had to work so hard for everything they had and yet, somehow, they could be happy.

Pellin, on the other hand, was not happy. A month. September thirteenth loomed only a month ahead. He had never heard of anyone failing to find the baby. Would he be the first? The swamping, drowning sensation grew worse each day. He did his best to hide his distress from Celeste.

Throughout the last two months church and town celebrations had introduced Pellin to many babies. He had found babies born on the night of a full moon and babies who had green eyes, but no baby who had both. Pellin was confused. It made no sense. The portal was supposed to only unfurl near one of the special babies. *Could it have opened in error?* Newfane was the closest human settlement, but maybe he needed to widen his search?

Pellin was mixing James's special batter, heavy with the scent of beer, when the back door slid aside with a loud clacking. A wagon, laden with sacks, pulled alongside the delivery dock. A stooped, elderly man climbed onto the mass and began pulling at the wedged sacks of flour. Pellin left his deep bowl to help the miller. Together they neatly stacked the delivery along the storeroom wall. When they finished, the man gave Pellin a grateful smile and pressed two small copper coins into his palm. A fairy would never issue a payment without a strict agreement. Pellin felt humbled.

After that Pellin began regularly helping the deliverymen. Over the last few months he had built muscle on the human frame. The physical work no longer caused pain. It was during the breaks, when the men stopped and shared drinks from a canteen, that Pellin learned about the outlying farms in the small hamlets that dotted the countryside. He wished he had heard of them earlier. Time was growing short.

In the last week of August the milkman told him about a small boy, born April eighteenth in one of the outlying farms. The baby was causing quite a scandal in the rural community. The child reportedly had a pair of brilliant green eyes while both his parents sported deep brown irises.

That evening, Pellin again crept from the storeroom to make his observations. He stared at the figures scratched in his sand patch. After smoothing the surface, he rechecked the moon's phase and completed the calculations for a second time. He looked at the result and blinked. The same answer. April eighteenth had been the night of the full moon. Finally. This *had* to be it. Pellin closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. The fairy emptied his mind and savored the feel of the cool night air in his lungs. A flicker of relief coursed through him and he slipped back inside.

The next night, after the town had gone quiet, he gathered his few collected coins and piled them in the center of his makeshift bedding where Celeste was sure to find them. Pellin slipped from the storeroom and hesitated on the threshold. He looked

up at Celeste's darkened window. Guilt sliced through him: he hadn't said good-bye, hadn't been able to find the words. She would have questions and he wouldn't have the answers. *This was better*. At least, that's what he told himself.

According to the milkman, the scandal baby lived on a small dairy farm several miles outside of Newfane just off the main carriage route. Unfortunately, it was in the opposite direction from Carraig. The rock troll could only open the portal at dawn, and Pellin worried he would be unable to make it back to Carraig in time. He didn't know whether the troll had enough magic to hide all three of them for an entire day. People would come looking. The baby would need to eat. None of this mattered, however: he needed to try.

Pellin tossed the dogs a few juicy scraps and opened the rear door into a long kitchen that dominated the north side of the house. A fruity aroma lingered in the air. He smiled. A table filled with glistening jars confirmed that the lady of the house had spent the day canning. He bypassed the jam and moved slowly through the room, testing the floor ahead for creaks. In the corner a narrow flight of stairs led to the second floor. He crept upward.

The stairwell ended in an alcove that opened onto a hallway. A crisp, linen curtain at the far end fluttered in a warm breeze. Pellin moved toward the window. He stopped at the first open bedroom door and peeked inside. Deep breaths confirmed that the occupants were asleep. Pellin watched the mother for a few moments. She was completely relaxed in deep slumber, her long, dark hair streaming across the pillow.

The room at the end, filled with a warm yeasty scent, turned out to be the nursery. Quietly, without disturbing the baby, Pellin removed his egg and lay it on the floor next to the crib. He hesitated and glanced back over his shoulder. Guilty anticipation swamped him.

He released a soft huff as he knelt down, and with a sharpened stick scrawled an intricate pattern across the top of the lump and waited. The putty should form into a changeling to be left in exchange for the human infant. An exact replica. Fairies considered this a fair trade of equal goods. *Was it really, though?* his mind pestered. *After all, humans didn't consider their children to be goods.* No one in Fae questioned the philosophy. None of them thought human parental consent was relevant.

When nothing happened for several long minutes, sweat pricked on Pellin's upper lip. He forced his thoughts away from the mother down the hall, reminding himself she would still have a baby. With his fingers he smoothed the lump's surface again. He must have made a mistake—this was taking longer than it should. He feared discovery. His fingers trembled as he forced himself to patiently redraw the pattern.

Again Pellin waited and again, nothing happened.

*Did the baby have a protective charm?* Pellin's face flushed. He had forgotten to check after the inscription failure. As gently as he could, the fairy unwrapped the sleeping infant and discovered the problem. This wasn't a little boy. It was a little girl.

Pellin hadn't realized, until that moment, that he'd been holding his breath. He let the air from his lungs in a soft whoosh then eased himself back through the house.

Three days. He only had three days left. Sweat pooled under Pellin's arms. He sat at the kitchen table and sipped his blackberry tea. He was going to fail. *Will they really force me to be a slave in the queen's court? Is it true there's never a second chance?* His blood ran cold. *They will never give me a second chance.*

Celeste hurried down the stairs from her sleeping chamber and piled an old quilt against the bottom step. As Pellin watched, she placed several flour sacks in a semicircle around the cushioned blanket, then propped young Garvey up in the middle. The baby half-sat, half leaned in the corner where he could watch his mother work. Pellin was preoccupied with thoughts of his coming fate and paid little attention to the infant. A hiccup caught his attention. He looked toward the sound and froze. A pair of sparkling emerald eyes looked back at him. Celeste caught him staring. "What's wrong?"

"His eyes."

"What about them?" Celeste walked over, peering at her child's face.

"They were blue."

Celeste smiled, "Now here I thought cha knew all about babies! All of em are born with blue eyes. Color changes as they get older. Now they're green, just like his daddy's."

Pellin thought he was going to be sick. He fought to keep his voice neutral. "You know, I don't even know when Garvey's birthday is. When was he born, anyway?"

"May eighteenth, my spring baby."

"Was that the night of the full moon?" Pellin asked through a thickening throat, although he knew the answer.

"What a strange question! I don't know. I was a bit occupied at the time ya understand."

"It sure was," James joined in, entering from the storeroom. "I'll never forget. It was so bright, I didn't even need a lantern when I fetched the midwife."

Pellin's hands shook. *This can't be happening. Not Garvey. Not Celeste.*

That night after everyone had settled down and the tavern was bathed in silence, Pellin slipped upstairs. James's rumbled snores came from the first room. The opposite door

was closed. Pellin swiped a sweaty palm against his pants and took several deep breaths before grasping the knob. It twisted smoothly under his hand. With a click and a creak the door swung open. The room was darker than the hallway and it took Pellin's eyes a moment to adjust.

In the dim light he saw Celeste's slim form tucked under a faded blanket. Her breathing was so soft Pellin had to strain to hear it. At the bottom of her bed, Garvey slept in a wooden crate. The fairy crept two steps forward to look at the child. Garvey's small, rosebud mouth drooped open. His eyelids jumped and leaped as he played in his dreams. Nausea gripped Pellin's stomach. The egg, still in his pack, felt like a lump of lead.

*Take the child.* The instruction echoed through his mind with an insistence that was almost painful. Images of his family flashed before his eyes. Memories, all types of memories, played through his mind.

*She'll have the changeling,* Pellin tried to assure himself. *The changeling won't ever love her.* Another part of him argued back. *So?* His insides twisted. Now he knew what love meant to human beings. He knew what the lack of feeling would do to Celeste.

He bent over the small bed with his arms stretched toward the sleeping infant. His fingers dangled inches above the swaddled form. He didn't want to be a slave. He needed his full fairy magic.

Pellin toiled his way up the now shorn field, the leather bag held tight against his chest as he walked. There was an autumn chill in the evening air. His breath sent up small cloud puffs that marked his progress up the hill toward Carraig's sleeping form. The eclipse was just a couple of hours away, and the bright full moon guided him to his destination.

The Carraig boulder remained in a deep slumber under the red-leafed sapling. Pellin did not wake him. Instead, he made his way to the rotting log and crumpled over. He rocked against the pain girdling his stomach, a pain that had nothing to do with hunger. It raged through him.

For the first time Pellin hated being Fae. This wasn't fair. He now saw the truth. Fairies knew nothing of life. They judged from a privileged existence, relying on their magic. Magic stolen from the humans who didn't know how to use it. Alone in the night, the young fairy gave in to his grief. He pressed his cheek against the roughened bark of the log and openly sobbed.

Spent, his eyes swollen and dry, Pellin took a quivering breath and looked to the stars. A whisper of an idea skittered through his mind. The idea came so quick that Pellin

barely registered the thought. Wait. He tried to seek the idea again, but it retreated into the recesses of his mind. He slowed his breathing and silently urged the idea forward again. *Patience*, he cautioned. Then, like a flower, it bloomed. *Of course*.

Pellin sat on the log and began swinging his legs back and forth. A weight he hadn't known he carried rose from his shoulders and a lightness suffused him. A smile played near the corners of his mouth.

After another hour, just as the eclipse had begun, he heard a rustled stirring. The rounded stone became an upright oblong boulder. "Where's bebe?" Carraig asked with a yawn.

"I couldn't find it."

"You know what means?"

"Well," Pellin replied. "If I go back to Fae I will forever be a slave to the Fairy Court." He continued with a barely suppressed giggle. "That's why I'm staying here, Carraig."

"No magik."

"That's okay."

"Where you go?"

"Anywhere I want."

"You staying with animals?" Carraig's voice betrayed his incredulity.

Pellin couldn't stop the wide smile spreading across his face. He approached his friend and laid a hand where he supposed the troll's arm was. "I like this skin, Carraig. I find it suits me."

# Reclamation

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by Wendy Jensen

I saved a spot for you. The place fits tightly against my body, curled into my soul. I welcomed you there at night, after the day quieted and before sleep took a deep hold. You came and emptied your anguish into that place, leaving it there to fall between the cracks and take root. So heavy and dark, collecting in the quiet. You left lighter.

I held your rooted sorrows for so long, accepting them as part of my own heart, until one day the fear released me, like a fish left quivering and gasping on the sand. Fear leaped in my heart and put its blackness over everything, but only for a moment, a fleeting bit of time that left me forever changed, forever doubting.

Over time I traced that leap of fear back to its source, and found that the path led outside my own skin. It led me back to that saved spot, that place where years ago you used to enter, commanding my thoughts and feelings to resonate with your own. We merged so completely that I forgot where I ended and you began. I was small, and yet made larger by your presence.

But now it's over. I reach over and flip up the saved seat. It's not for you anymore. I'm no longer waiting for those dark visits, I no longer lean into the heavy pull of your deep sorrows. They are yours, there, just there, not nestled next to me but simply part of my wisdom. I understand pain, I have cuddled it close. But I am done now.

I stand and walk away, carrying only what was born with me, within me, what belongs to my heart and mind and soul. I walk lighter now, smiling at the sunlight playing on the wet ferns, laughing with my children and singing with the wind in the tall oak's leaves. The darkness is an old story that informs my being but no longer demands its own space. It's all mine, now.

## from *Jubilee*

by Patricia S. Wild

*In this excerpt, Adam Fisher has had a stroke that has completely altered his personality, much to the dismay of his wife and business partner, Alana.*

Alana eased their silver Lexus out of the garage and down the hill towards town. Their staff had been told to expect changes in Adam's behavior when he arrived at the office for the first time after the stroke. They had strict instructions to treat him as if nothing had happened, but to also make sure they double-checked with Alana about any instructions from him or any decisions to be made. Alana didn't think anything could truly prepare them for Adam's unpredictability. She didn't realize that she was holding her breath between shallow gulps of air, expecting the worst.

Adam watched his house grow smaller as they made their way down the driveway and out onto the street. He wondered what it would be like to pocket that small version of the house and take it with him everywhere so he could feel like he was never far from home. There was probably an idea for his real estate business in there somewhere, he mused.

They passed the elementary school and Adam watched the big yellow buses egest their backpack-laden contents as they lined up along the crescent-shaped school driveway. Some students shuffled languidly up the walkway, none too anxious to arrive at their destination. Two boys began a shoving match and a small knot of girls bowed their

heads together in shared secrets while the teachers on bus duty tried their best to herd everyone into their classrooms. Further down the street almost identical scenes were taking place at the middle and high schools, only with bigger kids and more threatening attitudes. Adam wondered how and when schools became such aversive places for children. *Forget Disney World*, Adam thought. *If I were in charge of the schools they'd be the happiest places on earth. I'd start with dedicated exploratory labs where science, math, and all of the arts collaborated on interesting projects and real-world problems. And then...*

The car lurched sideways as Alana took a roundabout a bit too fast. Adam's attention shifted with his body. He thought roundabouts were a questionable idea imported from England to New England. *What if one kept going round and round?* he wondered. *Could they create a time-traveling vortex and be spit out in some other century? Now that would be a ride to remember.* They took an exit off the roundabout and headed towards Main Street where Alana nudged the car into morning traffic.

"We're almost at the office, sweetheart," Alana said, interrupting his time-traveling thoughts. "Now remember, if you feel confused or tired at any point, just rely on the staff and me to take over. We're all here to help. You don't want to try to do too much your first day back." She tried to disguise the worried look on her face but she couldn't stop her hand from reaching for a strand of hair to twist.

As Alana parked the car, Adam considered that the Fisher Luxury Real Estate company might need to make a few changes. They had been very successful financially, and everyone in the company prospered, most especially the Fishers. But what was that to Adam now when there were so many more exciting things to think about? The world seemed as new as he was, and Adam grinned as he imagined the possibilities. Real estate was at its heart all about making people feel happy and safe on their own little plot of this good earth. Profit really had nothing to do with that.

Alana took Adam's arm as they made their way into the office. Everyone stood as they entered, and welcome-backs, glad-to-see-yous, and you-look-greats were offered. Hands were shaken, backs were slapped, and cheek kisses landed juicily on their targets. Adam could smell coffee brewing. The usual box of morning donuts on the communal gathering table had been replaced with a cake. It was decorated in thick white icing edged in yellow scallops with *We Missed You Adam* spelled out in red on the top. The whole thing was covered in colored confetti sprinkles. Adam laughed as he imagined a tiny doll-sized version of Alana popping out of the middle of the cake clad in her best dove-grey suit and killer stiletto heels.

The cake was sliced and offered all around, and everyone returned to their desks as Adam and Alana too headed for their shared office, cake in hand. Goopy gobs of

icing collected in the corners of Adam's mouth as he happily savored his slice. Alana's piece went untouched, as she was deathly afraid of sugar. *Sugar makes you sick, sugar makes you crazy, sugar makes you hyper, sugar makes you fat.* Alana wanted no part of any of those things. With her slim, statuesque build, impeccable makeup and hair, and designer clothes, she was, above all, a study in cool perfection. Never a drop of sweat in sight, either. "If you're not going to eat your cake, I'll take it," Adam said through muffled bites. Alana looked doubtful about this idea, but she wasn't going to argue. She slid the cake towards him.

"I've put a stack of our latest listings on your desk," Alana said. "Maybe you could start by getting caught up on what's new since you've been gone."

Adam shuffled through the papers with one hand while he finished Alana's piece of cake with the other. The company generally featured higher-end properties in and around town, but Adam was glad to see that today there was an unusual mix of styles and prices in the stack. Everyone needed to find their perfect home, and that home could come in all shapes, sizes, and prices, he thought again, even a tent, though it was curious why their new listings included the less than luxurious, even the ramshackle. Those listings were the bailiwick of the Quimby Real Estate company.

"How are things going in here?" the office manager asked, popping his head in the door. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Alana and Adam answered at almost the same time.

"We're fine," Alana said, barely looking up from her number crunching.

"Seth, come in," Adam said. "I have an idea I'd like to talk to you about."

Alana looked up at this and exchanged a nervous glance with Seth. What on earth could Adam be thinking now, she wondered. Ever since the stroke he seemed to have a skewed vision of the world, and she was never sure what strangeness would come out of him next. She needed to keep a close eye on him at all times to avoid embarrassment. When it came to the business, however, both an eye and a controlling thumb were in order.

Seth made his way to Adam's desk and took a seat. "What's on your mind, boss?" he asked.

"I was thinking this morning it would be quite cool if there were a way to shrink a house to carry in your pocket all day," Adam began. "Houses are more than buildings and financial investments, you know. They're homes, perhaps the only places where people feel safe and secure, and where they can express their true selves. Wouldn't it be great if with every closing we handed over the keys on a personalized keychain with a miniature version of the house?"

Seth stole a quick look at Alana, whose face was unreadable. He cleared his throat, seeming to consider Adam's idea. He bent forward in his seat, elbows resting on his knees, fingers laced across the span. "Well, it's an interesting idea, and from a marketing standpoint the company name could be prominently included on the keychain. But as each house is entirely different, each keychain would be entirely different. This would cost us a small fortune since they couldn't be mass-produced."

Adam stared at the ceiling looking thoughtful for a moment, then turned to Seth. "Why don't you look into the idea? I'll bet there's a way to make it happen. I hereby deputize you to make phone calls, visit manufacturers, talk with designers, and anything else you need to do to make this idea a reality."

"Well...OK, boss. I'll see what I can do," Seth said, looking more than a little worried. He got up to leave, but Adam signaled him to sit back down.

"One more thing," Adam said, smiling. "You know how some offices have suggestion boxes where employees and others can leave feedback and ideas? Well, I'd like to create here what I'm calling a listening box. It would be a way for everyone at Fisher Luxury Real Estate to learn to listen deeply to one another so that we can all feel truly heard. Ideas, concerns, petty arguments, all can be taken to the listening box."

"Exactly what would that look like?" Seth asked, thoroughly puzzled.

"How should I know?" Adam said. Crusts of dried cake icing ringed the edges of his mouth. Bits of it fell to the desk as his smile widened. "You're the office manager. Surely you can figure it out. Use the Force, son." One of the small confetti candies stuck to the corner of his glasses as he spoke.

Alana lowered her head in her hands in dismay. She couldn't let Adam's condition either affect or infect the business, but she couldn't keep him away from the business either. She'd have to find a way to let Seth appear to research Adam's ideas without actually implementing them.

As Seth left the office he gave a final glance in Alana's direction and shrugged. She sat twirling her hair furiously.

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At lunch time Adam felt the need to be out of the office and alone with his thoughts. Alana, afraid to leave him on his own, insisted on going with him. But Adam insisted harder and promised to intentionally make a scene if she came along, and at last he found himself walking down Main Street towards the Bread and Butter Deli. *A missed opportunity for a sassy name*, Adam thought. *Why not O Salami Mio, The Cheese Stands Alone,*

*In a Pickle, Ketchup in the Rye, or Yellow Submarine?* But then, the name Fisher Luxury Real Estate was as dry as the deli's day-old bread.

With sandwich purchased and wrapped, Adam made his way to one of the newly-installed benches on Main Street. The town was undergoing a much-needed beautification project, as it had been looking rather worn-out recently. *Good old New England*, Adam thought, *reluctant to change but sorely needing to get on with it*. Adam greeted every passerby whether he knew them or not, talking with his mouth full of chewed turkey BLT. He was totally in the moment, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine, when he heard a strange jangling sound approaching. He watched as a woman he had never met but recognized anyway approached the bench. She wore flowered overalls, an orange t-shirt, and purple high-topped sneakers. He had seen her around town many times, and most people he knew were well aware of her. She had a reputation as an oddball, a misfit, a loner. Some called her a curmudgeon, some thought she was some kind of witch. At the very least she was one of a kind, and no one could argue that point.

She approached Adam's bench and ordered him to shove over. He slid down the bench to make room and she sat down noisily. In addition to her bizarre wardrobe, she wore a thick leather belt from which a set of keys, a Swiss army knife, a small flashlight, a collapsible tin cup, and a wallet hung suspended, the clear sources of the jangling noise. The objects clinked together as she took her seat.

"Name's Evelyn McBride. You're Adam Fisher. Seen you around," she said.

"Pleased to meet you," Adam said, grinning. "I've seen you around too. You're impossible to miss."

Evelyn barked a short, raspy laugh, and her belt clinked again as she shook with amusement. Her long white hair grew out of her skull every which way in wild, wiry clumps. *An angel's halo, or Medusa's snakes*, Adam thought, and he laughed along with her as he tried to imagine which one she might be. He hoped to get to know her and find out. Most folks in Center Ashford might be afraid she would turn them to stone, but Adam was intrigued.

As she seemed in no hurry to talk further, Adam jumped in with, "That's a great look you have there. Unique Chic. Flowered overalls, orange tee shirt, and purple hi-tops. No need for a purse. If you're not careful you'll start a fashion trend."

Evelyn peered at him through narrowed eyes, then laughed so loud she snorted. "Most men don't get it," she said. "I can tell you're a man of discriminating taste."

"Guilty as charged," Adam agreed, suppressing an answering laugh.

"Heard you was in the hospital. Heard you had a stroke. Heard you're different now," Evelyn began again after a long companionable silence, during which Adam pol-

ished off the last of his sandwich. Somehow his glasses had gotten smudged with mayonnaise in the process. The confetti candy had long since fallen off somewhere.

"Yeah, different," he said, looking into the distance without really focusing on anything. "That's what they tell me. But I'm not so sure what's different. I feel like I've always been this way, whatever way this is."

"Honey, we're all different," Evelyn answered. "Every moment we're different. We got so many people inside us it's like a virtual circus in there. Trick is to embrace 'em all and have fun with 'em. No use livin' just one life when we can live so many of 'em."

