

Agnes Scott

Writers' Festival Magazine 2005



Prizes in poetry,
short fiction,
personal essay,
and one-act play
will be awarded
during the Festival
by distinguished
guest writers
Edward Albee and
Linda Hogan.

Works by finalists
in the annual statewide
literary competition
sponsored by the
English Department

CHRISTOPHER BUNDY
CHRISTY BYRD
JIMMY DEMER
TRAVIS WAYNE DENTON
MIKE DOCKINS
SHELLEY HELMS FLEISHMAN
PATTI GHEZZI
TAYLOR GILLAN
KRISTIN HALL
ERICA JARRELL
KIMBERLY KARRIS
BOBBI KORNBLIT
CASEY MCINTYRE
EMILY ELIZABETH NORMAN
LINDY PATTERSON
ALEX QUINLAN
CAREN SCOTT
KIMBERLY WALLACE
COURTNEY D. WARE

Agnes Scott College

34th Annual Writers' Festival

April 14-15, 2005

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Edward Albee and Linda Hogan.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the Festival, and a prize of \$250 is given to the winner in each contest category.

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April, 2005

Editor

Rachel Trousdale

Selection Committee

Poetry: Terra McVoy

Short Fiction: Willie Tolliver

Personal Essay: Susan Percy

One-Act Play: Quiara Hudes

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Poems by Jimmy Demer

Dirt Cycles

I. We dug the pit to make jumps
And packed dirt against logs to bank.
Brian Caffrey got the Bicentennial Huffy that year.
That bike was hard as currency.

It got stolen. When they caught the thief
Brian said his dad was gonna break both his legs.
Their garage was full of nails.
I believed he would break both his legs.

Brian's sister Dawn didn't ride with us anymore.
So Brian spraypainted her pink bike black
And we rode the tracks into town
For hundred thousand dollar bars.

II. When Carlson came he was the new kid.
He'd done stuff, he said. He did things.
His sister smoked pot and she gave David Cox
A hand job in the basement.

Carlson told me how to smoke pot.
I told him when school starts say
I smoked it already.
He sold me some pot.

Between the video games at the bowling alley
I showed it to Nash.
He said that's not pot.
It was dill weed from Carlson's mother's spice rack.

III. I kissed Dawn that summer
One night while she was babysitting across the street.
I kissed her for a long time.
Then we never said anything about it again.

Knotmakers

I knew a knotmaker. Knots for boats. Knots
That hadn't ever been thought up or tied.
It's mathematical, he said, and ought
Not seem hard. To me? I asked, and he tried
To explain. Through his fingers a string looped.

(Knots must come the way a band mines a groove
Until a song comes. Or, maybe, appear
The way Satisfaction's riff, finished, clear,
Woke up Keith Richards.)

Then a girl walked by
And I lost sense of the knot's path. A sigh.

O! how the moon hangs like cotton, how you,
Knot on your finger, move from me, dark-eyed,
More or less, undetectable as noon's
Pass, and return, more or less, like the tide.

The Thing that Winds the Line

Pickle's room has two beds.
His mother has her own room.
It was summer so we went up to the Y.
Behind the Y the Charles River ran.
The same river goes to Boston.
It seemed too shallow and skinny for the explorers' ships
But maybe they passed right here.
We flushed squirrels and birds
From the trees on the other side by throwing rocks.
Pickle walked across it while I fished.
The bottom was muddy leaves and I lost the worm.
A tennis ball popped over the fence.
We got it for street hockey.
They were mowing the golf course.
We found arrowheads and golf balls
And skipped them across the river.
It wasn't dark but Pickle said his mother was coming home
So we rode bikes back.
In the parking lot at St Bart's
I dropped Pickle's brother's fishing rod
And broke the thing that winds the line.
We cut through Mister McDivit's yard.
We were almost to Pickle's when he saw us.
We went into Pickle's through the basement.
I put his brother's fishing rod back where it was.
His Dad was down there watching TV in his chair
Next to the big lamp.
Pickle got out Battleship.

Poems by Travis Wayne Denton

Open Windows

My neighbor is unfastening her bra,
 Her back to me as it drops and she
 Disappears out of frame into the kitchen.
 Across the street, the man who slugged his wife
 In their upstairs bedroom Monday night
 Watches the game on his big screen.
 He beats his fists against the open air
 As the red team sails into the end zone.
 And my computer, spyware creeping in,
 Slings open a cacophony of windows:
 A breeze blowing through my hard drive,
 Swelling to a hurricane before I pull the plug—
 Naked 9th Graders in the Midnight Hour,
 Free Trip to ZooLoo Country,
 Find Your Long Lost Sister.
 But I can't stop thinking, as I walk
 From room to room with the lights off
 And peep out through my blinds
 At the windows of the houses across the street,
 All the windows in all the houses:
 "Man with Dog,"
 "Girl Spinning Cartwheels into Silk,"
 "Woman Peeling Orange."
 Behind each pane there's a world
 That thrives on being seen,
 That stretches toward light like a philodendron
 Reeling toward a bathroom window,
 A shadowbox, where the players
 Mouth their lines in black and white,
 And move in silent comedy.

Behind the Walls

When we stripped away the cracked
 Plaster walls of what used to be a dentist office,
 They were everywhere:
 Rat nests filled with human teeth,
 Some white, most yellowed,
 Others cast with specks of silver or a glint of gold.
 Bits of mattress stuffing and colored cotton cloth,
 Haphazardly arranged to make a place
 For their prize. Years of baby teeth
 And permanents, licked clean,
 Enough ache and misery to finance a new religion.
 But what about the stories of Dr. Hygosity,
 How he thought his office haunted,
 At night he'd lay a day's worth of teeth
 On his porcelain sink to dry, the next morning:
 One, sometimes two, missing?
 After a long weekend: all of them, gone.
 We didn't mind getting our teeth pulled,
 Didn't mind when he'd look up and say, cavity,
 This one's got to go. We wanted to hear
 The ghost had taken our teeth, a new kind
 Of tooth fairy that baffled even the adults.
 And now to find this: another myth revealed—
 Carried away by tiny padded feet
 Only to be bound in plaster and pine.
 All the saints, fairy tale princes and villains,
 Exiled by disbelief and led away one by one to a room
 Where they sit this very moment, drinking coffee,
 Telling stories that begin with Back in the day...
 And plotting their comeback.

Variations on a Theme by Berryman

Today the average number of lightning related deaths in the U.S. is 80 a year. Fortunately, not everyone who is struck dies.

—*National Geographic*

The first time it happened, he was strutting out of a coffee shop in Five Points. The clouds were breaking in the East, people working their way outside again after a hard southern rain. Like most, he didn't see it coming: those negative charges sizzling through the atmosphere at a downward clip, awaiting marriage with the positive ions hovering above him in the parking lot.

The untold number of kilovolts slammed his jaws shut, and threw him to the asphalt. Left him with a facial tic and a right arm with a penchant for dancing. It would hang limp, then suddenly begin to jitter and writhe. The mockingbirds that he used to wake up cursing were replaced by the ringing of a brass gong. He lost all feeling in his body. He could no longer discern the hand of his wife on his neck combing for stray hairs that she'd pluck without remorse. No need for a coat and hat, he'd sit in the front yard in a lounge chair with no shirt and bib-overalls in sub-freezing weather, his neighbors pointing through their kitchen windows.

But that's not what bothered him. It was the paranoia: the feeling that someone was out to get him and he had to get them first, only he couldn't quite finger the culprit, but some days he felt a guilt reserved only for those who've murdered. He was sure he had somehow done the deed, perhaps in those uncertain hours of black out—he'd think hard, list name after name on a legal pad. Numbering everyone he knew.

He'd dial the phone just to hear a familiar voice on the other end, then hang up, beads of sweat rolling down his cheeks, dripping onto his pad. For a moment, he'd be relieved, then start again. Nobody's ever missing, he'd say over and over, whispering for reassurance, nobody's ever missing.

Poetry by Mike Dockins

There is No Such Thing as Superman

Toddlers slip railings, plunge into roaring waterfalls.
Burglars sip wine, sift through garbage bags full of jewels.

The planet's rotation will not reverse, nor will tectonic plates ungrind,
leaving the heroine in the station wagon uninjured.
Time will forever wear a capital T on its T-shirt,
will never U-Turn away from death.
Bullets smash straight through teeth, jaws, skulls, lungs, ribs.

Skyscrapers remain unleapable,
even when unhinged into rubble—
the capital S of Steel, Siren, September.

The Bad Guys do not resemble Bad Guys:
there is no hide-out littered
with striped costumes, rubber masks,
or schematics choked with jets and obvious equations.
The abandoned factory east of town, the dugout bar
on 12th Street, the sand-strewn cave
in a land no one can spell—nothing is labeled
Legion of Doom, such an easy target for the carpet bomb.
The populace is weakened by elements
that suffocate, each metropolis a seething hive
of danger, a nest of threat.

Trains race away from bucolic hometowns,
and the hometowns will not catch up,
nor will lovers left behind, limited
by human biology: such feeble speed.

No one will listen to Science, no one
will accept the planet's place in the cosmos:
alone, a tiny blue fire on a lifeless plain, on an immeasurable night.

If anything alien catapults Earthward,
anticipating the planet's curves,
that thing is an asteroid,
and no one will stop it, heave it like a football
back into that blankness—no one,
not even the suspiciously mild-mannered
co-worker who hides no remarkable gifts as he hums
in the shower, mails the rent check, bends
to spill vittles into the cat's empty bowl.

Schoolhouse

In kindergarten we mooned over Heathers & Jerrys,
 & 6½ was more sophisticated than 6.
 In gluey overalls we pledged allegiance
 to chocolate milk exploding from runny noses
 when the class clown said “underpants.”
 Clocks squinted help from sad wallpaper.
 We were learning simple words: dog, boy, car.
 When Teacher’s little boy got tangled in leukemia,
 what three-letter word could help us?
 6th grade wrapped us in a gooey cocoon
 of nomenclature: an arachnid is a wombless primate,
 & elephants molt from exoskeletons
 to emerge as delicate arthropodic protozoa.
 This is called metamorphosis or thorax.
 In the foreground of a shoebox diorama,
 Mrs. Mikulsky gets slammed by a dodge ball.
 The background is fuzzy: death, probably.
 By 7th grade we had perfected at last how to torment
 the weak, the filthy, the spectacled,
 our own confidence kicked to a pulp by Velcro sneakers.
 High school was a factor of $x^2+5x+\pi$
 divided by the cube root
 of Napoleon’s endoplasmic reticulum
 multiplied by 50 squat thrusts en la biblioteca
 minus The Catcher in the Rye—
 & the calculator was busted.
 Our spines bent like sine curves over the pop quiz:
 “According to p. 28, life is what?”
 The answer might have been “oogenesis”
 but a friend had vaulted from a dormitory
 in upstate New York, a dusting of snow
 on the edge of the roof,
 so we sprawled flat as abscissas on our beds,
 stared at the glow-stars on the ceiling—
 exaggerated moons & comets—
 trying to solve something.
 College = meteoric blur, a smeared firefly.
 We were soon adrift on a möbius: an 8 infinitely toppled.
 Our folks divorced, our true love shuffled off
 to Minneapolis, to the Azores,
 with a luminous hippie.
 A moment like a snowflake landed on our lawns:
 a gleaming calculus of loss.
 Now it’s snowing, still.

Dead Critics Society [a double abecedarian]

Zooks! What have I done with my anthologies? I’ll need a
 year of sleep after writing my millionth review (with aplomb).
 XX bottles of moonshine litter my bedside table like arsenic.
 Why no lilting iambics in contemporary poetry? Only dead,
 vermin-ridden prose riddled with autobiographical treacle.
 Under my bed, the skeleton of Browning. I use his broken-off
 tibias as walking sticks. For hundreds of scenic miles I drag
 sensitivity, & marvel. Content must be pounded into a rich
 risotto of form—evident rhyme scheme & equal stanzas. I
 quote Keats: “Gasp! I’m dying!” Were he as prosperous as J.
 P. Morgan, he may not have suffered so. These days, a black-
 out of good taste, a dimming of metrical etiquette, a dismal
 nerve of postmodern surrealism, whatever that means. I’m
 mad! I raise one of Browning’s femurs in revolt! I’ve a notion,
 ladies & gentlemen, that our language has crumbled into
 kindling—a few tiny sparks, maybe, but no thick log to keep
 joy in prosody truly alive. Meantime, I’m just about up to Q
 in my encyclopedia of verse: Quixote, etc., but still I gather
 hives hunting hopelessly for my beloved poetry anthologies.
 God knows Browning would have understood—what a saint.
 Five finger bones claw the floor under my bed, searching. You
 entertain such a relic, you pay the price—each knuckle a shiv
 digging for inspiration in the floorboards, scraping shallow
 crosses into my skin as I slumber. I should lock him in a box!
 But then nothing would remind me of my own bones—O my
 awaiting death—the only theme suitable for a poetry buzz.

Poetry by Shelly Helms Fleishman

Brother

I did not come out of the womb first,
Was not smacked on the bottom
Then held in our mother's arms
Like no baby she had held before.
I was not burned, broken or bruised so much.
It is not my story.

It did not happen to me.
You shot the nest out of the tree.
A squirrel, you thought, a mass of leaves high up.
But when it hit the ground,
A possum, shotgunned open,
Babies born by explosion,
Pitted squirmers, mewling.

I did not open the gate
When the tractor backed up for the cows,
Trailer rattling behind it over the ant beds.
It was not my head that turned away – distracted –
Then caught between the post and the green-painted trailer,
An extension of a very jumpy transmission.
It was not my head.

Invitation

I remember the shorts I was wearing:
Navy background with fruits,
Dangling cherries.
I was 12 and answered 'no'
When I meant 'yes.'
My shirt was yellow.

You would have thought
I'd learned my lesson,
To say things how I mean them:
Truth, yes, no stabbing girlishness.
I mean it.

Today, a man wearing
A white shirt and fine, dark pants
asked me with his eyes.

The Empath

Not that I'm not good at attraction,
But I attract sadness
Like summer pop cans attract yellow jackets.
And I sense it too,
Pass through me on the train,
Coming at me from the woman next to me,
Like perfume on an elevator,
The smell of a carcass,
The grease in the air at a fondue restaurant:
It becomes part of me,
It becomes me.

I'm a girl; I was taught to be happy,
Polite in my grief, gracious in my disappointment.
When I didn't get what I wanted,
I still said thank you.
You are so kind.

So here I am, nuzzled up to this
Great warhorse of loneliness,
Anxious anger,
Nearly there tears,
Her hands picking at her purse straps,
Then still, then against her face.
I want to tell her
I know. I'm sorry.
Give it to me.

Poetry by Casey McIntyre

At The Beach

By the time my mother and I
approached the body on the beach,
it was a pale blue.

Tangled in seaweed and covered in sand,
its long thin legs stuck out from underneath
a white bed sheet placed haphazardly over its midsection.

My mother learns that the body
washed ashore after a boating accident.
"How tragic," she says,
"Can you imagine?"

But I am looking at its fingernails,
chipped light pink ovals
dipped gracefully in the sand.

My own fingers ache
to guide the boat,
to put the ocean to sleep.

think think

think think
splat love

think warm toes white sand
think sun

think soft brushing against bare skin
think red flesh

think damp palms
think unintelligible

think kisses that scar
think consuming rash

think thin lips pressed together pressed together
think inkblots

think love
think splat love

Burying My Mother

I think of my mother
in her garden,
surrounded by mounds
of dirt and tools and bulbs.

I remember watching her plunge
the trowel into the soft earth,
her wrinkled fingers pushing
and pressing the dirt,
making small hand prints in the soil.

I would watch her plant,
lilies, hyacinth and peonies,
and wonder what it must feel like
to be buried and bloom.

Poetry by Alex Quinlan

Arabesque

The track bends out of sight behind trees.
Light from the train's headlamp
hangs like lace in the bare, ice-bound branches.

She reaches. Her shoulder presses
against the gear shift as she slams
the heel of her hand on the accelerator.

I bite into a plum, flip the radio dial.

The car lurches, does not
move. Schumann's Op. 18:
filigree of fox and olive
tree; mimosa flowers
floating on a dark river's surface.

Any moment now
she will scream
as if screaming could rattle
the train from its track or
startle the car into motion.

Juice runs down my hand. I suck the plum
like a snakebite.

The engine gulps air, gasoline
explodes against the piston-face.

She sits up suddenly. I take the last
bite of plum, swallow the pit.
Train brakes spark like an axe head
against a grinding wheel's industrial diamond.

Her face is a river's surface
when it is summer and the river
is a small river
moving slow as the sun
but moving still.

Light cracks against the window,
filling her lap like water.

Dismantling the Heavens

Were the lost ever found?
Even crucifixion is a symbol for
something other than crucifixion.
What were their names? Shadow and longing
are the rivers' language; flame and dust,

that of sky. How is the face of loss
a rain-rutted hillside? Leaves hold thimblefuls
of moonlight. Children carry fireflies in cupped hands.
How many dead were carried away? The osprey
dives from its perch. Its white breast doubles
back light's reflection on water,
blinding its prey. No, how many
were carried away? To push a canoe
from shore, even a paper one,
means letting go.

Grief and the Ocean

He dreamed of the ocean. Of walking along
 sand at the shoreline, carrying a heavy axe.
 Of pulling the axe behind him, furrowing the sand.
 Tide washed up over his footprints, left
 bone splinters and bright glass in the heel marks.
 Wide as land can be it was, the gray beach

bare but for a black-trunked tree, green-throated
 birds in its branches. Listening to their songs
 he dreamed it was his own wild voice he heard.
 He pressed his hand against the salty trunk;
 notched the trunk. Tears started. So much salt.
 Iron rang in the notch. He continued, sobbing.

At dawn, the tree fell. The birds still were singing,
 but farther away. He climbed into the hollow stump and slept.

Poetry by Caren Scott

Postcard From Wiesbaden

Down the street from Hotel Kaiserhof,
 is a church like a gingerbread house.
 German food makes me want to feast
 at a long table, fur round my shoulders
 & a dripping turkey leg in my fist.

Tomorrow, the Bavarian ridge,
 from there to Innsbruck, from there
 to Naples. You've wanted a blown
 glass Christmas pickle. I've found one
 & a cuckoo clock wristwatch for Sam.

A Housewife Writes Her Sister

My little Annette, I could call, but I got this fleur-de-lis stationery & sealing wax. How are things with you, Phil, the boys? As I write this, I sit at the dining table, chunks of stone strewn about. I am choosing marble, again. I am torn between "Hosta Green" or "Sandpiper." Who knew there were so many kinds of marble? Am I to make a permanent decision based upon such small squares of color? Had a good visit with Mother & Daddy, though we had a flat in the birch forest driving through Flagstaff. A tour bus filled with gospel choir stopped, the minister helped Richard with the tire & the ladies sang Wade in the Water. Mom still won't let me have that old green pea coat of yours. I've lost 20 (well, 18) pounds, but I can't button it & until then, she says, it stays in her bedroom closet. Please send me that article you clipped about the cabbage soup diet. Yesterday, the strangest thing. My doormat was black with ants. I didn't have anything else at hand, so I sprayed them with Windex, & at least they curled up or ran. Today Sears brought a new Neptune washer. I gave the deliverymen a cold Heineken & told them of the awful racket, & how the suds reached past my knees and ruined the hem of my skirt because I had added bleach to the water. Remember Amanda Fisk? (Fourth of July party—that teal dress) I went over to borrow potting soil, & she invited me in with gin & tonic & Persian lime & iced lemon pound cake and began to cry right there at the table, tears on the vinyl placemat. Her husband swore he needed the sea again. He up and joined the coast guard. Fortunate that she couldn't have children. I'm considering a course in stenography at the community college, Tuesday evenings. You know how I am fast & soft with my hands. I feel lately as if I need something to fall back on. Could go on writing, but I must stop to make dinner. I got a new cookbook (on sale), going to try Tuscan dishes. Salmon with a lemon-herb glaze, topped with a slice of orange. (strange as it may seem, salmon is as expensive here as it was back east) Asparagus with crispy, browned garlic. Tiramisu. I hope decaf coffee will soak into the ladyfingers as well as espresso. Looking forward to January. Though most of your time will be spent at the conference, at least you'll have a welcomed break from South Bend snow. Thank you for the anthology. I like to read, but don't know what I should be reading. I especially liked Elizabeth Bishop's "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore". Please come flying, Annette—"We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping"

Making Hoecake in a Cast Iron Skillet

I told my mom: I want to make hoecake. She squeaks: Why do you want to make hoecake? If you need money for groceries, I'll send a check. I say: No, I like hoecake. Just tell me. She says: Do you have self-rising flour? I say: No. She squawks: Every woman should have flour! I say: I don't want to make hoecake right now. It's actually for a poem. She yells: Roberrrrt! Your daughter is writing a poem about hoecake. Then a shuffling. My brother braaks into the phone: What up homey? The Sammy has rooters on it now. I say: What? He says: Mud tires. I say: Oh. He says: Me and Derek the Honduran are going to The Pits. I say: Don't get stuck again. Then Mom: You need to have a talk with your brother. Something smells like it's burning. I'm putting your father on the phone. He says: Hi Punkin. I say: Hi Daddy. I'm just trying to figure out hoecake. He says: Remember the way granny made biscuits?

And I remember: her and that bowl with hues and specks of green, shaking the Gold Medal flour, two or three cups, measuring with her body, pushing her fist into the flour to make a hole, filling the hole with buttermilk from the paper carton granddad secretly drank from, pouring onethousandone of vegetable oil into buttermilk, wiggling bent fingers under the swimmin' hole of buttermilk, the loose skin under her arm shaking, everything slopping until there was dough. He says: Hoecake is different. Hoecake needs more buttermilk. Pour with small pours, mix with your fingers until the dough is sticky. Hoecake batter isn't pancakes, not quite biscuits. And I remember: Some Sunday mornings, before I left home, sitting on a barstool, my mug of coffee from the French press in my curled hands, watching dad & hoecake. I say: Reader, come to my house. Make hoecake for me.

The cast iron skillet was mom's and also great-grandma's. It's in the pullout drawer under the stove, upside down. It has the long handle. On the bottom are small blooms of rust.

Turn the knob between low and medium. Grease the pan
 with olive oil, extra virgin, first cold pressed. Granny used bacon grease.
 Pour the batter in. Cover the pan with the chipped plate.
 Hoecake is done when the top is firm, when the bottom has browned.
 Cut hoecake like pie. Lift the slices with a spatula. Cut
 the slice like a biscuit. Spread butter between. I like clover honey
 on one half and strawberry preserves on the other. Granddad
 liked sorghum molasses. I want two eggs. I want the yolk
 mostly hard, but not in the middle—I want it to run
 when I mash it with my fork. I want home fries. I want home fries
 with fresh rosemary—and crunchy on the outside. I want grits.
 They're done when they taste right. Keep tasting.
 I want them with real butter, black pepper, salt, cheese.