Adam thought about that for a moment. Maybe Evelyn was onto something. Yes, everyone is changing all the time, whether by choice or by accident or by some other force of nature. What was the use of denying ourselves the fun of discovering everything and everyone we are? Could we really avoid that, even if we wanted to? It all comes knocking at our internal door eventually, and it passes under the doorsill like smoke if we don't answer.

Adam and Evelyn sat together quietly for some time. Adam was avoiding going back to the office. Evelyn seemed to be enjoying watching people stare and go out of their way to avoid her, occasionally giggling to herself at someone's barely-disguised revulsion. They were both quite content to be in each other's company.

"Thank you, Evelyn. I enjoyed our talk. You're very wise," Adam said, eventually conceding that he had to get back to work. "I fully intend to embrace the fun from now on. And I hope our paths will cross again."

"Count on it, honey. I got nothin' better to do," Evelyn said with a wink. She got up with a grunt and saluted a goodbye. As she jangled her way down the street, the sun and wind caught her hair in a blinding white nimbus.

"Definitely a halo," Adam said to himself.

# One of Us

by Claudia Altemus

I woke to the sound of Angels, their metallic wings scraping the pavement four blocks away. In my town or the next town over, there was a writer who had just closed his laptop and crawled into bed. I didn't know his name or his face but I was sure he was real. We were both part of the same continuing dance, and at 5:27 in the morning I got ready to take my place in it. I quietly dropped my feet onto the smooth, cold floor and started readying myself to meet the Angels.

The key to getting out for a walk on a dark January morning is to keep yourself from checking the temperature until you've put every stitch of your snow gear on first. The thought of having to take it all off again usually keeps me from scrambling back into bed when I see how cold it is. Dressed and ready, I put my hand on the doorknob and glanced at the thermometer. It read a nice even zero and the little man on the display was wearing his digital scarf, hat, coat, and boots, just like me.

Stepping outside, I was taken aback by the luminous world beyond my porch. The moon was hidden, but its light, and that of the street lamps, was magnified by the reflections of cloud and snow. My short, narrow alley of a street with the grand name of avenue attached to it had been made smooth and even by fourteen inches of new powder, undisturbed by tire, paw, or foot. *No early morning dog walkers would be out in this*, I told myself. *It will be just me and the Snow Angels.*

It's hard to say when I started thinking of our town's giant plow trucks as Angels. Their drivers must have something of an angel's heart in them somewhere. Anyone who loses sleep to clear a path so my husband, the nurse, and others like him can find their way to work is a saint in my book. But it was their vehicles, I have to admit, that

captured my imagination first. Like huge Archangels whose approach is heralded by a fanfare of roaring engines, jingling tire-chains, and the golden glow of safety lights, the plows unfold their great scooped wings and turn the drifts into snowy plumes. I always try to give them a wide berth since they won't be on the lookout for mortals like me in a snowstorm at that time of the morning. I felt like little Peter from Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day* as I plowed two unbroken furrows through the drifts until I reached the end of the avenue.

My usual walking route was a circuit that brought me first to the house of a fellow writer and then round to home again. As I shuffled along in the cold wondering whether it might have been a better idea to stay in bed after all, I pictured this writer pouring her first mug of coffee and dropping into the armchair by her desk. In my imagination, I thought of her chair as a porthole to her own secret country, a realm sketched in plot lines and illuminated by colors selected from her personal crayon box of experiences and emotions. I'd always told myself that she wasn't one of those writers who dreamily waited around for her magical muses to come and take her by the hand: No, she was the kind of writer who made real progress by parking her behind in the chair and applying her fingers to pencil, pen, and keys.

That was the type of writer I wanted her to be, at least. In truth, I had no way of knowing what sort she was. I did know that finding the time, and more importantly, the will, to write could be a struggle, and a lonely one at that.

"When do you write?" is something I ask every writer I meet. Like many before me, I have become obsessed with the question. Maybe it's because no two writers ever answered it in exactly the same way. Only a few have told me that they religiously show up at the same time and place each day to work. The majority said they had to chisel out time whenever and wherever they could. One enters her sacred space during the slim twenty minutes she squeezes from her lunch break, while another, after settling his crying baby, writes from 3:00 a.m. until his household wakes. While many seek calm and quiet to engage in their sometimes fluid and often clumsy waltz with words, others write in the midst of noise and confusion. At all times of the day, writers can be seen in my town's local coffee shops, an Americano or latte steaming next to their glowing screens. They appear to be oblivious to the sounds of laughter, conversation, and the hissing of the espresso machine. The fact that their coffee cost them ten times more than a cup of home-brew doesn't seem to worry them: It has bought them a ticket to that secret country of their imagination, and they are grateful.

I don't drink coffee, which I'm sure disqualifies me from being any kind of serious writer. Tea was what I craved as I turned the next corner and into the wind. Icy flakes

bounced off the only part of my face not swaddled in protective clothing. A Snow Angel roared across the intersection half a block away, flakes whirling in its pulsing halo. When I reached the crossing I abandoned the snow-choked sidewalk and followed the path it had made. The next street on my route had not yet been blessed by the Angels and I had to lift my heavy boots high to make any headway. Chilly and exhausted, I turned another corner and saw my destination. My writer lived in one of those New England capes ungracefully added to through the generations. A bay window on the right side of its door broke the original symmetry, and light spilled from the window onto a four-foot snowbank piled there by the angels. Three dozen more trudging steps and I was there. The question was, would she be?

Like Ratty and Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*, I stood transfixed by a tableau framed in a glowing window. In Grahame's story it was a picture of familial ease and contentment that held Mole and his friend Rat spellbound, a scene that made them long for the warmth and comfort of their own homes still a long, cold walk away. Standing unseen in the grayness I was ready to be back in my warm house as well, but I had come for inspiration and there she sat, a study in creative concentration, a lone figure bent over her work in the light of a single lamp. I didn't always find her there when I passed by on my morning walks, and what motivated my neighbor's writing was a mystery. Perhaps the storm had been as irresistible to her as it had been to me that morning. What she was writing, I did not know, but whether it was the great American novel or a page in her journal didn't matter. Her presence confirmed the existence of all the unseen writers I knew to be out there. She was one of us and was holding open the door until we could join her.

I didn't linger long in the cold. I turned from the window and peered into the sleeping crabapple tree above, its branches delicately picked out in snow. "The lacework of the fairies," I heard myself say, a phrase borrowed from another writer I'd read long ago and whose name I had forgotten. She was one of us as well.

The sky eased into a lighter shade of gray as I made my way down my little avenue again. The Angels had plowed it while I was gone. On the porch I stomped my feet and swiped at the snow piled on my shoulders and head. Flakes, turned to droplets by warm air, dripped from my hair as I readied my twenty-cent cup of tea. My turn had come. I parked myself in the chair. Two streets over I heard an Angel lower its wing to the pavement. Somewhere, in my town or in the next town over, there was a writer getting ready to join me in the dance.

# Tequila. Peyote. Coyote.

by Sophia Eastley

Sleepy eyes peeked to the morning's glare. I blocked the light with a wrist. A pearl-buttoned cuff fell on one cheek, stinking of booze and cigarette smoke. For a heartbeat I felt guilty. "Bad spirits," the medicine man had told me. I'd been avoiding him. Me give up booze? No fucking way. An invisible chain sunk into my neck like a rattler's fangs; I doubted it would ever let me go.

Dangling my arm, I opened my eyes a bit more, to the rough sawed timber used for siding, edges brown with bark. The cot squeaked as I shifted my weight. My toes, snake and cowskin boots, pointed up as if I were already in a grave. When would Ruby get up and make breakfast. From inside the cabin, the slamming of cupboards thundered, and a storm flew out the door. A ball of my jeans and shirts, arms and legs flailing, settled on the porch.

"Get the fuck out of my life." A bare foot kicked out my black case and vintage guitar. With one hand on a tank top-covered hip, Ruby's eyes were wide and her nostrils flaring. "I am sick of your *ta-kill-ya*. You're not gonna' ruin my life anymore. If you're not gone in an hour..." She threw the half-emptied bottle onto the pile. When she kicked the door closed, the wall shook. The bolt turned.

"Ahhhh," I groaned. Ruby's cousin was one of the cops in a three-cop town. She'd call him. No doubt about that. I was half glad we were done; I was sick with the lyin' and cheatin'. It wasn't Ruby's fault. My anguish began long before I met her; guilt and shame for what happened to Billy all those years ago, the storm I'd hidden inside.

I hoisted myself up and waited, sitting still, for my head to stop spinning. My skull

felt like I'd been run over by buffalo, and in my belly, sludge stirred. Once I made it to my feet, I staggered down the steps, to the pinion pine and cedar, where I emptied the bilge. Wiping my mouth with my sleeve, I gave one glance at the small house we had rented. An old foreman's cabin, left over from the days when cattle ranches were thousands of acres, but like me the land had been cut up in small pieces and sold away.

Five years of life: clothes, the bottle, a notebook and pen, and CDs were crammed into a knapsack and saddle bags. I stunk of dust, sweat, and heat. Didn't bother to change the shirt, because where I was going no one would care. Pebbles crunched underfoot. Strapping the bags on, I admired my pride and joy: the Vincent "Lighting," a constant companion, a fine warrior pony, all silver patina and burnished chrome. It reflected the sun, and shone like a polished stone. Once I strapped the guitar to my back, I threw a leg over the bike. One click and the engine purred. As I skidded out of the yard, throttling over sand and gravel, dust spewed out behind, as if it were an answer; each pebble and piece of grit flung my rage and hurt.

I'd burned out of life, of Ruby, and women. Didn't know where my path went next except to Albert, the medicine man. Lightning knew the way.

Dirt road turned onto highways and blacktop smoldering in the sun. I rumbled through small towns where main street was a gas station and a taco stand. They all blurred together. Open roads and sky, fields of crops, sunflowers burst gold. I went full throttle by ranches with bulls, gripping the handlebars so tight my arms hurt. Sickness churned in my belly and soon fled. From the road, bound by fenced fields of pasture, I turned onto Albert's dirt drive, long and straight, up a low hill.

Albert's house sat on one side of a sandy path. Rectangular and cement, typical of those on the reservation; in the summer, it heated like an oven. Only a few scraggly weeds and tufts of grass grew about the block foundation. Opposite the house rusted a cherry red pickup truck and two cars. The truck's hood gaped open, a mouth to the sky. The burgundy sedan's windows had been shot out, and bullet holes peppered the ebony hide of the El Camino. Corroded axels were half sunk into sand, tangled with weeds and feathered prairie grass.

Once the bike was silent, I could hear the chirping of birds. From the knapsack, I drew a red bandana and a packet of tobacco. After sprinkling tobacco in the bandana, I rolled it up, stuffing it in my shirt pocket. It was the traditional offering for a medicine man. I didn't want Albert to see the mess I was in, although he'd seen worse in Vietnam. Then again, Albert didn't look at a person; he looked into you. Mustering my courage, I strode to the rickety steps that shook with each footfall. The metal door rattled like hell before I knocked, and then Albert appeared. He stood on the threshold in worn jeans,

dusty cowboy boots peaked out at the bottoms. “Hey, Albert.” I couldn’t look him in the eyes. Albert Silver Bear was Ruby’s uncle. Word must have gotten out already. I’d bet money that she’d been on the phone to her relatives by now. I’d be surprised if the whole county didn’t know.

Albert didn’t say anything for a moment. He wore his customary old-style western shirt, a tan check. He leaned against the jamb, a thumb in his belt, the kind that rodeo riders wear, with a big and round silver buckle: a man riding a bronc. It flashed in the sun. His small eyes were sharp like a crow’s; they missed nothing. Watching. Waiting. He squinted and looked up at the sun. “You and Ruby having problems?”

“Yeah.” I hung my head.

“Ready to start the journey? You’ll reach the pueblo by sundown if you go now.” His soft voice had a lilt.

“Guess so.” I looked up for a brief moment. I’d little idea of what needed doing, and I was a bit scared of the whole thing.

Feral white hair hung from Albert’s head. On one long finger, a silver ring glinted, an animal with pointed ears and snout.

I withdrew the bandana from my shirt and placed the offering in his hand.

“Wait, I have something for you,” he said, and went into the house. Once he returned, he handed me a folded blue bandana. “Eat one piece each night at sundown and pray. On the fourth day, come back here.” His eyes widened for a moment, becoming playful, and he gave a gap-toothed grin. “Unless the coyote plays tricks on you.”

“Thanks,” I coughed, and looked away at the scrubby pines in the distance. “I’ll make it back.”

Serious again, Albert said, “You’ll pass a big arroyo off Highway 550. The dirt road is after and on the right. Head west to the pueblo, and camp by the kiva. A sacred place. The ancestors will come. In the old days, we fought with arrows and guns. Today we use the mind and spirit.”

I nodded, turned to leave, eager to make dust. If I didn’t reach the pueblo before dusk, I’d have to camp on the side of the road.

“Hey,” Albert said. I stopped in my tracks and looked at him.

“Whatever crosses your path has a message.”

Waving, I strode to the bike, started the engine, and took off. Always been easier for me to be on the road and moving than sitting in a house of metal, wood, cement, and glass. And I’d always felt like a ghost, blown by the wind, never putting down roots. When things got tricky, I’d run off to the hills, to the mountain, to the canyons, the wild—wherever people weren’t. Many journeys took weeks. Once I took off, driv-

ing across country to Mount Shasta who loomed in my mind like a great mother, her fringed shawl open to collect her children. Crazy, I'd hurried to her, and lived at her feet for a month while I fished and scavenged for food.

Like the lone Indian warrior on an exhausted horse, *The End of the Trail*, I was a needy child once again, alone and bereft. The handlebars and road absorbed the tremors in my hands. Gliding over sunbaked blacktop, the yellow lines reminded me of long Navajo snakes woven into their blankets. They guided me to some unimaginable mood in my life, a way I'd only felt in my dreams, yet I'd yearned for throughout my whole life—peace.

On the road, time becomes elusive: the height of the sun, the gold cast of light, the ripples coming off the road like a mirage; these were the only real things I cared about. Avoiding cities, blaring lights, bed bugs, hotels, and their clientele, I preferred the quiet and open sky.

As the sun sank into a narrow ribbon of ochre, the highway stretched across sand dotted with cacti and sagebrush. A canyon, all carnelian and shimmering, loomed in the distance like a large, flat table. I kept alert for the arroyo, the dry river bed. In a sudden rain, it became a rushing creek, pulling trees, sheep, and cars with it.

Silver streaked before me. I veered, nearly losing control of the bike, slammed the brakes, and panted. It set my heart careening. My guts were already knotted from the booze. Was I hallucinating? Or was it a fox or some other critter? Another wreck filled my mind with images of blood, sand, and a howling grief, that old animal that raised its head every now and then. Once I got ahold of myself, I saw the arroyo ahead, and not far beyond lay the dirt road.

Kicking up stones, I drove toward the ancient rim and cliffs, all terra cotta and burnt umber. When I reached the end of the road, I parked the bike. Silence. Otherworldly, the pueblo's air was thick with the ancestors. I felt welcomed, as if I belonged, even if it was the end of the world. The Center of the Earth—that's what the Navajo and Hopis called it. At one time it had been home to the mysterious Anasazi. No one knew where they'd gone or disappeared to.

For a while, I wandered around the ruins of fallen walls, stones, and short flights of stairs carved into solid rock, climbing to the sky. Rectangular rooms of stones and crumbling stucco wrapped along the ridged face of the rock cliff. All the while I searched for anything I could burn: dead sagebrush, dried juniper branches, and crinkled leaves. A light breeze lingered over the pueblo. Not far from Lightning, I found a kiva, a ceremonial circle sunk eight feet into the earth. Open to the sky. Closely fit

stones lined the walls. Nearby, I sprinkled tobacco around in a circle in which to sleep, and built a fire in a circle of stones as Albert had instructed me to do.

The sun sank below the edge of the world. Set up camp, with knapsack, saddle bags, matches, and spread out the sleeping bag. As long fingers of shadows slid into dusk, I lit the fire. The bottle stuck out of one bag and glinted. It called, tempted, and pulled at me. My stomach burned with the need; the amber tonic of forgetfulness. I fought myself and my mind. Whenever images of the limp, bloody body filled my mind, I drank until they receded. Flames lapped at the night.

From the blue bandana, I withdrew a piece of peyote, from the Aztec "*peyotl*," the sacred cactus. Albert said the plant spirit would answer my prayers and give me advice. I sang the songs Albert taught me, before eating, and after. "*Hannannayo*, welcome; spirit medicine beings, Peyote beings; have pity on me." I choked on the words, the sounds, for I wanted nothing more than to get away from myself, and the pain that welled up like a slow-moving magma. It turned in my heart like a blade.

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Ruby and I had been together about a year, we were grilling some steaks on the deck. Dressed in jean cutoffs and a pink tank top, she tilted her head to the side and said, "Where's your mind?" She leaned into me and pressed a finger into my cheek. "You're miles away from me."

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Cool air closed in, so I slid into the sleeping bag. My song felt small. Eyes watched me. Or was it paranoia creeping in? This place was filled with old prayers and songs. Sounds of faint drum beats and rattling haunted the air. Dizzy, head spun, there were faint whispers, a hundred tiny voices chanted. The hairs on my neck prickled. Now I lay inside a kiva and next to a fire; like a paralyzed animal, I was a big lump and couldn't move.

All around me, eyes shone. Old men sang and drummed, the drum heads were pale, glowing moons. I saw a human-like being with thick plumage on his head. His body, face, and feathers were oddly painted, horizontal stripes alternated black and white. The being danced around the fire, widening its eyes. In my vitals, a storm churned. I couldn't quell it any longer. Was it me who bellowed? With the sleeping bag clutched in my fists, I heard teeth chattering.

When I awoke in the morning, flies buzzed in my ears and mouth. Throat dry as if I

had swallowed sand. Heat cleared the sky and deepened the blue. Azure. I lay on my side, and pushed the hair back from my eyes. A little lime-green lizard sat stone still a few feet away. Bulbous eyes stared, popping from his head as if they'd been glued on. "Look at someone else." An orange tongue stuck out and caught a gnat. When I sat up, the lizard scampered away.

Foot paths meandered around, and I wondered how many people had walked or run here before me. I came upon a collapsed adobe wall. Ruby's aunt once told me that their ancestors lived in the great cliff house beyond; the world where people went when they died and were close by. Dust, bird feathers, and shit covered the rubble. Sifting among the remains, there were pieces of a mural: black lines depicted a long-beaked bird and a crimson chest. Perhaps I'd found an altar. Craig, an archaeologist friend, had studied remote pueblos and found mummified hummingbirds that had been carried from Mexico by the Aztecs. Fragments of tile, turquoise-colored wings had been separated from their bodies. I knew how it felt. Kokopelli bent over a broken flute, silent notes haunted air. I sprinkled tobacco for him and Hummingbird.

A cliff archway and a shadowed area underneath an overhang caught my attention. Among the horizontal striations of light yellow sandstone and copper umber, a low wall, a ridge of black stone, reminded me of a long snake disappearing into the shadowy depths. I kicked a small, pitchy thing with my toe that made a flinty sound. A chipped arrowhead, leaf shaped, made of hardened lava. I slid it into my jean pocket. A shelf jutted out from the cave's mouth and around. Shuffling, I grasped onto cracks and hand-holds carved in the rock. Where the two cliffs met, the rain pooled in a basin. I knelt and cupped the water drinking deeply, and leaned back into a shady niche. Drops of water fell upon my face. All the feelings of a storm ran to the surface.

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Billy and I were in our beds. He slept. The door opened to the dim hall light. Ma tip toed in wearing her familiar broom skirt—all black. Her beaded earrings, turquoise and midnight blue, glinted. Her tears rained on my face, mingling with wet kisses. "I'm so sorry. I have to leave. I'll die. Your Pa—isn't who I married. I'm—" A sob quelled with a hand.

"Ma." I called out, lifting off the pillow.

"You take care of Billy. I know you don't understand, maybe someday. Forgive me...I love you. Don't ever doubt that. Here." She thrust a stone and cording into my hand and squeezed. "Your great-great-grandpa made this. He walked The Trail of

Tears, the forced government march from our homeland in Kentucky to Oklahoma.” She wiped tears from her face. “I’m going to California with—he’s good to me.”

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I couldn’t tell which were tears or droplets from the cliff. Didn’t matter. I poured that old pain into the basin and onto the rock. When I looked into the pool again, ripples and shifting patterns of refractions lit the surface. At the bottom, a rattler coiled, a reddish diamondback. Sunlight glittered off scales; jade-colored algae shimmered too. Albert once said, “You need to befriend your animal ally. Gives you strength.” I sure as hell needed that and courage. He told me the traditional Hopis sprinkled cornmeal and pollen in the circular imprints left by snakes. The pueblos called the snake messenger Ma’shr’true’ee who also brought rain.

That night I ate the second piece of cactus and prayed, calling out to the *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Mystery, and *Mutakuyasin*, All My Relations. Overhead the stars spun as I swayed. The flames lapped at the night like fingers. Little firefly lights flashed, first peridot and then turquoise. They swirled around each other and turned into a hummingbird of light. Wings beat about me, a soft thunder. The long beak pecked at me, pulling dark threads from my body. Then I flew from my body and watched from above: eyes sank into sockets, flesh disintegrated from my face, neck, and hands. Bones, white in the pale glow, and concave pools of shadow faded like a mirage.

Moistened with sweat, I shook and rolled over. I swear I felt a presence next to me, touching me. In the dawn light, before I opened my eyes and looked over my shoulder, it left.

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Resinous scents of blue sage and juniper filled my nostrils as I awoke. The sky was clear, a shimmering silvery azure. I breathed in the thousand-year-old silence. Next to me, the bottle lay on its side, empty of amber liquid; the glass refracted the sun, casting colored gems of light onto the sand. In the desert, light changed and did strange things; it slid sideways. Shadowy places appeared among the carnelian and umber cliffs I’d not seen before. At one moment, the sun’s rays turned caves and shafts, cracks and striations into faces, eyes, noses, and mouths; when I’d blink, they’d be gone, like the spirits of the dead, the ancestors; they’re there, but only sometimes could I see flashes or short appearances of men and women.

An owl flew overhead silently searching for a rodent, circling and then landing on

a grandmother saguaro cactus at the outskirts of the pueblo. I tread on a different rock-strewn path, and wound around to the far side where I'd not yet explored. Feeling eyes on my back, I stopped and turned. A coyote was backlit by the sun, fur glowing and glossy with silver. His small eyes reminded me of Albert's. He sauntered away, and then I turned, continuing on.

The path led me to a one-room home. The left wall had been mudded to the sandstone cliff. The window in the opposite wall, one that I hadn't noticed, overlooked the rubble of red mud and stones, allowing a breeze to flow through. Except for a narrow door, the solid, outermost wall kept out the harsh midday sun. At the far end of the room, a niche had been carved into the solid rock. A dusty earthenware pot sat in the place of honor; around the middle, long parallel lines of black wove together and curved in a partial spiral. The lid revealed, blue-green corn. It had been stored, waiting to be ground, as if the people meant to return. Sacred corn. From the Corn Mother who gave of herself so the people would live. Ruby loomed in my mind.

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The summer I'd enrolled in night courses at the community college, I'd been drawn to the Powwow for dancing, the drums and songs, the food, and women. On the outside of the dancing circle, there were grills cooking buffalo burgers, throwing up smoke that smelled of meat and charcoal. There were rows of colorful tents: bead sellers, stone traders, trinkets, unspun wool, and sheep with their tongues hanging out of their mouths breathing heavily in the shade. Men beat great drums and sang. When I saw Ruby for the first time, her rings and bracelets shone in the sun, and she danced with pheasant and eagle feathers in her headband; an emerald-colored shawl edged with gold fringe flitted around her like wings. Even though there were many women dancing, she attracted my attention. Back in those days, her skin was smoother, and smiles lit up her eyes. Her face didn't look pinched with anger or worry. At Albert's camp, we talked. She fed me fry bread and pieces of juicy melon. A few weeks later, when we kissed, I soared. Warmth shot like lightning to my heart.

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Once dusk settled, I lit the fire and ate the last fleshy piece of peyote. Sounds haunted the cool air: singing, the rhythmic beat of drums, and rattles rang, sounding like rattlesnakes shaking their tails. I settled on my sleeping bag and began singing prayers.

The coyote loped toward my camp and stopped. The flames of the fire danced in its

eyes. As it approached, the coyote paused every four steps or so. He stood up on hind legs like a human. The skin on my back grew cold. My heartbeat quickened, and I tried to raise an arm to shield myself, but my limbs were numb. They wouldn't budge. In a flash of light, the coyote's head sprouted white hair, and its face turned into Albert's. Grey fur flashed and became jeans and a plaid shirt. Paws transformed into hands, one holding the oak stem of the strange-looking rattle, an inverted triangular head of grey fur. Dark gemstone eyes in the top corners didn't blink, but saw right into me and stared and stared. A rhythmic shaking, shsskk, shsskk, pulsed all around me. My wits fled. Wishing I was somewhere else, I'd become like the ones in the other world: barely alive, hollow, and scattered like the remnants of bones, kivas, arrowheads, and the slightly concave flat-bottomed grinding stones the women used for the corn. All outer self had been stripped away, so the only remains were grasping tendrils clinging for life. Spirit held me together: *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Mystery, the Earth Mother had kept me alive for some reason, yet the past and Billy's death swallowed me.

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The morning sun was already causing snakes of heat to rise off the tar. I was gassing up the truck, a ten-year-old rust bucket that Pa kept together with bondo. Hay and cheap nylon halters lay in the bed. The air stunk of fumes, exhaust, and melting pavement. Inside the cab, Pa rested a leathery hand on the steering wheel, a beer in hand. The other arm he hung out the window holding an unlit cigarette.

A powder-blue Cadillac, pulling a horse trailer, drove to the other side of the pumps. Two cowboys were laughing and drinking from a bottle. One got out wearing leather jeans, sequins glinted on his shirt and hat, scattering rainbow lights on the car. Once I replaced the nozzle and climbed into the cab, Pa said, "Probably never done an honest day's work in their lives." I looked the other way.

As Pa lit the cigarette, he narrowed his eyes, then turned the key. I coughed. On the way home, I eyed the ranch houses with flowers around their doors, water-fed lawns of velvet, trees, and fences of wood that ran on forever.

When we drove into the sandy yard of Pa's flat house, he stopped the truck. "Hitch up the trailer," he said, and striding on long legs, disappeared into the house.

Billy, skinny as a bean pole, wore a cowboy hat, faded jeans, and a yellowed tank top, forked hay over the corral's pipe fencing. The bulls jostled each other with their weight and horns for the best pile. I waved and backed the truck up to the trailer next to the corral. I pointed to the cattle and said to Billy, "Hey, they look all right?"

"Eating like they always do," Billy said. Light danced in his eyes, and his mouth screwed sideways in a cockeyed grin. "I'm ridin' tomorrow. Biggest prize money I've ever seen."

"You told Pa yet?" He helped me hitch the trailer.

"Hell no."

"Tomorrow's big league, there'll be professional circuit riders. It's as big as the Salinas rodeo."

"I won last month at the Flagstaff rodeo. I'm just as good as they are." His eyes narrowed a moment.

"I know you are."

"He'll see," Billy said, nodding to the small ranch house. "Pa will see I can do something big. I'll buy us a new truck, black as night with shiny chrome."

I shook my head. "Not worth you getting hurt."

Fists clenched at his side. "I'm gonna' ride." He stomped away.

A weird feeling snaked in my gut. That night I dreamt of a mad bull in the stock trailer. Biggest red bull I'd ever seen nearly tore the trailer apart, got a horn through the metal siding, snorting and stamping, as if it stood on a hornet's nest. A giant bat flew out, wings flapping, and hovered over my face, blowing hot air. I cried out. An omen of death? I quaked in bed.

It was early morning and the sun had just teetered over the edge of the land when we gathered at the round breakfast table. I ate two bites of an egg and a strip of bacon. Billy hummed, wearing a clean, white shirt and the turquoise bola mom had given him. All I could do was look at him.

Pa, elbows on the table, looked up from his cup of black coffee. "Spit it out."

Billy stopped humming and glared at me. I should've said something right there. I shook my head.

We loaded up all the bulls: the four moon-pale Brahmas, a truck-sized Black Angus, and an equally large and quick-tempered Brangus that weighed eighteen hundred pounds. The rodeos paid for the use of the bulls, and if they bucked well, Pa sold them.

In three hours, we were driving through the tall metal gates of the rodeo grounds. I started to sweat. Pa climbed from the truck and left to sign the papers. Billy whistled as we went to check on the bulls. I followed him. "It's not too late. You can change—"

"I ain't. All I see is that check for thirty grand in my hand."

"Billy, I've a bad feelin' about this."

"Would you quit yapping."

Heaviness weighed on my chest, and I sounded shrill even to myself. “Ma wouldn’t want you to ride.”

“She ain’t here.” He looked down and toed the sand with his leather boot. “I’m wearing her charm ain’t I?”

I sighed. He was set on his haunches like a mule.

When Pa returned, we backed the trailer up to a corral empty except for a silver water tank. One by one the bulls thundered down the ramp, eyed the pipe fencing, and smelled the sand. As far as I could see, herds of bulls filled rows of sandy corrals. The air made heavy by churned-up dust, low bellows, the stink of piss and manure.

When Billy got a number to ride, I started chewing my lip. I could barely stand still. “I gotta get in line,” he said.

I walked with him and slid an arm around his bony shoulders. He seemed vulnerable to me, more than I’d ever have thought. I wanted to shake him and haul him off to the truck, kicking and screaming. I had to respect his wish though: I couldn’t deny him a chance; he’d never forgive me if I did. My voice strained. “You be careful, if it gets bad, jump. Don’t take any foolish risks.”

“All I see is that check in my hand,” he said, and then he got in line behind the announcer’s booth.

I felt sick and shoved my trembling hands into my pockets. A man’s voice over the loudspeaker named the time of the last rider, and added, “Bill Walker up next, folks.”

Two men helped Billy up on a bull, a hulk of a red roan with long twisting horns. Billy wound the rope around his glove. The bull hopped in the tiny pen of eight-foot metal pipes. Nearby were a group of cowboys, and one said to the others, “That’s one of them bulls from South America, wild and crazy, makes ours look like pussy-cats.”

I froze. The blood pounded in my ears. It was too late to stop him. Once the bell rang, the door popped open. The bull exploded out of the chute, kicking and leaping. The bull turned left, then right, spinning around, pivoting on front hooves. All I saw was horns, Billy, red roan hide whirling as if in a tornado. The bull threw itself and careened into the wall as if trying to bury him. Billy didn’t look real. His head was thrown back. Dust flew and the rodeo clowns dove toward the bull. Billy lay on the bull’s horns, shaking like a rag doll. Blood stained the white shirt. The loudspeaker’s voice broke the air—I was deaf. I saw that Billy was being taken from me now—as if he were nothing. I was in a nightmare. God—wake me. When he landed on the sand, blood seeped from his mouth. My heart slid sideways. I was stunned and in a world of silence; I became a sleepwalker.

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Crouching next to the campfire, I shook with sobs. Heart's blood filled my mind. Every muscle hurt; every breath was a struggle. My thoughts were scrambled. Eyes were all around me: Ruby's, Albert's, Billy's, the Coyote's, a giant peyote cactus—everything's caught up with me; I was scrambled like eggs.

As if I'd moved into another world, an uncanny place, I sensed the movement of a huge spirit. From the sandstone ridges now hidden in night, I felt a large presence and hunched down, quivering as if a child under blankets. Sounds, breathy, whispering, tiny voices sang softly, like the ones I'd thought I'd heard long, long ago when I was a boy. A spirit, made from a thousand tiny stars of light, separated from the cliffs. I glimpsed breasts, legs, and arms. She was colored the reddish-ochre of the cliffs and towered over me, and then shrank to a human size. Behind her arms, shafts of light became wings that whirled. As if she were a gem, shifting patterns of light exploded in hues of emerald, turquoise, and crimson. Her eyes glinted like quartzite, and in a breezy whisper, she said, "No matter how damaged or changed you are, you are sacred and carry the light."

I watched as my heart yawned open, a gaping wound. From my blood-soaked flesh, the woman of light reached down and withdrew a black arrowhead from the festering puss. I screamed. She tossed the scallop-edged head into the pool of rainwater at the base of the cliffs. It spiraled to the bottom and was washed clean of blood. Rose light filled my chest. Tears washed my cheeks and fell.

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In the morning, when I awoke, a copper-colored snake slid away from me. On the sand lay a feather of iridescent green. Once, when I'd hiked with Craig, he'd spoken about a dig in Mexico. He'd uncovered colorful murals of the feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl, the revered spirit of light and knowledge.

The stunted Palo Verde tree and the saguaros were vibrant as if there had been rain. I smelled a freshness in the air and the sweet-sage blooms. For the first time in months, I picked up the guitar. When I plucked the strings, the notes rang out across the stones. I shivered.

A sense of peace pervaded me and the pueblo. In the beauty of silence, the desert and ancestors kept the balance between death and life; all that had been dead inside me had sunk into the body of the Earth Mother. Far above, the remains of an ancient wall held a window that opened to the silvery violet sky.

The air shimmered about me. I saw into another world: the sun blazed from a turquoise sky onto a field of corn, softly curled leaves of jade trembled in a gentle breeze.

A youthful man in a white shirt stood up and gazed at me. "Billy!" I reached out to him. In a gloved hand, he held a hoe and leaned on the handle. He pushed back his cowboy hat and nodded. A cockeyed grin played across his lips.

# The Tetrapods

by Ian Rogers

The Namerikawa City library houses a mimeographed volume of municipal newsletters going back to the years after World War II. The cover of one issue from 1970 features a man watching proudly as a crane hoists a large, four-pointed concrete object onto a wall of other large, four-pointed concrete objects along what was once, long ago, a beach. The photo—taken on a bright, cloudless day with the ocean in the background and the crane tower reaching proudly toward the sky—embodies the optimistic progress of a small Japanese city that’s harnessed the power of the tetrapod to protect it from tsunamis. *Look how far we’ve come! the photo seems to proclaim. Only a few decades ago our country was a bombed-out shell of rubble lagging behind the powerful nations of the West, but now we’ve engineered these incredible concrete barriers for all the world to see!*



That was nearly a half century ago now, and though the tetrapods still line the Namerikawa shoreline, these days they're covered with trash and dried seaweed that no one wants to clean up. Between their dull, rounded points, creviced openings yawn menacingly into the darkness where snarled grass stalks grow in all directions, while on their surfaces plastic bottles and beer cans and candy bar wrappers and stained shards of laundry baskets and rowboats grow bleached and discolored in the sun. Faded cartoon signs written with *furigana* warn children not to play along the shoreline, not because there are monsters hiding in the crevices, but because the tetrapods have jutting edges that could crack a falling child's skull.

*Progress* is the central theme of the library newsletters, and in addition to regular updates on Namerikawa's population (reassuring, perhaps, to a war-torn Japan that had lost so many of its sons and daughters from the previous generation), photographs of newly opened highway bypasses are followed up with artist renditions of what the city might look like in the future, with wide boulevards, towering department stores, clover-leaf highway interchanges, blocks upon blocks of uniform housing and factories, and even a monorail mounted above the city. Japan was in the midst of the Economic Miracle then, with foreign money pouring in and an expanded manufacturing sector racing to produce the new cars and refrigerators and washing machines that symbolized its new prosperity. The rest of the world watched with envy and awe as Japan developed undreamed-of wonders like pocket calculators, the Walkman, and Super Mario Bros, and worries mounted that the country was destined for the top of the global economic food chain. It was only then, after Japan's land prices had risen to astronomical highs that the bubble economy finally burst at the end of the '80s and its Lost Decade began.

Namerikawa doesn't have a monorail or towering department stores now, and I imagine its downtown has changed very little in the decades since the tetrapods were installed, aside from its having gotten older, rustier, and emptier as more and more of its shops went out of business. Most of the city's pharmaceutical factories have closed, and because the people who once frequented the narrow downtown streets have moved away or died, most of its small, family-owned shops sit vacant now. What few businesses remain stock cases of old sake, packs of cigarettes, or wrinkled, water-stained futons, their owners lingering in back rooms with nothing else to do. There's a gas station here with no one buying gas and a playground where children climb on monkey bars and shout through the quiet streets. Faded katakana signs in the block style of the 1960s read *Dorai Kurīning* and *Koin Randorī*, imports from the West that at one time embodied exciting progress but now feel as distant as the Meiji era. Many of the sheet metal-lined houses seem near collapse, with weather-beaten sliding doors and walls splotched with

rusty orange and brown, and though some people still live in this shadowy place most of the garages are empty and their mailboxes have been taped over with cardboard. It's a neighborhood in desperate need of cool, unmarried young people to move in and start building new beginnings, but the Japanese don't seem interested in urban renewal and there aren't as many young people around here as there used to be.



The writers of the Namerikawa newsletter couldn't have imagined that in the decades after the tetrapod photo the city's growth would begin to slow and that what little development occurred would be confined almost entirely to an east-west arterial highway where chain restaurants and home centers with large parking lots stand alongside convenience stores and emporiums selling designer glasses. They couldn't have predicted that, much like America before it, the city's residents would start leaving their cramped and drafty houses near the city center to buy up more spacious, single-family homes in the suburbs, leaving the neighborhoods where they'd grown up crumbling and forgotten. They couldn't have predicted that people would want to drive their new cars everywhere instead of walking, riding the now mostly unmanned train line, or taking the bus, which now runs once every two hours and mostly carries senior citizens with no other way to get around. They couldn't have predicted that Namerikawa's residents would one day be able to shop online and pay at the *konbini* or choose from dozens of light-blocking curtains at an enormous Nitori home center, and neither could they have imagined that the flashing lights of the city's pachinko parlors or its lofty orange AU sign would appear blurry and inconsequential to car after car zipping along on its way to somewhere else. There are no tetrapods along the bypass, only 7-11s and a Hachiban Ramen.



The city planners during the Economic Miracle couldn't have predicted these things just as the city planners during the bubble economy couldn't have predicted that the culture of big money and lavish nights out would cool to pale imitations of what

they'd once been. They also couldn't have predicted that as the excesses of the '80s ground to a stumbling halt a new culture of *sōshoku* herbivore men would eschew the pressures of salaryman life and shy away from dating, while *otakus* bought stuffed pillows imprinted with their favorite *anime* girls and began marrying video game characters. One wonders, however, whether the city planners of the '80s had begun noticing that more and more Japanese women were taking overly demanding jobs alongside men, and that fewer and fewer of them would begin having children or even getting married at all. Maybe the city planners suspected, or maybe they didn't, that Japan's fertility rate would begin to fall as its percentage of elderly rose to the highest in the world and worries mounted that there one day wouldn't be enough young people to work and supply the pension money the Economic Miracle generation had been promised in more prosperous times.

I wonder what Japan's suburbs will look like when they, too, begin to decay, once Namerikawa's newest supermarket has no use for its enormous bakery, meat, and seafood sections that also sell fresh salads and *takoyaki*, and when there aren't enough shoppers to keep both of its eyeglass emporiums in business. Maybe these buildings will be torn down and the land reclaimed by nature, or maybe they'll be left standing like the empty cigarette shops and *koin randorīs* of the downtown, with weeds sprouting from the cracks in their parking lots and their chain-length fences growing rusty in the salty air. Maybe people in this later time where the traffic lights at even the busiest intersections all flash yellow will walk past the shuttered Family Marts along the bypass and the boarded-up sake shops in the downtown and imagine that both of them closed at the same time for the same reasons as the decades of the Showa, Heisei, and Reiwa eras merge into a blur.

Maybe too, when people stumble across the overgrown Hamasushi with its cartoonish white plastic greeting robot standing cracked, broken, and gathering dust by the door, they'll mistakenly feel a quaint nostalgia for this earlier time of progress when it seemed there was absolutely no limit to what Japan could do—the same sensation I feel when I see the tetrapods covered in trash along the shoreline.

# Octopus and Honey Badger from *I Wanna Be Evil*

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by Joe Panzica

*I Wanna Be Evil or Gretty Gets to Meet the Pope and Sit on the Group W Bench ostensibly tells the story of an unplanned pregnancy that threatens to interfere with our heroine's mission to warp the arc of faith and history via the culture-creating potential of online mass mesmerization. In this excerpt, an ill-considered attempt at multitasking sends the unlikely plot unspooling.*

Gretchen Idler flinched, shaking off the chin pressed into her shoulder along with its owner's warm breath. Sinuously she stretched back for a languorous moment until she felt his eyes roll over the little hills beneath her pale pajama top with its arching lines of dancing pachyderms.

"Like white elephants," he murmured.

She coiled into a wrestler's crouch and pounced, pitching him off the bed and onto the carpeted floor where she planted a naked foot hard into his chest. With a glare of warning she grabbed again her sheath of papers and resumed reading aloud:

Hellbent Heidi tugged back helplessly, but Rex the Weimaraner swerved her swiftly up the driveway where her slender dad stood squinting, sun-blinded. He never sensed the snarling dog until its teeth ripped into his shin.

"Don't get mad, dad! Remy just hates surprises, and you scared him by standing there!"

Dieter Rosenbergfeltz glared down at the dog crouched protectively between him and their worried girlchild. His feet stomped, but only the beast's ears retreated, its growl growing ever more menacing. He pulled back for a forceful kick, but it anticipated, spinning around snapping so that he almost lost his balance as his foot swung up past gnashing teeth and blazing eyes. He righted himself, twisting to face the animal now pressing its body fast against the asphalt, its head arching upward in angry alertness. Heidi inserted her body between the panting combatants, calmly staring up at her affronted father, daring him to injure her rather than revenge himself on Rex, her precious pet.

Gretchen glared down at the boy now sniggering beneath her feet. "*Precious pet? Whadya think? Too much alliteration? What?*"

"It's good, Gretz. Panting combatants! I do so looves your sweet assonance. It's a first draft. Let it *slink* creepy deep into how you sweetly sleep on it."

Gretchen gasped and raised her eyebrows, momentarily moved by what she considered boyish poesy. Then, ticklishly offended by the way he suckled between her toes, she slashed at him with her fan of papers, barely avoiding opening his face with their cutting edges.

"*Sleep yourself, you dirty slinking boy. Leggo my foot, willya?*"

"HEY! ... Why Rosenbergfeltz?" he frowned. Wasn't it Ribbentrop?"

"*Too obvious. I know Rosenberg sounds Jewy, but one of Hitler's minions was named that.*"

"Rosenbergfeltz? Really? A Nazi?" He rolled himself back onto the bed to nuzzle her and his phone. "Hmmm. Wikipedia says... Alfred Ernst Rosenberg... was a Baltic German? ... He hated Christianity with a passion? ... The guy was a freaking mastermind. He was Adolf's rosy Bannion!"

"*Yeah but nobody'll get it. Whaddabout Rosenbergfeltz? That have a nice Feltz? Ooh, ooh, you. That feltz nice, but I'm workin' here, ya know?*"

"Nobody'll get it. Nobody gets does. Ever."

"*Oh, you baby. It just seems that way—it's just you that never gets any. Ever, hmm? Do you, poor boy? Aww...*"

"Anyway, it's just too hard to figure out."