Poetry by Kimberly Wallace

Ladybugs

ladybugs are coming inside to die
 they are coming inside in droves in drives in
 heaps lifeless ladybugs clumping like blood cells
 coming endless ladybugs seeping in creeping in to die
 on the ceiling one three nine twenty-seven eighty-one
 ladybugs through the cracks around the doors
 ladybugs through the tape around the windows
 piling up like lemmings like ladybugs
 dying to come inside
 see the ghostly yellow shells of the
 ladybugs coming inside to die
 they die black-speckled tucked in legs clenched tight
 they die brittle broken feebly twitching antennae
 they die determined in the scuttering march
 of the ladybugs coming inside to die

How Toys Become Real

It's something that happens to you
 slowly, fifteen years of the sharp edges of existence
 dissolved, plush fur worn threadbare-smooth as stitched leather,
 every seam a stark and flattened scar,
 brown plastic nose rubbed to pink and through to white,
 prickly whiskers ripped out and forgotten
 years ago, years ago.

("Does it hurt?" said the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse.)

I know the roughness of your skin
 better than I know my own, I can read your surface
 like Braille, my arms cannot cross without you in them.
 If I were lost to the woods, you would be
 the body held out to the dogs to bring me back.
 You have taken my shape to fit against me,
 taken my tears and the tracks of my hands.
 I have taken I have taken I have left in you
 I have forgotten the name you had before I had you;
 you were like me, once. I made you not in my image
 arbitrary she to he, the contusions of gender and pronoun but
 Never it. Never it. Never it. Never it.

You are my charm, my confessor,
 my hex to ward off ghosts.

If you were lost to the world, I would be
 shattered, I would move on but I but I, I would have seams at my edges,
 I would never sleep the same again, waiting for the voodoo
 worked upon my body, a needle in your aging eyes
 and I am on the ground screaming, and you
 are not (said the Skin Horse,

here for for he was always truthful.

me to "When you are Real
 have you don't mind
 something being hurt")
 to touch.

Ten days, a decade,
 the edges of your skin give way
 and you crumble crackle into dust
 that drifts up drifts up into the sunlight,
 half a world away I start up from my bed
 into the dark, the edges of my breath working
 but my throat dissolved, clutching at my chest
 where the scars constrict around the gaping hole.

Rapunzel

Tonight cut off your hair and flee to France.
 Stock up on Camembert, expensive wines,
 All the necessities of hidden life
 In wild French mountains. Bring an extra rope
 And lots of cash; you'll need it to buy goats
 You'll milk for pennies every day at eight
 And sell the extra cheese Tuesdays in town.
 Perfect the art of being nondescript
 Into a foil-backed mirror, if you must,
 Until your tears are only scratchy brine
 That leaves washed wounds unhealed. Beware of men
 Who follow you with speculative eyes
 Down winding boulevards into the dark,
 Who murmur as they reach to grab your wrist,
 "Mon petit chou, ma belle dame sans merci!"
 Refuse their train fares, kingdoms, golden geese.
 Feel free to run like hell. You live alone
 In some long-shabby hut beside a tree
 And you are no one's happy evermore.
 Or bind your braids back, close your eyes, and stay.
 For want of you some prince will lose his way.

Short Fiction by Christopher Bundy

Early One Morning the Sun was Shining

Francie and I married in the summer of 1966 after graduating from the University of Georgia. From Athens, we moved to a small town in the western corner of South Carolina where I took my first job as a bookkeeper with an office supply company. We rented a two-bedroom bungalow next to a larger craftsman in an old neighborhood near the women's college, traded my Ford Falcon for a two-year old Dodge Dart, and settled in as Mr. and Mrs. Harry Banner. Mr. Papandreas was our landlord and neighbor, a man in his late sixties who, over the first of our afternoon gin cocktails, asked me to call him Pete though I never did, his high-pitched, cigarette-soaked grumble and abundant white hair combed back on his head with pomade, long against his collar—*like a man in show business*, Francie said—far too detached from those I imagined simply as Pete. *Mr. Papandreas* was all that would do for my landlord and friend, a man then so suddenly without his mother. Her house had become ours, and we were its first occupants since her death in a year I would remember only as the moment the US began bombing North Vietnam.

From the time we walked across the stage in Athens, Francie and I had been trying to get pregnant, the war in Vietnam arriving as a remote scent on the air, a burn somewhere over the horizon whose only proof was in the black clouds that rose to the sky like a hooded serpent. It was a flimsy reason to bring a baby down to earth, already the smell of chaos in a South unhinged, races clashing in self-defense and panic, a violence in the streets that we had never witnessed. Everywhere you turned people were afraid: whites of the unknown future before them, a change in the weather that they had not seen coming as they clung to a way of life they had no rightful claim to; blacks in a moment that needed defining, an affirmation already in their hearts and minds and now rising in their hands and arms that might slip away if not taken to the streets.

While we were isolated in our quiet corner of the state, we kept in touch with the world through television, so much more news than we had ever seen. Our first purchase after arriving on Palmetto Street was a 15" Magnavox and we sat down with our tray tables in front of Walter Cronkite or David Brinkley each night, faithful to the black and white images of a far-away war, a jungle country of tawny faces in black pajamas, not a Japan or a Germany, not an evil-empire Russia, but a riddle of people and place. Who were these small, clandestine Vietnamese, and what was their beef with us? we wondered. It might be a good idea, our friends in Athens whispered over restaurant tables, that if I didn't want to wind up in Southeast Asia shooting Commies, Francie and I ought to consider starting that family. But Francie and I, both of us born into the aftermath of WWII's victory, thought we supported the war, President Johnson's warning to contain the red plague threatening to sweep Southeast Asia fresh in our minds.

AMERICA KEEPS HER PROMISES, LBJ declared as he committed more troops to the war in Vietnam. To keep our promise, the president needed men—men like me, between the ages of 18 and 25, he told us. I had done well on the Selective Service College Qualification Test the previous spring, my student deferment had expired with graduation, and marriage no longer protected me. And though Francie and I didn't think much about the possibility of me going to Vietnam—everything's fine *here* the way it is, we reasoned—we had no interest in the anti-American activities that simmered on college campuses up north. Besides, there were those that wanted to be soldiers, career men like their fathers and brothers who would enlist wrapped in the comfort of a different idea of war, those that would answer the president's call. These men would do our bidding, dispatching the policies we built here inside the center, keeping America's word for the rest of us. Vietnam,

with its unfamiliar name and its peculiar, suspiciously anonymous people, held no consequences for us here in the Bible Belt—I had not once in my twenty-two years read, heard or thought of Vietnam, or for that matter, most of the countries or peoples of Asia other than the Japanese. But my war had started long ago with the mantles and bookshelves of my childhood, all preserving remnants of fearless men for me to contend with: my father, the Naval Intelligence officer afloat in the North Sea, 1944; my grandfather, the infantryman afoot in the trenches of northern Italy, 1918; my great-grandfather, the sailor aboard the USS Baltimore in Manila Bay, 1898.

As more troops left for the war in Vietnam, Francie mindfully prepared the small second room with a child in mind. I knew nothing of fatherhood except what my father, a quiet man who relied on numbers as reason enough for any decision, taught my sisters and me through well-trafficked maxims around the dinner table. My father advocated no free lunches. *Asset = Liability + Equity*, he reminded. One thing balances another. There would always be a give and a take. And to me, making a baby, a liability in the midst of so much upheaval at home and abroad, didn't add up. I made enough to pay rent in a small town, to buy a two-year old sedan, and to spend a week of the year in Gatlinburg or Myrtle Beach, but to raise a child on my \$6,000 salary, especially since Francie would stop substitute teaching at the high school nearby, seemed unfeasible. For me, Vietnam with its spectacular images of rice fields, jutting mountains and helicopter gunships, was nowhere near as terrifying as raising a child. It turned out that my landlord and neighbor, Mr. Papandreas, with his lilting, effeminate crackle and his pitcher of iced gin, provided the insulation I needed in the face of improbable babies and a far-off and puzzling war.

Mother never left this town, not even for the four-hour trip to the beach, Mr. Papandreas told me from underneath a straw gardening hat, eyes veiled behind rose-colored lens in large round tortoise-shell frames. *She said she didn't need to see what was elsewhere to know that what she had right here was just fine.*

What about all those photos of Rome and the Coliseum and all that along the hallway? I asked. Well, she had different ideas for me. *Those pictures? Mine mostly, but they're a lie. And a disappointment of her life, I suppose.*

Mr. Papandreas had left his mother's modest house as it was the day she died—a tidy, woman's place. As a condition of our lease and the reasonable discount offered for doing so—we paid only \$75 a month—Mr. Papandreas asked that we leave his mother's furnishings as is, a tribute, he claimed, to an *extraordinary woman*. From rose Georgian sofa and upright mahogany piano to heavy silk drapes in violet and porcelain miniatures. My favorite was a Victorian wicker rocker I found perfect for short naps, nightcaps and a final cigarette with the *Tonight Show* before bed, Francie already claiming the chair for future purposes. *What a sight you and baby will make*, she beamed over hamburgers and Cokes at the Dairy Queen. Mrs. Papandreas had left behind a well-preserved stereo console—a large piece of walnut that still worked, finding a better radio signal than my own Honey-Tone transistor—and with it a twenty-four-volume set of the *World's Greatest Music* in library green. She had collected decorative plates with images from *Gone with the Wind*. There was Scarlet descending stairs, Scarlet and Rhett in a sunset embrace, and Tara burning, flames rising from its windows. Mr. Papandreas insisted that we keep them on the fireplace mantle below the pastoral painting of a foxhunting expedition. Along the hallway and in our bedroom were sepia photos of Mr. Papandreas as a child in waistcoat and knickers, his mother as seamstress, and common pictures of Italian monuments. There were no pictures of a father and no mention had ever been made of one.

But when I came home from work, what I noticed each day more than the personal trimmings was the smell of the house, strong in our noses no matter what we sprayed or left in pretty dishes. It was a slightly sanitary scent of powder and Listerine, as if someone had recently tried to over-

whelm a bad smell. Eventually our clothes, bedsheets, blankets, and pillows took on the smell, and we adjusted to it much as we had to the outdated furnishings.

Mr. Papandreas and I began our afternoons with gin, Pimm's No. 1, and lemonade. I didn't know anything about Pimm's—*It's imported... from England*, he said—but the drinks were cold and suited the end of a suffocating summer day. Home from work, I found him amid white iron lawn furniture in the fading heat, a pitcher of iced gin on the small round table, large garden hat on his head and a Pall Mall in his hand, his bright eyes sparkling from between the hoods and wrinkles of age and a lifetime of heavy smoking. Initially I accepted his invitation to sit and talk through a few cocktails for the sake of good neighbors, but grew to look forward to our afternoon visits. We only ever saw Mr. Papandreas outside, never an open door to sit with him inside his house. *He's probably got his mother propped up in the bedroom like that Faulkner story*, Francie joked. Despite the creepiness of Mr. Papandreas' devotion to his mother, we enjoyed having him as our landlord. Like this we went through the summer until August, when three weeks before Labor Day Francie announced she was pregnant.

Are you sure? I asked.

Pretty sure, I'm three weeks late. Francie smiled, her eyes waiting for something more from me.

Three weeks?

Uh huh.

It could be nothing though?

You're happy about this, aren't you? Francie asked.

Of course I'm happy. Wasn't I? A baby, for Christ's sake, my guaranty against Vietnam, and a child of mine.

It'll keep you out of the war, Francie offered.

The next day Mr. Papandreas raised his glass and congratulated me in his high, hoarse voice. *Oh my, you two move fast, don't you, like little rabbits. Well... that's wonderful. Just wonderful.*

Yeah, should keep me out of the war, too.

Yes, there's that, as well. Aren't you two the fortunate ones. Mr. and Mrs. Fortunato.

Guess so.

Yet I carried a trickle of doubt in my belly every time I thought of Francie growing with our child. And why shouldn't I go to Vietnam? Weren't fathers and brothers there already? My sense of duty seemed to grow with each newsreel, with each bodycount, numbers that I had never witnessed on television. Would somebody else not go in my place? Did we not need to contain the spread of communism before it was too late, all of Asia in its clutches, Europe on its lips, and then who knew where. There were nearly a billion red Chinese ruled by a mysterious, melon-faced man named Mao, while Fidel Castro in Cuba courted his own brand of communism. And God help us where the Russians landed next.

You've your family to think of, Harry. Forget about that ridiculous war, Mr. Papandreas advised.

I tried, but the more I saw on television and read about in the newspaper, the more I began to think that perhaps I should think about the war. Perhaps I owed my country a debt of service.

If not now, when? I asked Francie.

Why you, Harry? Why do you have to go to this war?

I thought you were for the war?

Well, I thought so too, but now I don't know. Maybe... maybe it's not right us being over there, doing God knows what. It's between them. None of our business.

Isn't it?

No, there's plenty men over there already. They'll probably have this thing wrapped up by Christmas. From the map, Vietnam's no bigger than Florida. Wouldn't you rather think about your family?

Well... wouldn't you? Mr. Papandreas asked and refilled my glass, his voice already syrupy with half a pitcher of gin cocktail.

Sure, sure. But it bothers me, that's all.

It bothers you, does it?

Yeah, what's wrong with that?

You afraid you're gonna miss out on something?

I just wanna do my duty like everyone else.

Don't be goddamned stupid, Harry. Everyone doesn't pay the same way. Didn't they teach you that in college? You're one of the lucky ones.

Even more reason, then.

I suppose so. Leaning in to me across our cocktail table, he pinched his lips into a smile, refilling my highball glass. *Well, I'm no psychiatrist, mind you ... but you seem awfully concerned about that war suddenly.*

By early December, Francie's belly pushed out its bold new roundness and the war in Vietnam advanced, thousands more men committed each month.

You know HE's against the war, Francie told me, holding up Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* for me to see. *Says, how could anybody raise a child then send them off to something like that?*

I tried to absorb a few chapters of Dr. Spock's book at Francie's urging, but I couldn't concentrate, a remote itch behind my skull causing the language to blur, the words to rip away from my mind as soon as my eyes took them from the page. My job at the office supply store was secure, if I didn't actually work that much, the business an old one that relied on a handful of customers whose accounts I billed and collected with little effort. I spent most of my time filling in behind the counter or on the floor helping customers find ballpoints and ledgers, card stock and swivel chairs, the occasional NCR register.

On New Year's Eve, Mr. Papandreas, Francie and I all stayed home watching Nelson Eddy and Gale Sherwood on Guy Lombardo's New Year's Eve program. Mr. Papandreas and I got drunk on hot rum punch and howled up at the moon together in the backyard as the clock struck midnight. I wrapped my arms around Francie and kissed her. She tasted like coffee.

Happy New Year, sweetie. She said and smiled up at me.

But her eyes focused somewhere beyond me, a curiosity behind them that I couldn't understand. The warmth of the alcohol and Francie's round tummy left me balmy in the crisp winter air, and I pulled her fat belly into mine. Firecrackers and car horns filled the night sky. I pulled her closer.

Careful, she said.

I love you, Francine Banner, I whispered, relieved, joyful even that a baby grew inside of her, a flash of confidence that I could after all love this baby boy or girl of ours instinctively. The next day, a gray sky overhead, I had already lost that confidence, a long, restless morning sleeping off a hangover that left me fearful of parenthood once again. We were supposed to visit her parents in Columbia, but I couldn't get out of bed.

What am I supposed to tell them? That you're still drunk and too hungover to leave the house? Francie yelled from the bathroom.

It's the day after New Year's. So we'll miss one day. We can leave tomorrow. Tell them I got a bug... I wouldn't be surprised if I was getting one anyway. This is worse than a hangover.

You're going to be a father, Harry Banner. You better start acting like one?

Or?

There's no 'or,' Harry.

Yeah, well some men don't have that luxury.

I swear, Harry, if you say one more thing about the damn war, I'm gonna walk out of this house.

I'm just saying, that's all.

Well, I've had about enough of it. I'll call my parents and tell them we'll be late. We'll leave after lunch.

In February, Francie stopped substituting as planned and stayed home reading magazines, applying finishing touches on the former sewing room, and watching soap operas with Mr. Papandreas. During the day the pair shared large lunches, coffee, and the occasional cigarette, never missing an episode of *Search for Tomorrow* or the *Guiding Light*, while in the early evenings our afternoon gins were rarely missed.

Francie thinks she would like to name a boy 'Nelson,' after your father. Did you know that? Mr. Papandreas lit a Pall Mall and inhaled noisily, a dramatic gesture it seemed to me, designed to underscore the answer he already knew. He was right, too, I didn't know. Francie had either not told me or I had not heard her. It didn't matter—both led me to feel guilty, a response I suspect Mr. Papandreas had intended.

Guess I don't. What if it's a girl?

Hasn't found one for a girl, yet. You know, you're a lucky man, Harry. Once in a lifetime chance for greatness. Now it's time to grow up and be a great man.

Thanks, Dad. I tried a thin smile.

You don't know.

What?

That to grow up and be middle-aged, live to be there with a family beside you, that's greatness. You best get your mind straight, Harry. Forget this war.

How's that?

Be a man, goddamnit.

Fighting for your country, that ain't being a man?

Don't be stupid. Mother told me the same thing right there as she packed my bags for the only trip abroad I would ever take. Be a great man, she said. So I went to Italy—you know, Rome, Florence, Venice, the whole thing—my plan to study art history a dream of Mother's since she saw a picture book about Michelangelo. I stayed one week, each day a new misery. I had no taste for it—travel or art. I was fine right here on Palmetto Street. Started helping Mother run her sewing shop, eventually selling top of the line Singers, the newest Featherweights, Husqvarna, the Elna Superomatics. The latest and the greatest.

Mr. Papandreas's cigarette had burned down to his fingers, his eyes twinkling with gin and remembrance, and for a moment he seemed cheerfully lost in his yesteryear of sewing machines. I pointed to the cigarette and held the pitcher up for his glass.

Was she disappointed when you came back early? I asked him.

He crushed out his cigarette in a tall porcelain ashtray and lit another. Devastated. Wouldn't speak to me for two weeks. One day I just showed up at her shop and that was that.

What about your Dad?

He looked as if he had not heard my question. She had grand ideas for me, Mother did. Satisfied with his bit of storytelling, Mr. Papandreas stood as if to leave, shook his glass so that the ice rattled, raised it chest-high, and curtsied, then sat down again to finish the pitcher in silence as we watched *Gunsmoke* on my black and white Magnavox.

I sure like that Matt Dillon, Mr. Papandreas said and laughed.

In March, Francie waddled around the house with the burden of her swelling body, her moods changing by the minute, the baby due in late April. I got a raise at work and spent it on a new color television.

That's all you could think of? She asked.

But in February 1967, I saw the war in Vietnam in stark color pictures for the first time. With its dark green jungles and ravaged foothills, the pale faces of Marines against their helmets and uniforms, the war looked unendingly green, its mountains and swamps not unlike the ones of South Carolina. Marines waded through rice paddies and jumped from giant helicopters. They carried slick, black body bags across currents of green grassland.

For the last month and a half I tried to stay out of Francie's way and often worked late to avoid her uneven temper; and I missed some of my afternoon sittings with Mr. Papandreas. In the quiet of downtown evenings, the rest of the staff gone home to their families, dinners and television, I sat in my tiny warehouse office with a sack of hamburgers and my own bottle of gin reliably nearby. I roamed the aisles, little work of my own to do, straightening displays, ordering paper stock, or dusting typewriters and registers. It was the third Wednesday in March that I wandered the store much the same way, distracted by a cockroach I had chased into a corner near the Schaeffer ballpoint pen display, when the telephone rang out in the dim light of afterhours.

This is Harry.

Pete here. Pete Papandreas. His voice held an odd gravity, a tremor that I had never heard.

Mr. Papandreas?

It's Francine. She... we had an accident.

What do you mean? What kind of accident?

In the car. In my car. She wanted ice cream.

Ice cream?

She wanted ice cream and she wanted me to drive her.

Jesus, is she alright?

She's at General. Me too, I'm here. She's in the emergency room, the doctors are looking at her now. I'm sorry, Harry, I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have been driving, but she wanted ice cream. Said she didn't know when you would...

I hung up the phone, unable to follow what Mr. Papandreas was telling me. The cockroach had disappeared and I searched the floor for any sign of it, determined still to stomp out the pest. When I found him at the base of the counter, I slid my heel over the floor, crushing it against the oak siding. With the insect underfoot, I leaned against the counter trying to move. It took me five minutes before I lifted my shoe and left.

At the hospital, Mr. Papandreas sat with a sheriff's deputy in the hallway.

... for the Dairy Queen, that's where she asked me...

When he saw me, he stopped talking, looked up with what I thought to be a mouthful of bad news and embarrassed eyes, and stood slowly as if I might swat him back down again. I nearly heard the worst before he spoke. But when he did, his mouth turned up into relief and he placed both hands on my shoulders.

Harry, oh Harry. She's alright. She's alright, just a few scratches, bruise on her head, got to watch her overnight, doctor said. But...

But what?

I'm sorry, Harry.

What? What is it?

The baby, Harry, the baby. It's all my fault.

In the hospital bed, Francie slept, her left eye blackened, gauze over her nose and chin. The metallic odor of blood and alcohol hung in the air. When I kissed her forehead, she opened her eyes.

Oh... Harry, she whispered, and her face split into tears.

It's okay. Doctor says you're okay. They just want to watch you.

It's a boy, Harry, she managed between breaths. His name is ...

Nelson. I know. I was glad that I could remember the name for her, that for a moment, for this dent in our lives, I could show her that I was the good husband.

You know?

Uh-huh. Nelson, I love it, it's a great name.

I'm sorry.

It's not your fault. I could hardly believe that the broken woman below me, whose breath came as a slow, sour-smelling hiss, was my wife.

They took him, Harry... our child.

Tears rolled from Francie's eyes and soaked into her bandages. *Should have been more careful... I could hardly hear her any longer. It's my fault... he was just being nice.*

Accounts to bill, I had told her over the phone after closing the store.

It's nobody's fault, I said. It was an accident.

Why, Harry? Francie sucked in a gulp of air so strong that I thought of calling a nurse. She looked exhausted, beaten, as if she struggled to breathe through her fatigue. *And what about the war?*

Mr. Papandreas rode home with me from the hospital when the nurse suggested that it would be better for everyone if I left and got some rest. Francie would sleep. And strangely so would I. As I lay on my back, eyes up at the ceiling trying to run the awful day through my head, all that came to me were images of Rome, Florence, and Venice, like a snow globe of grand buildings and noble statues, a vacation, like Mr. Papandreas', that I would not finish.

The next morning I awoke to a roomful of light, the shades up and a spring sun shining through as if I had slept for days. I could hardly recall where I was, our room masked in white light, the sounds of mockingbirds and lawn mowers outside my open window. Sitting up in the bed, I took a gulp of air whose scent no longer held the disinfected sweepings of a tidy old woman, but a cool, unsullied smell of the freshly-mowed lawns outside and of the coffee brewing inside. When my eyes adjusted to the sunlight, I realized Mr. Papandreas stood in the doorway in a white linen pantsuit, a cup of coffee in his hand, his eyes hidden behind rose-colored lenses. *Time to get up, Harry. Time to get up and be a great man,* he said and walked away leaving an impression of his figure for my sleepy eyes like a ghost in the doorway, his words drifting across the room to me on plane of sunlight and dust.