"*Too hard? Really? Ya know what the chorus girl axed the talkshow host, dontcha?*"

"What?"

"*How... hard... IZZIT?*"

“OWCH! Geez!”

*“Oh? Oops! Musical Interlude! Time to dance. On your feet. Mach schnell!”*

Expertly she scrolled to a playlist sequence that seemed apropos. Her tablet was already connected to extravagant speakers set to maximum blast; the three selections were pre-tweaked to suffer no pauses:

ELVIS: *I’m Evil*

*“See, nobody should dance with clothes on!”*

LAVERNE BAKER: *I’m Saved.*

*“THAT ought to keep us from the devil’s old clitches!”*

PAUL MCCARTNEY: *I’m All Shook Up*

*“NOW, gutterboy,” she gasped. “Maybe we can stay focused on serious business?”*

When she’d caught her breath, she primly wet fingered her way to the saved place in the now crumpled pile of printouts and resumed reading.

Heidi and her dog forged boldly towards the setting sun into the wild wood where they hoped no one would follow. Unprepared for the cold, they welcomed the darkness, for it daunted not the keen-eyed canine darting ever deeper into the murk, frequently doubling back to guide his trusting mistress forward as the heavy gloaming slowly cloaked them.

“I wanna be your dog!” he rasped.

*“Down, Iggy. Down!”*

“Why you wanna write this stuff? Ain’t you ever gonna go back to classes?”

*“I’m not here ‘to go to classes,’ I’m here for THEM to help ME with my main life project.”*

“But you always stay stuck in your room, and now it’s with your little German girl in her Bavarian fairy tale forest.”

*“I’m an orphan of the Holocaust, don’t forget.” She looked up at the shelf above her messy dorm desk. “Even if my grandfathers survived the camps—and my parents couldn’t survive me. Now let me just read this fucker!”*

In the darkest part of the wood, Heidi and Rex fashioned a secluded bower sheltered soft in the iron roots of a tall mossy tree. Fireflies soon brightened their walkways with gentle flickering. Together, each day they foraged for nuts and sweet berries with Rex learning to nose for fibrous tubers and luscious truffles he dug up with fast black claws while squealing in anticipatory delight.

“Oh. I like that. That I like! That like I! . . . Oh!”

“*As if. Git!*”

“They—” he said, pointing to a shelf clamped up above them. Two mismatched but ornate boxes served as bookends for paperbacks of Uncle Wiggles, Noam Chomskies, Pippi Longstockingses, Simone Weils, and Mary Poppinses. “Weren’t *they* born *here*?”

“*P&M?*”

He looked at her blankly.

“*Pa and Ma! Pooper and Mudder! Fat Procreator and Selfish Misfit!*” Gayly she waved up at her parents cleanly contained in their high perched ash boxes. “*The hitlers couldn’t kill my grandfathers in OuchWitz but they sure did help kill those two right here in Apple Pie Land, or shudder I say ‘reich jeer?’ No ducking doubt about it. They got Mom in Gotham; she popped a Plaza Sweet dose of lethal pills in her favorite hotel puking down on Central Park. Pop in Beantown; he had a fatal fat attack on their grassy Common there. And they still might get me here. The past is never done. It just keeps creeping and changing on ya. Now, please try to stay focused!*”

And to combat the gloom, she taught herself to fashion ethereal figures who would cavort brightly for a sudden brief time under the arching canopy of leaves before bubbling away into the damp and wispy air.

“How does this SLAP.”

“*Ouch! Goddammit!*”

“Ow! . . . happy folderol advance your ‘main life project,’ which, by the way, has a mid-semester checkpoint coming up very freaking soon?”

“*You never were perched upon by a muse?*”

“Wanna perch right here, huh?”

“*Watch where you wave that, willya? I wanna create, not procreate.*”

“Hey! You watch out. OW!”

“*ESPECIALLY in a lady’s boudoir, there ARE certain standards of decorum. You deserved that.*” She fixed him with a stern glare of momentary severity and, when satisfied, picked up where she thought she’d left off:

But Lord Rosenrotz sent searching emissaries to scour the woods seeking to find them. And then, inevitably, they were discovered. Her enchantments afforded strong protections. Yet the Dark Lord had ancient powers and the seething patience of settled in evil. First, he attacked her spritely figures which swelled with purple pain so that they raged and sorrowed until their plaintive wails scattered the birds who in anxious panic flapped far away from each other as fast as they could fly. And instead of dissolv-

ing into the dancing breeze, these exquisite creations, unable to soar, stayed and solidified, slumping into sad and lonesome heaviness.

“Purple prose.”

*“Sumptin’ else might stay...”*

“Aww! You should be coding and modeling, not scribbling nonsense. You came here to do game design and VR.”

*“It’s not my coming you’re worried about!”*

“Ooch!”

He swayed back on the book- and paper-strewn bed, staring up at the dorm room ceiling where Gretchen had pasted a homemade New Hampshire (*North Hamster!*) poster titled “The Bretton Woods Four.” John Maynard Keynes and Hank Morgenthau were the only names he could remember. Another, he’d been brightly informed, might have been a Russian spy. She had colorized and electronified them in a vague approximation of Andy Warhol’s four-paneled apotheosis of the Beatles. Ringo’s pastel pigeon fluttered juxtaposed against John Maynard’s tweeds.

Atop one of the ashboxes—he couldn’t remember which contained her Pa and which imprisoned her Ma—sat an old iPad, now reduced to a marquee. Against star-swirling backgrounds, one line at a time, it flashed her latest “snotrag for the soul,” which is what she called a poem:

**The universe doesn’t owe me sleep  
I ripple it with every twitch  
The universe does not owe me love**

**The universe does not owe me warmth  
I am the spark it tropes and troubles  
The universe doesn’t owe me love**

**The universe does not owe me light  
Together we pulse, dance, laugh, and wave  
The universe doesn’t owe me love**

**The universe doesn’t owe me love  
I’m all a blur it’s only one  
The universe does not owe me love**

She followed his eyes to the shelved ashes. *"They vowed to each other never to have children. Not in this world."*

"But here you are so captivatin'..."

*"Awwwww. So many people who shouldn't have babies, but they do. And then what?"*

"And here we are. Together." Their eyes met.

*"...Tingling."* Twenty fingers danced eagerly across receptive skin.

*"...Alive as hell."* They pressed together closer.

*"Out. Of. CONTROL!"* She bolted upright, shoving him off balance so that only his arms kept his upper body from slamming to the floor while his lower parts stayed splayed on the bed.

"Hey! HEY...Hey! Damn, Gretzel," he sputtered. "You don't mind me calling you 'Gretzel' do ya?"

She swung herself on top of him, pinning him to the bed with bruising, bouncing kneecaps, singing, *"You can call me Gretzel. Or you can call me Gretty. You can call me Gretel. Or you can call me Betty. You can call me Hell Babe or Heaven-Sent Confetti. You can even think of me as Christi G. Rosetti. Yet,"* she petted his hair like one might pet a small boy's. *"I'm Godzilla Girl to YOU."* She playfully slapped his face again. *"And you're only Tokyo to me."*

"Outch! Geez! Just what is your real name anyway? Is it Gretchen or Greta?"

With a deflated sigh she rolled off of him. *"Once they found out I was not to be a boy, my fat dad, because of some outré fancy of his own, wanted me to be Gretchen."* She pointed up to the bookshelf. *"My mad mudder, for solid Jew reasons, thought that was way too Teutonic. So, they compromised on Greta, but only on paper. At least, I think that's how it went. Since I often need to check, I always keep my corpus close to two copies of my barf certificate."*

"Oh," he said. "You know, you really should start attending classes again."

*"I'm getting more done here. I've got Heidi here. But so far for my grandstand contraption of a monumentally hyper-meta-masterpiece of an epic computer game I've only got a semi-animated Octopus and a bit-mapped Honey Badger waltzing and sparring across the Abyss of Nuclear Holocaust under the Volcano of Catastrophic Climate Change, so I don't gots time to go slushing through mud puddles to get to classrooms."*

"Well, you still gots more than some of us."

*"I don't wannanother algorithm for screentime solitaire. I'm here to generate a culture creatin' epic outa meme bits and myth bytes."*

"Yeah, so what happened to animating a *Choose Your Own Ending to Paradise Lost*?"

*"Derivative. Move your fucking arm!"*

"I'm trying all my moves..."

*"Stop trying so hard."*

"If you don't go to classes, you shouldn't be paying to stay here like it's a goddamn hotel. You could do everything you're doing here at home."

*"Home? Well, writing is a North Hamster thing. Makes me feel at home."*

"Yeah, Glassy you and Salinger."

*"Me and JD were like this, dude!"* she quipped, pressing her middle finger against her index and wrapping them tightly. Then she started, mouth opened in well-rehearsed shock, reversing the position of the supine digit so her pointer was on top pushing rhythmically down against its uncomfortable partner. Pausing to affect another eye-popping stage gasp, she flipped both fingers again and again before finally covering them protectively with a draping palm. She fluttered her lids in mock modesty.

"Right. They say he liked young ones."

*"No, it's never what THEY say. I never met the man. He just seemed to know how to treat a babybabe. And it's. Not. Like. That!"*

"Ouch! Come on! That's NOT how you treat THAT!" With one hand he shoved her forcefully backward while cupping himself protectively with the other. His eyes and mouth registered multiple brands of hurt.

*"Oh. Will the poor boy ever forgive me?"* She was momentarily just a tiny bit sorry.

"Aw. Just take her easy, huh?"

*"It could be SOOO easy? Huh?"*

"Not with you."

*"Oh. It doesn't have to be that way."*

"It shouldn't. I'm nice to you."

*"Only because you..."*

"No. I only wanna be..."

*"OH yes!"*

"Oh-oh! Oh no!"

*"Oh! What just happened? What?"*

"Oh no. I'm sorry! It..."

*"Oh, I did not consent to that!"*

"Oh. Oops, Greta? Oh God. I'm so sorry. Let's do something quick!" Head wagging and up on all fours, he scrambled about the book-laden bed like a frightened beagle not knowing what to howl at or chase.

*"Oh. Just go!"*

"How 'bout," he panted, "spritzing something up there? A little Coke maybe? Oh!" he cried, trying to dodge the rainstorm of slaps and kicks. "Ouch! Sorry! OWW!"

*"Just go!"*

As he scurried to reclaim his clothing *The Myth of Sisyphus* whizzed past his head. Before he could scamper away, she hit him square against his bare back with a fat Frantz Fanon. Then her hurled hardcover of *Men Without Women* smacked flat against the just swung door to latch it shut—a split second after his hasty blond-haired blue-eyed escape.

“Yeah, just let some air in. Dickhead.”

She pressed her head down against *Travelers in the Third Reich*.

And somewhere else:

Heartbroken Heidi huddled cold on her hard bed. She would not cry. Neither would she speak nor smile. She would not laugh or dance or sing. Not until she freed herself from this locked room and rescued poor Wrecks, sold to be a bomb sniffer on the far southern border. Her father's will was cold dark iron. But hers, he'd soon find, was white hot plutonium.

# Fences Are a Joke to The Three Amigos

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by Carol Soule

*This essay previously appeared in the Laconia Daily Sun, the Concord Monitor, and the Miles Smith Farm website, [www.milesmithfarm.com](http://www.milesmithfarm.com).*

Sometimes I envy crop farmers. Their corn and potatoes don't steal food from the apple trees then run around the farm looking for trouble. But, neither do they provide entertainment.

Ferdinand is a white Scottish Highlander calf. While such calves typically weigh sixty to eighty pounds at birth, Ferdinand weighed only forty pounds at birth. But what an energetic forty pounds! At first I worried that because he was small he'd also be weak, but within days he was charging around the field, investigating every twig and rock. When wild turkeys walked through his pasture, he would chase them, wanting to play. Always on the lookout for fun, he'd engage older calves, chasing them or being chased. He was a free and energetic spirit.

Ferdinand quickly realized that because he was small he could duck under the electric fence without getting zapped. Then he'd wander around the barnyard, exploring its possibilities. His mom, Brittany, watched him from the confines of the pasture, and if she lost sight of him she'd moo for his return. After a few months, Brittany ended her vigil. She either gave up or just trusted that he would return.

Calves develop friendships, and soon Ferdinand had convinced his pasture-mates Allie and Lorna to join him. He taught them to duck under the wire and check out the chicken coop, or to munch on hay in the feed bunker. The feed bunker is a sturdy, concrete structure where dry hay and other feed is stored and served. Cattle belong outside the bunker; they have to reach in when food is served. Every morning we'd straighten up the bales of hay the calves had pulled down and clean up the manure that had been deposited where it shouldn't.

We call those calves the Three Amigos. Their ages range from six to ten months, with Ferdinand the youngest and smallest. Although he is their leader, he's also capable of acting alone. Every morning we let the chickens out and leave the coop door open so the birds can return during the day to eat or (hopefully) lay eggs. Until recently, Ferdinand would start each day waiting outside the coop staring at the closed door, willing it to open so he could squeeze inside and help himself to the chicken feed. After that he'd spend the rest of the day with his gal pals, the three of them slipping under the electric wire, willing to risk a shock for the pleasure of roaming freely.

This freedom allows the Amigos to come running when we serve veggie scraps. We distribute bruised and out-of-date produce collected twice a week from Shaw's in Gilford to the cows who gather outside the feed bunker. While they follow the rules and poke their heads in to eat, our three partners in crime stand inside the bunker ready to snatch pineapple skins and melon rinds that fall out of reach of the bigger animals.

When the Amigos get bored or want a drink of milk, they return to their mothers' pasture.

It's a good thing the older cattle don't plunge through our fences. It's one thing to have calves walking around the yard, but if Stash or Topper, both of whom weigh 1,400 pounds, were to run free, that would be a problem.

Soon we'll have to wean the three delinquents and train them to respect the electric fence. We chained the chicken coop door to protect the feed, but for a while yet I'm going to savor the joyous spectacle of the three calves kicking up their heels and bouncing across the lawn like kids at recess. Youth is fleeting and should be celebrated fully, don't you think?

# She Shook Me Cold

by Ricky Mailhot

Since the evening of the incident, Adrian had only spoken when spoken to. Without him to muddle their conversation, he wondered if his friends had always sounded so mean, and what part he himself had played in allowing the incident to happen.

“Adrian, why didn’t you ask your parents to send a car to the funeral parlor or something?” Anna whined. She trudged forward with her arms straight at her sides like they weighed more than she could manage. “This heat is stupid.” Her tone sounded every bit of her sixteen years.

“They don’t do that all the time,” Adrian replied. He looked around as if he could see the discomfort she bemoaned. To him, the seventy-degree summer morning felt nice, and the breeze it blew through his short brown hair was pleasant. Around him, Anna and Alice, both cousins, wore matching sun dresses the color of their yellow hair, and while Arthur and Adrian both wore suits, the sour occasion hadn’t stopped Arthur from picking a particularly large yellow flower to garishly adorn his outfit.

“You should’ve told them how sad you were or something. I bet they would’ve sent a whole friggin’ limo!” Alice said.

“That would’ve been sweet!” said Arthur, slapping his thigh as if to suggest that the suggestion was hilarious. Arthur never laughed, he only pointed out when he thought things were funny. He obsequiously fanned himself even though he wasn’t sweating, grinning at his fake exhaustion to call attention to the humor.

“The A-List shouldn’t have to walk,” Anna concluded, ignoring Arthur. That the four friends all shared A-names was the joke, but they’d earned the title with the way they

acted toward their classmates. Their entire high school had been granted the day off to visit the local funeral home in observance of Zoey, the student who'd passed, but even the solemn day of remembrance hadn't affected the attitude of Adrian's three friends.

"We're almost there anyway," Adrian said, rubbing his temples.

"Well, that's something, I guess," Alice finished. Although Adrian was the tallest of the four by a head, Alice's statement made him feel like he was being spoken down to.

Anna groaned and pulled out her cell phone, pecking away at the screen. A heart-beat later her cousin's phone went off and she got hers out as well. It wasn't until a third chime came from Arthur's phone that Adrian was sure they were talking about him. Though the three friends slowed to accommodate their typing, Adrian kept going, enjoying the peace their distraction brought.

The space between Adrian and the pack grew, and as it did, he felt the tension in his head lessen. Whenever they went quiet like that, he could come up for air. He tipped his head back and took what felt like his first deep breath in days. The morning sun peaked through the sidewalk's overhang of oak leaves and graced his face with its warmth. A breeze from the ocean to the west compelled the branches to dance and push the descending light around his face. His guilt buzzed along with their phones.

"Girls don't shoot themselves," Anna said, their conversation leaking into the real world. "That's a boy thing."

"Zoey did though. Probably why they didn't have the body for us to look at." Alice formed a gun with her fingers, placed it to her temple, and flexed her thumb, tossing her head with a sound effect. "*P-kow*."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I heard they buried her pretty quick. Not too much to look at alive or dead," said Anna, laughing at her own joke. Alice laughed too, and Arthur commented on how funny it was.

The exchange only made Adrian's headache worse. The pain in his skull had flared every day whenever he thought about his role in the incident, so he'd tried his best not to. The sight of his driveway did nothing to remedy the persistent ache because he knew his friends would be coming over. They all usually spent afternoons at his house, but he'd hoped the somber events of the day would've caused them to split up afterwards.

"Where's the golf cart?" Anna said. She scanned the tree line for the vehicle they usually used to drive down the quarter-mile paved road leading to Adrian's property.

"I don't know. Maybe being serviced or something," Adrian explained without stopping.

"This day *literally* couldn't get any worse," said Alice.

After a short march, Adrian saw the five-car garage in the distance.

"Did your dad get the Jaguar out yet?" Arthur said, licking his lips in anticipation, as if he could see the row of sports cars inside. He was always curious as to which cars were at the house and which ones were in storage.

"I don't know which one that is," Adrian answered honestly.

"One day, I'm gonna be a big-time lawyer like your dad." Arthur puffed up and grinned.

"You're too *stupid*," Anna said, giving him a shove hard enough to throw him off his gait. "Besides, his dad isn't a lawyer, he's an *attorney*."

Anna, Alice, and Arthur pepped up and even put their cell phones away as they neared what they privately referred to as their *clubhouse*. Before Adrian's father had made partner years before, he had been a self-made public defender. Adrian remembered him being more tired back then, but at least he'd been around. Back then, a clubhouse had been a stack of couch cushions in Adrian's living room, but after his father's career change, a clubhouse had become a pool house cleaned by maids. While Adrian's father disappeared into his work, his mother had found new friends she felt were more appropriate to their new lifestyle, and those friends had children. Although Adrian never forgot that his father had earned the family's wealth, he felt like he'd inherited the A-List. His parents seemed so happy with the arrangements that he didn't feel like he deserved to be unhappy with them.

From the driveway Adrian saw Henrietta wiping down one of the windows on the fourth floor. Mother must be out, he surmised, considering she always wanted the cleaning done out of her sight to convince herself that the house had never been dirty in the first place. He regarded the grey stone façade that covered his home and considered how cold it looked, like a raincloud ready to burst. The two grown evergreens on either side of the main entrance met the third-floor bay windows and formed teary eyes. When he was a few feet from the front door, Rosa opened it.

"Hola, Adrian. You look handsome," Rosa said, wiping her bony hands on a towel draped over her shoulder. Her smile was wide, but her brow was knotted with concern.

"Hola, Rosa," Adrian said, walking directly into her spread arms. "Thank you for laying my suit out for me. I could've gotten it myself."

"Of course you could *mi hijo*. When you get your license next month you won't need me for anything," said Rosa, her words sounding strained from the tightness of their hug.

"Not true. Never true," he said.

"Are you hungry?" Rosa said, holding onto Adrian's shoulders and pushing him back, trying to appraise how he felt. The spiderwebs around her eyes made them look wise and narrow.

"No, I'm OK. I just need to be home, you know?"

"I want a Coke," Anna said suddenly with her nose in her phone.

"Me too. And I want pizza," Arthur added.

Alice coughed, not bothering to look up from her phone.

"Two Cokes," Arthur amended.

Rosa released her grip on Adrian and crossed her arms with a scowl. "Drinks are in the fridge where they always are. Help *yourselves*." She turned her attention back to Adrian and her kind eyes returned. "I'm glad you got to take the rest of the day off for the ceremonies, but you probably didn't eat anything, did you?" Her hand found his face. "Pizza might not be a bad idea. You know your father has his card held at Josephine's."

"That's OK, Rosa. We're just gonna go hang out in the pool house."

Nodding, Rosa stepped back into the house and disappeared around a corner. Before Adrian could follow, the rest of the A-List cut in front of him and made their way inside before he could.

The four of them could've easily gone around the back through the garden, but the cousins and Arthur always wanted to go through the house first so they could raid the pantry. Past the foyer and the least trafficked of the sitting rooms they made their way to the main kitchen. Before Adrian could catch up he heard the cabinets swinging open and packages crinkling as they were stuffed into purses and pockets. Without appetite, he made his way instead to the sliding glass doors leading outside to the pool. He slid the heavy door open and his three companions slipped past him again. Once they were out he saw they'd left the cabinets open. Adrian sighed and turned back to close them before joining them outside.

The rest of the A-List had already made their way past the pool and into the two-story pool house, shutting the door behind them before Adrian could enter. Arthur sat on the large white couch with his legs raised and his shoes on the cushions. He was already working on his second package of Pop-Tarts, having devoured the first during the walk from the kitchen. Its carcass lay crumpled on the granite coffee table in front of him.

"Heads up, loser!" Alice said, tossing a can of Coke from where she stood at the open fridge. Arthur dropped the Pop-Tarts onto his lap to catch the can. He opened it before it could calm and a slosh of foam pumped onto his pants. For a flash he looked at Adrian, checking for disapproval. Finding none, he smiled and brought the can to his lips to chug. Alice grabbed a can for herself and joined him on the couch.