Short Fiction by Patti Ghezzi

Calvin Lewis, Age Fourteen

Martin Dixon pushed through the courthouse doors and tossed his worn briefcase onto the conveyer belt. He walked through the metal detector, grabbed his briefcase and headed toward the juvenile wing, his wingtips shuffling on the grimy floor.

As he entered the waiting room, he hit a wall of hot air, air that felt like it had been breathed, exhaled and breathed again. It was 8:30 a.m. and the room was already full of teenagers hunched over, inhaling the already-breathed air as they dozed in the hard chairs. Next to each one, a mother, an aunt or a grandmother stared into space, exuding defeat and waiting to be told where to go and what to do.

When Martin first started representing children seven years earlier, he wondered every time he walked through that waiting room where the fathers were. Now, he just hoped his client showed up.

Today, Martin would toil on behalf of Calvin Lewis, age fourteen. Martin hadn't met him yet. He was just a name on a manila folder some clerk dropped on his desk in the public defender's office.

"Calvin Lewis? Is there a Calvin Lewis here?"

He made his way around the room, stopping at every black boy who looked about fourteen. That included pretty much everybody.

"Calvin Lewis?" he asked again and again.

Some opened their eyes, fixed them briefly on Martin – a sunlight-deprived man with thinning hair the color of maple syrup – before returning to sleep. Others didn't react at all, forcing Martin to look to the weary guardians, who shook their heads. Finally, Martin got to the last boy. He was dozing next to an elderly woman whose chin rested on her clenched fist, supported by a scaly elbow propped on the arm of the chair.

"That him," she said, motioning her head toward a scrawny boy with a comb jammed in the back of his untamed afro.

"You're Ms. Bates?"

The woman's chin moved up and down almost indiscernibly, her identity more information than she cared to disclose. Martin had called Ms. Bates the night before. She acknowledged she was Calvin's great aunt and legal guardian, having reared him since he was three, when his mother was sent to jail for drugs. Eleven years later, Ms. Bates didn't have anything good to say about her great nephew.

"Won't go to school," she yelled into the phone. "Won't help me around the house. Won't respect me. I can't do nothin' with that boy."

In an unusual turn, Ms. Bates and Calvin would be sitting on opposite sides of the courtroom. Instead of railing against the school like most guardians did, Ms. Bates was supporting the school district in charging Calvin with truancy. She wanted him locked up for skipping school.

"I want that boy out of my hair," she told Martin. "I'm too old for this."

Martin hadn't told Ms. Bates judges don't lock up kids for skipping school. Like it or not, Calvin would be leaving the courtroom with her. He didn't want to ruin her evening.

"Calvin," Martin said. He reached down and jiggled the boy's knee, sharp and bony through his baggy jeans. "Calvin, wake up, man. I'm your lawyer, Martin Dixon. You can call me Martin. We've got to get ready for court."

Martin's client opened his eyes as if he were regaining consciousness after surgery. When Martin reached out for the obligatory client-attorney handshake, Calvin's arms did not move from the armrests. The boy's eyelids, apparently incapable of rising beyond the midway point, appeared ready to drop.

Martin motioned for Calvin to follow him to a bench in a stark hallway where they could talk in semi-privacy. "Welcome to my office," Martin said, motioning for Calvin to have a seat. As Martin sat down next to him, Calvin tilted his head to one side and closed his eyes.

"Calvin," Martin said. "You can't sleep anymore, man. You and me have got to talk and prepare to go into that courtroom. The school district says you missed sixty days of school since September. Is that true?"

Calvin shrugged.

"Why don't you go to school, man?"

Calvin was silent.

"I'm trying to help you, Calvin. You're a first-time offender, and that's a good thing, but you need to talk to me, so I can defend you. Why have you missed so much school?"

"I don't like school," Calvin said, looking down.

"Calvin, if I had a dime for every kid who told me that I'd be a rich man. I'm sorry you don't like school, but the law says you have to go, and without a high school diploma and some kind of vocational training you won't be able to get a decent job."

Calvin said nothing.

Martin sighed and checked his watch. They were due in court in five minutes. Long enough for Martin to hold the kind of one-sided conversations he was used to having with his clients. Truancy, he went on to explain, is a status offense, a crime because of Calvin's age. Georgia law requires children to attend school until they are sixteen. The judge would hear from the school social worker, from Calvin's great aunt and from Calvin. Then she would ask Martin for a recommendation. He planned to recommend six months probation. The judge would probably go along with that. She would explain to Calvin that if he missed any more school without a doctor's note, he would be in violation of his probation and subject to incarceration. "That means getting locked up," Martin said. "And trust me, my friend, you do not want to spend even one night in juvie."

If Calvin were listening, he gave no clues.

Martin's heart was beating fast knowing he would soon be in the presence of Judge Olivia Hudson, the most recognized and respected juvenile judge in the county. Frequently quoted on television and profiled in magazines, Judge Hudson was a sought-after keynote speaker, who urged more compassion and money for abused and neglected children. After hearing her speak, gray-suited businessmen would defy their stingy reputations and write checks on the spot to the children's charities she supported. A home for battered women and their children was named for her, a distinction usually reserved for the wealthy and deceased.

On a regular basis, Martin got to experience Judge Hudson front-and-center. Inside courtroom 4-B, all the chaos, incompetence and injustice that made Martin cringe evaporated. Judge Olivia Hudson was the absolute authority in her courtroom, and she had a gift for cutting through all the nonsense, the lies, the indifferent expressions on the children who appeared before her. Somehow, she managed to come up with a humane solution when there appeared to be none.

Chuck, Judge Hudson's bailiff, swung the courtroom doors open and called Martin and Calvin in. They sat at a long table, facing the judge's empty throne. On the opposite side, Calvin's great aunt sat with several bureaucrats employed by the school district. Martin didn't think much of these slickly dressed women. They were all about filing paperwork.

Maureen, the officer in charge of making the day run smoothly in courtroom 4-B, moved about purposefully. She wore practical black pumps and elastic-waist black pants. She styled her

long, frosted hair in an outdated, feathered look. Clumps of pink lipstick sometimes rubbed off on her front teeth.

When Maureen caught Martin's eye she lowered her hand to her waist and waved, a private wave intended only for him. She and Martin had an on-again-off-again thing. In Martin's mind, the relationship was currently in the off position.

Martin tried to keep his brain focused on Calvin's situation, but he kept thinking about Judge Hudson. For years, Martin had wondered about her ethnic background. Was she black? Asian? Hispanic? Then, one night when he was in bed with Maureen, who had the goods on everybody, she spilled what she knew about Judge Hudson. She was half Filipino, on her mother's side. Her father was mixed race. The result was a stunning woman, even Maureen had to admit. Stunning women – even moderately attractive people – stood out against the beige background of the juvenile wing.

For seven years, Martin had labored in this wing, representing children accused of drug dealing, petty theft, running away from home and skipping school. It wasn't the career Martin envisioned when he graduated from night law school and passed the bar exam on the first try. He started out in the public defender's office, like many rookie lawyers do, and hoped to land enough high-profile cases to launch a private practice. But there was a problem. In spite of Martin's ambitions, he found himself wanting to help his clients improve their lives, not just deal with their legal troubles. This isolated him from the other public defenders, who closed their cases quickly. Only Martin posted on the wall next to his desk a list of services for mental health, housing and other programs. He made contacts in drug rehabs in hopes that his clients, once freed, would get help. Martin's colleagues called him a social worker with a law degree. After a while, Martin didn't mind.

When the occasional teenage runaway case made it to the office, Martin took it on. He worked with girls so desperate to get out of violent homes they were willing to turn their lives over to pimps who sold them to strangers, beat them and raped them. The street life was more anonymous and somehow tolerable compared to the abuse they suffered at home at the hands of stepfathers, uncles and their mamas' boyfriends. Sheronda, Brittney, Deneen, Stacy, Angelique. Those names stuck in his mind, just like the exceptions to the tax code did long after Martin had passed the bar.

After a while, Martin knew every dust-bunnied corner of that wing. He knew where the bailiffs took their smoke breaks and which soda machines had the highest probability of spewing out the requested drink. He knew whom to fetch when the men's bathroom ran out of paper towels.

This was the hardest part: he knew most the kids who turned up in juvenile court would be back. Juvenile justice was not really about justice, it was about finding a place for the children nobody could be bothered with. Juvenile was the triage unit. In adult court, there was a jury. There was testimony from the victims and the victims' family. Impact statements. Juvenile was all about closing the case. Too often, closing a juvenile case meant choosing the lesser of two unthinkable options, sending a girl home to a family everyone knew was hurting her, because nowhere was worse than the state's inadequately staffed, overcrowded juvenile detention centers.

The work took a toll. Martin gained weight, turned doughy. Almost everyone who worked in the wing was fat, the predictable result of a vending-machine diet and days spent sitting on hard benches. Milk of Magnesia, perched in a vending machine between BBQ Fritos and Big Red gum, was a top seller. Martin returned to his apartment each night drained and tired. He cracked open a beer and crashed in front of the tube, often falling asleep while still wearing his wrinkle-free khakis and polyester dress shirt.

Despite his girth, Martin had a reputation in the wing as a lady's man. Maureen was just his latest conquest. Their romance had never been passionate, just comfortable. They usually got together after long days of working one hard case after another. Martin liked Maureen. She was a

rough-edged woman who swilled beer from the bottle and cackled at the dirty jokes the bailiffs told. Martin didn't want anything serious, though. He hoped Maureen realized that, but past experience told him she probably didn't.

Chuck the bailiff's voice boomed through the courtroom. "All rise."

Judge Olivia Hudson charged through the swinging doors. Martin had to take her in quickly, before her slim body disappeared behind the bench. She was tiny, even in her trademark heels, but she was still a force.

Judge Hudson sat down and motioned for those in the courtroom to do the same. Had Calvin even bothered to stand? Martin didn't know. Seeing Judge Hudson always distracted him. He looked out of his peripheral vision and saw Calvin's rump moving downward toward the bench. The judge read the charges against Calvin.

First, the school social worker took her turn. She produced reams of paperwork on Calvin, all for the purpose of stating that he rarely went to school, a fact not even in dispute.

Then, Judge Hudson asked Calvin's great aunt to rise.

"When did Calvin start skipping school?"

"It started when he was around twelve or thirteen. He started hanging out with a bad crowd, you know, bad kids. He stopped listening to me. Started smoking reefer. Started stealing beers out of my refrigerator."

"Ma'am, do you have anyone in your family to help you with Calvin?"

"No, I got two other nieces besides his mama, but they got problems of their own. I'm old. I got sugar. I can't do nothing with him no more."

"Ma'am, do you have any other health problems besides diabetes?"

"Yes, I have high blood pressure, poor circulation in my legs, varicose veins, arthritis, a weak heart..."

"Thank you, Ms. Bates. Whose beer was in the fridge?"

"It was mine. At night, I like to take a little sip now and then."

"Is that a good idea given your health problems?"

God, Martin loved Judge Hudson. Nothing got by her, even first thing Monday morning.

"Well, my doctor said it was okay every once in a while."

"And, Ms. Bates, do you realize that if I order your nephew incarcerated he will be sent to a juvenile detention center, where he will be shackled at the ankles and housed with criminals accused of far more serious crimes?"

"I just know I can't keep him no more. I want the state to take him. Foster care. I heard about these group homes."

"No ma'am, this is a criminal proceeding. Family services deals with foster care and alternative housing, and neither of those is an option given the shortage of beds for teenage boys. We have emergency shelters for children with nowhere else to go, but those shelters are infested with rats, unsafe and on the verge of being shut down by federal court order."

Ms. Bates was silent.

"Do you have anything more to say, Ms. Bates?"

"No, I said what I came to say. That he don't respect me and he ain't even mine. I can't take it no more. I'm too old, too sick."

"Thank you Ms. Bates. Please be seated."

Martin didn't need to look at Calvin to know the expression he bore. Martin knew the look of exhaustion, like he had never gotten a good night's sleep. Exhausted from shuffling in and out of a broken-down house with lead paint peeling everywhere. A house various uncles and strangers used as a flophouse. Tired of trying to fit into a world that didn't want him around. By the time they got to court, Martin's clients didn't really care what happened to them. Going to court and

getting probation was as routine and expected as getting a haircut.

Judge Hudson turned her attention to Calvin.

Martin touched his client's elbow, signaling him to stand. The boy leaned on the table, rested all his weight on his forearms and pulled himself up as if he were an old man with two bum knees.

"Calvin, is this true what the school social worker said, that you have missed sixty days of school since September?"

The boy said nothing.

"Calvin, you need to look at me and you need to answer me. I'm the one who is going to decide whether to lock you up. Do you understand?"

Beads of sweat started to form on Martin's forehead. "Your honor, may I address my client?"

"Please do, counselor."

Martin whispered in Calvin's ear. "Just answer the judge's questions, Calvin. I need you to speak to the judge."

Martin nodded at the judge.

"Calvin, is it true that you skipped school sixty times in this school year alone?"

Calvin nodded.

"Calvin, you have to speak so the court reporter can transcribe what you say. Did you skip school sixty times?"

"Yes."

"Did you take beers from your great aunt's refrigerator?"

"Yes."

"Did you smoke marijuana?"

"No."

"You didn't?"

"No."

"Then why did your great aunt say you did?"

"I don't know."

"Calvin, you may be seated."

"Counselor, what is your recommendation?"

This was Martin's cue, his turn to deliver his lines. "Your honor, we request Calvin be returned to the custody of his great aunt with mandatory family counseling and probation."

"Thank you, counselor."

Martin sat down. He was shaking even though he had been in court a thousand times. She had that effect on him.

"Calvin, please stand up."

Martin's client hoisted himself up readily this time. He even looked at the judge, who was ready to give her ruling.

"Calvin, I am remanding you to the custody of your great aunt..."

"I don't want him!" the old lady screamed.

"Ms. Bates, this is my courtroom! I am remanding the defendant to the custody of his great aunt, Ms. Clara Bates. He will be on probation for six months. He will attend mandatory counseling twice weekly at his home, with his great aunt, so they can work out their differences. He will go to school every day, and be on time. Calvin, if you violate the orders of your probation, you will be locked up in juvenile detention for a term not to exceed sixty days."

She looked at Ms. Bates.

"Ma'am, if you saw juvenile detention, you would not want any member of your family to go there. I don't send children into lockup solely for skipping school. There is one condition of this

order, however. I'm going to drug test the defendant."

Just when Martin thought he could guess what course of action Judge Hudson would take, she surprised him. He had never seen her drug-test a kid not charged with a drug-related offense. Chuck, the bailiff, pulled out a plastic bag that contained a cup, a lid and a dipstick and led Calvin away.

Once Calvin was out of the courtroom, Maureen asked Judge Hudson when was the last time she drug-tested a fourteen-year-old charged with truancy.

"I don't remember ever doing it, but I got the feeling that young man was not being truthful about his drug use, and if he has a drug problem, the counseling won't be effective and his relationship with his great aunt won't improve."

"I don't want him," Ms. Bates reiterated.

"I have heard your perspective, ma'am, but the county doesn't have a foster family willing to take a fourteen-year-old boy who won't go to school. The emergency shelter is not safe. You tell me there are no family members who can take him. There is no one but you, Ms. Bates. There is no one but you."

Martin could listen to Judge Hudson's voice all day long.

Chuck pushed open the swinging doors and walked toward Judge Hudson. He whispered in her ear. Her face showed no expression.

"Counselor, please approach."

His knees rubbery, Martin made his way to the bench. Judge Hudson leaned in. She smelled of expensive shampoo. "Your client flunked the drug test, counselor. He tested positive for cocaine."

Shit. This was going to get tricky. Martin would have to mount a defense for a client whose pee turned a dipstick the color of a Coca-Cola label.

"I'd like time to confer with my client."

"Very well."

Outside the courtroom, Calvin slouched on a bench, his hands stuffed in his pockets, his eyes fixated on the floor, on a brownish stain of unidentified origin.

"Calvin, we've run into some trouble with the drug test."

Calvin looked up, mustering his most earnest "What'd I do?" expression.

"Don't look at me that way, man. Your drug test came back positive for cocaine. Cocaine, man. I'm looking like a fool in front of the judge, and you're facing juvenile lockup."

Calvin said nothing. His eyes did, though, finally open all the way.

"How did it happen, Calvin? Drug tests don't lie, and you shouldn't either. I want to keep you out of jail, man."

"I smoked a cigar," the fourteen-year-old said, pronouncing the word see-gar.

"Oh really, and had someone dug the tobacco out of that see-gar and replaced it with god knows what?"

"I don't know. Maybe"

"So you didn't know there was anything besides tobacco in that see-gar? Someone just gave it to you and you took a few puffs? Is that what happened?"

"Something like that."

"Well, what exactly happened?"

"What you said, I guess."

"All right. Let's go."

Chuck fetched Ms. Bates, who was waiting alone just outside the courtroom, muttering to herself over the prospect of having to take Calvin home.

With everyone present, Chuck announced court was back in session.

Judge Hudson again had the floor. "Counselor, a drug test has revealed your client is using cocaine, when he denied using drugs in this very courtroom. What is your response to this evidence?"

Martin felt like a kid trying his first case. He felt Maureen's eyes on him, Chuck's too. They were wondering how he would tap dance around this one. Whatever he said, they were sure to give him shit about it later.

"Your honor, I have two points to make in defense of my client. First, he denied in your courtroom using marijuana, not all drugs. Second, he didn't know the blunt he was smoking contained cocaine. He thought it was a regular cigar. He had no idea."

Judge Hudson stared at him.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, your honor. Nothing further."

"Thank you, Mr. Dixon. Be seated."

Had she ever called him Mr. Dixon before? Martin didn't think so. As he sat down, he felt his tense body return to normal. She would, of course, add a drug treatment component to Calvin's probation. Martin knew of an outpatient program on the Southside that accepted teenagers. She would send Calvin there. Martin would call over to his contacts and make sure Calvin got a good counselor.

Martin's stomach growled. This case was dragging on longer than most.

Calvin squirmed around, looking first at Martin and then over where his great aunt sat stone-faced. Calvin whispered to Martin, "Am I going to jail?"

Martin shook his head.

Relief washed over Calvin's pock-marked face, scarred from what Martin suspected was a bad case of childhood chicken pox.

Judge Hudson was writing furiously on Calvin's papers. She often did that before rendering her ruling, but she was taking longer than usual. Finally, she looked up.

"Calvin, please rise."

Calvin and Martin stood, their arms hung loose by their sides, their shirtsleeves almost touching.

"Calvin, having been found guilty of truancy and of using cocaine when you are only fourteen years of age, I am remanding you to a juvenile incarceration facility for sixty days. Upon your release, you will be remanded to the custody of family services, which will determine an appropriate foster care placement. You may have visitation with your legal guardian at your foster residence but not in her home."

Calvin looked at Martin, who looked at Maureen, at Chuck, at Ms. Bates and finally at Judge Hudson. What the hell was she doing? Locking a kid up in juvie, where she knew he would be exposed to, and possibly attacked by, real criminals? Putting him in foster care, knowing he had no chance at getting into a decent group home with his criminal history?

Martin couldn't look at Calvin.

Judge Hudson stuffed Calvin's paperwork in a folder, and placed it in front of her. She removed her glasses and looked up at no one in particular.

"I don't want to lock this boy up, but I can't send him to a home where he has access to drugs and liquor and no supervision. He needs to be out of that home, and this is the only way I can make that happen. Family services wouldn't take him today. It would take months for them to take action if I sent him home. However, they will take him coming out of juvenile lockup, once they see my report on the home conditions that contributed to his behavior. He must be out of that home."

Then, she looked at the child who stood before her. "Calvin, you will have teachers and so-

cial workers in juvenile detention who are there to help you. Take advantage. I want you to make something of yourself, do you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Bailiff, please remand mister..." She searched Calvin's papers for his last name. "Mister Lewis. Please remand Mr. Lewis to custody."

Chuck stepped toward Calvin, who flinched backward like a cornered animal.

"Turn around and place your hands behind your back, son."

Calvin kept his eyes fixed on Martin. He didn't look angry. He looked like a child stuffed in the body of a teenager.

"Go ahead, Calvin," Martin said. "It'll be okay."

Calvin covered his face with his hands and sobbed, his shoulder blades rising and falling with every heave.

"Don't let them lock me up, Martin," he said. "I don't want to go to jail."

"It'll be okay, Calvin. Do what the bailiff said. Put your hands behind your back. He's goin' to cuff you, but he'll put 'em on real loose."

Chuck took one wrist and Martin held the other. Calvin's body stiffened.

"Don't let them lock me up. Please."

Chuck put a hand on Calvin's lower back and pressed forward, pulling his wrist behind his back before reaching for the other and slapping on the metal handcuffs. Tears slid down Calvin's cheeks and snot dribbled out of one nostril.

Maureen pulled a tissue out of her pocket. She dabbed Calvin's cheeks and held the tissue to his nose.

"Go ahead and blow, honey."

He complied.

"You're going to be okay," she said. "I have a good feeling this will turn out for the best. Be strong."

Chuck looked at Martin, who heard himself promising to visit Calvin in juvie within the next couple days.

"Promise?" Calvin said.

"Yeah, man, I promise."

"You'll get me out?"

"We'll see."

Calvin shifted his gaze past Martin, toward the bench where his great aunt had sat. The bench was empty.

Martin gave Chuck a nod, and Chuck led Martin's client through the double doors. Martin stood watching the doors swing back and forth until they stopped. Then he sat down on the bench and opened his briefcase. He stuck Calvin's manila folder inside and slammed it shut.

That night, Martin and Maureen lay in his bed, in between pilled sheets that had not been washed in months. Maureen's head, sticky with hairspray, rested on the soft cushion of Martin's upper arm. With his free hand, Martin flipped around on the remote control, looking for a nature show or something mindless to watch.

"She did what she thought was in Calvin's interest," Maureen said. "When you think about it, she did the only thing she could do to keep him from going back to that bad home environment."

Martin didn't want to talk about Judge Hudson, whom he had regarded as the one person of power knew how to make the broken juvenile system work. Martin kept his thumb firmly on the remote control. He watched the channels flip by. Leno. Letterman. Nightly News. Sheronda. Brittny. Deneen. Stacy. Angelique.

Short Fiction by Lindy Patterson

Old Man Know-All Died Last Year

William awakened that morning to the sound of the radio alarm coming through the wall. Until a month ago it hadn't gone off for over thirteen years and the noise of it both irritated and calmed him. He rose and made his way to Elizabeth's bedroom door with deliberately loud footsteps and knocked, hoping to wake her, but the alarm radio kept on. He knocked again and called, "Elizabeth." His voice, he feared, sounded harsher than he had intended—almost a bellow that echoed in the long hallway—and he chastised himself for this.

Then he heard a door click open behind him, and he was standing in a column of light. "Yes, grandpa?" Elizabeth stood in the doorway, dripping and hugging a giant purple towel around her small frame.

"Oh. Your alarm, that's all." Without looking back he shut himself in his room and waited and thought of the things he should have said to this granddaughter—I just wanted to be sure you had what you needed, honey, or better yet, a funeral is a solemn and important occasion, especially the first, and I'm glad that I'll be there with you today to help you understand. But he didn't say anything of the like to this granddaughter, who felt more foreign to him with each passing day, who was born and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts—a place he'd never been to—and who was living in the room next to his own, Ruth's childhood room. Ruth wouldn't stay in it. Too creepy, she'd said, though he didn't know what to make of this statement. Creepy like ghosts or dead things. Creepy like a bug, like a spider. Creepy like the memory of an old dread or like the memory of a better time or an innocence that will never be regained. It could be any of these, William thought, one or all.

The bedroom had barely been touched since Ruth left almost fourteen years ago and not at all since Anna died. William tidied only the rooms he occupied, and cursorily at that: the kitchen, the library, and his bedroom. The ghosts and the spiders and the past—they could have the rest of the house as far as he was concerned. And, for the most part, they had kept to themselves, stayed in their rooms.

But now his daughter was back with the not-so-much-of-a-surprise granddaughter, and the ghosts and daemons of the past had erupted, angry but quiet, from the dusty halls and dark rooms of the house.

He missed Anna. Almost a year she'd been gone already. Dropped dead instantly of a blood clot. He would never forgive Ruth for not coming back for her mother's funeral. She'd said she was so sick she couldn't get out of bed, but he would never believe that. Ruth had always been a coward and she had simply been afraid to face him. Anna had tried to stay in touch with her through the years, getting bits and pieces of information about where she was and about the child, but Ruth wouldn't speak a word to him. Not for well over a decade.

He couldn't think about these things. If he did, he would not be able to let them be in his house. He would not be able to live in his house. And though he knew that Ruth believed she was back for the summer to help him take care of Anna's things, clear the house and make his future departure less cluttered, he had his own motives. He was a Christian man and naturally wanted to forgive her before he died. But, more than that, he wanted to repair what wrong he had done with his only daughter, whatever he had done that had made her turn wild and rebellious. He planned to do this by way of Elizabeth. Though no one but Ruth knew for certain the identity of the father, and it seemed she would never tell, he knew that the girl was at least half Cochran, and through

her he hoped that something of the honor of their family name could be restored.

Phoeby Johnson's funeral would take place today. Ruth had been the one to see the announcement in the paper day before yesterday. Pheoby Johnson, Ruth's nanny, their housekeeper for more than ten years, had died of cancer—bone marrow, William believed, though the paper didn't say. He'd heard news of it when she was diagnosed. He hadn't spoken to or of her in thirteen years, but felt nevertheless that he was obligated to pay his respects. He owed her this much, as did Ruth. Ruth was still sleeping in what had been the guest bedroom when William and Elizabeth sat down to breakfast. They ate in silence. He had noticed that she was a slow eater like Ruth. He finished his cereal and tried to make pleasant conversation.

"You like to get up early?"

"Sometimes, I guess."

"Not like your mama, then."

"I guess not, she likes to sleep."

It was strange to William that this thirteen year-old girl could seem so equivocal and aloof one minute and timid and shy, almost trembling, the next. When she'd stood earlier that morning, ringed from behind by the bathroom light, chilled and shivering for all the terry cloth, he could have spoken to her. She seemed to want him to say something then. *Yes, Grandpa?* she'd said.

William looked across his empty cereal bowl at his granddaughter.

"It's an important day, Elizabeth."

She looked at him with the hint of curiosity behind her usual pale, nervously blank expression.

"Your first funeral service."

"Oh." The curiosity faded.

He'd missed his opportunity, he thought, and he would be more careful next time. He would watch for her blank and distant face to turn receptive and he would be ready with some wisdom for her. What had she known of the world up to this point, he wondered. How would she navigate the complexities of life with only the direction of her mother's strange and misguided notions? This was his last and most important charge, he felt, his second chance at leaving a family legacy, a moral inheritance. He would not fail this time.

After breakfast, William sat down to his Bible, and the girl wandered the house for a while then went outdoors. He watched her from the parlor window as she walked out to the red dirt road and looked both ways. He suspected then that she would cross it, but instead, she stood on the edge of it and kicked up dust with her white sneakers. A click from the kitchen and he dropped the lace curtain with a start. But it was only the refrigerator, he realized, humming mildly now in the quiet.

He returned to his reading chair and began again to read his scripture. He read Ecclesiastes, a book that gave him comfort, that told of the difference between the fool and the wise man. *Sorrow is better than laughter, it said, because a sad face is good for the heart. And, A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.* He read this one over aloud, the words rolling like smooth-sharp gems over his tongue. The heavy hand of the Spirit scraped at his heart, inscribing just that wisdom that he would need for the day ahead.

He whispered his gratitude to the ceiling.

When Elizabeth returned to the house, she came into the study where William read and stood scratching her short-clipped fingernails across the ridged surface of his oak desk.

"Would you like to read?" he asked.

"Maybe."

William found himself irritated by this curt response—her almost disrespectful refusal to look up from the desk and cease her scratching—and his hand trembled as he resisted raising it to her cheek. He returned to his reading.

"I like murder mysteries."

"Oh?" But he kept his face turned to his book.

"Yes, and fantasy—anything with magic or giants. I like giants."

"Oh?" he said again, with a tone of half-interest. This, he had begun to realize, was the way in; by ignoring her, he created in her the desire for his attention. Probably a neurosis brought on by her lack of a father.

The scratching came to a slow stop. "Do you have any books I could read, Grandpa?"

William removed his glasses. "Certainly none to do with murders or giants, child. Your mother may allow those kinds of books, but you won't find anything of the sort in this library." Elizabeth said nothing, but continued to gaze at him intently, expectantly. "Look at the library over there, Elizabeth. This is who we are in this library. Count the number of religious titles that you see. Those are not there for idle reasons. They aren't there for decoration. This is not for window dressing. This is who we are in this library. We're historical people and we're religious people and we're scientific people."

Elizabeth walked past him to the wall of books opposite the desk. She ran her fingernails across the bindings, paused, continued, paused and then pulled a title from the shelf—a natural history of Georgia. She looked to William and he nodded his approval.

She was so unlike Ruth as a child. Ruth had bubbled through the house, never still, never silent, never willing to listen. She'd had those light brown curls and soft features, a pout that won her arguments with her mother and brought on anger from him. In her teen years she had started finding real trouble, fooling in places she shouldn't. He'd tried his best to cure her of her silliness, her way of manipulating with her dark lashes, but, he realized, he had failed in this. Perhaps he had gone about things in the wrong way—too many slaps, not enough in the way of verbal guidance. Wasn't this what everyone said nowadays? She'd hated him, probably still did.

The book that Elizabeth had chosen was a heavy one, and as she sat in the dusty blue armchair adjacent to his, both of her small hands knuckly with the effort, he felt a surge of protectiveness for her.

At two o'clock, Ruth padded down the stairs. Through the archway William and the girl could see her. Eyes puffy and red, hair pressed into an unflattering shape and sticking to her cheeks. She looked disgraceful. She disappeared into the kitchen, returned with a cup of coffee and padded back up. All of this she did without glancing their way, even when Elizabeth, looking at her, coughed lightly. They both stared at the empty landing for a long and silent moment, until the girl snapped the book closed and followed her mother up the stairs.

Alone in the study now, William could no longer concentrate on his reading. He saw half of his face fifteen feet away in the hall mirror. It looked hoary in the white afternoon light, tired, perhaps even wise. One eye gazed across the room at him and seemed to contemplate his real image, as if this eye could tell him, perhaps, what it meant to be a young man grown old. The half-face reflection could have said to him that age was a blessing and that only after years of living does a man find the calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young. After the mistakes of his youth and middle age, he believed this to be true. His passions were spent, his temper cooled.

He returned to his reading until it was time for them to get to the funeral service. Ruth and Elizabeth were still upstairs. He wouldn't like to be tardy. It would make him seem indifferent and arrogant to her family and he wouldn't risk this considering she had provided him with domestic

service and considering they were black; the relatives would already have a certain impression of him. He wouldn't disgrace either of their families with tardiness.

In his room, he opened the closet to look for his dark brown suit. He didn't wear the brown often. He liked it least of the three suits he owned—none of them black—but since it was the darkest of them it seemed most appropriate for a funeral. He had last worn it to Anna's and found it hanging in with her things. He didn't remember putting it there on her side of the closet, and it took him a moment before he could bring himself to reach for the suit, hanging there between her pink and yellow floral skirt and the gray cardigan with maroon piping.

After he had undressed, wearing only his underwear, he sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over his belly to remove his house shoes and to put on dress socks and shoes. Anna had always teased him about this habit. The first things on and the last things off were his shoes. In case of emergency, he would say, he wouldn't want to be caught with bare feet. It was a habit he developed as a child after attending a series of prophetic lectures with his folks, where history was spread out before him, painted in vivid color—beasts and dragons and scarlet-clad women galloping in terrible brightness on muscled steeds. At the end of the long mural was Christ among hosts of glittering angels and beneath him the few were reaching up to him, smiling, clean, and the rest were pulling at the rocks, yearning for a quick death beneath their weight. A boy wouldn't want to be caught without his shoes and socks on, in any case.

William pulled on a thin white undershirt and noticed, not for the first time, how it stretched at his paunch. He finished dressing, pants last, pulled on over his shoes.

On the landing at the bottom of the stairs again, he called up. "Ruth." This time he did not regret the harsh edge that crept into his voice. "We're going to be late."

Ruth appeared at the top of the stairs and glared down at him with eyebrows raised. With a false cordiality she said, "Yes, Daddy, we'll be down in a minute." The puffy eyes and matted hair of a few hours before were gone. She was dressed in black, but without the slightest hint of solemnity, William felt. The dress was short and it wrapped across the front to make a low V at the neck. Her lips were painted a dark red, and her hair, instead of being drawn back in some somber or even dignified manner, was full of those large and playful curls of hers. She was too pretty—not beautiful, he'd always told her that—but much too pretty. A familiar angry heat rose up his back and into his neck. She would disgrace him no matter when they arrived.

William turned on his heel and headed for the kitchen. He poured a glass of water and drank it quickly. Why would she dress like a whore for a funeral? For *this* funeral? A memory played in his mind as he stared at the cabinet fronts. He'd dragged a sixteen year-old Ruth by the arm into this very kitchen where Pheoby was drying the dinner plates. Ruth's face was flushed and blotchy, one cheek a solid red where he had slapped her. "You apologize to this woman. You tell her what you did and you apologize." But Ruth just sobbed and struggled to release her arm from William's grip. Pheoby looked away and William told her how he'd caught them—Ruth and Pheoby's boy, Al—in the bedroom. He didn't tell her what he'd seen. He tried to push the picture out of his mind—Ruth pressing herself white and half-naked against the Johnson boy's dark brown shoulder. Even now it made his stomach turn.

Pheoby had responded with dignity, William believed. She looked somberly at Ruth and then turned to him with a kind of sadness in her eyes. He took this as her own wordless apology and insisted again with a shake of the arm that Ruth beg Pheoby's pardon. Instead, she tore her arm from his hold and ran from the kitchen. Her feet pounded up the stairs, tripping once, and then her bedroom door slammed shut.

Pheoby looked away, holding an intricately painted blue-china plate in a tea towel. She'd quit her job right after and on the rare occasion that he saw her, she never looked him in the eyes again after that—something Ruth probably didn't realize.

And now his daughter would dare to go to this same woman's funeral dressed in a manner that would only remind them all of her trespass. Perhaps she hoped that Al Johnson would be there. This must be it. William realized that she probably didn't know that Al was married and had two children of his own, and of his own kind. Young people didn't understand the importance of this, but William did and Pheoby did. They understood what difference meant and that it mattered and that the Bible gave specific guidance on this point. Even Solomon was led into sin by intermarriage, and was rebuked for it by Nehemiah and by God, Himself.

William poured another glass of water and drank from it, more slowly this time. He began to calm. It would be a good lesson in humility for Ruth, to see Al married and living well. He had a good job now, an office job. He'd gone to college, a good one up north, if he recalled correctly. He'd done things right. His mother could be proud of him.

Just then their footsteps sounded on the stairs. William straightened his tie and met them on the landing. He was glad to see that Elizabeth was wearing a modest chocolate-colored dress, not too fancy, and it complimented her dark brown eyes, which, William thought, she must have inherited from her unknown father. Again, her waifish smallness, as she stepped out of the front door and into the back seat of the station wagon, inspired in him the impulse to shield her from the possibility of danger—physical or spiritual. He would see to it that she was safe today.

Ruth drove. This made William uncomfortable for reasons that he was unsure of, except that he didn't trust her. Who knew what thoughts she had going through her mind as she drove the dirt road away from the house and through the pine and cottonwood trees; he felt certain that it wasn't their safety, in any case, seeing as she drove faster than she should, kicking up red dust behind them.

"Slow down," he commanded.

She glanced at him but did not slow the car. She may have even sped up slightly. Provoked but determined to remain calm, William turned his face to the window, catching sight of the shadowed half of his face in the sideview mirror.

They arrived five minutes late and William was appalled to find the crowd of mourners sitting in lawn chairs in the parking lot of Rawlings Chapel, the funeral chapel in the black part of town. The mourners were gathered there in the shade of a large blue tarp, sitting in lawn chairs or standing around long tables heaped with casseroles and fruit salads.

Flustered, he turned to Ruth. "What in God's name?"

"Didn't I tell you? The regular service was at two. I thought we would just come for the viewing and some of the wake. They're standing vigil all night." She pulled the car up behind a gray Cadillac, and left the engine idling. "It seemed more appropriate, I thought. I just thought you'd be more comfortable this way."

William was stammering, but finally managed to ask where the body was.

"Daddy, it's a drive-thru funeral. Didn't you read the announcement at all? The body's behind that window up there." Ruth pointed and William only now realized that they were in fact in a line of cars. Arrows directed them into a narrow lane that led up to a plate-glass window. "The eulogy from the regular service is going to be broadcast every half-hour on AM 1220." She switched on the radio, turning the dial until she found the right station. "See?" And sure enough, a preacher was belting out the eulogy.

"You mean to tell me that the body's in the window and we're going to motor by in order to pay our respects? This is—" He couldn't finish his sentence. He couldn't imagine that Pheoby Johnson had wanted such an embarrassing spectacle made of her body. And, worse yet, he couldn't believe that he was in a car and soon to witness her humiliation.

"It's no big deal, Dad. Get a hold of yourself. Rawlings added on the drive-thru last year.

The announcement explained the whole thing. It makes it easier for a lot of people who can't get around so well. It's becoming more common." She was smiling. She was enjoying this, he realized. She hadn't told him on purpose, wanted to see him rattled and embarrassed. His right hand twitched with anger and before he knew what he was doing, he'd whanged the dashboard violently. A loud crack echoed through the car. Ruth gasped. Elizabeth squealed.

Before him, William saw only a dark tunnel where the line of cars had been. His hand, which he had pulled quickly back into his lap, was throbbing. The crack had been, in part, the breaking of his thumb. He could feel the sharp edge of a bone pushing against flesh and skin. An organ played and voices sang through the static on the radio. *...in yonder Land, no pain, no trials there, no trace of earthly care; all sin shall be unknown, praise shall surround the throne, in yonder Land...*

William hazarded a glance at Ruth. She stared straight ahead, lips tight. It was that look she'd always had in these after-moments. He could feel Elizabeth's eyes on him from the back seat, but couldn't turn around and face her now. Though he knew he needed to go to the hospital, he tucked his broken thumb into the sleeve of his suit jacket.

The Cadillac pulled forward and they were next in line to view the body. There was a light knock on his window, and William turned to see the face of Al Johnson, drawn but smiling through the glass. The window began to roll down without William touching anything. He was glad they were power windows; he wouldn't have been able to crank a handle with his broken thumb, which he could feel pounding and swelling now inside his sleeve.

"Mr. Cochran." Al reached his hand in the window and, after an uncomfortable pause William raised his left hand and shook Al's awkwardly. "Awful good of you to come." William couldn't manage a reply, but nodded and set his eyes on his trembling knees. He hoped that he appeared sorrowful, but feared instead that he seemed like some dumb animal. With the window down William could hear the murmur of voices and occasional laughter and shrieks of children. Funerals sound just this way, the way Anna's had. That day he had wished that he lived in a culture where mourning still allowed for public and soulful howling. Not that he would have opened his throat and released his cries, but he had wished that the people around him would. Everyone behaved so well at a funeral. If they were to cry, they did it as privately and quietly as possible, and it seemed that if there ever were a time and place for uninhibited noise, it would be at the death of someone you loved.

Al looked at him with an expectant but half-hearted smile, but William didn't notice him again until he bent down and looked past him. "Ruthie. I heard rumor you were back in town. What's it been now, seven years?"

William's head jerked up at this, and he turned to Ruth. Calmly, she turned the volume down on the radio.

"Al went to college up near Worcester, Daddy. We lived in the same town." She patted his knee, which made him cringe—it was a humiliating gesture. Ruth reached across him and clasped Al's hand directly in front of him. "Seven years too long. Is Alice here? And Stephi? Lord, she must be eight years old now."

"Yeah, they're right over there. We've got a boy now, too. Four years old."

"Look at that. My God, it's been a long time." They smiled at each other. Old friends and William the old fool. "I'm so sorry about your mother, Al."

"Well, we all are, but," he swallowed and blinked, "well, I guess we know she's in a better place. No more pain. Don't those words seem used up? But it's some kind of comfort, isn't it?"

"It is, but of course you'll miss her. We'll all miss her." Ruth was kind and genuine, articulate even. "Elizabeth, say hello. You remember Al, don't you?"

"No."

Al looked into the back seat. "Well, Elizabeth. Aren't you all grown up?"

William couldn't listen to their chatter. What was it that he had wished to say to Elizabeth today? What scripture had fallen so warm and heavy on his heart that morning? It seemed like a memory from some distant time, and he couldn't, for the life of him, remember the words. His thumb was pulsing and hot. He would have to tell them soon.

"Mr. Cochran, it's a pleasure to see you again, too. I hope y'all stay for a while and get something to eat. There's plenty."

William nodded, still speechless. His throat was dry and empty. Perhaps, he thought, he would never speak again. *For even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent*, but, William thought, he is nevertheless a fool.

The gray Cadillac pulled away from the window and Ruth put the station wagon into gear and pulled into its place, under a lattice awning overgrown with wisteria. She turned the radio back up, and the zealous voice of the preacher came calling through the speakers. William looked past Ruth, who was glaring at him again, and through the car window, through his reflection and through the drive-thru window at Pheoby Johnson's body. She was laid in a modest casket, surrounded by yellow flowers. It must have been her favorite color, for he remembered then that she always wore it. Anna had said to her once, "You're so lucky you can wear that lemony yellow Pheoby. I wish I could, but yellow makes me look like a meringue pie." Pheoby had said, smiling wryly, "Well, you know, us dark women have all the luck."

"Daddy." Ruth's voice had a hard edge to it.

It occurred to him that something about seeing Pheoby framed through the window made her seem timeless. If she stayed there behind the glass, he believed that she would never decompose, everything would stay just as it was forever.

"Daddy, I won't let you do that in front of Elizabeth. Rude to Al, beating the damn car."

She was just a darkly painted porcelain figurine, draped in yellow.

"I won't let you turn her into either one of us."

Then he felt Elizabeth's small cool hand on his cheek. She wiped at it. She leaned over the seat and draped her arms around his neck.

Ruth stared at them, blank and unsmiling. And the preacher on the radio said, "Brothers and sisters, as we say goodbye to this our dear sister, Pheoby Johnson, we cannot forget the blessed words of God, when he revealed to his servant, Solomon, that *the day of death is better than the day of birth, that it is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man*. Every man. Every man. Every man. Do you hear that, people?"

His eyes refocused from Pheoby's face to his fuzzy reflection in the plate-glass. The lattice-work cast irregular flecks of shadow and light onto his face. The pain in his thumb was unbearable now.

Short Fiction by Courtney D. Ware

Hit and Run

"Elaine, do you want me to buy you another beer?" Elaine's best friend Renée asked her as Elaine finished off her fifth bottle of Corona in the dimly lighted, smoke-filled bar.

"No thanks, Renée. I think I've had enough." Elaine slid some money to the bartender and spun around on her bar stool.

"Suit yourself, girl. I've got room for one more." Renée and two of Elaine's other girlfriends laughed as they toasted and finished off their bottles of beer. Renée was a petite, dark brown skinned woman with wide hips and short, curly black hair. She was dressed rather flamboyantly in a bright red, fitted dress and high heels to match. And her voice was just as loud as her outfit.

"Yeah, well y'all can continue to sit here and drink up. I'm going home. I have to read my case studies tomorrow. I'm already behind foolin' with y'all." Elaine tried to stand up but lost her balance and fell back onto her bar stool. "I'm o.k." she said.

"Do I need to take you home?" Renée asked as she lifted another beer to her lips. "You can barely stand up. How are you gonna drive?"

"I'll be fine. It's these damn high heel shoes I got on. I'm not drunk . . . just a little tipsy." Elaine took off her black, 3-inch stilettos, stood up, and straightened her simple but sexy black, sleeveless dress. "See, I told you it was my shoes."

Renée grinned widely. "All right, Elaine. Call me tomorrow."

Elaine smiled back. "Ok, I got you. Good night, ladies!" Then she turned away from them and sauntered out of the bar, high heels in her right hand.

The bartender asked Renée as he watched Elaine saunter off, "Do you think you should let her go like that? You see how she's walkin' sideways. She's goin' to drive like that too. Call her a cab." He frowned and shook his head.

Renée laughed and shook her head. "Don't be so concerned. She'll be fine. She leaves like that every Friday." The other women nodded their heads in agreement. "Elaine has the highest tolerance of all of us."

Elaine opened the door of her 1999 tan Honda Civic and sat behind the wheel, trying to steady herself. Elaine had spent all her cash in the bar on beer, so catching a taxi was out of the question. She figured if she drove with all the windows down and her jacket off, the cool air would sober her up. She also put on her glasses, thinking that would help focus her blurred vision. Then she started up the car and slowly eased out of the crowded parking lot.

Elaine was a rather plain young woman with a rather plain life. She was about five feet five inches tall and slim, with thick, dark brown hair that she always wore in a bun. She hid her large, pretty brown eyes behind dark brown, plastic framed glasses and wore no make-up on her brown skin – it was too much trouble. She dressed like she was still at the university, in jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers, although she graduated almost two years ago. She usually stayed at home buried in her law books, but on Fridays her girlfriends would convince her to go out with them and drink. That was the only time she ever wore heels, and that was because Renée gave her so much grief about it. Elaine had never before been a heavy drinker, but the stress of law school was getting to her. So drinking had become her brief escape from it, but it was nights like this one that made Elaine realize her drinking could be getting out of control.