Anna stood at the bar in the back of the room flipping through the channels on the television suspended above. "There's never anything on," she said, sounding exhausted. "Maybe Zoey had the right idea."

With no room on the sofa, Adrian took a seat at the glass dining room table near the bar. He tried to ignore Anna's comment while he rubbed his head.

"That's not funny, Anna," Alice said with a tone more serious than usual.

Adrian looked up, hopeful that someone else in the group was finally drawing a line so he wouldn't have to, that maybe they were finally ready to talk about the part they'd played in Zoey's death. Alice looked concerned for her cousin and continued, "You're not crazy. Only crazy people do what she did."

"She wasn't crazy. She was sad," Adrian said aloud to himself, but that didn't stop the others from hearing.

"If she wasn't crazy then she was weak. Crazy or weak, it doesn't matter," Alice said matter-of-factly, as if it should have been obvious.

"People can be depressed," Adrian said, hoping that his role hadn't been the final straw in Zoey's decision, or, more wishfully, that it hadn't been a factor at all.

"Oh please," Anna said, walking over to the pool table. She picked up the cue ball and tossed it into the waiting pyramid with a crack. "*My* mother's depressed and the only thing she's ever killed was her braincells with booze."

"That's hilarious," Arthur said.

"Yeah, but what we did..." Adrian said weakly.

"*We* didn't do anything. You pulled a prank. And it was hilarious!" said Arthur.

"I'm serious!" Adrian heard his hand slap the table, something he hadn't told it to do. He felt his cheeks burning, like he wanted to cry, like he felt he should've at the wake but hadn't. His friends stared at him. Each was a blank canvas, revealing no hint of what they'd say next.

"Oh, we're serious too," Anna said, breaking the pause. "You did it. We just told you it'd be funny if you did." There was an edge to her words, like they ran just along the blade of an accusation.

"*And* it was funny," Alice said. She turned around on the couch to face her cousin with wide eyes, as if reminding her to calm down.

"If Zoey had a brain in her head she would've figured out the joke like, immediately." Anna crossed her arms and popped a hip like she was ready for a fight.

"Yeah, like any of us would go out with someone in band," Arthur said as he looked at his phone.

"But you told me to ask her out. And you didn't tell me till the night of that I was

supposed to cancel,” Adrian said, his headache surprisingly subsiding as he made his point.

“And?” Anna said, crooking an eyebrow.

“That was the night she did it. What if doing that was a reason she...” The words tripped over the lump in his throat and back down again.

“I think you should leave,” said Anna.

Adrian heard Anna’s words, but they didn’t make sense when he assembled them in his brain. “What?”

Anna’s feet were planted in place like a tree daring a storm to move her where all other storms had failed. “You’ve been a pain in the ass all day.”

Adrian was the only one of them with money, real money. His friends’ parents could keep them in nice clothes, makeup, and spending cash, but the kind of wealth they were accustomed to by being his friend was off the table if he was out of their lives. Alice wore that knowledge on her furrowed brow and looked at her cousin with saucer-sized eyes to convey her frustration and fear.

Anna, however, didn’t flinch. “You were mopey at the wake, which is like, a celebration of life or whatever. You didn’t even *try* to get us a ride here, and don’t think for a second I’ve never noticed your maid being snarky with us. Since you wanna’ lay it all out we might as well cover everything. So, you tell that *bitch* next time you see her that when I want a drink then I better get a goddamned *drink*!” Her voice grew simultaneously louder and firmer, never wavering.

Arthur sighed, wiping the crumbs from his lap and pocketing his phone like he was getting ready to leave.

“Fine,” was all Adrian said.

The pool house became as silent as a grave. Alice looked from Arthur to Anna in astonishment; Arthur returned the look while Anna stood her ground, unflinching.

To Adrian, walking out of the pool house and leaving them behind was a gift. He’d spent the better part of elementary, middle, and high school following the whims of his three friends, so being asked to leave was a welcome reprieve. He’d thought less of them for suggesting he ask out and then ditch Zoey, but he thought a lot less of himself for going along with it. Leaving them felt like leaving the worst part of himself behind. Once the door was closed and he was on the other side of it, he heard Arthur comment on the humor and the cousins laugh.

Adrian sat at the marble island in the kitchen, his head in his hands. His headache had subsided, but it still felt good to massage his temples. His fingers pushed in a clockwise spin, working the shards of his sharper thoughts around his brain.

Last week he’d been dressed in the same black suit he now wore when he’d trotted

outside to the pool house to meet his friends. Since it had been their idea to ask Zoey out, he imagined they'd have some insights on his clothing. The A-List didn't welcome outsiders into its fold and so he'd never been on a proper date before. Even though they'd grown up together, he deferred to their knowledge of how he should dress and what to say as if they always knew better. He hadn't counted on them telling him that he should say nothing, and not show up at all. He'd sat in the pool house while they laughed at what a loser Zoey was falling for such an obvious prank, and Adrian wondered what they thought of him for believing it too. The cousins had to wipe away tears of laughter as they speculated how Zoey was probably sitting at home in her best dress wiping away tears of sorrow, though Adrian himself had wanted to cry too.

But he hadn't. He hadn't told them he was miserable, or that he'd been nervous about the date. Instead he'd smiled weakly and kept his feelings to himself.

The severity of his ousting from the pool house had confirmed his fear that it had been, at least in part, his fault. Sometime after he hadn't shown up at her house she'd taken her father's gun and committed herself to something so final that a part of him admired her resolve. His headache reached a new height and the light began to waver.

Since the afternoon sun still hung high above, none of the ceiling lights were lit, but as the sky outside grew thick with clouds their absence became apparent. The bright summer greens of the trees were muted beneath the overcast, turning them to black.

"Rosa?" Adrian called as the wind rose with the sudden change in weather, gripping branches and rapping them against the house with irregular rhythm. When no one answered he called again.

"Anna? Guys?" Standing up, he found his legs unsure of their purpose, and blinded from the vibrating migraine, he fell to the floor. His cheeks contorted under the pain, twisting his face into a mask of agony. He placed his palms on the sides of his head as if to keep it from exploding.

"Anyone?" he tried again. Wind caused the shutters to clatter and beat out his cry. Beyond Adrian's clenched eyes the sky was black as pitch, a starless night, like an up-turned world hanging over an endless precipice it was sure to fall into. The moments stretched like hours and a buzzing numbness spread throughout his limbs and chest; his mind finally threw up its hands and allowed him to pass out.

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A doorbell rang in the black of his sleep. Having squeezed his eyes so tightly shut, opening them felt like he was unlocking them. It took several blinks until they could be trusted to move on their own again. Aware that he was on the floor, Adrian pulled himself on

to his elbows, a good start before he committed to standing. The doorbell rang again.

Steadying himself against the kitchen island, he ran a palm over his face. The headache was gone, but it had been replaced with a deep weakness like he'd slept for far too long.

"Rosa?" he called out. The doorbell rang. Still reeling, he found himself somehow making his way to the front door, though his steps were surer now that his mind had settled on a goal. He noticed a blue hue that now colored the house. He wondered how long he'd been lying on the floor for the day to have grown so dark. The violent wind had passed, but the leaves on the trees still swayed to and fro, remembering their dance. The doorbell rang.

The knob was cold and covered in a thin frost. His hand recoiled when the cold met his skin, signaling to his brain the sensation of heat. He rubbed the moisture from the melted ice between his fingers and saw his breath take shape with the drop in temperature. The doorbell rang again, and fighting the dazed feeling of departing sleep, Adrian opened it.

Before him stood a girl he'd known only in passing. Someone with whom he'd only spoken a handful of words to although they'd gone to the same middle and high schools. A girl in a dress blue like the ocean, punctuated with white polka dots and streaked with the browns and blacks of mud and dirt. Her shoes were missing, along with one sock. One naked foot twisted nervously on its toes as she wiggled her heel back and forth. She clutched a violin case that shielded her lap, her fingers adjusting and readjusting on the handle. She smelled of damp earth.

"Hey Adrian, I hope I'm not too late." Her face was obscured by her curly brown hair that a hand quickly brushed away. Her eyes were the same color green they'd been when he knew her, only paler, like they were on the other side of a foggy embankment. The freckles on her cheeks were dark against the paleness of her skin, and they bent around the corners of a smile.

Adrian tried to make sense of what he saw, running over every possible explanation that would steer him away from madness. Hallucination, head injury, trick, dream? He put a hand to his cheek to feel something, anything, that could tether him to reality.

"You don't like the dress?" the girl said, using her free hand to smooth out the wrinkles above her knees. With his wide eyes, gaping mouth, and hand held to his cheek, Adrian looked astonished.

"Zoey?" Abandoned by reason, it only made sense to pose that name as a question.

"We didn't settle on a place to meet so I thought I'd just show up," Zoey said. "Oh no. You forgot about our date, didn't you?" Her smile upended into a frown.

In his stupor, the truth tumbled out effortlessly. "Of course not."

"Good." She grinned, her teeth as white as the moon. "You look really nice. I'm glad you dressed up. I thought I'd be overdoing it."

"Yeah..." He looked down at his black suit remembering why he'd really worn it.

"This is my first date. Like, real date. Do your parents want to take some pictures or something?" She put a hand on the door and arched her neck trying to peer inside.

"No!" Adrian shouted, pulling it quickly shut, afraid of anyone else seeing what stood on his step.

"So, should we just get going?"

"Right."

She stepped back, giving him space to come outside. He exited on autopilot, only realizing that the door had closed behind him when the popping of the latch snapped like a broken bone.

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Zoey carried the violin case behind her with both hands and tilted her head to one side, casting furtive glances at the young man in her company. Adrian followed behind by a step and stared at the nest of curly hair on her head. He couldn't see the wound that had taken her life and was glad for it.

"It's a beautiful night," she said.

Adrian saw a patchwork of clouds so black and purple they looked to have survived a beating. Each one swirled at its edges and dovetailed into the next. The hidden sun cast an eerie light through their filter, painting the world azure.

"It's not raining," was all Adrian could muster as his brain reeled from the absurdity of it all.

"You're right. We can walk downtown without getting wet." The girl shifted her violin case to her left hand, leaving her right to dangle at her side. She clenched and unclenched her fingers, biting her lip and looking at his hand expectantly.

"Is your hand ok?" Adrian asked.

"I'm fine!" she said, laughing insincerely and closing her fist.

The sidewalks were empty in both directions, and the streets were too. No cars passed and no birds sung. Even the breeze that chilled the air kept its voice down as it caressed the leaves overhead. Without shoes, Zoey's footfalls were silent, too, leaving only the clapping of Adrian's dress shoes and her own humming to disturb the evening.

"Hey Zoey, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, you can." She slowed down a step and moved to his side. The lids around

her eyes turned down and appeared to smile. Although eerily milky, they had an aura of kindness about them.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” He tugged at the tie around his neck.

Zoey sucked on her lip and answered as if responding to an interview. “Well, I was at home. I was dressed up for our date...” She paused, and her face dropped. Her pace slowed and her rheumy eyes looked puzzled at something on the horizon. Adrian’s blood ran cold at the thought of what might follow. “And then I went to sleep. I felt like I was sinking. I was warm and happy.”

Adrian gulped. “Was there like, a light or something?”

“In the dream?”

“Yeah, in the dream.”

“Not really. I mean, not like I needed it. If I did I knew I’d get it, but I knew I didn’t.” She shook her head at the thought. “I’m sorry that doesn’t make any sense! I must sound crazy.”

Adrian came to a full stop. “Hey.” The look he gave her matched his tone. If he was indeed inside a dream or fantasy, he’d say precisely what he meant and try to set things right. “You’re *not* crazy.”

“Thanks.” She smiled again and dropped her chin. Hooking a rogue strand of hair behind her ear she looked up with grateful eyes. “I’m glad you asked to take me out.”

“Oh man,” he said suddenly. Now that his brain was putting the world in order, he remembered the purpose of their outing.

“What’s wrong?” Zoey asked.

“I don’t have any money on me.” He patted the empty pockets of his jacket, finding only a wad of tissues he’d taken from the funeral home. “I mean, for the date.”

“Oh, we don’t have to go anywhere, really. I was hoping we could just spend time together.”

“No, I was gonna try and take you somewhere. Like, actually take you somewhere.” He patted his clothes in search of the money that wasn’t there.

A stiff breeze pushed wild curls in front of Zoey’s eyes. “Well, we can try again some other time if you think it’s a big deal.” She took a step backward and the chill increased.

“Wait.” With a hand still held against his back pocket, something was taking shape. “I don’t need any money. I think I have an idea.”

“You still want to go out?” she asked her feet.

“Yeah, don’t you?” In spite of everything, Adrian conjured a smile at the thought of his second chance.

“I do,” she said, meeting his eyes. “What’s the plan?”

Aside from the two of them walking down the street, only the occasional lonely leaf skipped across the pavement. The houses they passed with lights on were full of activity. In one he saw a woman dancing with a man in a filthy suit, her head resting peacefully on his shoulder. In another an elderly couple wrapped a child in their arms, sobbing in unison but with wide smiles that betrayed their true feelings. He wished he could've felt as joyous as those people did, but the torment of what he'd done persisted. He hoped not to spoil her evening a second time.

The town's main street ran in a straight line for a half mile. Small businesses stood on either side and led to a roundabout the high schoolers affectionately called the Lollipop; whether this had stemmed from the roundabout's long stick and rounded top or from the candy store at the circle's crest that had long since closed didn't matter much, as the name had stuck. It was there that Adrian led Zoey to the hand-painted sign reading *Josephine's* in swirling cursive. Zoey looked concerned.

"I've never been here before."

"It's really nice. I mean, is this OK?"

"No, this is wonderful. I've just...this place is really expensive."

"We get takeout from here all the time, so my dad keeps a credit card on file. I mean, if money's the problem?"

"I've just never eaten somewhere so fancy before." Her face took on a smile less vibrant than the ones she'd given him earlier. "I'm sure it'll be nice."

Adrian stepped to open the door like a gentleman, but her hand was already on it. He pulled his hand away and tried to stammer out an excuse. They entered.

Josephine's had been open for so long it had earned the distinction of being referred to as an institution. The restaurant charged accordingly, but not for its prestige. It had earned its reputation and its spot at the top of Main Street with recipes carried on lovingly by a family that had come from overseas to practice their trade. Pictures of the original husband and wife owners looked down from the dark-paneled walls, a short man with hair on the sides of his head that stuck straight out and a beautiful woman with a smile like a knife's edge.

"That's Josephine," Adrian said, pointing to the woman in the photograph.

"This is her restaurant?"

"It was both of theirs." He wagged his finger between the monochrome couple.

"But she died when I was just a little kid. Her husband's still here though."

He led her down the hall to a cherry wood podium as dark as the walls where a man

in a white chef's coat and apron stood busy with the guestbook.

"That's their son. He runs everything now," Adrian said.

"Ah, Mr. Benton," the man said. "You didn't call in an order." He was thin everywhere but his belly and was balding with small wisps of hair stuck to the sides of his head.

"No pizza tonight, Mr. Torelli. I was actually hoping to get a table for..." He looked back at Zoey briefly in a flair of embarrassment at having to use the word *date*.

"Well, you're in luck. We're completely empty tonight, so it's all yours. I sent the hostess home early, which is why I'm up...here." He froze as he glimpsed Zoey's pale eyes looking back at him. His jaw fell open, though it was impossible to say whether it was to continue talking or to scream because Mr. Torelli senior appeared with his boisterous energy to intercept.

"I've got this under control, my boy. Table's all set up." The elder Torelli grinned from ear to ear. "You just head back to the kitchen. And watch for the chicken." He was a short, older man with a thick accent and the same hair sticking out above his ears.

"Chicken? Dad you have to..." The junior Torelli's head swiveled as he looked from his father back to the pale eyes that had caused him such alarm.

"Just go talk to your mother in the kitchen and she'll explain the whole thing," Torelli senior said, waving a hand dismissively. "Trust me now and tell me I'm crazy later. And you two, follow me." He walked into the restaurant proper with a bounce in his step, and as he followed Adrian, recognized the concoction of terror and confusion on the junior Torelli's face, the same feelings he'd been battling himself moments before.

Other than the three of them, the restaurant was empty to a seat, and quiet but for the gentle plucking of a lute coming from unseen speakers. Mr. Torelli took them to a table at the room's center.

"Here we are. We've been so excited to meet you, young lady." The elder Torelli swept an arm over a white linen table with a candle at its center. Zoey wrinkled her nose, not looking like she understood his comment, but giggling at the attention.

The napkins were folded into the shape of swans with long necks that dipped toward one another and formed a heart where their beaks met, and the silverware framing the golden plates shone brightly where the light from the candle hit the polish.

"It's *beautiful*," Zoey gasped.

"And it's all for you, my dear." Mr. Torelli stepped forward and scooped up her hands in his. "You've done a wonderful thing by coming here tonight. A marvelous thing! And I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Oh! Well, thank you for having me." If Zoey felt awkward over the outpouring

of gratitude, Adrian didn't see it. She looked back over her shoulder at Adrian with excitement.

"Please, my dear, allow me to get your meals ready." Torelli passed by one side of the table and widened his eyes at Adrian. "I'm sure you can see to it that the *lady* finds her *seat*?" He punctuated his words with an index finger thrust at her chair and winked at his sentence's end.

"Yes!" Adrian said, taking the hint and the opportunity to be a gentleman. He dashed over to pull out the chair, then stuttered, not knowing the words to accompany the gesture.

"Thank you very much," Zoey said, taking her seat. Adrian took his as well.

Torelli watched them before clapping his hands. "Excellent. I'll be back in just a few minutes with your entrees."

"But we haven't ordered any," Adrian said feebly, though the senior Torelli was already passing through the double doors to the kitchen beyond. As they swung outward Adrian caught a brief glimpse of the younger Torelli, hands covering his mouth, addressing a woman all in black.

"Mom?" the junior Torelli asked as the woman opened her arms and frowned back tears before the doors swung shut.

"Did you see that?" Adrian started, though Zoey was holding a large soup spoon close to her face while her other hand wiped at the corners of her mouth with her fingertips. When she saw him looking she dropped the spoon with a clatter and threw her hands into her lap. Her face dropped for a moment and hung for a beat before bursting out with laughter.

"What's so funny?" Adrian giggled halfheartedly, wanting in on the joke.

"You weren't supposed to see that."

"What wasn't I supposed to see?"

"How hard it is to try and look pretty." She covered her face with her hands and shook her head. "Ugh, I'm being a dork."

"You don't have to."

"Ask anyone, I'm sure they'd say I can't help it." She giggled.

"No, I mean, you don't have to try and look pretty, because you already do," Adrian said, meaning it.

The light from the candles set stars in her cloudy eyes and the hair that she'd tried to fix made her look electric and wild, something her laughter only exacerbated. "Thank you," she said, looking into his eyes. "I still think this is nuts, though."

"Really?" Adrian put his palms on the table, thinking she was finally about to address the insanity of her return.

She mimicked his posture and leaned in like they were sharing a secret. Adrian's eyes grew big awaiting her explanation. "I didn't think you even knew who I was. When you asked me out I didn't know what to say, aside from yes." She straightened her back like she was steeling herself. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What made you ask?"

Adrian was incapable of lying to those bright and honest eyes, so he told her a version of the truth. "It was actually my friend's idea." He busied himself by unfolding his napkin across his lap.

"Really? Which one?"

"All of them." He cringed at the thought.

"That's cool. I didn't think they knew me either."

"I think that all the time," he said.

The swinging doors burst open with the senior Torelli carrying a plate in each hand. Behind him Adrian saw his son hugging the woman in black and weeping into her shoulder. Mr. Torelli blocked his view as he advanced on the table.

"The house specialty. Chicken parmigiana over homemade pappardelle." He set the plates on the table and scooped a pitcher of water from a nearby table, humming to himself as he filled their crystal cups. "If there's anything else at all, please let me know. I'm just through there." He nodded to the back, and then went off the way he'd come. When the doors opened again the woman was speaking and nodding in the direction of their table while the son listened intently. As he craned his neck to see, Adrian kicked something under his table.

"I'm so sorry! I should've put it somewhere else," Zoey said, pulling out her violin case.

"It was my fault, I wasn't paying attention."

"I just never go anywhere without it, you know?" When he didn't say anything she added, "Maybe you don't."

"No, it's not that," he said, staring at the case, all black with silver latches and a sticker with their school's mascot of the wood frog on one side. It was streaked with the same patterns of dirt that were on her dress, and he wondered whether her parents made sure she always had it with her. "Did you have that with you when you," he gulped, "woke up?"

“Oh yeah. I sleep with it. Other girls had teddy bears and I got a Stentor. That’s the brand.”

Adrian didn’t bother with his food. “Is the violin special? Or would any violin be special to you?”

“Yes,” she chuckled. “When I was young I really wanted to play the violin because I thought it sounded pretty. So we had to lease this one from the music shop. We didn’t really have money at the time, so I took extra care of it, but if it was any other violin I bet I’d feel the same way. This one is mine, though.” She squeezed the case with her fingers till the buckles clicked.

“It sounds like your parents really cared about you. I mean, you wanted it and they made it happen.”

“Not really.” Her mouth turned downward and that faraway look returned. “Sometimes I think they got it for me because it was something I could do by myself.” She stuck the case back under her chair.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up anything like that,” Adrian said.

Zoey chewed on her bottom lip as if lost in thought and let the silence of the room engulf them. “Music is the only way I can express myself and really say what I’m feeling, you know?”

Adrian’s face must’ve given away that he didn’t because she continued the thought.