As Elaine drove along, the car began to pick up speed. Her intoxication, combined with her heavy foot and the sloping road, made very dangerous driving conditions. The wind was blowing

hard in her face and howling loudly in her ears as the car whirred past the houses and trees lining the dark, two-lane back road leading up to her apartment complex. Elaine was so caught up in the cold wind in her face that she didn't realize she was swerving in and out of the lane for oncoming traffic. It wasn't until she hit the curb and ran up on the sidewalk that she snapped back into reality. "Oh shit," she cursed and turned the wheel hard to the left, jerking back onto the road. She still did not have control of the car, crossing both lanes and running up on the sidewalk on the left side of the street. "Ooooh nooo . . . !" It was during her struggle to regain control of the car that she saw a dark form crawl out in front of her. Elaine gasped and stomped on the brake, but it was too late. She felt the sickening thud and knew she had hit something or someone.

The car was still, stopped on the sidewalk, but Elaine was trembling uncontrollably. "Oh God, what have I done?" she sobbed to herself. As the realization of what had occurred slowly came to her, Elaine began to panic. She was frozen to the seat, and she gripped the steering wheel so tightly that her hands ached. *I have to get away . . . I have to get home . . . I can't just sit here . . .* She was going to put the car in reverse and back up, but she didn't know where the thing she hit was and was afraid of running over it. *I'll just ease forward a little and turn back onto the road,* she decided. But instead of easing, she accidentally jerked forward. The sound of bones crushing let her know that she had run over a body. Elaine screamed and sped off down the street leading to her home.

Elaine rolled out of her car, ran into her apartment building, and stumbled up three flights of stairs. When she got to her door, she fumbled in her black purse for her keys then tried to steady her trembling hand to work the lock. She burst through the door into the dark apartment and threw herself on the black leather sofa. Then she fainted.

When Elaine regained consciousness ten minutes later, the memory of what had happened came rushing back to her. *Oh my God, I've killed someone.* Somehow, Elaine dragged herself from the couch to her room, dropped her coat onto the floor, and went into her bathroom. *Maybe if I take a shower, it will wash the whole horrible thing away,* she thought pitifully. She turned on the bathroom light then peeled off her black dress and nude panty hose, turned on the cold water, braced herself, and jumped in the shower. The sting of cold water made her cry out and cringe, but eventually her body temperature adjusted to the coldness.

The horrible thing that just occurred was not washed away with the water, though. As Elaine stood under the jets, the scene played out in her mind over and over again. How she swerved from one lane to the other. How her car jumped the curb onto the sidewalk. How the dark form crawled out in front of her car. She heard the loud thud as she hit it the first time, and then the bones crushing as she ran over it a second time. She shivered remembering those sounds again. *Oh my God, what am I going to do? I'm a murderer!*

After pondering all of this more than she could handle, Elaine got out of the shower and dried off. She stepped mechanically into her room, pulled a t-shirt over her head, and crawled into her bed. She usually felt safe and trouble-free under the big comforter on her bed, but not tonight. Instead, it took her a long time to fall asleep. Every time she closed her eyes, the image of the dark form crawling in the path of her car appeared. *Why was it so dark on that road? Why weren't there streetlights?* She thought. *Why didn't I see the person long before I hit him?* Then she realized that she must not have had her headlights on. *Damn! Why did Renée let me drive home? It's all her fault this happened!* A wave of anger rose up in Elaine against her best friend, but it soon passed and was replaced by fear. In her fear, she fell into a fitful sleep filled with nightmares.

Late the next morning Elaine woke up with a pounding headache and tired from a restless night. She had trouble remembering what she did last night – the consequence of a serious hang-over. She sat up in bed and tried to remember, but all she could see were the images of her nightmare.

Was it a nightmare? Driving home, swerving, and hitting a dark form that crossed in front of her car – that was real. *No, it was a nightmare, wasn't it?* But the images were too clear to be imagined. *I just drank too much, that's all.*

Now that that was decided upon, Elaine walked from her bedroom to the kitchen and stood at the sink, contemplating what she could eat or drink to ease her body and mind. *Caffeine is always good*, she decided. Elaine turned on the coffee pot then went into the living room to turn on the T.V. *This place is too quiet*, she thought. *I just need some noise to fill the awkward silence.* It was days like this one that made Elaine think she had made a mistake by deciding to live alone. But maybe it was better to live alone – she couldn't share her thoughts with anyone. Not even Renée.

While flipping through the channels, a familiar scene caught her eye and she stopped to listen. A news anchor was reporting on something that had happened in her neighborhood. Elaine began to panic as she listened to the story. *Why does this seem so awfully familiar? It's like . . . my dreams!* The reporter rattled off the breaking news this way:

"This is John Bradley from Channel 6 news reporting live from Thompson Street in northeast Atlanta at the scene of a hit and run. Investigators are confirming that this hit and run took place sometime late last night. The victim appeared to be crossing the street when he was struck by an oncoming car that apparently stopped only briefly then took off into the night. The victim, a thirty year old teacher at Harris Middle School, was walking from his car which had given out of gas. The victim was found early this morning by Mrs. Bobbie Taylor, who lives across the street from where the body was found. Mrs. Taylor, could you describe to us what you saw this morning?"

"Yes sir, I can. I came out of my house about 8:00 this morning and walked down my front driveway to pick up my Saturday morning paper. When I got to the end of the driveway and reached down to pick up the paper, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a bright red something, so I decided to take a closer look. I walked across the street, and as I got closer I saw it was a body, so I turned and ran back into my house. My husband asked me what was wrong, but I told him I had no time to talk, I had to call the police. And that's just what I did."

"Mrs. Taylor, did you check to see if the victim was still alive?"

"No sir, I didn't touch the body, but I could tell that it wasn't breathing by looking at its chest. No movement whatsoever."

"Thank you, Ms. Taylor, for that insightful rendition of what you saw here today. We at Channel 6 questioned the police chief about any information known about the suspect, but he declined to comment much, only saying that there is a \$1000 award out for the arrest of the perpetrator. We'll get more information to you as this case unfolds. This is John Bradley reporting; now back to you, Brenda."

Elaine stood motionless, staring in disbelief at the television, pondering what she just heard. *Oh my God . . . it wasn't a nightmare! I've killed a man!* Elaine turned off the television and hurried to her bedroom to put on some clothes. What should she do now? Turn herself in? Try to conceal her crime? She knew from her study of law that a hit and run was a serious offense. *No, I can't turn myself in*, she thought desperately. Coming out of her bedroom, she heard the phone ring. *Brrrrriinnnggg!!!* Elaine stopped dead in her tracks at the obnoxious sound. *Should I answer it? What if it's the police?* She tried to calm herself and gain some composure. Then she picked up the receiver:

"H-e-l-l-o?"

"Hey girl, it's Renée. How you feelin' this morning? I mean, afternoon?" She chuckled loudly at her joke.

"I'm . . . fine. Thanks. What's up?" Elaine's voice was shaky.

"Nothin'. Last night, I told you to call me today. When you didn't, I decided to call and

check on you – make sure you made it home safely and didn't hit anything – that sort of thing. What are you doin' today?"

Elaine's heart stopped. *She's just joking; get yourself together.* "I'm going to wash my car." *Damn, why did I say that?* "Umm, I'm going to read my case studies – I'm behind in my reading."

"Oh yeah. You're always doing work. I won't bother you right now, but call me when you get bored, and I know you'll get bored. O.K.?"

"All right, I will. Bye, Renée."

"Well bye to you too, then."

Elaine hung up the phone and sighed with relief. It didn't seem like Renée realized anything was wrong. She didn't even question her about going to wash her car, which is something that Elaine never does. Elaine grabbed her keys and left the apartment before the phone could ring again.

When Elaine got outside, she stopped and looked at her car from a distance. It was almost as if the car had the cloak of death surrounding it, and Elaine was afraid to get too close. *But I have to get rid of any evidence that might cause someone to suspect me*, she decided. She couldn't let her guilt cloud her practical duty in this matter. She walked up to the car and paused then slowly made her way around it completely, checking every corner for any chips of paint, dents, scratches, or marks of any sort. Or blood. Or hair. But stuck in the grill of her Civic were the remnants of dried blood. It was not much but enough to make Elaine panic and look around to make sure no one was watching her. She concluded that the best thing to do now was to take her car to the car wash.

The car wash was only a few miles from her apartment complex, but on the way she decided that she needed an alibi for Friday night. Just in case she was ever questioned by police. Well, she could just tell the truth up to a certain point: she went to the bar with her girlfriends, drank then left them to go home. She only had one beer and wasn't drunk. She decided to take a different way home than normal. Why? Because the roads on her usual route were too dark at night. Why did she go wash her car the next day? Because it was car-washing weather and it needed it. Content with the alibi, Elaine went over it in her mind repeatedly until she did not forget any detail.

When she arrived at the car wash a few minutes later, Elaine pulled into a vacant spot and inspected her car once more. The dried blood was still lodged in the grill of her car. She put quarters in the slot, grabbed the foaming brush, and began to scrub furiously at the grill until she could see no more traces of hair and blood. Then to keep from drawing attention to herself, she scrubbed the whole car down and rinsed it off, periodically inserting more quarters in the slot. Elaine spent more than thirty minutes scrubbing and rinsing the car. She ran out of quarters twice and had to go to the change machine for more. When she finished washing the outside of her car, she thought about the interior. It smelled a little like beer, so she bought a hanging, cherry-scented air freshener out of a vending machine and hung it from the rearview mirror.

Elaine rode home with the windows down, letting the soft fall breeze circulate throughout the car. She wanted to feel a little bit more confident about the whole situation, now that the visible evidence against her was gone. But the whole process of covering up her crime was unsettling. Up until this point, she had been completely consumed with denying this event ever occurred – with making it disappear. But she couldn't make it disappear – not with the image of the dried blood stuck in her mind. That blood came from a human being. A man that was a school teacher. And now his students would have to finish out the school year with a stranger, all because of her carelessness. And what about his family? Elaine began to fear that there was nothing she could do to make this situation right.

Back at her apartment, Elaine realized that she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday afternoon. She went to the refrigerator, pulled out a frozen dinner, and put it in the microwave. A couple of minutes later, her phone rang. *It must be Renée*, she thought. She walked from the kitchen to the living room and picked up the phone which was mounted on the wall. "Hello?"

"Hi. Is this Elaine? This is Mrs. Wright." It was Elaine's elderly neighbor who lived right below her. She was very sweet but also very nosy. Mrs. Wright only called when something was amiss in the building.

"Yes, Mrs. Wright, this is Elaine. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, honey. I'm just calling to let you know that the police are here. They've been questioning every person in the building. They just left my apartment; now they should be coming to the third floor where you are."

Elaine's eyes widened with apprehension. "What did they want, Mrs. Wright?" *It must be about the hit and run*. Elaine could feel the panic rising within her.

"Have you seen the news today? Somebody hit and killed some poor man last night. Now they're on the loose. The police want to know if we know anything about the victim or if we saw or heard anything suspicious last night. I, for one, didn't hear anything. Did you, honey?"

"No ma'am, I don't know anything about it."

"Well don't be scared, honey. Just tell them the truth and everything will be all right. I hope they find the horrible person who did it." Elaine could almost see Mrs. Wright closing her eyes and shaking her head in that judgmental way of hers.

"Yes ma'am. Thank you for calling me." Elaine was in a hurry to get off the phone. *I need to get my story straight before the police get here*.

"You're welcome, honey. Let me know what they say to you." Mrs. Wright never tired of gossip.

"Yes ma'am. Goodbye."

"Good b—" Elaine hung up the phone before she could finish. She turned to hurry to her room when there was a loud knock on her door. *Oh no . . . they're here*. Elaine stared at the door and tried to compose herself. "Who is it?" she said in a loud voice.

A burly voice with a southern accent came from the other side of the door. "It's the police, ma'am. We have a few questions to ask you."

Elaine went to the door and opened it. Standing in the doorway were two police officers. The one she assumed had spoken was tall and looked as if he weighed 250 pounds. He was red in the face and had very short, very thin sandy brown hair. His partner was almost his exact opposite — short, skinny, and pale, with red hair. They both wore black cop uniforms, and their badges shined brightly.

"Yes . . . officers?" Elaine exhaled.

The big one said, "Ma'am, I am Officer Davis, and this is my partner, Officer Jones, and we have a few questions for you about the hit and run accident that occurred late last night around here. May we come in?" He looked impatiently at her.

Elaine attempted to smile. "Oh yes. Please come in. I . . . I don't think I'll be much help though."

"We'll determine that, ma'am." Both men pushed their way past her into the living room. Elaine closed the door and followed behind them. The two officers sat down on her leather couch, and she sat in her EZ chair across from them.

"Ma'am," the burly one began, "Please state your name, and tell us where you were around 11:30 last night." He had a pad and pencil in his hands.

Elaine cleared her throat. "My name is Elaine Johnson, and I was at home."

The officer scratched something on his notepad then continued. "Had you been at home the entire night?"

"No, sir." She stopped.

"Where were you and at what time were you there?"

"I was at Joe's Sports Bar, and I got home at 11 o'clock."

The officer looked up at her. "What were you doing there, and how did you get home?"

Elaine made herself look directly at him as she spoke. "I was with some friends. I drove." That's right, Elaine, be brief. Only answer what they ask.

"You say you got home at 11 . . . did you notice anything suspicious on your way home?"

Elaine could feel his eyes on her, but she ignored them.

"No. I came straight home. I didn't see anything unusual." The officer wrote something on his pad again then whispered to his partner. "Will that be all, officers?" Elaine asked. She was eager for them to leave.

"Just one more thing, ma'am: what kind of car do you drive?"

Elaine looked straight ahead. "A Honda Civic."

"Tan?"

She stood up and said, "Yes. I must be the last person you've asked that question of."

Both officers ignored her and stood up. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Johnson. If you remember anything else, please give us a call." He handed her a business card then turned and walked out of the door, his partner following close behind.

Elaine watched them go, holding the business card and feeling very guilty. The officer's last questions troubled her. She knew it was meant to startle her. *They probably know more than they let on*, she thought. But Elaine was at a loss for what she should do now. She looked again at the business card. *I'll just wait*, she decided. *They probably asked everyone who they questioned what kind of car they drove. And I think I'm the only one with a Honda Civic . . . just calm down, Elaine*. But she was losing the calm she had exhibited for the cops. Now her hands were shaking. A deep fatigue came over her, and she went to her bedroom and lay across the bed. She needed to rest and not think about this anymore . . . Elaine eventually fell into a troubled sleep.

When she awoke again it was evening. She was still tired, weary, and hungry, but she didn't want the now cold food that was in the microwave. She was too fatigued to fight her thoughts anymore, and her sense of guilt was getting stronger. It was her knowledge of the law and her sense of justice that made the weight of her crime burdensome. She realized she was clutching something tightly, and when she looked down at her hand, she saw that it was the officer's business card. She had slept all afternoon with the card in her hand. It was at that moment, while staring at the card, that she realized what she must do. *I have to confess*, she thought. *Maybe they will be lenient if I say I didn't know that I hit someone that night . . .*

Elaine sat in the parking lot at the police station. On the way there, she had driven in a dream-like state, not really feeling what she was doing, just driving. Now that she was at the station, though, her heart began to race as she contemplated her fate. As she got out of her car, a cold wind whipped about her, causing her to hurry inside the station.

It was hot and stuffy inside; almost suffocating. The walls and floor were white, and the yellow, artificial light was blinding. Police men and women were everywhere, walking and talking amongst themselves, shuffling paper, and questioning people who Elaine guessed were witnesses. Where should she go — to find Officer Davis? She began to walk past the crowd of officers, some of whom eyed her as she passed by. She was thankful that no one asked her if she needed any help. She had not gone far when a loud commotion flared up behind her.

Elaine turned and watched a group of police officers struggling to hold a man down. He was handcuffed, but he was thrashing his body and kicking his legs out at the officers, trying to fight them off.

"Hold still! The more you fight, the more charges we'll pin on you!"

"I didn't kill nobody!" the man shouted. "Let me go!"

"The only place you're going is to a jail cell!"

Elaine watched the whole episode in horror. *What am I doing here?* She wondered. *They're not going to be lenient; they're going to treat me like that man! He is only being accused of murder and is being treated in such an unsympathetic way. They'll probably do much worse to me because I am confessing to a murder!* Elaine was sorry for what she had done, but she was too afraid of prison. With this realization, she turned and walked fast toward the exit doors, leaving behind the commotion and the naïve thought of confessing.

She drove home from the police station in a daze. "What was I thinking?" She wondered aloud. She snapped out of her daze as she came upon an area that looked familiar. Trees and houses lined the street, and Elaine knew this was where the accident had occurred. This was not the way she had intended to come home, but now that she was there, she couldn't turn around. She instinctively slowed down and eyed her surroundings carefully, trying to notice anything that might spark her memory. She found it strange that there was no police tape or chalk anywhere in the street. As she crept along, she noticed up ahead a family standing on the side of the street. They were rather solemn and didn't look up as she drove by. She rode past them a few feet and parked her car. Elaine was curious to see what they were doing – what they were looking at. She would see if they needed some help.

As she approached them, she saw that the little boy was crying, and his mother was holding him. She heard the mother say, "It's going to be o.k., son." The father looked up as Elaine came closer, and she quickly attempted to explain herself.

"Hi . . . I don't mean to bother you, but you look like you need some help. Is everything all right?" Elaine forced a friendly smile.

The father replied, "Thank you for your concern, but we're all right. Our son is just a little upset, but he'll be fine."

Elaine looked at the little boy, who began to cry harder. "Do you mind me asking what's upset him so?"

"Oh sure. Well, this afternoon he went out to play, but he couldn't find Max."

"Oh? Who is Max?" Elaine asked.

"Why," the man said, "Max is our son's dog. He was a golden retriever. Unfortunately, our son found his body on the side of the road today. It seems that Max was hit by a car late last night. He must have jumped the fence in our back yard and ran into the street. We're giving him a proper burial now."

Elaine's eyes widened. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Do you have any idea who hit your dog?"

The man shrugged. "No, we don't know who did it, and we probably never will."

Elaine took a couple of steps back. "Well, I will leave you all alone. I hope your son will be O.K."

The man smiled. "Thank you for your concern. The world needs more people like you."

Elaine lowered her head and turned and walked away. *Their dog was hit late last night, and they don't know who did it, thought Elaine. Could it be possible that I hit their dog, and not the man, like I thought? All the deceptive things I've done and all the lies I've told to cover up a crime that may not have had anything to do with me Elaine wanted to believe that she hit a dog instead of a person. Not that she would be happy if she hit the little boy's dog – she could still hear him sobbing as she got into her car. Then she drove away. She would see that news report and hear the child's sobs in her dreams for a long time to come.*

Personal Essay by Christy Byrd

Black, White, Gray

Classical music plays in the MARTA terminal. The music and the station mingle together in a strange discord. A brown layer of grime covers everything here, but that is the result of age, not neglect. There's no litter on the ground, and the benches are worthy to sit on. The station tries to project friendliness—it's sad how pitifully it fails. Colorful murals of nothing in particular decorate the walls. Of no great artistic merit, they provide momentary distractions for bored travelers. Advertisements for obscure plays in town share wall space with a map of the rail system. I've seen big city subways on TV, and they always seem so neat and metallic. This city is definitely up there in population, but one could best describe the Metro Atlanta Regional Transit Authority as "brown." Well, it tries.

Brown is a good way to describe the MARTA people, too. African-American that is—black—clothed in various uniforms and brand names. They sit silently on the orange benches, or stand by the platform, occasionally peering down the track. No eye contact is the rule. Each person exists in his or her own world, maybe one that includes their traveling companion, and pretends that nothing else exists. Only the train is real. When it comes, it brings the indescribable scent of dust, oil, and electricity. The MARTA smell.

I have seen white people on the trains, usually students. Else, they come in groups, for some sort of event when it would be more trouble to drive. Not many other ethnic groups, either. The MARTA is the domain of black folks, it seems. If you can afford a car in Atlanta, you drive.

Sometimes, it's depressing trying to understand or at least ignore the social forces that rule here. There are many explanations, even beyond the basic conservative and liberal positions. I haven't yet decided which to believe. Either we did it to ourselves or they did it to us. Or we were letting it happen—that seemed a popular one. Though the logic disturbed me deeply, I couldn't argue against the idea. I went to school with white people who believed, at least implicitly, that very thing. I never took the chance to ask my black peers.

Sometimes the best way to deal with a problem is to stop thinking about it.

The westbound train pulls in behind a greasy wind, and I board. No music plays inside; the sound of the train on the rails would obscure it anyway. Bright fluorescent lights illuminate the brown carpet and blue seats. Whoever thought orange, tan, and blue would make a good color scheme had been seeing the wrong psychiatrist.

I try to imagine what the MARTA looked like when it was brand new, before the years covered it in grime. I try to see the first spotless train rolling out of the freshly built Five Points station, to the cheers and maybe grudging applause of the city's public. I can't. Not that the MARTA is that old; it's just that the MARTA, its grime, and its people seem irrevocably united and timeless in the way that the poor and hard up take on a mass dreariness that never changes, even though the faces do.

I sit down in one of the side facing seats across from a man with a large portfolio opened across his lap. He is finishing a portrait of a teenage girl. The drawing is all in pencil, shaded black and gray, yet somehow, life flows through it. With careful, controlled movements, he shades in a shoulder of the girl's dress. Occasionally, he erases with a gray nub he produces out of his jacket pocket and begin shading once more. It's amazing to me, someone with no artist talent whatsoever, how the gray blurs become a dress collar, drift and morph in skin, gray still but subtly different—now with the suggestion that a pulse runs underneath.

When I take my eyes off the drawing, I notice that he is working from a color photograph. It is

tilted, so I can't see the image. The man himself is young, probably in his twenties. Underneath a black jacket he wears a maroon shirt and black pants, a uniform of some sort. A black baseball cap is perched carelessly on his head over a set of headphones. All his concentration is focused on the drawing, buoyed by the music he is listening to. I wonder what sort of music it is. Rap, most likely, but wouldn't it be remarkable if someone like him grooved to the Beatles or Wagner? Or would it?

I am not the only one focused on the young man's work. Everyone within his line of sight has turned toward him or gives him the occasional glance. The train slows, stops; the man glances up. This isn't his station. I turn my eyes away and pretend I haven't been staring at him. The train continues rolling, and the man continues working.

Somewhere between Edgewood/Candler Park and East Lake, he finishes, filling in the last strokes and signing in the corner. I can't make out his name. He unclips the portrait and flips through the portfolio to find an empty space. I see glimpses of other works, all in pencil, all impossibly vivid. He holds open the portfolio to insert the girl's portrait next to one of 2Pac Shakur. The rapper is standing with his back turned, gazing over his shoulder, sadness etched into his face. I catch my breath when I see it, as it seems that the dead man is looking right at me and could very well turn around, reach out, and pull me through the plastic sleeve.

The man puts his pencil and eraser away, and works the drawing into its own sleeve. Finally, he clips the photograph on top. Seeing it, I am disappointed. It is the same girl, but how is it that she seems so much more beautiful in black, white, and gray, seen through an artist's fingers instead of a camera's reality-capturing lens?

The train stops again—my stop. As I disembark, I see the man sitting beside the artist reach out his hand. They tap their knuckles together, the black man's handshake. I do not hear their conversation. The doors close behind me and the familiarity of Decatur station greets me. Walking out into the twilight, I can't help but think about the artist. Did anyone pay him for his talent? Probably not much if they did. If he sold his work, it was to friends, family, and friends of friends. He was working for himself, for the love of his art. He was finishing a beautiful work on the MARTA ride home instead of in a downtown studio. He'd probably never get to that studio, and I couldn't say why.

Somehow, the thought didn't sadden me.

Personal Essay by Taylor Gillan

Graduation

I pulled up to the drive of my house and turned the car off. I didn't want to go inside just yet, I needed the quiet for just a minute, it would be the only quiet I would get all day, and the next week for that matter.

As soon as I opened the front door I was bombarded by the noise that only a gathering of family could make. *Here we go...*

"Oh Sweetie, you're home!! Give grandma a hug, precious." My Grandma Irene, who seemed to believe that all her grandchildren's aging was arrested at six. She spent fifty years of her life being a wife to a small town farmer in Kansas, until his passing four years ago. She had three sons, the oldest, Tom, her favorite; Tim, the middle child who was forever ignored and overlooked, and was the only one of the family to continue farming; and my father, Doug, who was the scapegoat of Tom his entire life. My dad was the black sheep, moving entirely too far away from the family farm, pursuing a career in radio. My Grandma always had a cheery smile on her face, but she could not control her pissy opinions, though they were said through the clenched teeth of her perma-smile and in a sing-song voice.

Could you be any more sugar-coated and forced? "Hey grandma, how was your day?"

"Wonderful sweetie, but I missed you so much!"

Being gone an entire five hrs...

"You look so pretty! So pretty and so skinny and such a lovely tan!"

My Aunt Michelle interjected, "She's so skinny because she lost so much weight after her surgery. How long ago was that?" My Aunt Michelle was an out of shape, middle aged woman with a sour disposition. She always felt the need to interject her opinion, believing herself to be the only one who had the answers. No one really took her scathing remarks to heart, after all, the life she led was not exemplary by any standards. She had gotten pregnant at fourteen, and gave birth to her first child, Justin, at fifteen. Her mother, Caroline, allowed her daughter then to get married to the father, Kenny, since it was the only Christian thing to do. Michelle and Kenny then began their life in the trailer park, and soon were pregnant with twins. The twins, Chad and Benjamin, were born prematurely, Chad dying two days after birth, and Benjamin after six months. Immediately after Benjamin's passing, Michelle was again pregnant with fraternal twins, Amanda and Wade. The family continued their life in the trailer park, Justin being affected by multiple seizures a day, sometimes as much as 150 times. Kenny, when he was there, was drunk and abusive. Often, my Aunt and my cousins would stay at my house when Kenny was in a drunken rage. Then, when Justin was eight and the twins were four, Kenny was killed in a violent car crash. To this day, my aunt has not found the time to have grave markers made for Chad and Benjamin, but had one made for Kenny with the words *Loving Husband and Father*, to the protests of her grown kids. When my mother became pregnant with my younger sister, Morgan, my Aunt Michelle, always in competition with her younger, prettier, more successful sister, announced that she was pregnant a month later, the father being a drug addict with the prospects of his future poor. Justin is now twenty-five, living still at home, with an illegitimate child, given up for adoption because he refused to support the mother in raising the child or financially. He recently had a surgery that removed the damaged part of his brain, nearly a quarter of it, stopping his seizures. Wade, 22, also lives at home, residing in the basement where he is rarely seen, except on the occasions he makes a trip to the video store to rent more games, or to open the door

for the pizza delivery man. He never socializes, and is close to being morbidly obese. Amanda just moved out of the house a year ago, and is studying to be a veterinarian. She just came out to her mother that she is lesbian, and Michelle is still hoping that it's a phase she will get out of when she graduates college. None of the children or Michelle has ever sought counseling.

"Four months, right?" my other grandma, Caroline, the saner one. "Or was it three? February, right?" I nodded in agreement. It didn't matter how long ago it was.

"Well, you look unhealthy, you should have gained your weight back by now," my lovely aunt Michelle.

A diet of cigarettes and all things caffeinated tends to stop weight gain...

"Oh no, she looks wonderful, you look perfectly fine dear. Especially in your little prom dress! Now why didn't you go with lovely boy, Miles was it?" Grandma Irene.

How to put this... the asshole left me for a stripper with silicone tits... "Ya, I thought it would be more fun to go with Brandon, since we're best friends, and it made more sense to go with someone who's in high school, too"

"We were all so worried about you, Taylor, when you got sick and had surgery. We were so scared." Grandma Caroline.

"I loved that little car he drove... what kind of car was it?" Irene.

"It was a Lotus Elan" *Why does she bring this up every time...*

"You missed dinner, but there's leftover hamburgers in the fridge, you need to eat," Aunt Michelle said as she left the room.

"Did I remember right, that he raced those cars of his?" Irene.

Why are you asking, you would know, you talk about him twice as much as I ever did... "Ya, grandma he did, remember I sent you those pictures from one of the races."

"Taylor!" it was my cousin Tiffany, "Have you taken your cap and gown out of the bag? Its gonna be wrinkled." Tiffany was the daughter of my uncle Tim. She is four years older than me, and before she went to college, people would say that we might as well be sisters, we looked so much alike, the only difference being that she was almost seven inches shorter than I. She had been my favorite cousin, always nice and funny. Then, when she came back from studying abroad in Spain for a year, her disposition had changed. She was now at least fifty pounds heavier, and she no longer had the inclination to even give me a kind word. She is now engaged to André, a man she met while in Spain, who doesn't attend school and does not speak English, though his cooking is excellent. Everyone on my dad's side of the family, except my dad and us, had lost it when she brought back a non-English speaking foreigner, and there were still tensions about the issue.

What a nice hello. "No, I haven't done that yet, I'll go do it right now." *Anything to get away from Irene.*

I went upstairs to my room to hang up my cap and gown. I locked my door, and took out the vodka stashed in my bottom drawer, took two shots, then sat down.

After collecting myself, I went to check on my mom, laying in her room. She was sleeping, but woke when I opened the door.

"How're you feeling, mom?" I asked her, sitting on the side of her bed. I couldn't see her very well, the lights were off.

"I'm okay, just really tired." She put her hand on my arm, her hand so frail compared to what it had been. "How're the grandmas holding up?"

"Well, good considering. They haven't torn each other apart. Yet. Aunt Michelle and Tiffany are taking care of the cooking and everything. So that lets me have some free time."

"Good, you should be out having fun with your friends, don't worry about everyone here, they can entertain themselves."

"Can I get you anything? When was the last time you ate?"

"No, I don't think I could keep anything down right now, maybe in a little bit."

"How bout some Sprite, or some juice, you should at least try to drink something."

"Maybe some Sprite, I might be able to keep that down."

"Ok, I'll be right back."

I went downstairs. My little sister, Morgan, my cousin Jordan and other cousin Mathew, Tiffany's younger brother, all around the age of thirteen, were playing a Sponge Bob video game in the living room. In the kitchen, I grabbed a Sprite and ice. My cousin, Tiffany, her fiancé André, my aunt Michelle, and both grandmas were outside on the back deck. The kitchen windows were open, allowing me to overhear their conversation.

"They made him go back to work already?" Tiffany asked.

"I think he's been back at work for a few weeks now" Caroline replied.

"It's ridiculous, they can't make him go back to work this soon, he still can't read without getting nauseous, how is he driving to work?" Michelle said, blowing her cigarette smoke through her nostrils.

"How long is it supposed to take for him to recover?" Caroline asked.

"The doctors said it could take up to two years to fully recover from a concussion as bad as his was." Tiffany said.

"The insurance company even tried to weasel their way out of paying for his rental car, that's such bullshit, his car was totaled, how could they not pay for a replacement?" Aunt Michelle.

I took the Sprite back upstairs to my mom, passing Gary, my Grandma Caroline's husband, in a drunken stupor in the dining room. What time was it? Too early to be drunk, but that's Gary, always wasted. Caroline had been with him almost twenty years now, off and on. They had met when Caroline was only fifteen, and she swears up and down it was instantaneous love, though it's safe to assume that 'love' was one sided. Then Gary left the state for a new job, and Caroline married another man, the father of my Aunt Michelle and Uncle Carl. My uncle Carl is currently homeless, by choice, living under bridges or crashing at random people's houses, the only time he contacts his family members is when he has run out of money. Then their father, who was extremely abusive, left Caroline and started a new family. Caroline then married Fred, the father of my mother and her younger brother Sean. When Fred was there, he was a loving father, but for the most part he was absent. He divorced Caroline when my mother was sixteen. The last time he contacted us he was in Illinois, or some random state, and was asking for all of our social security numbers so he could start his 'new business'. During the time when Caroline was raising her children, she was in a state of deep depression, often letting the kids to their own devices, locking the door to the house and leaving them to roam the countryside. This, though all her children agree to it, she still denies, denying that she ever had depression, though she had been put through electroshock therapy. After her children had grown, Caroline was reunited with Gary, her 'first love.' Gary refused to marry her, for whatever chauvinist reasons he dreamed up. Only when the doctors told him he had about two years left in him, after his third heart attack, did he buckle, and they got married about a year and a half ago. Why she'd want to marry such a slob, I don't know.

"Here's your Sprite, mom."

"Thank you," she said weakly, taking the glass. I helped her sit up, propping the pillows up for her.

"Do you want to watch some TV?"

"Oh, no, I'd just rather have quiet right now. What's every one doing?"

"Morgan, Jordan and Mathew are playing video games, the grandmas, Tiffany and André, and Aunt Michelle are out back discussing dad, Gary's drunk, and I don't know where Uncle Tom is." *Good thing he is MIA, he tends to be jumpy when my aunt is around, since she works for the*

IRS and he likes to employ illegal Mexican immigrants at his nursery. His excuse being that he was helping them achieve the American dream. That dream of being illegal aliens, working too many hours and not having enough money to put shoes on their children's feet. They would have a better life working fulltime at McDonald's living on minimum wage. Though all of my dad's side of my family is aware of who he employs, excepting my grandma Irene, no one has had the courage to turn him in. It is not their place, they must reason, to betray a family member.

"What were they saying about your father?"

"Just talking about his accident, and how he shouldn't be back at work yet." I watched as my mom scrunched her face in pain, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, my stomach isn't doing too well. I'll be fine though," she whispered.

"When do you need to take your meds again? Where's the schedule? It says you can take them in an hour. Can you wait that long? You don't look like you're holding up too well, maybe you should take them now."

She moaned, and then said, "Maybe that's a good idea. I tried to sit downstairs with everyone earlier today, I think that wore me out. Probably shouldn't have done that."

"No, you shouldn't have. You need to stay in bed, you know that Dr. Michaels wants you to be under hospital care right now, so you can't go and try to do things." I paused, looking at my mother, how she was just a wisp of what she had been. It made my chest ache to see her like this, in constant pain. *She's doing a lot better than she was. At least her body isn't overcome by thrush anymore.* "You know, maybe you should listen to Dr. Michaels. You probably wouldn't be in the hospital long, just long enough so you could really get your strength back."

"I won't miss my daughter's graduation," she stated. I knew she meant it, she'd push herself to the very limit to make sure she was there to see me get my diploma.

"Mom, you know it wouldn't hurt my feelings a bit if you missed it. Its not a big deal, graduations are all the same. Besides, Dad's going to video tape it."

"He can't. He can't hold up the camera, remember? Aunt Michelle will have to do it. But I'm not going to miss your graduation, and I'm not going to the hospital."

"Well, then stay in bed until Saturday. If you really want to go, you can't wear yourself out now just because we have company." I went to get her pain meds. "Do you want just a pain killer, or do you want a muscle relaxer?"

"Just pain right now. I'll wait on the muscle relaxer, I hate taking those. How're you doing? You aren't too stressed with everything going on?"

Well, I feel like my head is about to explode, there's a sharp pain behind my right eye that's been there for three days, and I feel like someone's duck taped cotton over my nose and mouth...

"I'm doing OK, just really busy with everything. Just a little headache. Finals this week at Green River, but at Kent Lake there's absolutely nothing going on, so that's nice. And since Aunt Michelle and Tiffany are taking care of the housework, I don't have to worry about that. It's nice to not have to cook for a change, or pick up Morgan from school."

She could tell that I was making light of how I felt. "Take a vicadin, sweetie, it'll help ease your tension. Just don't tell your father." *Funny how she used to think medications were pointless band-aids used by doctors and psychologists when they were at a loss of what to do. I wish she hadn't felt that way when they offered me a cocktail for depression and anxieties a year ago.*

I took one, not one to refuse free drugs, even if it was from my mother. "Why would I tell dad?" *Even if I did, what could he say. Not exactly like he'd ever been involved in raising my sister and I, not to mention in his state he really wouldn't say anything.* "I love you, mom. I'm going to study for philosophy a bit. Let me know if I can get anything else for you."

"I love you too."

I went into the computer room. I couldn't concentrate on my philosophy book, there was just

too many things swimming in my head to think about Immanuel Kant. *Half hour till this pill kicks in. I can't believe my mom, what was she thinking trying to sit downstairs. She was thinking that all these family members had come from out of state, from middle America, to come see her oldest daughter graduate. At least we know she doesn't have AIDS. Three months of no one being able to tell us what's wrong with her. "Severe thrush such as with you mother only occurs in patients with advanced HIV and chemo patients." Well she's not in chemo. So she must have AIDS. How many times did they take her blood? Too many to be healthy. You think they would have figured out after the thirtieth negative test that she didn't have AIDS. So we find out two weeks ago that she has Crohn's. Still not sure exactly what this disease is, except that it's chronic.*

The phone rang. "Hello?" I answered.

"Hey, is Taylor there?"

"Ya, its me."

"Damn, I was hoping it was your mom." It was my friend Adam. *And here we go again...* "Put her on the phone, I want to have phone sex with her."

"Would you knock it off, you stupid fuck" After being friends with Adam, the politically incorrect, vulgar class clown for three years, I had given up on trying to stop his insulting comments. To be friends with Adam, you just had to put up with a little abuse.

He was laughing, "Hey you know I'm just messin' with ya. We're all getting' together at Rob's house tonight, you comin'?"

"Ya, when is everyone getting together?"

"In about an hour. But his parents are there, so we have to find somewhere else to go, got any ideas?"

"I'll think about it, dunno though, everyone has family over, so its gonna be hard to find a place to go. We can always go to Flaming Geyser Park."

"Ok, well, we'll figure it out when we all get to Rob's house. Can you call a few people?"

"Ya, no problem."

"Just make sure Nate doesn't find out, we don't want that kid to show up, he'd fuck everything up, trying to be cool and all. That kid just tries too fuckin' hard, ya know? Well anyways, make sure you bring your mom, I wanna screw her."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Okay, okay sorry. Hey, why don't you invite that hot girl from Green River you hang out with?"

"She wouldn't want to hang out with jack-offs like you, Adam."

"Ha ha. Very funny. No, seriously invite her."

"Why, you still have a girlfriend. Cassey's going to be there tonight, right?"

Laughing, "Oh ya, that's right. I always forget I have a girlfriend. Hey, I have this song stuck in my head, don't you hate it when that happens?"

"Ya, it sucks."

"Guess what it is."

"I don't care what song it is"

"What do you care about, then?"

"Getting trashed tonight."

"We'll work on that, don't worry. Anyways, let me sing this song for you maybe you'll recognize it....*Taylor's mom, has got it going on, She's all I want and I've waited for so long-*"

"I seriously hate you, you prick" There was hysterical laughter on his end of the line. *I hate this stupid "American Pie" pop culture, I hate that fuckin song about Stacey's mom. It pisses me off that all my friends think my mom is so hot, granted she is really pretty. It didn't help matters that she got a tit job two years ago. All these older women, all these young mothers, these so*

called M.I.L.F.s, love that stupid song. "It's liberating, it makes it finally okay for older women to date younger men, you should be glad society is progressing, you'll be glad when you're older and you can date the hot young studs....." It makes me sick, haven't these people seen "The Graduate," how about "Tad Pole"? I wonder what my therapist would say about all this, if I ever went any more, instead of going to see a movie every week....

"Don't be a bitch, you love me and you know it. Seriously, I'd probably rather screw you than your mom anyways, but well, ya know I have a girlfriend."

Do I stick needles in my eyes now, or should I wait, get drunk first and do it later? "Well thanks, Adam, that's so sweet of you. I'll see ya in an hour." I hung up the phone. *I wonder if he'd still make those comments if he knew my mom was sick. He probably would. I can't wait to get away from these people, my group of so called 'friends'. They're such assholes, all of them. I hate them. But who else would I hang out with? No one, because these are the people to hang out with, the brainless fuck ups that people think are cool, so they want to breathe the same air as them, us. People try the oddest things to impress us, to impress Adam. If they only knew the hell you get yourself into, that it's inescapable because these are the only people I've hung out with for three years, and to turn my back on them would be social suicide. Two months of summer, then I'm free, out of state, no scars and only halfway worse for the wear. The only thing that kept me sane was taking most of my courses at the community college, Green River, at least there people aren't caught up with social climbing, though very few are there to learn. Most of them are there because they didn't have a job, so after high school they thought they might as well just go to community college. Not much better than the high school, but at least I'm not stuck in one, mind numbing clique. That vicadin is kickin' in....*

"Taylor!!" Someone was yelling for me downstairs, "Taylor, where are you?"

It never ends.... I walked downstairs. "Who's looking for me?"

"Mathew and Jordan need a new game to occupy themselves, can you run to the store? We also need groceries." My cousin Tiffany told me.

Shit. "Umm, well actually, I was going to go meet up with some friends." *I can't wait another hour to get out of here.*

"Have you told Grandma this?"

"Uhh, well, no....."

"What's going on?" My Aunt Michelle entered the room, with a scowl on her face.

"Taylor thinks she's going out with her friends, but we need someone to go the store, and she has the only car here right now, because Uncle Tom isn't back yet, and neither is Doug."

"You're going out now? Have you eaten dinner?" Aunt Michelle.

"I'm going to eat at Rob's house." *Damnit, shouldn't have said that.*

"So you can't eat dinner with your family, you won't even eat the leftovers your Aunt and I made, you're home for less than an hour, and now you're leaving again to hang out with some friends that you can see anytime?"

Tiffany, you are such a bitch! "Pretty much."

"Oh let her go out with her friends, its graduation." My grandma Caroline, "We'll see her all day Saturday."

"Thanks Grandma. I'll have my phone on if you need anything." I grabbed my purse and headed out the door."

"How long will you be out?" Tiffany yelled at me.

"Dunno." I yelled back, opening my car door.

"That's not good enough, when will you be back?" My Aunt Michelle

I shut the car door and lit a cigarette, "Dunno." I turned on my music, blasted it, and pulled out of the driveway.

Personal Essay by Kimberly Karris

Leaving and Returning: Life as a Jehovah's Witness

"I'll send for you as soon as we are done," Mrs. Slezak, my fourth grade teacher says. "You sure you don't want to stay?" She asks me that every time, as if I might suddenly change my mind. I nod my head and walk out into the hall, listening to the playful laughter and excited bellows, which fade as the heavy door shuts slowly behind me. I do want to stay. Why must the school office be so close to my classroom? Pass four rooms on the right, down the stairs and you're there. I kneel down to tie my shoes. They're already tied, so I unlace and tie them again, making sure the loops are dimensionally exact and the knot is perfectly centered. I do this six times – each shoe. I continue to walk as leisurely as possible. I run my hand over the railing, brushing off blue and red paint chips and wipe them on my jean shorts. I use this as an excuse to wash my hands, so I veer toward the girl's bathroom. I wash them attentively and tediously – an event my grandmother would have paid for – making sure every fingernail is completely clean. Then I dry them thoroughly, so that every ounce of dampness is gone. I tidy up the bathroom before I leave, in the interest of the hard working custodians, of course. But there are only so many distractions from my walk. I finally reach the office. "Hey Kimberly," the office secretary says. "Are they having another birthday party?" I look around to see if anybody else heard, the waiting parents, the sick children, the bustling office staff. They did.

This is just one of the memories I have of walking to my elementary school office after leaving the commencement of a Thanksgiving, Valentines, Hanukah, President's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Christmas, Easter, or Halloween event. And birthday parties! Do parents simply refuse to have babies in the summer? Needless to say, the office personnel and I were unusually acquainted. They even made a special spot for me with crayons and coloring books. But the recurrent walks were never effortless and never without discomfiture. I could hear their overly convivial smiles when I opened the office door silently say, "Here comes that Jehovah's Witness." Then in their usual pejorative tone, "Here you go, sweetie. We'll just sit you down right here."

The first days of elementary school were always the worst. My father would arrive early with an elaborate brochure explaining who the Jehovah's Witnesses were and describing our beliefs. He would speak to my teacher, turning the pages, inviting her to look up the scripture references at her leisure. I can remember the bell ringing and the children rising to salute the flag and sing the national anthem. At the end of the morning announcements, one student would always raise his hand and upon being acknowledged, announce to the class with a dramatic point in my direction and say, "That girl didn't pledge the allegiance or sing the anthem!" The classroom would gasp in unison and then my teacher would reply in that excruciatingly polite voice, "Well, she and her family do not believe in patriotism to our country. She is a Jehovah's Witness." I couldn't help but brace myself for a "Children, can you say Je-ho-vah's Wit-ness."

The rest of the school year was just as vexing. Once the other students acquired the phrase "Jehovah's Witness" into their 10-year-old vocabularies, it soon became the new catch phrase in casual dialogue. "How come she gets to go home early today? Is she sick?" "No, she's a Jehovah's Witness." "Why does she get to be the line leader? Why does she have purple pens? Why are her shoes white?" "Duh, it's because she is a Jehovah's Witness." Once I was made public, I surrendered any hope for anonymity.

By middle school, I learned that keeping my religious identity concealed would be my

only alternative. So when the first day of sixth grade came, I told my father that I would meet with my teachers and explain my beliefs and restrictions myself. "Well, aren't you becoming a little woman," he said and handed me that brochure. He had me practice what I was going to say to my teachers at least three times. I arrived at school, found the first garbage can to pitch the evidence in to and played with my collar during the flag salute, so that it looked like my hand was over my heart, every morning thereafter. No one ever really caught on. I just had to play the cool, exasperated, silent kind that didn't want to pledge or sing. But I never did pledge allegiance. Nor did I take part in Christmas carols, Halloween costuming, or Valentine exchanges, even under my clandestine façade. I was taught that it was wrong, that if I participated Jehovah would punish me one day. And simply put, I believed it.