“Sometimes I just feel so much, like my ribs really are a cage and they’re holding something in.” She touched her chest with her palms, her curly hair falling again in front of her eyes. “But when I play, when I really play, the music says something I can’t.” As she threw her head back her eyes were especially glassy, the reflection of the candlelight obscuring her irises.

“You seem to be doing a pretty good job of expressing yourself now,” Adrian said.

Zoey clapped her hands, almost blowing out the candles. “I want to play for you.” She pulled out the violin case again. “You’ve never heard me play, and I want to play it for you.”

“Actually—” Adrian began, about to reveal a secret he’d only ever shared with his friends when the doors to the kitchen exploded open once again.

“Hello children, how is everything going?” The senior Torelli wrung his hands like he was eager to serve.

“It’s beautiful, sir,” Zoey said politely. “Thank you so much for having us.”

“My dear, it’s my sincere pleasure. But *maddone*, it looks like neither of you has taken a bite!”

"Oh, you're right," Zoey said as her eyes went from her plate to her violin and back again.

"I think she's got something else on her mind right now, sir," Adrian said. "We'll just take the check."

"I won't have it. This wasn't a normal meal, young man, you two were my—" he looked wistfully back to the kitchen, "*our* guests. You take this young lady wherever she needs to go. *Now*." Torelli slapped one hand into the other; his laugh was so strong it shook his belly. "Get up, get gone! Consider yourselves no longer welcome. But you, my dear," he said, pulling out Zoey's chair, "can come back whenever you want. You're always welcome."

As they left, Zoey seemed energized and hugged her violin close to her chest, leading the way out of the restaurant while Adrian fell behind. The senior Torelli was holding the kitchen doors open while on the other side his son stood with an arm around the woman in black. All three of them turned to Adrian looking grateful and happy. It was when the senior Torelli joined the woman by her side that Adrian knew he'd seen the two of them somewhere before. Walking out, he passed by the old black and white photo and understood that there were many second chances that night.

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"I'm sorry, I just got excited," Zoey said, looking down at their clasped hands. Adrian thought she'd have blushed were her skin not so pale. Even though she was apologizing for taking his hand like it was a simple mistake, she didn't release her grip.

Her hand was cold as ice and when it flexed he could feel the struggling joints working underneath. The cold, however, was countered by the blood pumping rapidly through his heart.

"It's OK," Adrian said. "Where are we going?"

"Across town, near the mountain. It's not far." She began walking.

"Can't you play anywhere?"

"I can, but if you *really* want to hear me play you've got to trust me." She bit her lip and he thought he caught her looking at his.

"OK. I trust you."

The sun had begun its descent and with the quilt of clouds still overhead the twilight arrived ahead of schedule. Streetlamps sparked to life and lit the still empty streets with their yellow glow. Wind in a steady gust blew the curls around Zoey's head and carried on it a stronger scent of earth. Adrian didn't find it unpleasant. It reminded him of walking in the woods.

The activity from the houses had spilled into their yards. Families crowded around in masses of hugs and kisses, too preoccupied with their joy to have noticed the pair holding hands. A college-aged girl ran down the street past them, laughing through tears while a dirty dog loped along behind her with eyes as rheumy as Zoey's, its tongue hanging out of its mouth. Adrian felt silly for ever feeling afraid of the girl he walked with. He embraced that feeling and squeezed her hand tighter.

At the end of the base of the lollipop they took a right toward the dark peak reaching toward the sky. They passed the houses of the branching neighborhoods with only the sporadic light or two coming from their windows. With no moon to gift its light, only Zoey's hand anchored Adrian to reality. The *how* of it all didn't matter anymore; what was real was how he felt. *Happy* was too small a word, but it was the only one he knew.

Down a dead-end street they arrived at a line of trees with a path between them. The pavement turned into a gravel road that sloped upward and off into the darkened wood. Had he been alone, some animal part of his brain would've warned him against venturing into a forest at night, though with Zoey holding his hand, nothing could've stopped him from following.

Up, up, and up the gravel road they went. An embankment framed either side and went down so far that eventually Adrian could see the tops of the trees spreading out beneath them, along with their town. The lollipop of Main Street, with the secondary streets growing off it like vines and the houses in turn growing off of them like grapes. He knew roughly where his house was, but in the distance they all looked the same.

Adrian slipped on a loose stone. "You OK?" Zoey asked.

"Yeah, I just lost my footing a little." Adrian looked at his feet as if the supervision would keep him upright.

"That doesn't matter because we're here!" Zoey shouted with a jubilant hop.

As the road leveled out they found themselves standing at the base of the mountain; piercing the sky with its summit, it lorded over them in darkness. To the right a wrought-iron fence bordered a sea of green grass peppered with gravestones, and at the foot of each lay an open casket like an abandoned bed with its sleeper off to join the waking world. With only one lonely tree at the back corner of the graveyard, the remaining light of the evening shone unabated on the sprouts of headstones. Adrian felt a rock in his stomach.

"I always loved that tree," Zoey said. "I tried to bring my mom up here and show it to her once, but she said I was being morbid." Her voice carried off like it was falling away. "Come on, it's over here."

She ran off to the left and away from the cemetery, across the clearing to the body of the mountain. An enormous, eight-foot-tall metal drainage pipe led into the stone two hundred feet to the other side. At the lip of the entrance, Zoey hopped over a small dip in the ground between it and the road where the pipe did its job to guide rainwater down the mountain and preserve the path they'd taken. Adrian followed her as she entered, though only a few feet in and she was already hard to see, just a silhouette against the circle of light at the other end.

"How did you find this place?" Adrian looked over his shoulder at the graves.

"I've been coming here for years," she said, running back to the pipe entrance. "I used to think the mountain would give me the sound I was looking for. I wouldn't have believed it if someone told me what I needed was man-made." She rapped a knuckle against the metal above her head, sending the sound barreling down the pipe until it felt as loud as a cannon.

"You used to climb the mountain?" Adrian asked, craning his neck in disbelief. In the waning daylight it seemed to tear a hole in the very sky.

"Only halfway, and only until I found this." Squatting down, Zoey opened her violin case and screwed together the two pieces that made up her bow. She tucked it under one arm and held the violin out to Adrian. "Do you want to hold it?"

"Sure." Adrian took it from her, realizing how delicate it felt. It was the color of cherry wood with a clear plastic chinrest; he'd always thought chinrests were black. The violin didn't seem capable of much, but he knew better and remembered to finish his thought from the restaurant.

"You know, I've actually heard you—" He looked past the violin and saw her shift into a kneeling position. She had one elbow to her knee and shook with the effort of trying to stand. He was immediately at her side and pulled her to her feet. "Are you OK?"

Upright again, she yawned so big that he could see her back teeth. "Yeah, sorry. Just tired is all."

With two hands he handed the violin back, afraid of breaking it. He wasn't sure if it was the fading light, but she looked even paler than before. "I can take you home if you'd like?"

She shook her head. "No. I want to play."

"You don't have to do this for me," Adrian said.

"Who says any of this was for you? I want to play." Her mouth smiled, but her eyes looked sad. She took a few deep breaths that seemed to invigorate her. "All right, I'm feeling good."

"Where should I stand?" Adrian asked.

"Come inside, maybe a third of the way, and then I'll go to the other end."

"Alright."

Inside the pipe, it was Adrian's feet that made the most noise. The hard bottoms of his dress shoes made hollow bongs whenever they connected with a ridge of the pipe, though Zoey's bare feet made no sound.

"In the winter this place is full of ice and it wreaks havoc on my strings," Zoey whispered. "And in the fall this whole thing becomes a wind tunnel and obliterates the notes." Her words were so quiet and sharp, he could feel them on his skin. "Spring floods the whole thing, which is why it was built in the first place, but in the summer it's perfect." Gently, she grabbed his elbow. "Stand here."

He watched as Zoey walked toward the light at the end of the pipe. With her muted steps, she became a shadow growing smaller. Something inside him wanted to shout out and tell her not to leave, but her whispers made him feel almost reverent. With resolve, he waited.

When Zoey was at her absolute smallest at the end of the pipe she turned and placed the bow on the strings. Still as stone she cloaked herself in silence. Adrian waited patiently for a minute he felt could've contained a year, and then finally, she played.

A single sweet note, high and peaceful, stretched out to fill the silence. Amplified by the pipe, it swelled as she rocked the bow across the strings, adding harmony to the lone note. Then it became two notes, holding one another, but not the same; one was an octave deeper than its companion so that it gave the illusion of two instruments playing in tandem. He thought the two notes were singing to one another, a love song, to be sure. Then they stopped abruptly, as if the introduction was what might've been but would never be again. From then followed a series of chords so brief and beautiful Adrian wondered if he'd heard them in the first place. They formed a wall of sound that hit him like a wave, threatening to carry him away; he wanted to let it. This was her song proper. The universe as only she saw it.

The whole world had been replaced by sound. Their town, their school, the people in it were all given form within the music and at its center, he saw her, a staccato with curly hair. Brighter than an exploding star she outshone the entire rest of the sky and became that first note, woven into everything. He saw himself too, somewhere in the crowd of billions she painted into reality with her strokes. Her note weaved through the song, seeking a place to harmonize as it had in the beginning. One by one she paired her notes with the others and a sourness spread. Adrian could feel the heat coming off her note, the desperation and longing that it felt. He heard it wildly seeking its mate as the tempo increased. The music grew fevered and low, sluggishly dragging itself across the

deeper notes as if crawling through broken glass on its knees. Her note was there still, but it was drowning, changing, becoming something that it didn't want to be amidst the conspiracy of the others. The offending notes tried new tactics to drown out the first: they pressed, they squeezed, but the note held on, shaking but never losing its strength. The darkest of the notes attempted a melody, a single crushing weight that would stamp out dissenters forever, employing a trick so cruel it stole the breath from Adrian's lungs. The disharmony incorporated a version of her note into its dirge, a facsimile. The melody now played on with this imposter, leaving the original alone—so terribly alone. She stopped playing.

Again, as in the beginning, the lone note rang out, struggling to finish its sentence and wavering for the first time. It was so tired, so indescribably beyond exhaustion that it drifted off. She played the note a second time, slower, and without the passion it had once had. She dragged her bow for the third time; the note was only a whisper in the cosmos until it stopped halfway through the measure. The final sound Adrian heard was the pounding of his own heart.

Although her body remained an outline, he could tell she was staring straight ahead and through where he stood. He was invisible, and she looked beyond him. He turned to look, hoping to see what she did and saw the graveyard. Beautiful and green, quiet and welcoming. It was in that moment after hearing her song that he understood her death had nothing to do with him. He spoke, then, not bothering to look away from the cemetery, the reverberations carrying his words back into the pipe.

"I tried to tell you earlier, but I've heard you play before," he said. "My parents were taking us away for a ski weekend, so they said they'd pick me up after school. When my dad got caught in a meeting I had to wait for a few hours. They figured I wouldn't leave so they didn't bother telling me, but instead of waiting out front I wandered around the empty building and heard something in the auditorium. I think you were practicing for a winter concert, the one last year?"

"The Snowflake Pageant." Her voice sounded close.

"That must've been it. It was just you, though. No one else was there. You stood onstage and played the most beautiful song. It wasn't anything like the one you just played, but it was amazing."

"It was the same song, and the theater was full of people." She laughed softly. "You're just remembering things differently." Her voice hovered just over his shoulder now.

Of course, Adrian thought, it was a pageant, and people would've been there watching. In the darkness of the pipe and in the bright light of his memory, he could only remember Zoey; no one else mattered enough to recall.

"When I think back, it's just the two of us though. I told my friends how I'd seen you play and how it made me feel. That's where they must've gotten the idea for me to ask you out." He turned to her, wanting to finish his confession, when she kissed him.

Adrian heard her violin and bow hit the floor with a crash. Her hands found his cheeks in the dark and she kissed him with the same passion her playing had held. His hands found her back and pulled her chilled body closer. She exhaled through her nose, relaxing as she did, blowing chilled breath down his neck. Gravity abandoned him and he felt like he was drifting. Her hands grasped at his face, pulling his deeper into hers as he did the same. He wrapped his fingers in the tangles of her hair, moving his hands in an affectionate caress until his fingers felt a hole. Immediately he pulled back, remembering everything.

She collapsed. It wasn't a graceful fall, but he tried to catch her. In the darkness where they landed he could see only scant details. Her eyes looked to be rolling off into her head, but her smile persisted. She kept one hand on his face while the other fell to the steel beneath her.

"Zoey, *Zoey!*" Adrian cried out, the pipe magnifying his panic.

"This was so nice," she said through a yawn, her eyes fluttering. "I'm glad I got up for it."

"It's ok. You're here now. You don't have to go," Adrian whimpered.

"You're sweet. Thank you for taking me out." She curled into him, rolling onto her side and burying her face in his stomach.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. For everything. Please don't go!" He felt himself grasping for any combination of magic words that would make her stay. He wondered if the power might lie in tears and screamed at himself for not crying. He begged the universe to help, and begged his tears to fall, though when the last of his cries died off in echoes, he was left with silence.

He tried his best to lift her as effortlessly as the heroes did in the movies, one hand behind her knees and another behind her shoulders, but she was limp and stubborn. Instead he draped her arms over his shoulders like a cape and lifted with his knees. With his hands free, he was able to pick up her violin and bow. Her nose nestled into his neck and her head rolled back and forth as he walked her back outside.

The clouds had departed all at once while they were inside the pipe, revealing a crimson sky with a few brave stars poking through the atmosphere. Nothing about the evening made sense to him, except carrying her to the cemetery, to the tree at the back of the lot, the one she liked so much. His legs gave out when he was just a few feet from the trunk, and what was left of Zoey tumbled onto the grass next to him. Her face

turned away and she looked to be asleep on the warm summer grass. He lifted himself onto his knees and read the tombstone just beyond where she lay.

*Zoey Young*

*At peace, at home, at last.*

He thought it was the only place she belonged if she didn't belong with him. He picked her up and placed her in her coffin. After tucking the violin and bow under her hands he closed the lid.

Adrian didn't have the words to convey what he felt but he wanted to say something. He whistled a nonsense tune, trying to say a goodbye with the only music he could muster. While he blew out the notes, the coffin slowly sank into the ground with a gentle rumbling. When it was beneath the surface he could still hear it moving under the earth till at last it stopped. He finished his song and ended on his best rendition of the note she'd used in her recital. It rang out over the hills, and he wept.

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He made it home, which was as still and quiet as when he'd left it. He couldn't tell whether his parents were back with all the lights out, but it didn't matter. Drumming his fingers on the kitchen island as he walked by it, he noticed a new pile of garbage indicating that the A-List had made another pass at the pantry. He walked back to the pool house.

Inside he saw Anna, Alice, and Arthur leaning on one another, asleep and gently snoring on the couch. He thought of the grace Zoey had shown by peacefully passing on and decided to let his friends sleep till dawn before cutting them loose.

# God Is...So Lonely

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by Lone Cypress Workshop

“Against Loneliness...  
even the gods themselves  
contend in vain”

~ ki ~

**P**eople are always telling you to try and put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Try to think about what they are thinking. What they are feeling. This can provide invaluable insight into who they are.

I have been trying to do this for what seems like forever. The attempt can truly be a window into someone else’s soul. But seeing things from another person’s point of view is a difficult challenge indeed, to disassociate yourself from your experience, your beliefs, and your own personality, from your own preferences and value system. Think, for a moment, what those other people are feeling—and more importantly, why. Understand what their needs are, and what their motivations are, what makes them tick. If you can do this, you may just catch a glimpse of what they see, and feel what they feel. This goes a long way toward understanding others and opens an additional window into self and discovery.

This is the goal of empathy. Many people use the word empathy without understanding what it really means; so many people, so many words, so little understanding. I try to talk about things that can change your life. This is something that has changed mine.

There are so many things that are truly frustrating in this life. People not under-

standing the meanings of the words they use is probably the most frustrating of all. Communication involves relaying a message that is consistent, valid, and ultimately understood clearly. You cannot exchange ideas with someone else in another language unless one, or both, can speak both languages. And even then you have to rely on the other person to interpret the language, with all of its nuances and inflections and context.

Empathy is NOT sympathy. Empathy is *not* compassion. These things may derive from the empathy you can discover, but they are not requisite. I can experience empathy in relation to someone's situation or position, yet feel no sympathy for their plight. One needs to be objective to receive the most from an excursion into empathy. One gathers information to make a judgement about what the other person may be thinking and feeling. I may not feel sympathy for a person who put themselves into a bad situation and is now trying to deal with it, although I may feel sympathy if I find they are not responsible. If I do not feel sympathy because they are responsible for their predicament, it does not preclude me from having a valid empathetic understanding of the problem. While empathy and sympathy might normally go hand in hand, one is not imperative to the other.

So what does any of this have to do with the Big Guy, the Eternal Kahuna? Throughout my life I have never come face to face with a single person—not one—who ever joined me in the attempt to question whether we could ever hope to feel empathy for the entity many of us refer to as God. I find myself in a weird minority of one, once again, because I have thought about this hundreds if not thousands of times while following my own path of discovery. Why in the world would anyone want to think about any problems a god might have? Why would one care about this particular deity? He (or she) is eternal. All-knowing. All-seeing. He can have no wants because everything is his as his whims dictate.

Well, I don't see it that way. After all, unless all the innumerable other gods that mankind has contrived over the millennia exist to keep him company, what does he do with his spare time? Or does he not have any? I mean, he worked hard for six days, rested the seventh, and he's been on retirement ever since. (More on that later.) And a lot of those gods weren't really nice people—maybe he doesn't even like them. So what else has he got? Not a lot of conversation with a Holy Bird (we are talking the Christian God here), and as far as his son goes, he's a little preachy and conversations could get heated.

No, I think of a different reality. And all jokes aside, my philosophy makes me question whether God could in fact be lonely, and that makes me sad. Why? Because I have attempted to have empathy for the poor guy when it looks like no one else cares.

While most of us might think we would welcome being a god, a bit of thought might make us reconsider. The concept of immortality has been portrayed many times in literature, especially in science fiction (one of my all-time favorite genres) and in movies, with many takes on the eternal warrior who keeps getting killed and coming back to life. There must be a ho-hum aspect to getting killed hundreds of times even though you know it's not permanent. At some point, would you not want it to be? Or does existence continue to be exciting forever?

From my point of view, immortality must get pretty boring after a couple of millennia. By then you've experienced every perception and read every book ever written in every language because you've had time to learn them all. What comes next? I guess you take a week to create a universe in six days and then take some time off. (Just a side note here: I do not think evolution and creationism are mutually exclusive—but again, another day, another discussion.)

That is one reason why I think that god may be lonely, and why he started each of us on our own journey of discovery. He wants company. He wants to have a conversation, and he would like to have that conversation with us. He is waiting. He has given us everything we need. He has time. He has waited an eternity already and is prepared to wait another. My sadness is increased because I see that we are not evolving at quite the speed he was hoping for. Or maybe we are—the expectations of a god are tough to figure out.

There are many things I realize I do not know, and that I may very well never know. The understanding of the soul, and of eternal life, are part of that non-knowledge. I view life as that journey that takes us from here to there. Our current lives seem short and insignificant, and that may be all there is; but it seems like such a waste if this is so. I choose to believe differently. I am not an individual with a strong faith in things that cannot be explained. God and religion are two of those things. I choose to believe in a force that directs time and matter, of which we are all a part. I would like to believe that the soul is a real thing, that mankind is part of a communal consciousness, that there is meaning in life and we will be given the opportunity to pursue enlightenment and a place at the table for that discussion with God as equals. I am not there yet. But, the pilgrimage is enjoyable at times.

These beliefs bring me a semblance of peace and contentment during the arduous sojourn. I will continue to direct my life in a positive direction, my behavior toward values of integrity and honesty, searching always for the elusive truth that will clarify and enhance whatever time I have left, whether days or millennia. Do not live life for

the rewards, or the punishments, that lie on the other side of the light; live life the way you know it should be lived, simply because you know it is right and that you should not live it any other way. Peace, contentment—and, dare I say—happiness, will never be realized by doing those things we know for certain are wrong and destructive. Doing what is good, and what is right, may not bring us happiness either, but it will always nudge us in the right direction.

Our paths are taken one step at a time. One step forward, then another, and then maybe one backwards—though hopefully not two steps back and one forward. As long as we make progress, no matter how small, we are one step closer to the ultimate conversation with that which we need and desire, be it god, or self. It may take an eternity, but if you take a moment to contemplate that progress, you will understand that the end result will be inevitable. This would bring me happiness, at least until I take the next step, forward or back. Look forward to the day when you reach the end of your adventure and God is there to meet you with a smile on his face and a tear in his eye.

“So good to see you! I have been waiting. I need no longer be lonely.”

# from *Love on the Farside of Vegas*

by Daniel Ellison

Dion and Gerry packed and repacked, checking and rechecking every item for the hike. Dion went over it in his mind. The trail started out easy enough, but when they ran out of road, the unmarked trail was straight up over steep terrain. This was a hike for only the most experienced hiker. "I think we have everything we might need," said Dion.

Gerry nodded. "We better get some sleep if we get up at midnight."

"Right," said Dion. "Nick, Gerry, and I need to get started by 2:00 a.m. We should make Mahogany Flats by 6:00 p.m., worst case. If everything goes well, we could make it by 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. So, Nick, you'll need to be at Mahogany Flats by 3:00."

"Okay. I'm going to walk over to the Furnace Creek lounge and watch a little Monday night football. The Saints are playing the Astros," said Nick.

"Take the Jeep," said Dion.

"Naw, it's a short walk."

The alarm startled Dion. Penny was telling him something, but he couldn't remember what. Gerry was making coffee and Nick was snoring; better use the toilet before he woke up, Nick could tie it up for the better part of half an hour.

"Want me to cook eggs?" asked Gerry.

"Not for me. I will load up on oatmeal with raisins, orange juice, and toast. Lots of carbs."