When all the girls would be discussing their weekend plans during lunch, I cringed. Inevitably someone would ask, "Kim, why don't you come to the movies with us?" Or, "Can you come to the sleepover on Friday?" There were only so many excuses one could use. "I'm sorry, I have to visit my aunt," I would mumble and then comment on the watery green beans. Later, "Man, I wish I could go, but my grandmother is sick and she wanted me and my dad to bring her some applesauce. Not the plain kind, the kind with the cinnamon in it. I'm her only grandchild." Eventually they stopped asking. The Jehovah's Witnesses, as a life choice, restrict themselves from extracurricular interactions with "nonbelievers," a term they coined to refer to anyone who is not a member of their organization. I could only associate with other Jehovah's Witness children in my congregation. Soon I began to resent my religion. And my antipathy only got progressively worse as I grew progressively opinionated.

High school. In science, we were studying evolution. In history, we were learning about the women's struggle for their right to vote. I was planning for advanced placement classes that were designed to further assist me in college. These were all things that conflicted, in one way or another, with the way I robotically adhered to Jehovah's Witness principles. Witnesses mindlessly believe in creation, are restricted from voting, and women in the organization often do not ever attend college. But I started to desire these things; I wanted to embrace a more alternative way of thinking. I now thought about war, government, abortion, global warming, sexual orientations and human rights. I secretly saturated myself in music, secular reading, poetry and art. Thoughts about going to a woman's college, traveling, gaining independence, succeeding at a career were now intoxicating. Then, of course, came the compulsive questioning. Why do men only hold the elder (priest) positions? Why can't women speak publicly in the congregation? Why are Jehovah's Witnesses so scared of college education? Why couldn't they vote or simply associate with others outside the religion? Why do they shun gay people?

I can recall sitting at one of our five weekly congregational meetings and listening to the brother read a scripture others had read countless times before. But this time, it was the way he said, "... and men shall not lie with men," with such utter disgust. I could hear it in his throat, in his syllables. I saw it in his hand gesture, in his extended gaze at the audience. I began to feel sick. Who were these people anyway? Who was the lady in front of me who had not spoken to her son in eleven years since he revealed his homosexuality? For (Jehovah) God's sake, who were these people who praised her for it? What if I was gay? With the aid of hindsight, I now realized I obsessed over these particular questions because indeed, I sat (uncomfortably) under the queer canopy.

"There is nothing out there, sweetie. Worldly pursuits [i.e. college] will not get you into Jehovah's kingdom." My father had stolen those phrases right out of the Witness' mouths. It always sounded like he rehearsed the words in his head before he verbalized them as his own. My father held an elder position in the congregation, as did my grandfather, which is a leadership standing given only to those who uphold the most exemplary conduct not only for themselves, but

also for their family. If anyone in an elder's household falters, he is reprimanded and looked at as incapable as an example to the congregation. So my father began to worry about my skirt-combat boot combination, my generous self-distribution of silver jewelry, shirts that read, "Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right," my firm rejection to dating the boys in the organization. How could he hide my disinterest to others? I threw out words like revolution, feminism, and oppression. I came up with excuses that would exempt me from going to the congregational meetings. Either I was sick, bedridden with cramps, or had a grade-defining test the next morning. Until one night I simply said, "I don't want to go, Dad."

My father smiled, but I could already see the fear of losing me in his face. "I know it's hard to get ourselves up and out. Every meeting I have to fight off being too tired to go. But you know Jehovah will bless you," he said in an overly jovial, rather cavalier voice. Perhaps he knew then that I no longer wanted to be a Jehovah's Witness. It looked as though he had been preparing for the infamous "I don't ever want go," but the reality of losing him delayed my announcement. My father raised me alone, provided for me materially and emotionally single-handedly. How could I leave him? I had no money of my own and nowhere to go. He had been my only parent for 18 years. Leaving the religion meant abandoning him. If I remained, I would have had to suppress my sexuality and staunch political ideals. A full-fledged tug-of-war tussled in my fragile conscience. I was miserable. I was restless. I was ready. It was time to be me, not who my father needed me to be. I never signed up for the part; it was merely assigned. Forty-five years later, my father was still playing the role his parents wanted, but I just couldn't do it anymore.

So I left. It was the first time I saw my father cry. Even though I knew it was leaving-the-religion protocol, I was still shocked when he told me to get all of my belongings out of our house and handed me some family pictures he thought I would like to have. He was under moral obligation not only to the religion but also in his eyes, to God. He could no longer father a "nonbeliever," as I now was considered. "Jehovah will always forgive you Kimberly. He'll welcome you back with open arms," he said. Even contending with the overwhelming pain, I knew I would never return. How I could I pretend I was straight? How could I forget the teasing? How could I forget all the things I missed out on as a child – sleepovers, holiday gift-giving, acting in school plays? And how could I forget those walks to the office? I simply couldn't. I put the pictures in my back pocket and bid my father and our relationship a tearful adieu. I would never be allowed in my own home again.

When I was little I used to imagine myself at those class parties and how much fun it would be or how the cake tasted. Well now the world is my class party. This time I am not ambling away. I am scurrying to my classroom, through the hallway and up the stairs. I reach the class breathless, heave that heavy door open and they say, "Hey Kimberly. Just in time."

And the cake is delicious.

Personal Essay by Emily Elizabeth Norman

Dad's Kitchen

Almost a decade since his death, I find that I have to work a little to recall details of his appearance without the fog of bias memory can impose. The memories are still there though, and after a few moments of reflection, I can remember his figure quite clearly. Only measuring about 5'9", his stature was not what made him such an imposing figure. He possessed the stout and compact build that is ubiquitous in the Norman family line; a body shape that I inherited and have grown to resent but for the resemblance to my father. I look more like him every year; my adult self has the characteristic sturdy physique, strong brow line, and almond shaped eyes that make relatives gasp at the likeness. I predict that I will probably inherit his prematurely gray hair as well. Vestiges of my father's less tangible attributes also remain. I can remember his textured voice delivering a very dry wit, and his smell, which was sweet and familiar.

When I talk about these things, I worry it makes people uncomfortable; my friends adopt a respectful silence, not knowing exactly how to react, often resorting to the automatic, "I'm sorry." I reassure them that condolences are no longer necessary. My father was replete with charisma and wit, and his character doesn't deserve to be buried under a quiet curtain of reverence, but rather to be enjoyed and celebrated. To treat these memories like fragile heirlooms is to ruin their charm and their brightness. In writing about my experiences with my father, I am able to preserve his legacy as a living testament to his unique character, as well as to better understand myself.

My clearest memories are those of him in the kitchen, seen from the eyes of a juvenile drafted for involuntary assistance. From about age six, and for many years forward, there was a definite pattern to my evening activities that was formed by my fear of being recruited by my father as the "chef's assistant." Around six or seven o'clock, I would notice my father stirring from his after-work spot on the sofa, and would try to make myself scarce. My father was an excellent cook; and while I loved the fruits of his labor, the labor itself wasn't worth sticking around for. While I didn't savor the experience then, the memories of the past have grown sweeter with time.

Even being as inconspicuous as I could, I was seldom excused from kitchen duty. As long as there were pots and pans to be unearthed from inconveniently placed and seriously disorganized cabinets, I had a purpose.

"Emily! Come here, please."

When beckoned, I had no choice but to comply. Dad—a former Green Beret and result of a military upbringing himself—was a firm disciplinarian, and I knew better than to try to avoid his call. Reluctantly, I'd abandon whatever I was doing, and shuffle ungracefully downstairs.

I'm sure I was a helpful assistant in some capacities: I could reach the aforementioned pots and pans from low cabinets not comfortably accessible to people over five feet tall, and I had a good sense of how spicy was "too spicy" for my mother. Still, I have little doubt that these evenings of being the "chef's assistant" were more about my dad giving me a hard time, and less about assisting. My father was a loyal advocate of giving one's children unnecessary grief to build character—or perhaps resentment. One or the other, I forget which.

"We're making gumbo tonight. You ready?"

"Oh yum" I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. I didn't want to give him reason to hassle me more than usual, so I tried to appear as content as I could about my kitchen servitude. I had been playing this game long enough to know that if I complained about helping, it would just bring about more work, and possibly a lecture—all parts of that character building thing.

I stood around for a few minutes, while he picked the desired herbs and spices from the shelf and gathered other ingredients out of the refrigerator. Plunking a dewy plastic bag on the countertop, he directed me to de-vein and prepare the shrimp. I gingerly pulled one of the large pinkish grey crustaceans from the bag. There were not only veins to be removed, but also antennae, legs, and beady little black eyes.

"I don't know how to do it, Dad" I replied, hoping that my ignorance would excuse me from the task, but he just scoffed and answered in his typical gruff manner:

"Use your brain, Emily. You've eaten shrimp before; you know what parts you don't eat. Take the legs, shell, eyes, and antenna off, and then pull this vein out" he concluded while indicating to the nerve cord running down the length of the animal. He deftly prepared the first shrimp while I watched, then scooted the bag closer to me and told me to get started.

I have to give him credit: while they were rarely pleasant, unsavory tasks such as this one made me into the non-squeamish woman I am today. The pragmatic sensibilities I garnered from my less delicate kitchen tasks continue to be applicable in my daily life: I am often the one able to bandage the wound, throw away the moldy Chinese takeout, or squash the roach, when many of my peers are unwilling to. While valued now, somehow the nine year-old version of me, plucking eyeballs off ugly sea animals, didn't appreciate the values that were being instilled.

After a few minutes, I was deemed "slow as Christmas" and my dad returned to the sink to work alongside me. Once the shrimp were lying prepared—immobile and without sensory organs—I returned to standing out of the way, and waited for my next commission. Without looking up from the pot of rice he was starting, he said:

"Get me the French chef's knife"

"The what?"

"The French chef's knife"

"Which knife is that?"

"You've seen me use it a million times. It's the big one I'm going to use to cut these vegetables" he said, as he motioned toward the onions, peppers, and garlic sitting on our big wooden cutting board.

It should be known that, at the time, we owned about four thousand cooking utensils, and half of them were knives. Furthermore, "big" and "used to cut vegetables" could probably describe about half of them. While he undoubtedly *did* need the French chef's knife, it was clear that he was purposely testing my endurance at this point.

I plodded over to the knife drawer. The knife drawer was a nightmare for anyone with the slightest bit of common sense. Narrow and unorganized, it was pretty much just a sliding pit of sharp objects haphazardly tossed in. With a silent game of "eeny, meeny, miney, mo" I pulled a knife from the drawer that was big, and also looked like it could easily cut an onion.

"That isn't the French chef's knife," my father said, not looking up from the pot of rice. I went back to the drawer of very sharp objects, and selected another. "The French chef's knife isn't serrated," again, he spoke without raising his eyes from his work. Thanks, Dad. That would have been a great initial clue to discovering the great French chef's knife. Another try resulted in a pre-emptive "try again" followed by a sigh, and the declaration that we were going to be there all night if I didn't "sharpen up." An older, more smart-mouthed me would have loosed the pun that was begging to be made, but at the time, I just wanted to find the begrudged knife and be done with it. I finally choose the correct one. We still own that very same knife, and I will never forget the name for it. Lesson two for the evening. Henceforth, I could correctly identify a French chef's knife, and mercilessly tear the eyes off shrimp.

During lulls in the culinary action, I would stand out of the way and watch him work. Watching was most exciting when he was cooking some elaborate French dish, or an exotic des-

sert that was set aflame before eating, but ordinary dinner preparation held its own charm. My father's artistic eye and attention to detail made observing fascinating; there's something to be said for his highly developed sense of presentation when serving even the most mundane of dishes. It was not uncommon to sit down to dinner at my house, and find an irreverent sprig of parsley adorning a meatloaf, or a tomato-peel rosette alongside your grilled cheese.

As the kitchen filled with the delicious and spicy tang of Cajun cooking, I continued to fetch various pots, pans, utensils, and ingredients according to the authoritarian orders barked out by my father. Big pot, small pot, trivet, Tabasco, fork, cayenne pepper, all the way to a fresh sprig of mint from the herb garden in the backyard.

"Mint?" I asked incredulously.

"It's for my drink, but don't question me again until you've been promoted past 'chef's assistant,'" he answered.

A true lover of spicy food, I was happy to be called away from setting the table to taste a "chef's bite." The chef's bite was a highly honored tradition, and I felt privileged to be the first to sample his newest creations. Dad held out a spoon of the fire-red broth, and said "blow on it, it's hot." Taking the spoon, I smelled, and then tasted the sample. Seconds after putting the spoon to my lips, my eyes were shiny and my lips tingling. I had to admit, it was delicious, but was a little strong for even a spice enthusiast such as myself. "You think it's too spicy for your mother?"

Working to regain my composure after the five alarm test bite, I vigorously nodded, indicating that yes, it was too spicy for my mother, and was probably hazardous to anyone pregnant, nursing, blonde, northern, sane, or with heart problems. "I like it, Dad, but Mom's not going to want to eat this."

Dad just laughed, and with an amused glint in his eye jokingly responded, "that broad needs to toughen up anyway," as he spooned the lethal gumbo over the rice. There was an affectionate, unspoken commendation of my tenacity in his smile.

One-Act-Play by Kristin Hall

Phantom Dog

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Sam: A somewhat awkward man who just turned thirty.

Jan: A young woman in her late twenties.

SCENE

A park bench in any town or city, early on a cold autumn morning.

TIME

The present.

SCENE 1

AT RISE: JAN enters jogging, wearing sweats.

SAM

(offstage)

Phantom! Phantom! Come back here right now!

(He runs onstage and makes a beeline for Jan.)

Look out!

(He knocks her to the ground.)

JAN

Hey!

SAM

(talking to something invisible at center stage)

Get back, boy!

JAN

Hey!

SAM

(still on top of JAN)

Bad dog! Bad dog!

JAN

Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing???

(SAM looks at her in disbelief)

Get off me!

SAM

Suit yourself.

(He runs to center stage and pantomimes chasing then grabbing hold of a dog, ab libs)

Come here boy, good boy, Phantom NO! *(etc.)*

All right, I've got him, I'm so sorry about this....

JAN

Yeah, you better be! I was about to scream "rape"....

SAM

Rape! Rape?! Lady, I just saved your life!

JAN

Saved my life! From what?

SAM

Are you blind?

JAN

I don't think so....

SAM

(motioning to his feet)

Look!

JAN

I am looking, and I don't see anything.

SAM

(He looks shocked, then starts talking to the imaginary dog at his feet)

Don't worry Phantom, she doesn't mean that.

She didn't mean to insult you, boy, you probably just scared her is all.
(Still restraining the "dog," he starts walking it over to the bench and ties it up. He turns his head to speak to JAN)

You ought to be more careful with what you say, his feelings are very sensitive. He's a good dog, really, but he does get a little excited sometimes, and vicious...well, let's just say that it's lucky for you I was here to save you and bring him back under control, that's for sure.

JAN
(incredulous)
Dog?

SAM
Yeah. I'm really sorry about a minute ago but...

JAN
(points over by bench leg)
Dog?

SAM
(slightly annoyed)
That's what I just said, yes. Anyway, I'm sorry. I had him off the leash for a minute because I didn't think anybody else was in the park this morning, and then you kind of appeared out of nowhere and he was off—

JAN
(as she whistles, shakes her head and starts backing away)
Whoa.

SAM
—and he just took off like lightning—he can run pretty fast, Phantom can—and I was calling out but I didn't think you even heard me.... hey, where are you going?
(JAN continues walking away and doesn't answer.)
Hey!
(He runs to cut her off.)
Listen lady, I don't know if your parents forgot

to teach you gratitude, but in case you haven't noticed yet I just saved your life! And now you're just going to walk away without a word of thanks?

JAN
Saved me?

SAM
Yes!

JAN
From the...dog?

SAM
Yes!

JAN
The dog—

SAM
Yes!

JAN
Over there.

SAM
Yes!

JAN
By the bench.

SAM
Yes!!! Do you see any other dogs here?!

(JAN sighs, peers at the bench, then back at SAM)

JAN
Look, sir, you seem like a very nice man. And I appreciate your "gallantry," or whatever it is you think you've done for me, but...you need help.

SAM
Help?! I think you're a bit confused—

JAN
No, I seriously doubt that *I'm* the confused one here—

SAM
—because you see, *you're* the one who needed help. And I gave it to you. And you won't even give me so much as a "thank you."

JAN
AAArgh! Fine.
(with effort)
Thank you.

SAM
(after a short silence)
You're welcome.

JAN
Okay.

SAM
Okay.

JAN
Bye.

SAM
Bye.
(JAN starts to leave, looking relieved)
Wait!!!

JAN
What?

SAM
(pointing to "dog")
Phantom wants to apologize.

JAN
Oh, my god. Then tell Phantom I accept his apology.

SAM
No, he wants to do it himself.
(motions to bench)
Sit down. Please.

JAN
(rolling her eyes)
All right.
(She sits down on bench, turns to her left, bends down and says very loudly)
Apology accepted, Phantom.
(She looks at SAM.)
Better?

SAM
No.

JAN
Why???!

SAM
(pointing to her right)
Because Phantom's over there.

JAN
AAArgh! Okay. Fine.
(She turns to her right)
I accept your apology, Phantom.
(She gives SAM pleading look.)

SAM
You know, Phantom would love to be scratched behind the ears.
(JAN starts laughing hysterically.)
What? What's funny?

JAN
Nothing. It's just....you really think...?
(She realizes he's serious and tries to stifle her laughter.)
...never mind. Okay.
(She shrugs, pantomimes scratching a dog's ears.)
Well Phantom, you're a very pretty...
(She looks at SAM.)
...er...what kind of dog are you?

SAM
German Shepherd.

JAN
Fine. You're a very pretty German Shepherd, Phantom.

SAM*(He bends down beside "dog.")*

What's that, boy?

JAN

What? What'd he say?

*(She makes a face, realizing that she's just acted as though Phantom is real.)***SAM**

He says he thinks you're very pretty, too.

JAN*(laughing)*

Really?

SAM

And he'd like to know your name.

JAN*(smiling)*

Jan. My name is Jan.

SAM

Hi, Jan. I'm Sam.

JAN

Hi, Sam.

(Awkward silence.)

Wow, that was some profound conversation right there.

(They both laugh, then SAM listens to "dog" again)

What now?

SAM

Phantom says he would be honored if you would join us for pancakes.

JAN

Pancakes?

SAM

Or coffee. Is coffee better?

JAN*(giving in)*

Coffee would be nice, yes. I suppose I owe

you that much, after all, for saving my life.

SAM*(as he pantomimes untying the "dog")*

All right. Phantom will just have to wait outside then.

JAN*(sarcastically)*

Poor thing, I'm sure he'll be heartbroken.

SAM

He's tried it before, but St. Bernards just don't seem to like coffee.

JAN

I thought you said he was a German Shepherd...

*(SAM looks at Phantom, thinks for a second)***SAM**

Mixed breed. Isn't that right, mutt?

JAN*(shaking her head)*

I'm sorry I asked.

(She motions to go.)

Shall we?

SAM

Certainly. Come on, Phantom!

One-Act Play by Erica Jarrell

Memories of You

*SETTING: Inner-city in the spring.**Late 1950s. A scantily decorated studio apartment including: a couch with coffee table, a kitchenette table, a bar area in the kitchen, and a balcony outside.**AT RISE: There is a tinkering at the front entrance, then the door opens slowly. In stumbles WILLIAM, carrying one paper bag of groceries and another that is rolled close. He is wearing a sweater that is too large for him, and field pants of an appropriate fit. He heads directly to the kitchen area and plops the grocery bag down on the bar. Gingerly, WILLIAM begins to unload the other bag. It contains a small vase of orchids. He places the vase in middle of the kitchenette table, then returns to unpack the other bag. In it is a whole pre-cooked chicken, a bottle of cheap wine, salad ingredients, and a baguette. WILLIAM fumbles through a couple of drawers and cabinets, retrieving a cutting board, bowls, and a knife. Just as he begins to prepare the lettuce, ripping it haphazardly, he is interrupted by the telephone ringing.)***WILLIAM***(answering)*

Hello? Uh, no, I'm sorry; you have the wrong number.

*(WILLIAM hangs up the phone and resumes the salad preparations. The phone rings again. He answers.)***WILLIAM**

Hello? Sorry, still the wrong number. Huh?

Well who is *this*?*(slamming down the phone)*

What a nosebleed.

*(After a couple of seconds, the silence forces his attention to the radio on the kitchen counter. Flipping it on, it plays Frank Sinatra's Memories of You. He begins to sing along.)***WILLIAM**

Your face beams in my dreams, in spite of all that I do; everything seems to bring memories of you.

*(As he holds the final note, the front door creaks open. EVELYN enters. She is a beauty in her mid-twenties with sympathetic eyes and a soft smile. She carries a well-worn shopping bag in one hand. EVELYN remains frozen in the doorway at the sight of WILLIAM.)***WILLIAM***(at the sound of EVELYN entering)*

Hello, Doll Baby! What's buzzin'? Don't just stand there; come on in and take a load off!

*(WILLIAM goes to her, takes the bag from her hand and leads her to a kitchenette chair. EVELYN continues to stare at him in disbelief.)***WILLIAM**

Dinner will be done in a bit. I hope you don't mind me surprising you like this. I got your favorite, rotisserie.

(hesitantly, then smiling)

I was in somewhat of a rush, so I got it pre-cooked. You don't mind, do you? You know I was never much of a master in the kitchen.

EVELYN

William?

WILLIAM

Yes?

EVELYN

What the hell are you doing here?

WILLIAM

I'm here to surprise you, Doll Baby, to make you dinner for once. You work so hard, and you always got dinner ready for me in the evenings. I just thought I'd treat you tonight.

EVELYN

You are here—

WILLIAM

Yes?

EVELYN

—to make me dinner.

WILLIAM

Exactly.

(He returns to the kitchen, throwing on a ridiculous Italian accent.)

WILLIAM

Be prepared to be amazed, my love! We are going to have a fresh Caesar salad, rotisserie chicken, and that horrifically disfigured bread that the French are responsible for. Probably their only valuable contribution to the world, but we won't hold that against them.

(in response to EVELYN's glare.)

It was a joke, Doll Baby, a joke. Like I was saying, then we may have a bit of music and dancing. I'll sing if you'll dance. You haven't stopped dancing, have you, Doll Baby?

EVELYN

(addled)

I wouldn't say that I was ever much of a dancer, Will. But this is all too strange; is there something that you would like to tell—
(noticing the flowers on the table for the first time) Oh! These are gorgeous! Where you get them?

WILLIAM

What, are you writing a book? Just enjoy them.

EVELYN

William! Really, where you get them? They are so beautiful, and usually ridiculously expensive. I can never buy them for myself.

(excitedly, losing herself in the moment)

Orchids are my favorite; did you know that? I've loved them since I was a girl, but I could never find pretty ones. Not ones as pretty as the ones I've seen in all the postcards Momma gets from the Gardening Society. But oh, these are just amazing—absolutely gorgeous. They add a whole new life to the room, you know? I've been looking for something like these.

WILLIAM

I knew you'd like them. That's why I got them.