"Makes sense," said Gerry. "I'll do the same. I'll wake up Nick."

Dion took the back seat of the Jeep, giving Gerry enough space to stretch his legs.

Nick drove out of the campground and headed west on the highway leading to Badwater. He turned off on West Side Road and headed for Shorty's Well. Nick parked in a small pullout.

"Wait a minute, guys," said Dion. "Shorty's grave is just two hundred yards down the road. We have a few extra minutes, so if you guys don't mind, I'd like to see it."

"Who's Shorty?" asked Nick.

"He was the quintessential gold prospector for this area. The number one chaser of rainbows in these parts. They say the man could smell gold," said Dion.

"How do you know all that shit?" asked Gerry.

"I looked it up. Besides, I've been interested in looking for gold ever since I looked for IEDs and mines. I've been thinking of buying a Garrett Infinium metal detector. It can find gold and other metals. Anyway, it's a thought," said Dion.

Dion shined his headlamp on the marker attached to a small stone monument. He read the epitaph: *Bury me beside Jim Dayton in the valley we loved. Above me write: Here lies Shorty Harris, a single blanket prospector.* Dion then turned to Gerry and Nick. "That is a man I could have been friends with. This is a monument to friendship, amigos. Talk about striking it rich. Thank you, Shorty Harris and Jim Dayton."

"Dion, you're figuring we can average one and a half miles an hour for the hike," Gerry said. "I like it. My knee should hold out at that speed. I don't like the added weight, but that mountain has snow on the top."

A full moon hung in the night while meteors streaked across the sky and the Milky Way marked the edge of the galaxy. Off in the distance, the coyotes sang a song of the desert. All this greeted the three amigos as each drank a cup of coffee while gazing east out across the salt flats, awash in the moonlight. Dante's View, at the crest of the Black Mountains, loomed in the darkness above the Badwater pool. The snow-capped peak of Telescope rose above them, bathed in the golden light of a harvest moon.

"This is it," Dion said. "Let's head out, amigos. Gerry, you set the pace. I'll take over when Nick heads back."

With Gerry leading off, they started up a Jeep road leading up Hanaupah Canyon from Shorty's Well toward Hanaupah Spring, which was ten miles into the hike and the only reliable water. They walked in silence, as if this was the only way to pay proper respect and tribute to the valley and surrounding mountains. The sawing wind, a rattling of dry sage, the scurrying of the small creatures foraging in the moonlight, and the hoot of a burrowing owl all blended to a soft nocturne of the night. After two hours, Nick bade his friends goodbye and good luck. "Let's share a cold one at Mahogany Flats," he said.

Dawn broke and the two amigos found themselves at the eight-mile mark of the hike. This was about halfway in mileage and about one-third of the way in elevation to the summit. So far, the trail had been a gradual grade. Dion checked his altimeter. It read 3,400 feet. Another thousand feet of elevation or approximately two more miles before they reached Hanaupah Spring.

Dion glanced at his watch. It was a combination watch, altimeter, GPS, and a diving gauge that measured water depth, a gift from the US Navy. "How's the knee, Gerry?"

"Okay, so far."

"Well, we're almost there."

They broke out their breakfast provisions, mixing water with powdered milk, slicing a banana into their bowls, and filling the bowls with granola and raisins. The sun first broke over the Funeral Mountains to the northeast. As it ascended, sunlight spilled over the Black Mountain range to the south, the light sliding down the western slope to Badwater.

"Jesus, what a sight! You know, Gerry, in its own way, Death Valley is as grand as the Grand Canyon."

After breakfast, Dion took the point. It was a long hike up the east-west ridge that wound its way to the north-south peak ridge that, in fact, was the Mahogany Flats trail to the summit.

The going was slow. Intermittent patches of scree made the footing difficult and dangerous. "Christ," Dion said. "Half the time, I don't know if I'm on the trail or not. Sing out if you think we've gone astray. It's two steps forward and one half back."

Gerry fell back. "I gotta slow down. This fucking scree is killing my knee." Dion stopped and drank from his water bottle. He turned to Gerry. "Give me your pack, at least until we can get out of this scree." Taking Gerry's pack, he slipped it on, covering his chest as he pushed onward. He concentrated on his breathing, exhaling on the same foot, trying for a rhythm of hiking and breathing. Now all conversation was out. There was nothing to do but climb. Just climb, don't think, just climb. Climb, climb, climb, sustain the effort, no thoughts.

Dion knew Gerry was staying close and sensed that he was pushing to keep up. Dion held up his hand. "Gerry, remember that tip we read in the Grand Canyon? Let's take a break, five minutes' worth, with our feet pointed toward the summit. The heart won't have to work against gravity. It'll give us a chance to catch our breath."

After their break, Gerry took his pack and on they went, silent partners in a silent wildland, the mountain an island rising out of the sea of desert. Above the treeless peak, now covered in snow, the slopes were teeming with creatures both great and small:

rodents, chukars, snakes, insects, mule deer, bobcats, lynx, fox, coyotes, and mountain lions. The Panamints, a fault-blocked range of mountains, pushed up through tectonic activity, steep on the east side but more sloped on the west side and still growing. The valleys below were still sinking, a horst and graben kind of thing. Geologic speak for yin-yang.

Time slowed, their pace slowed, and the shadows grew long, but at last they reached the junction of the north-south ridge, the standard trail leading from Mahogany Flats to the summit. Dion's altimeter read 9900 feet; only 1200 feet more to the summit on an excellent trail. "How you feeling?"

"The knee's not bothering me, but it's hard to breathe. I need to go slow."

Dion stopped short of the summit, letting Gerry go first over the final meters to the peak. Gerry stopped. "I will not hold your hand, but we touch the summit together. We better not linger; it looks like rough weather heading our way."

To the west lay China Lake and the Panamint Valley, rimmed by the Sierra Nevada and Mount Whitney, the highest point in the lower forty-eight. To the east lay Death Valley and the Black Mountains. In the distance beyond was Mount Charleston, all but lost in a haze, and not far below was Badwater, the lowest spot in North America. Two navy fighter jets that Dion recognized as F-14 Tomcats streaked across the Panamint Valley in mock combat.

Tucked in a fissure of rock at their feet was a metal ammunition box. Gerry opened it, took out the ledger, signed it and handed it to Dion. "The book is almost full. We'll tell the ranger when we get back," said Gerry.

Dion nodded, signed the ledger, slid it back in the ammo box, snapped it shut, and stuffed it back in the crack next to the cairn.

Dion checked his watch. "We have seven more miles to go to reach Mahogany Flats. It's about a three thousand-foot drop in elevation and an easy trail. I'm figuring we can make it in less than three hours, but like you said, rough weather is on the way."

The thunderheads to the west were boiling up over the Sierra and as they spoke, the air was turning colder. "I'll take the point, Dion, but we have to stay close and stick together."

As they descended the mountain, Dion eyed the storm clouds moving their way. It didn't look good. Gerry took a breather at the four-mile mark down from the summit. The clouds had overtaken them.

"I figure we have about three miles to go," Gerry said. A few snowflakes started to fly about in the cold, swirling wind. Gerry shook his head. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Twenty minutes later, they came upon two women resting beside the trail. They looked like a mother and daughter pair. The younger one was standing and the older one sat rubbing her ankle. The snow was still light, but threatening to intensify. Dion nodded to them. "Everything okay?"

"I sprained my ankle. It's not too bad, we're just resting," she said.

"We're more than willing to help. My name is Dion, and that's my buddy Gerry. We're headed down to Mahogany Flats."

"Thank you, but I think we can manage," said the older woman.

Dion looked at the pile of equipment next to her. He doubted that even between the two of them, they would manage. He laughed and looked straight at her. "I don't for a minute think you're not capable since you hauled all of that up here," he said, pointing to her equipment. "But, suit yourself."

Gerry shook his head, looking back at the peak and the storm gathering around it. "The weather is turning fast, and it looks like we're in for a good blow."

"I'm Carole," said the younger woman, "and she is my mother. She's a photographer and yes, we could use your help."

"Carole—oh, never mind. I'm Kathryn, and thanks for the offer. I'm afraid I brought up too much equipment, considering this weather and my dumb ankle."

Gerry swung her pack onto his shoulder. "Let's get going; it's getting bad up here."

"Gerry, go on with Carole and Kathryn, I'll sweep," Dion said. He followed the three, praying that the snow would hold off until they could get to Mahogany Flats. Kathryn kept up, despite her ankle. He adjusted her camera equipment pack, which included a tripod. Dion guessed it weighed somewhere around fifteen pounds. In today's world of digital photography, that was a heavy load.

Down they went, racing against the elements and failing light. The trail, however, was marked.

Kathryn, he guessed, was in her forties. She was, he judged, a fit, tough, and seasoned hiker, but independent to the point of being a little self-destructive. He could relate to that. Anyway, he didn't blame her for being leery of two strange men, high on a mountain in the middle of nowhere.

By the time they reached to Mahogany Flats, the snow had closed in. Nick was nowhere in sight. "Our buddy was supposed to meet us here, but there's no way he could make it," said Gerry.

Carole spoke above the rising wind. "For now we're stuck, so you guys are welcome to share our tent and ride down tomorrow with us."

Gerry spoke first. "Thanks, but we can manage. We have our sleeping bags and we'll cut some of the piñon tree branches to make a nice shelter."

Dion shrugged. "We can manage."

Kathryn hobbled over to Dion, invading his space, and held his gaze. "Yeah, you can manage, but you will freeze your asses off. Accept Carole's offer."

It was close quarters. The tent could hold three people and their backpacks, but four was pushing it. Dion and Gerry pulled their sleeping bags out of their packs. "It's a good thing we brought these with us. You can't go to the mountains unprepared, because shit always happens," said Dion. He nudged Gerry with his elbow and pointed to the tent wall. Gerry gave him a quick glance and a slight nod and unrolled his sleeping bag on the indicated spot. Dion spread his out next to Gerry and Kathryn put hers next to Dion.

All four took off their boots, jackets, and wool watch caps, rolling the jackets up to form a pillow. Gerry donned a sweatshirt from his pack and slipped it over the long-sleeve polypro he wore as his first layer.

Kathryn took off her toque. Her deep auburn hair framed her freckled face as it fell just above her shoulders. She caught Dion looking and smiled. He busied himself getting his sweatshirt out of his pack. The two women followed suit.

Gerry fingered his polypro. "I love this stuff."

"I live in it when I'm photographing outdoors in the cold," said Kathryn.

"So, what do you photograph?" asked Dion.

"The Eastern Sierra and the Death Valley region."

"You make a living doing it?"

"The short answer is no. I'm a mining engineer. I have a photography studio and a small gallery in Lone Pine. The photography is a hobby and a good excuse to explore the outdoors."

"What do you do, Carole?" asked Dion.

"I'm a veterinary surgeon."

"In Lone Pine?"

"No, I live in Sacramento," she said. "What about you?"

"I'm a retired navy man."

"I'm also retired from the navy as a steamfitter. But on my last job, I was a roughneck on an offshore oil rig," said Gerry.

Kathryn pulled her hair into a ponytail. "The company I work for is always looking for people with your skills, Gerry."

"I'll keep you in mind," he said.

“What about you, Dion, what did you do in the navy?” she asked.

“I was a boatswain mate on a destroyer and later I switched over to explosive ordnance disposal.”

“Explosives, so you’re a dynamite specialist?” she asked.

He laughed. “Yeah, that’s me, a dynamite specialist.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I’ll bet you are.”

“Mom,” said Carole.

Kathryn waved her off. “I’m always on the lookout for the skills these two have.” She turned back to Dion and Gerry. “My company is about to start operations not too far from here, and I guess I was thinking about trying to recruit you guys.”

Dion laughed. “Don’t count me out, I may be interested. I’ll think it over. I’m not committed to retirement.”

“Yeah,” said Gerry, “we’re on a road trip. The one we didn’t take when we were young. Dion here calls it a retro-trip.”

“My company is looking to hire and I’m the project manager. Might you two be interested?” asked Kathryn.

“Speaking for myself, I’m interested, but I want to finish our trip,” said Dion.

“What about you, Gerry?” she asked.

“The same goes for me,” he said.

“That’s fine, I’ll give you my card and you call me when you finish your retro-trip. Oh, and if you have a wife or a girlfriend, the accommodations are not all that great at the site, so they’d have to stay in Lone Pine,” said Kathryn.

“We’re not weighed down by either,” said Dion.

“I think it’s great you guys are taking a retro-trip, but why?” asked Carole.

Dion sat silent. The wind rattled the tent. Gerry intervened. “Our other amigo had a bout of prostate cancer and a nasty divorce about a year and a half ago. Anyway, he had a bucket list he shared with us. Dion had just retired from the navy and I was recuperating from a nasty accident on the oil rig. So, we agreed to help Nick with his bucket list. Dion and I decided that we both needed a do-over in life. What better way than a retro-trip to get something started?”

“The trip sounds like it’s a big deal for you guys,” said Kathryn.

“It is,” said Dion. “I didn’t know how big a deal it was until we hiked and camped out in the Grand Canyon. That adventure turned out to be Nick’s great ah-ha moment in life.”

“What about you? Have you had any ah-ha moments since you started the trip?” she asked.

Dion smiled, "I have. Every day is an ah-ha moment. In fact, meeting you in a snow-storm is one of those moments. Are you married or involved?"

"Oh!"

Dion held her gaze.

A quick smile crossed her lips. "I'm single. My late husband, Carole's father, died in a car accident when she was fifteen. My work has kept me from getting involved in a lasting relationship."

Dion let out his breath. His heart had skipped a beat or two when she said she was single. "Both of you have my heartfelt condolences for your loss."

Kathryn shifted as she turned away from Carole, her poker face revealed nothing.

"At the time Mom and Dad were divorced, thank you, Dion," said Carole.

"You're welcome, Carole."

"Dion, have you ever been married?" asked Kathryn.

"Mom! For God's sake."

"It's okay. Once, but that was twenty-eight years ago. After that, the navy became my mistress, which ruled out any chance for a lasting relationship. Besides, I was always gone or about to go on a mission."

"So, what about now? I mean, now that you could stay in one place long enough to get involved?" asked Carole.

"Good question. I haven't met the woman yet." Dion looked away as he rubbed his eyes with his index finger and thumb, squelching an incipient tear. "At least, not since the one I married who up and died, so who knows? Anyway, it's not about having the time, being too busy, or any of that shit. It's just chemistry; you either have it or you don't."

"Shit, Dion!" said Gerry. "After Penny died, you never gave another woman a chance."

"Whoa, where'd that come from?" asked Dion.

Gerry looked at Dion and then turned to the two women. "Penny was my sister. Me and this clever Cajun bastard go way back, and so here I'm listening to this conversation. It seems all I've heard are excuses for not being involved. It doesn't take long to get involved, just a willingness to do so. We're in the middle of a snowstorm, in the Panamints, in a crowded tent, and we're involved. I've said enough." Gerry rolled over on his side and tucked his head in his sleeping bag. "Good night all."

"I'm beat and I can't keep my eyes open much longer," said Carole as she followed Gerry's example.

Neither Kathryn nor Dion spoke. Dion studied the tent floor, and then he heard Gerry snore. He lifted his eyes and met her gaze. "For years Gerry has been on my case for me to let go of my feelings for Penny and move on."

"Have you?" she asked.

"I..." He stopped himself in mid-sentence. "That question deserves more than a glib answer. I need time to think about it. I think I'll try to sleep. Good night, Kathryn."

"Good night, Dion."

They hunkered down in their sleeping bags and Dion hoped that the storm would be gone in the morning.

Dion and Kathryn woke before the other two. She put her finger to her lips, shushing him. She pulled on her wool toque, making sure it covered her ears before she stuck her head out through the tent opening. A blanket of snow sparkled in the receding dawn; the ascending sun turned the azure sky white over the Funeral Mountains. Snowflake prisms turned the pinion trees surrounding the campsite red, blue, and golden. Stillness filled the air.

Kathryn stepped out of the tent and stretched her tall, lean frame. Her breath formed a small suspended cloud in the cold. Dion followed her out, and she spoke. "You go north and I'll go south. I'm sure we both have to pee."

They met back at the tent just as Gerry and Carole emerged. "North for the boys, south for the girls," said Kathryn.

Dion watched Carole walk away. She looked a lot like Kathryn and had the same confident stride. "How's the ankle?" asked Dion.

"It's a lot better. Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome and thank you and your daughter for sharing your tent with us. Also, it was a pleasure talking to you."

"Likewise. If you ever get to Lone Pine, stop by my studio."

"I'm sure we will. Don't forget to give me your card. Now let me help you break camp and load your truck."

Dion and Carole rolled up the sleeping bags while Kathryn and Gerry took down the tent and stored it in a stuff sack. Dion lifted the door to the truck cap and they put the gear in the bed of the pickup, a Dodge four-by-four with a crew cab.

"Nice ride," said Gerry as he settled himself next to Dion in the back seat.

Kathryn turned the key and the starter turned over several times, but the engine didn't catch. "It does this once in a while. Maybe I flooded the engine. We'll wait a few minutes. Anyway, my company furnishes both the truck and the gas to run it; otherwise, I'd be driving a Toyota."

She turned the starter key and after a couple of grinds the truck roared to life. Easing back on the accelerator, she let the engine warm up. "This time I kept the gas pedal to the floor instead of pumping it."

"That worked," said Gerry.

Carole pulled her toque further down around her ears as she hunched over and rubbed her hands. "I'm cold. I'll be glad to get out of here."

Kathryn put the truck in four-wheel drive and started down the road to the parking lot at Wildrose Canyon Road and the Charcoal Kilns 1.6 miles away. She was pleased that neither of the men had tried to tell her how to start the truck. "Buckle up and hold on, guys. This road is a six-and-a-half-percent grade; a bear in good, dry weather, never mind the snow."

"Do you think there'll be snow at the Charcoal Kilns?" asked Dion.

"Maybe a dusting. It's a little early in the year for the snow level to drop below seven thousand feet."

It took Kathryn almost forty-five minutes to reach the Charcoal Kilns. Wooden barriers blocked the road leading to the parking lot. Dion got out and moved them aside, letting Kathryn through.

He replaced the barriers and walked over to her truck next to Nick and the Jeep.

"Jesus, I'm glad to see you guys. I drove up here yesterday evening and when it got dark, I drove back. If you hadn't shown up, I was going to call the Park Service and report you missing," said Nick.

"Thank you, Nick, for your concern, but we got lucky. These two ladies let us share their tent and we made it through the night without a problem. Let me introduce you to Kathryn and her daughter Carole," said Gerry.

"Were you two just out for a hike?" asked Nick.

"No, my mother is a photographer, so she was trying to get a sunrise picture of Telescope Peak, but she injured her ankle on the way back down and your friends helped us out as the storm hit. How come you didn't hike up with your friends?"

Nick laughed. "I would have, but they wanted to hike up from Shorty's Well. Anyway, we hiked the Grand Canyon; it was something I'd always wanted to do. I got dehydrated the first day, but I was okay the next day. The hike was the hardest thing I've ever done."

Carole cocked her head to one side. "Well, you should climb Telescope. The view on the way up and at the top is fantastic. It's the only place where you can see the lowest point in North America and the highest point in the lower forty-eight at the same time. However, climb it from Mahogany Flats."

Dion and Gerry tossed their packs in the back of the Jeep, then Dion caught Gerry's eye and raised his eyebrows with a slight nod toward Nick. Gerry smiled. Dion

busied himself rearranging the gear in the back of the Jeep, and then walked over to Kathryn and Nick.

“Did you bring a thermos of coffee?” he asked Nick.

“I did. I’ll get it.”

“Would you and Carole like a cup of coffee?” asked Dion.

“We would,” said Carole.

Kathryn finished her coffee and handed the cup to Nick. “Thanks, I needed that.” She smiled at Dion and rested her hand on his shoulder as she pointed to Nick and Gerry. “You have great friends. We talked about personal stuff I never talk about, but what were we to do? Talk about the weather? It was a special moment granted by the weather gods and you still owe me an answer.” She handed him her card.

He slipped the card into his wallet. “Thanks.” He gave her a quick hug, which she turned into a long one, then stepped back holding both of his hands. “I hope we meet again.”

He applied a small amount of pressure to her hands, “We will. I’ll make that happen.”

She held his gaze a second, dropped her hands and hugged him as she whispered in his ear, “You better,” then climbed into her truck.

He waved as she drove away. When the truck was out of sight, he took her card out of his wallet. It read, “Kathryn Beaudry – P.E.” with her phone number and email address.

Kathryn watched the road as she drove away, remaining silent as she turned onto the paved section of the main road.

Carole tapped her mother’s shoulder. “What was that about?” she asked.

“Oh, shit, I don’t know, something happened between us, but with my luck, I probably won’t see him again.”

“You like him, don’t you?”

“Yes, but let’s drop the subject. I gave him my card. It’s up to him.”

[Love on the Farside of Vegas *is available on Amazon.*]

# The Beauty of Seasons

by Cheryl Barnhart

**A**lways, I counted them...  
the days, the years.  
They go by as sure as I hold my breath,  
but I must breathe again.  
Nothing was ever better, but so fleeting.  
In the beginning I had forever.  
Like in spring when the buds are on the trees,  
I can't see the leaves dry and fall.  
I take in the warm, fragrant air.  
I hear the birds and frogs.  
I see many smiles that are blissful and beatific.  
I had so much time in the spring.  
You were my tiny joy.  
I was your world.  
But time whirls by whether we will it or not.  
There is a countdown I don't want.  
18, 17, 16, 15...  
You're talking and eating and walking.  
14, 13, 12, 11...  
You see the world beyond me...  
10, 9, 8, 7...

and venture into it...

6, 5, 4...

without me.

3, 2, 1...

Like leaves near their end,

I watch as you gently drift to and fro preparing for a new season.

My winter is here now,

but it's surprisingly beautiful.

You visit like a snowflake, drifting in to see me.

You melt away,

but you'll come again.

# The Hallway

by Cheryl Barnhart

As I walked into the hospital, I smelled the wilting flowers on the nurses' desk. They were still giving off a fragrant scent. My thoughts were with my sick friend, her emergency surgery, and the hope that everything was fine. I heard my heels tap in the corridor while a nurse's sensible shoes squeaked as she moved down the hall. I saw the light above a patient's room turn on as he waited for a nurse to venture inside. I heard a forlorn family's quiet chatter as they waited for news.

Was I the only one feeling the symphony of the people? Everyone here but me seemed intent on their one purpose. They were either here because they were ill, or they were here to help those who were ill. I was here for my friend, but thoughts of my own recent illness were with me. My sickness had made everything stop. Afterwards, time had ticked more slowly. A moment turned into a complete experience of the world around me. Even though I was feeling better, I could no longer simply walk through a hallway without seeing anything but my destination.

As I thought about where my life was headed, the picture in front of me came into focus. How odd it seemed. The sky was on the bottom, and the lily pads were in the air. It was like a pastel version of a Monet but upside down.

Why was this picture hung like this? Maybe it was a prank. I asked a nurse and she told me that the hallway had been painted a year before the picture was hung. She just thought it was an abstract painting.

I stood there by myself and wondered how a picture could hang upside down for a year without anybody noticing it.

I stared at the upside-down picture for a moment longer before turning it upright and hanging it back on the wall.

“Hmmm,” I whispered to myself, “maybe someone else will see this picture?”

I turned it once more, hung it back up, and smiled as I went in to see my friend.

# A Vicious Pixie

by K. Dalton Barrett

A elianna's fireball went right up the fowler guard's nose. The surprise and pain—clearly he wasn't expecting *that* from a pixie—knocked him right off his duck, which kept on charging at her.

*That was the easy part*, Aelianna thought as she narrowly dodged the duck's snapping beak. The ducks were always smarter and tougher than their human riders.

The duck spread its wings and dug its feet into the forest floor.

Aelianna increased the speed of her vibrations.

The duck, stopped now, turned back.

Aelianna felt warmth surge through her as the frequency of her light moved beyond the duck's visible range.

The duck, surprisingly agile for a beast big enough to carry an armored human, halted its attack. Unsurprised by its prey's sudden disappearance, it scanned the area.

Aelianna flew behind the duck's head, being careful to stay far enough away so it wouldn't feel her heat. She searched the metal of the duck's helmet for anything reflective, even the brass ridges and rivets connecting the leather sections. No luck. Down one side there was still nothing, not even on the creature's protective leggings. If she could only find a point of reflection, she could turn it into a weapon.

The duck snapped in her direction; she'd gotten too close.

Aelianna swept around behind, beginning to feel the strain and heat of maintaining the higher light frequency. Still no reflections.

She heard movement behind her and darted higher into the air. The lumbering human swiped a net through the space where she had been. His armor looked to be non-reflective as well.

Struggling to keep her light vibrations high, she flew in a circle around the guard's head, but too high for his net.

The guard's head moved sharply, following her every movement. His dark goggles—far darker than a typical fowler guard's—aimed straight at her. Instead of swinging the net he jumped and jabbed it in her direction, coming closer with each stab.

*I should be invisible to him. Especially him. Ducks can see more than humans. Is it those odd goggles?*

Aelianna dove straight for the guard's face. She needed a better look.

Surprised, the guard stumbled backward and fell, though his goggles never left her sight. The lenses seemed to be made from some kind of smoky crystal.

*That must be how he can see me.*

As the guard got to his feet, Aelianna flew at him again. The duck took no notice of her, merely huffing and squawking in frustration. The guard's net swept past her, grazing her wings, and as Aelianna dove between his legs she spotted a jar tied to his belt that appeared to be made of the same kind of crystal as the goggles. If that crystal rendered her light tricks useless, once inside the jar she'd be cut off from all light, powerless. A pixie prison.

Feeling the strain of maintaining such high vibrations, Aelianna relaxed her body and flew to the nearest tree.

Now that she was visible again the duck glared at her while the guard leaped and swept the net through the leaves just beneath her.

"Come down here!" he shouted with a swipe through the branches.

The duck watched patiently, intently. It would let its rider thrash about as a distraction while it awaited the opportunity to strike. This duck was a big one, too, as fowler guard ducks went; scratches on its beak and scars where there had once been feathers told Aelianna that this was no precious specimen from the city. This was a battle-hardened duck.

Another leaping swipe of the net.

She had to do something.

A quick scan revealed that the copse of trees she was hiding in was isolated from the forest proper. She could, perhaps, escape if they were in the forest, staying high and hiding among the branches, but she feared crossing that gulf. She could fly faster than

the duck, but she'd be exhausted maintaining such speed for so long. Besides, this pair might have other surprises in store for her, which was probably why they had waited until she was in this copse to attack. If only she'd been more careful!

The duck tried to fly up to her, but its webbed feet couldn't get a purchase on a branch and it wasn't built for hovering.

A rock whizzed past her as the guard readied a second.

There was only one way out now. It might be more deadly than facing the pair below her, but at least she wouldn't end up in a jar waiting to have her wings cut off and sold for good luck or whatever else humans believed.

Aelianna sang out a call, hoping and dreading that it would be heard. One way or the other, this would be over soon. If she could avoid them long enough.

The guard's aim improved with each throw, forcing her to move continuously.

Aelianna had one last gambit. She leapt off a branch and flew straight at the guard. Just as she hoped, the duck opened its beak to grab her. *Not so smart after all.* She turned and tossed a fireball down its throat, barely avoiding the guard's net as she rocketed back up.

She heard the duck squawking and leaping about as she made her way up through the trees, nearly exhausted. *No more rocks, at least.* She could hear the guard calling worriedly after it.

Near the top of the trees Aelianna heard the sound that brought both comfort and a touch of fear: the screech of an osprey.

Duck and human went quiet.

The osprey, a male judging by its size and light coloring, called to the two other ospreys lagging behind it. He had answered this call and the prize—or the meal—was his. They stayed high above, circling.

The osprey landed on a branch well below Aelianna's, one that was thick enough to support its weight and put its beak within easy reach. It was smaller than the duck, but infinitely more deadly.

Aelianna didn't recognize him. He was young, probably working on his first nest, and that could be the end of her. What mate wouldn't be impressed by a suitor with a pixie in its beak?

The osprey let out a questioning call. A standard question when one summons a bird: "Why am I here?"

"I'm being hunted," Aelianna whistled. "By them."

The osprey looked down and sent a terrifying screech in their direction.

"I will give you a gem—" Aelianna said.

Short, sharp squawks echoed from the circling ospreys. They were laughing at him. They looked younger. His brothers?

"It's a ward against owls," she said loudly.

The hovering ospreys laughed louder.

"If you eat that pixie," the fowler guard called from below, "I will have to hunt you!"

The osprey laughed, then dropped a turd.

Aelianna heard shuffling and cursing.

"If you place the gem in your nest, owls won't come near it," she said to the osprey.

He sang back two short phrases: "Eat you. Take gem."

"I have to bless it or it won't work," she said quickly, lying.

From a little further away the guard shouted, "Last warning, bird! That pixie is mine!"

The osprey lifted its head and called to the two still hovering and laughing. Aelianna didn't understand the details, but she knew it was a battle cry. The two responded affirmatively, then dove toward the guard and his duck.

Aelianna heard much running and flapping.

"Thank you," she sang, "but they were hunting pixies. They'll be back."

The osprey stared at her. "Pretty wings."

Aelianna started to form a fireball in her hand, just in case. "They wanted more than that. They were going to put me in a cage, not just take me for my wings."

The osprey let out a loud cry, describing his hatred of cages and those who used them.

In the distance, the others responded and sounds of pursuit renewed.

The osprey turned back to Aelianna. "Where?"

"South. To the River That Splits the Earth." She had to check on Oriane. "Will you take me that far?"

A rustle of feathers. "Two gems."

Aelianna searched her bag. She hadn't packed for trading.

"I...I don't have any other gems."

The osprey opened his beak.

"I have an herb! It will make you irresistible to females!" *Males of all species like that, right?*

The osprey's eyes burned with anger as its chest puffed with air.

"Not for you, of course," she added quickly. "For someone who *needs* it. A gift."

The osprey settled down. "Herb," he sang. "For brother." He turned around on the branch.

Aelianna leaped onto his back then pulled herself to his neck, gripping the stems of his feathers.

The osprey jumped off the branch and soared into the air.

She almost lost her grip as the force of the wind pulled at her wings. She wrapped her arms and hands around the feathers tighter, grateful they were leaving the pair and their damned jar far behind as the osprey ascended above the treetops.

“What’s your name?” she sang.

He sang his full, formal name, clearly proud of his position as a new nest builder. The summoning part of his name was “Taj.”

She thanked him and praised his position, then sang her own name to him.

He sang a note of approval when she was done.

*What just happened?* Aelianna wondered. A fowler guard, not even pretending to be anything else, had attempted to capture a pixie. Pixie wing poaching was supposed to be illegal now. But this was different. Before it was banned, wing poachers typically took pixies down with poison gas or fluid, then removed the wings before they died because they believed the wings had to be taken while the pixie was still alive or they would lose their potency. Those monsters left the husks behind. This one meant to capture her, to put her in that jar. Why go to all that trouble?

And the equipment: the goggles, the jar. She had to believe they were specially made for capturing pixies. Was there some new potion or talisman that required a whole, living pixie? Her shudder almost made her lose her grip.

“Where?” Taj sang.

Aelianna peeked her head up enough to get her bearings. Ahead she could see the River That Splits the Land, as local flying beings knew it. The local humans had named it after someone they thought was important.

“Sunward cliff,” Aelianna told him. It would be a bit of a trek getting across the canyon, but she didn’t want to give Oriane’s exact location away. The temptation of two pixies might be too much for the osprey to resist.

Taj gave an affirmative call and descended rapidly.

Once on the ground, Aelianna jumped off his back and hovered, facing him. The osprey squawked for the gem.

“I’m getting it!” she said as she detached a pouch from her belt. She took out the piece of uncut amethyst and held it up. To her it was rather large; she needed both hands to lift it, but it was smaller than Taj’s eye.

Taj squawked and shook his head.

Aelianna nodded and said simply, “Yes, it really works.” It was true, it would ward

off owls. It would also blind a snake or poison a wolf. Not to mention sell to humans for a hefty sum. But she couldn't concern herself with that now.

She tied the pouch around Taj's neck, along with the one containing the herb. It was a simple cooking herb, but if Taj believed it made him irresistible, then it would have done its job. She stepped back and sang a short song of farewell.

Taj nodded. Then he gave three calls:

*Clear skies,  
Steady winds,  
Many fish.*

Aelianna made her way towards the nearby trees while Taj flew off. Once the bird was out of sight she turned and made her way back towards the cavern. She let out a call that was far beyond the hearing of both humans and most animals and would cut through the roar of the waterfall. She waited for Oriane's answer, but none came.

She leaped into the air and spread her wings. The roiling air and mist around the water held her suspended until she closed her wings and dropped for a bit. She opened them again, catching a wet updraft and riding it along the cliff wall until she made another dive. The water felt good; cool and cleansing.

A few more dips and rises and she landed on the outcropping that led to Oriane's home, then almost collapsed in horror. The illusion of rock that hid Oriane's entrance was gone.

Aelianna pressed her hand against the rock next to the opening and released a vibration. The ringing echoed through the crevice and came back to her, but with no response.

Aelianna pulled light from her wings and along her arm to her hand and projected it into the opening. She knew she wouldn't find Oriane alive, or else the illusion would have been up. Fearing she would instead find a wingless, lifeless husk, Aelianna inched along the crevice, calling Oriane's name. There was no sign of her friend. The place looked undisturbed.

Back outside, Aelianna flew up the cliff wall to the top. After searching for a bit, she found flattened ground, broken twigs, crushed leaves. Pushed against a rock by the wind were several duck feathers. On the rock, a splatter of the red fluid ducks and humans carried inside them.

It appeared that Oriane had been taken.

# Sycamore Strength

by Valerie Carter

A tree. I never expected it to be a source of sadness as I said goodbye. Goodbye to the home that I had lived in for twenty-five years. The only home that my twenty-year-old son had ever known. I had gone through the house capturing video images. The pencil marks on the wall of my son's room where we had marked his upward growth. The red-brick fireplace edge whose childproof padding had been removed when the youngest of my nieces no longer needed that protection during family gatherings. The Harvest Gold 1970s stove top, oven, and sink that I could never afford to update as a single mom focusing finances elsewhere. The deck from which three different dogs had patrolled the yard for squirrels, and where my mom had hilariously shooed away a racoon with a broom.

So many memories were sparked by each room and corner of the yard. The scent of honeysuckle blooms floated in the air as I walked around recording and smiling. Then I came to the large sycamore tree in the backyard. My vision began to blur. The meaningful belongings from the house were all packed and moving with me, but that tree, my old reliable friend, would stay.

I stopped recording and went over to its trunk. It was too big around for me to give it a full embrace, but I did my best. I leaned against it and wept. The leaves above rustled with the breeze and then quieted. Rustle and quiet. Rustle and quiet. It felt like being comforted in the only audible way a tree could provide. A large, thin sliver of bark landed in my hair. I laughed. "Of course. One more conversation." I took the piece of bark from my head and gathered several more that had littered the lawn. I

lowered myself to the sandstone rock at the edge of the flowerbed. I had done the same countless times before.

From the long, smooth pieces I began to break the bark into tiny fragments. They fell on to my lap and the grass around me. Throughout the years, these meditative moments had been like therapy for me. I enjoyed the tactile sensation and the small snapping sound as I broke each piece and worked through whatever thoughts or emotions were present.

*Will I really be able to manage staying in this house after the divorce? How can I turn this yard into a pirate adventure for my son's fifth birthday? Why does the man who makes my heart sing live so far away? What an incredible time I had! When is a new dental hygiene position going to materialize? Soon, I hope. Money is getting tight. What was the sign-up deadline for Zach's summer program? I must do that when I get back inside, and buy new jeans for him, again. I hope Dad's recovery goes smoothly after his surgery. We should go visit again tonight after Zach's violin lesson. When did I get that bruise on my leg?*

Sometimes I would murmur my questions, prayers, or thoughts into the wind. An answer didn't always come, but a renewed sense of peace and purpose always did. Sheltered in the shade of my sycamore, running my fingers along the smooth texture of its castoff bark was a reliable comfort to my soul.

During the final conversation under my beloved friend, I decided to offer up only gratitude. I made confetti of the final length of tree-peel and held it in my palm. I thought of all the comfort provided by my tree-bark therapy sessions over the past quarter-century of my life. My heart swelled with sweet grief. A tear fell into the remnants in my hand. I stood to say a final goodbye.

I sprinkled the small square-like shapes around the base of the tree like a celebratory decoration of honor. I leaned my forehead against its smooth trunk and whispered, "Thank you."

"Mom?" My son's voice rang out from the front yard. I could hear his feet landing heavily as he bounded around the corner of the house.

"I'm back here," I yelled, wiping my tears.

"Are you ready?"

I bent down to pick up one more piece of bark to take with me on the two-day trip to our new home. I sighed. "Yes. I'm ready."



# Contributors

**Claudia Altemus** is a writer of folktale fantasy and short nonfiction articles. Her work is influenced by a background as an environmental educator, professional storyteller, and artist. A proud member of the NHWP, Claudia spends her spare time growing produce and flowers with her husband and playing traditional Irish music with friends at the local pub.

**Cheryl Barnhart** is a confectioner, genealogist, photographer, and writer. She loves writing fiction and is currently working on her first historical novel. She can be reached at [cheryl68@aol.com](mailto:cheryl68@aol.com) or through her website, <http://www.psweet.com>.

**Kevin Barrett (K. Dalton Barrett)** is an award-winning playwright who recently published his first short story and is actively working on a novel, the opening of which is included in this anthology. He is active in local theater, primarily as one of the organizers of the Hatbox Theatre in Concord, but also as a director and actor. He also plays bass in a band called The Sherpa Lizz Expedition. (The story behind the name is too long for this bio.)

**Valerie Carter** recently moved to New Hampshire from Missouri with her husband, Greg, her son, Zachary, and their four-legged family members. She writes mostly nonfiction and is currently working on a memoir. Becoming an active member of the NHWP has been a welcome change as she adjusts to life in her new home. When not reading or writing she might be found enjoying nature, theater, music, gardening, cooking, conversing, laughing, or napping. She can be reached at [valeriecarter147@gmail.com](mailto:valeriecarter147@gmail.com) or you can follow her on Instagram @valnrgbzz2018.

**Gary Devore** is an archaeologist and author. He has written a novel, *Pantheon*, and a guidebook to Rome entitled *Walking Tours of Ancient Rome*. He has written a murder mystery set in the ancient Roman world and a fantasy novel set in a fantasy world, both of which he is currently pitching to agents. He has been a lecturer at Stanford University and the University of California at Santa Cruz and directed archaeological projects in Italy and the UK. His work can be found at <http://www.garydevore.com>.

**Sophia Eastley** received an MFA in fiction from Southern New Hampshire University in 2012. Her poetry has been published in anthologies and a portion of her novel published by a widely-distributed newspaper. For over twenty years she worked as a professional belly dancer and a psychic who taught adults about spirit guides, shamanism, and the mysteries of ancient Egypt. Part Cherokee and part Abenaki, Native American teachings continue to influence much of her work. She may be contacted through Facebook.

**Daniel Ellison** was born and raised in southern California. He attended the University of New Mexico majoring in anthropology and received his master's degree from the University of Missouri. He served in the US Navy and the Peace Corps and is a retired probation/parole officer. His credits include a newspaper column, articles in *Runner's World*, *Mother Earth News*, and *Walking*. He currently writes literary fiction and has completed three novels: *Dogspeak and the People of the Light*, *Love on the Farside of Vegas*, and *On Parole: A Promise of Good Behavior*. He lives with his family in Concord and can be reached at [ellison.daniel01@gmail.com](mailto:ellison.daniel01@gmail.com).

**Maria C. A. Fowler** is the typesetter for this year's anthology. She is a writer, graphic designer, and editor with over twenty years' experience in publishing from writing to bookselling that she's translated into Fowler Publishing Services (<http://www.fowlerpublishingservices.com>). When she's not writing her own stories or helping authors launch their best work, she also makes jewelry.

**Jay Haines** and his young family moved from Philadelphia to New Hampshire in 1980. Following a business career in banking, business consulting, and as owner of the Concord Antique Gallery, he entered semi-retirement in 2016. Inspired to leave a record for his kids and grandkids of what it was like way back when, Jay began writing memoir stories, some of which had their origin as Liturgist commentary to open Sunday church services. The memoir "Lost Gloves, Found Values" got its start in such a fashion. Jay lives with his pup Lucy in Concord and can be contacted at [jay.j.haines@gmail.com](mailto:jay.j.haines@gmail.com).

**Wendy Jensen** grew up in in the United States, India, and Iran, landing finally in New Hampshire with her husband to practice homeopathy, play violin, and raise her children. She received her veterinary degree from Cornell in 1987. She's authored two nonfiction books on homeopathic veterinary medicine and is currently writing a novel about a young woman in the animal protection movement struggling to survive abuse in her own life. Wendy would love to hear from you at [jensenhvp@gmail.com](mailto:jensenhvp@gmail.com).

**Lone Cypress Workshop** is a lifelong philosophical neophyte fascinated by the existence of life itself and the concepts of truth and integrity, not to mention god and religion. Why do people do the things they do? What compels them to love, and what allows them to hate? Lone Cypress Workshop believes in the eternal discovery of questions and the frustrating search for answers, has a passion for the power of thought, and is compelled to put those thoughts into words and share insights through a unique perspective. LCW is always looking for those individuals with questions or answers and an open mind, and can be contacted through <http://www.lonecypressworkshop.com> or [lonecypressworkshop@gmail.com](mailto:lonecypressworkshop@gmail.com).

**Ricky Mailhot** lives in Manchester with his high-school sweetheart, Helen. He's in the final two classes of his master's degree in English and will graduate in spring 2020. When he's not reading, going to the movies, or walking his dog Mabel, he's writing. He's working to one day get his doctorate, publish several novels, and find a radioactive spider with the propensity to bite.

**Joe Panzica** is a washed-up educator, annoying person, and author/creator of *Democracy: The Bloody Slide Show*, which is also a self-published book available at <http://www.streamlygredible.com>. He also wrote *Saint Gredible and Her Fat Dad's Mass*, a tragicomic meditation on humanity's innate capacity for infamy and regeneration. Joe is ever demoralized to drone on about the pataphysical infinity of incomplete creation. He regards liberal democracy as humanity's signature ongoing artifact—even if it fails to protect us from our own savagery.

**Ian Rogers** grew up in Warner and currently teaches English in the Toyama region of Japan, where he co-edits the art and culture magazine *The TRAM*. His short fiction chapbook, "Eikaiwa Bums," was published last year by Blue Cubicle Press, and he blogs about the struggles faced by creative people at <http://butialsohaveadayjob.com>.

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**Patricia S. Wild** is an artist, writer, workshop leader, and retired professor. She has completed her first novel and begun work on her second, in addition to a series of non-fiction books on the artmaking process. She has been published in journals, newspapers, and a Boston arts magazine, and occasionally exhibits her own artwork. She is also a voracious reader, an avid lifelong learner, a rusty pianist, and an occasional traveler, and has exceptional napping skills. Her website is <http://www.spiralartsforlife.com>.

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