(ripping more lettuce)

You know, I've heard that orchids represent perfect love, beauty and refinement.

EVELYN

Do they?

WILLIAM

Yeah. They told me that when I was overseas. I thought it was great that you liked them. I thought, how perfect! How amazingly perfect in every way that you, the essence of beauty and compassion—

EVELYN

William!

WILLIAM

—should be fond of orchids!

EVELYN

Oh, yes, well...

(pause)

Why are you *really* here, Will?

WILLIAM

(hesitantly)

Because I've got to explain a few things to you.

EVELYN

But you shouldn't be here—

WILLIAM

It won't take long, I promise.

EVELYN

And then you are leaving.

WILLIAM

Only if you come with me.

EVELYN

Of course! I wouldn't let you... wait, how'd you get here?

WILLIAM

I'll explain everything in a minute.

EVELYN

How about you explain it now. I've got plans for the evening and—

(seeing WILLIAM's deflated mood)

Go on, what it is that you have to tell me?

WILLIAM

(avoiding her eyes)

Do we have to talk about it now? You just got in; sit back and relax for a bit. I promise I'll explain it all while we eat—quickly, even— I'll explain it quickly, while we eat.

EVELYN

Is it good news, your being here and all?

WILLIAM

Excellent news. Now, you cool it and I'll have dinner dished up in a sec.

(WILLIAM retrieves place settings. When he returns to the table he finds himself gazing at EVELYN, who blushes.)

WILLIAM

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been staring like that. It's just that you are so beautiful, Doll Baby. I almost forgot how beautiful you were, especially in blue.

EVELYN

What a sweet thing to say, Will.

(awkwardly)

What is it that you have to tell me?

WILLIAM

(laughing, returning to the kitchen)

Nothing, nothing in the world until dinner!

You are just going to have to wait.

EVELYN

(anxiously standing to her feet and joining WILLIAM in the kitchen.)

Will you tell me any faster if I cut the cucumbers?

WILLIAM

You don't take surprises very well, do you?

EVELYN

Oh, I don't mind surprises at all; I just like to get them as soon as I know about them.

(She begins to slice the cucumber. After a few chops she stops abruptly.)

EVELYN

Bother! That's enough, I think. You don't really like them anyways; you always pick them out of your salads when I bring them to you.

WILLIAM

Yea, but I thought you liked them.

EVELYN

(popping a slice into her mouth)

I do, but these are enough for me. I guess you got me—I don't take surprises very well.

WILLIAM

(sitting)

I assure you that you are going to like this one. Now first of all—Oh! The wine!

(WILLIAM pops up from the table and grabs the wine. He walks back, holding it delicately with both hands and presenting it to EVELYN.)

EVELYN

Wine? I don't get much of that these days, not with the way the money has been. I can't even afford to buy a new pair of hose with what they pay me down at the hospital. You didn't spend much, did you?

WILLIAM

It depends on what you call much. Regardless, any amount is worth it, for you.

(dramatically dropping to one knee beside EVELYN chair)

Why, if I could spend three hundred dollars on a bottle of champagne just for you, I would.

EVELYN

(impatiently)

Don't be silly, Will.

WILLIAM

I would, Doll Baby.

(seating himself at the table and inching closer to EVELYN)

How are you, Doll Baby? You've been okay in this big apartment all alone?

EVELYN

I don't think it is big enough, actually.

WILLIAM

(redolently)

Well, I guess not... if there were to be the pitter-patter of little feet around here someday—

EVELYN

Which is unlikely to be anytime soon.

WILLIAM

Given. But all that aside, you are faring well?

EVELYN

(hesitant and suspicious at first, then opening up as she progresses)

Well, I'm making it, I guess. You know how it is; I'm sure I gripe about it enough everyday.

I'm living from paycheck to paycheck, even overtime, and I still don't have enough money to pay back my loans. The rent on this place is

ridiculous, but there isn't anything much better around the hospital. I don't know. I shouldn't be complaining, I guess. There are plenty of people in this world who are worse off than me.

WILLIAM

I'm sorry to hear that; I hoped to hear that you were doing better. *(cheering up, patting her on the arm)* I'll do whatever I can to help you out of this. You can put the past behind you and start all over from scratch. I'll do whatever I can in the world to help you.

EVELYN

That's sweet, Will. No one has ever said that to me before.

WILLIAM

Yeah, well, there is more, since you brought it up. I guess this is what I have been wanting to tell you for the longest of times. It's sorta silly, seeing that I had this whole thing planned out beautifully, and now that I'm right in front of you all of the words have flown right out of my head.

EVELYN

Just start from the beginning.

WILLIAM

Sounds easy, eh? Well, the beginning is this: with all my ventures overseas and all my travels here in the States, there isn't a gal on this planet that can compare to you. Most cats would say, Nobody can hold a flame to you, baby, but I guarantee that no one can even strike a match in the presence of a beauty like yours. *(pause)* But that's not what I wanted to say, exactly. I wanted to say that—*(turning pale, suddenly standing)*—is your chicken cold? I think I want to heat mine up a bit in the stove. You don't think that would dry it out, do you?

EVELYN

William! If you don't sit down—

WILLIAM

I can't sit down at a time like this!

EVELYN

Then stand! Just tell me.

WILLIAM

All right then. *(with newfound purpose)*

I think I can't live without you, Marilyn. I've been laying around on that hard bed staring up at that crumbling plaster ceiling for hours, thinking and wondering what I could have done to change things between us... to keep you with me. *(rejoining her at the table, searching her eyes)* It drives me insane, Doll Baby. I'm crazy without you. I can't stand it. When I think about the magic that was between us, and how marvelous things were—we were going to get married, for heaven's sake. And then it all changed, for no reason at all—

EVELYN

William—

WILLIAM

I don't think that I understand, but even better yet I just don't care. I don't care what I have to do to convince you that we were meant to be together—

EVELYN

—William, please listen to me—

WILLIAM

—and that evening at Niagara Falls was no mistake, Doll Baby. I asked you to be my wife because I—

EVELYN

(taking WILLIAM's face into her hands, earnestly, yet gently) It's me, William, Evelyn. Evelyn Carter. I work with you, remember?

(WILLIAM slowly pulls his face away from her hands. He speaks quietly, more to the plate in front of him than to EVELYN.)

WILLIAM

Miss Carter?

(WILLIAM stands from the table and begins to pace the room silently. After a pause, he looks back at EVELYN and begins to laugh.)

WILLIAM

I'm sorry, Miss Carter. I thought that—

EVELYN

(maternally, crossing to him and taking his hands) I know, William. Sit here and tell me what happened. How did you get here? Did Dr. Phelps or Martha release you or sign you out?

(WILLIAM undergoes an unnatural change of disposition, losing his former clarity and energy.)

WILLIAM

Na-uh. I just strolled right out the front door... Nobody stopped me and I didn't catch any heat. I was in the mood to see—you—and then... Well I caught the bus; I got the change from playing cards with Carrie. I know you tell us not to gamble but... yeah, the big city bus that you take to and from work everyday. Number 81, you told me. I was gonna just ride until I saw the old baseball fields, but I couldn't come to you like that.

(beginning to eat his food, chatting casually) Instead I got off the city bus at Sears. I didn't win much money from Carrie, so I knew I couldn't buy anything—and I knew they wouldn't let me into the store in that silly robe that I had on. I snuck through the back door and snatched the first things that I saw. My shirt is too big, and I even got my briefs in the wrong size. I had to go back and get more of those.

(WILLIAM stands and crosses to the kitchen. He searches for a corkscrew as he talks.)

WILLIAM

After that I hopped back on the city bus and

cruised until I saw the baseball fields. Then I got off and walked past Cup of Joe's, that coffee shop you always talk about. That's how I knew that I was headed in the right direction. I figured it would be a good idea to get some dinner, so I stopped in one of those small corner shops. As before, I didn't have much money, so I sent that little man behind the counter to the back of the store for some canned salmon. When he left I grabbed food and headed out of the store. I know it sounds awful. But you know me; when I get back on my feet again, I'll pay back that old man and Mr. Roebuck. Anyway, I got back on the street and headed north, then, tah-dah! Harbor Place. I strolled right up to 412—

EVELYN

And you broke in?

(WILLIAM returns empty handed from his search in the kitchen. He smiles mischievously.)

WILLIAM

You learn a few things when you're hungry and haven't had anything but canned beans for four days. Can't say that I didn't learn anything from the military.

EVELYN

I can't tell whether I want to be impressed or afraid. Right out of the front door, eh?

(suddenly glancing at her watch)

Dear heavens, have you had your medicine yet? Did Martha do *that* much, at least?

WILLIAM

Yeah, I took it before I left. I didn't even gag like usual; I just popped them in and—

EVELYN

(flabbergasted, standing and suddenly pacing the room) You took them yourself? How many? Which ones? How'd you get a hold of them?

WILLIAM

Don't worry yourself silly, Miss Carter. I took the green, like always, no sweat.

EVELYN

Like always *before bedtime!* Did you take the blue one at five?

WILLIAM

No.

EVELYN

Oh dear heavens!

(Suddenly the door swings open. MAXIMILIAN enters. Out of breath he crosses to EVELYN, seizes her by the shoulders and speaks rapidly.)

MAXIMILIAN

Evelyn? Dear God, Evelyn, where have you been?

EVELYN

Max! Good heavens, Max, what are you doing here?

MAXIMILIAN

(referring to WILLIAM)

Who is this guy?

EVELYN

He's a patient of mine. Here—

(crossing with MAXIMILIAN to the couch)

—sit down for a minute. I've got a lot of explaining to do.

MAXIMILIAN

Yes, you do—

WILLIAM

Who is this, Miss Carter?

MAXIMILIAN

(with pomp and fury)

—you've got plenty of explaining to do. Here I am getting ready for the banquet tonight. I call just to make sure that you were able to

get off of work on time. Lo and behold, some *man* answers your phone. *(pointing a trembling finger at WILLIAM)*

Is this the man? He tried to make a fool of me, telling me that I had the wrong number.

EVELYN

It was all a mistake, honestly. I told you he was my patient.

MAXIMILIAN

(blatantly)

So is he going to *leave*?

EVELYN

You see, that's the problem—

WILLIAM

I'm a problem?

EVELYN

(exasperated)

William, will you please excuse us for a moment? Please. We just need to talk for a moment.

(WILLIAM doesn't move toward the door. Instead, he crosses to MAXIMILIAN, looking him over critically.)

WILLIAM

(forthrightly)

I don't like his looks, Miss Carter.

MAXIMILIAN

Trust me, boy, the opinion is mutual.

WILLIAM

What, you don't like your looks either?

(Seeing MAXIMILIAN's patience waning, EVELYN softly takes WILLIAM's hands. MAXIMILIAN notes her affectionate action with distaste.)

EVELYN

I need to speak with him for a moment, all right? I promise it won't take long. Look, why

don't you go out on the balcony for a bit, take in some fresh air, eh? I'll come and join you in a sec.

(WILLIAM consents, occasionally glancing back at MAXIMILIAN. As soon as the glass door shuts, EVELYN begins to speak. All the while MAXIMILIAN stares at her coldly.)

EVELYN

Okay, all right. Where do I begin? Ah, yes, William. He is a patient of mine from the hospital. He followed me, well not really followed, but he snuck out and came here under the impression that I was someone else. He thinks that I'm his ex-fiancée.

(EVELYN continues hesitantly, realizing that MAXIMILIAN will not offer a response.)

EVELYN

I plan to take him back. I was going to do it right away, actually, but then he said that there was all this stuff that he needed to tell me and there was dinner on the table and... well it ends up that I left work early like we planned to get ready for dinner, and the nurse that I left him with wasn't watching him carefully and he took the wrong medicine. There is one pill he takes before bed to help him sleep, and there is another he takes around five to minimize his delusions. So he's been fading in and out on me—he thinks that I'm his ex-fiancee and I have to keep reminding him...

(There is still no response from MAXIMILIAN.)

EVELYN

Worst case scenario is that I'm not able to get hold of Martha and try, somehow, maybe, to sneak him back in without any of the other staff knowing. I know he'll be somewhat drowsy when he gets back, but we should be able to give him the other medicine immediately and he'll be alright. *(rather fretfully, more to herself than to MAXIMILIAN)* Oh but if I can't sneak him in, then I'll get in trouble for leaving work early and Martha will as well.

MAXIMILIAN*(mockingly)*

And we don't want you ladies to get in trouble. Joy. Are you out of your God-forsaken mind, woman?

EVELYN

What?

MAXIMILIAN

Brilliant. How long did it take you to think of this, gorgeous?

EVELYN

To think of what?

MAXIMILIAN

This little joke, this little lie. Your patient? Oh that's stunning. At least it isn't the pool boy, or the cab driver. Perhaps they would be better, though, instead of this... man. God, Evelyn, do you think I'm a fool?

EVELYN

What?

(pause)

Dear heavens, don't you believe me?

MAXIMILIAN*(sarcastically)*

No, this is rude of me. I should at least give you credit for being creative.

EVELYN

You don't believe me.

MAXIMILIAN

Am I *supposed* to believe that? Keep in mind that I was the valedictorian of my class, the star tennis player for my school, and chess club champion three years in a row—

EVELYN

What does that have to do with—

MAXIMILIAN

—do you *honestly* expect me to believe that a patient strolled out of the hospital, changed

clothes, and what, caught the bus? And then magically found where you lived and came here to make you a candlelight dinner?

EVELYN

Yes! Yes, you are supposed to believe exactly that. You are supposed to believe that because *it is the truth!*

MAXIMILIAN*(Taking hold of Evelyn.)*

You most ungrateful woman! If you didn't want to go tonight you could at least be man—woman— enough to tell me instead of making up this elaborate fairy tale. Honestly, of all the lies I've heard—

(WILLIAM, who has been watching the events through the glass door, suddenly enters. He charges directly to MAXIMILIAN.)

WILLIAM

Let her go. Now.

(MAXIMILIAN releases her.)

WILLIAM

Now leave.

MAXIMILIAN

Leave or what? Are you threatening me?

EVELYN

No, Max, wait; don't go. *(to WILLIAM)*

Will, it's okay. It is just a misunderstanding, okay? I'm all right.

WILLIAM

You're sure you're all right, Miss Carter?

MAXIMILIAN

I don't have time for these games, Evelyn. Tell this man to be on his way. We've got places to go and people to see tonight.

WILLIAM

You said you'd come back with me, Miss Carter.

love helping other people—

MAXIMILIAN

You are missing the point. What are people going to think when they hear that you are, not just a happy little nurse, but a nurse who dines with her anomalies and then escorts them back to the asylum. Joy. That'll go over well with the country club. Come on, beautiful. Go get dressed; slap on that little red dress my mother left for you. God rest her soul. I'll dump him off while you are getting ready, all right?

EVELYN

I'm not wearing that damn dress, Max, how many time do I have to tell you—

MAXIMILIAN

Well hell, I don't care. Put on anything, your pajamas if you wish—that'll be stunning—just get ready to go.

WILLIAM

Who is this creep, Miss Carter?

EVELYN

That creep is my fiancé. Look, Will, I'm going to let Max take you back to Meadowbrook, okay? I want Dr. Phelps to get a good look at you.

MAXIMILIAN

Must I stay there while he is examined? How long will that take? The banquet starts at seven-thirty and it's a half-hour drive.

EVELYN

He's got to get back to the hospital, Max; he needs to take his medicine.

WILLIAM

I'm fine, Miss Carter.

MAXIMILIAN

You heard the man, darling. You go shower and get dressed. I'll take him back—pin a note on his shirt or something to tell the doctor to look at him. They'll never know you were

EVELYN

I can't just tell him to leave, Max; I've gotta take him back.

MAXIMILIAN

And how long will that take? We are already running late and you aren't even dressed.

EVELYN

Well then you go ahead. I'll take him back, get dressed and join you later—

MAXIMILIAN

My speech is right at seven-thirty. You can't be late; you are supposed to stand up there with me while I accept. The speaker's companion is *always* there. It has been like that for years.

EVELYN

Did I not just explain this to you? I can't just let him go, nor can I leave him in the house alone—

MAXIMILIAN

And you certainly are not bringing that nut with us!

EVELYN

—because he— I don't believe you.

MAXIMILIAN

Evelyn, this banquet is one of the most important events of my life. My father is basically handing the company over to me. Can you imagine being the wife of CEO of Northwest Bancorporation? This whole shebang is in my honor. I can't stroll in there alone. *(seeing that EVELYN is unmoved)* God, Evelyn, just let him go. If he made it here alone then he can make it back as well. If they fire you, or you "get in trouble," so what, gorgeous? I have more than enough money to take care of you. Besides, that was our idea anyway, right? For you not to work and for me—

EVELYN

That was always *your* idea, for me not to work, for me to be just "the wife of." I love my job; I

responsible. They'll blame Martha.

(MAXIMILIAN goes to WILLIAM, expecting to snatch him up like a child. WILLIAM resists.)

WILLIAM

You gonna let him do that to me, Miss Carter?

EVELYN

(a delayed reaction) Pin a note on his shirt! No. You are *not* taking him back. For all I know you'll drop him off all alone in the middle of Nowheresville just to save time! We aren't going to that banquet tonight, or at least I'm not. I've got to take him back myself and take responsibility for whatever penalties are placed against me.

MAXIMILIAN

You surely are not going miss the most important day of my life for this...man!

(WILLIAM sits back into his chair, somewhat deflated and pale. EVELYN, ignoring MAXIMILIAN, kneels beside WILLIAM's chair.)

EVELYN

What's the matter? Oh dear heavens, how do you feel, Will?

WILLIAM

(obviously lying) Good. I feel good.

EVELYN

Light-headed? Nauseous? Sleepy? Do you want to go lay down?

MAXIMILIAN

On the *couch*.

WILLIAM

No. I'm fine.

MAXIMILIAN

Yes, the nut is fine, so fine he can find his way back to the hospital on his own and be just dandy. You can take a shower, get dressed, and be on with it.

EVELYN

(to WILLIAM)

Here, perhaps you should keep eating, get some food in your system.

WILLIAM

No, I promise I'm fine.

EVELYN

Go ahead and finish up. Shall I reheat it for you? Here, I'll reheat it. *(pause, taking at look back at MAXIMILIAN)* And then I'll join you, since I won't be eating at the banquet and all.

WILLIAM

Sure.

(There is a long, awkward silence as EVELYN reheats the food.)

EVELYN

There you are, Will. It's just on reheat and it shouldn't take too long.

WILLIAM

That's all right. I don't want to hold you up from your evening, Miss Carter. If you need to leave, you can.

EVELYN

That's rather nice of you, Will, but I'm fine right here.

WILLIAM

Well since you two aren't going anymore, do you think he'd like to join us?

EVELYN

Would you like to join us, Max? We have more than enough.

MAXIMILIAN

(shortly)

No thank you. I plan to eat later, with you, at the banquet.

EVELYN

All right then, suit yourself.

WILLIAM

You know, when I was a kid, I use to think that they were saying "shoot yourself." That always confused me, why my mother kept telling me and my dad to shoot ourselves.

MAXIMILIAN

And you didn't listen?

EVELYN

(ignoring MAXIMILIAN)

That's funny. My mom use to say, "Whatever floats your boat," and my sister and I would say, "and whatever tickles your tummy."

WILLIAM

That's cute. I bet you were a cute kid.

EVELYN

I don't know about that. I was kinda tough, somewhat of a tomboy.

MAXIMILIAN

Your *ever* being tough is like a lemming utilizing free will and thought--a very paradox in reality, gorgeous. You haven't a strong notion in your body.

EVELYN

(abated, retrieving food from microwave)

Oh trust me, I was. I made myself tough. *(to WILLIAM)* I was the strong one between my mother, sister and me. My little sister didn't quite know what was going on after Dad left, and Momma fell apart. I had to take care of them both. I put on the pants, so to say. Since then I've felt the need to take care of people. It makes me feel like I'm making a difference somewhere in this crazy world.

WILLIAM

That's sounds swell and all, Miss Carter, but who took care of you?

MAXIMILIAN

Your father left you?

EVELYN

(over her shoulder again, not facing him) I told you that, Max.

MAXIMILIAN

Surely you did not.

EVELYN

(sitting at the table)

Yes, I did. When we went to the lake that night, I told you *everything*.

MAXIMILIAN

You never mentioned that.

EVELYN

(dubiously) Didn't I? *(pause)* What was I wearing that night?

MAXIMILIAN

What kind of question is that?

EVELYN

The kind I'd like for you to answer. What was I wearing?

MAXIMILIAN

(evasively)

A dress.

EVELYN

What kind? At least what color.

MAXIMILIAN

Joy. Is this some sort of game?

EVELYN

What did we talk about?

MAXIMILIAN

Everything, like you said.

EVELYN

You weren't listening.

(MAXIMILIAN begins to explain, but she talks over him, returning quite casually to her conversation with WILLIAM.)

EVELYN

So I wouldn't say I was cute. I was actually kind of the rough, tough tomboy of the neighborhood.

WILLIAM

I thought you said you were the gal all the guys wanted at school.

EVELYN

(more to MAXIMILIAN than WILLIAM)

I *did* say that, didn't I. But that was in high school. Somewhere between junior high and the upper grades boys started liking me. It was funny, going from playing baseball with them one minute to having to turn down dates with them the next.

WILLIAM

I bet there were lines from your doorstep to Sears full of guys wanting to ask you to prom and homecoming, right?

EVELYN

I didn't go to either. I had to take care of Mom.

WILLIAM

Well I'm glad you didn't go with any of them, Miss Carter. They didn't deserve you.
(to MAXIMILIAN) Chicken?

MAXIMILIAN

No.

WILLIAM

All right, shoot yourself.

MAXIMILIAN

(over EVELYN and WILLIAM's laughter)

I think those old school boys had the right idea. You are a beautiful woman, Evelyn. I knew from the moment we met that I could save you from your desolation and give you all the joy in the world that you'd never received before.

EVELYN

(frankly, but quietly)

I don't need your salvation, Max. I've got Jesus for that. What I need is your love.

MAXIMILIAN

Joy! And just what is that suppose to mean? I do love you. I take care of you, don't I? I'm paying for this apartment, aren't I? How dare you say—

EVELYN

Are you even listening to me? Do you *ever* listen to me?

WILLIAM

There is a little more to loving a woman than buying her things, pal. Money isn't the trick.

MAXIMILIAN

I don't recall giving you permission to speak to me, boy.

WILLIAM

And this is who you left me for, Doll Baby? I can't tell whether to be hurt or insulted.

EVELYN

Will—

WILLIAM

Was it worth ruining what we had for *that*?

MAXIMILIAN

"What we had?" Brilliant! Poor fool.

WILLIAM

(standing from the table)

Did I stutter, pal?

EVELYN

Please, Max, he didn't take his medicine; he's just confused.

WILLIAM

No, Doll Baby. That ain't it. I don't need that crap. Any of it. I don't even know why you sent me to that God-forsaken place...

or perhaps I do, and that's what's driving me up the wall...*(disillusioned)* Did you want me gone, so you could be with him? *(pause)* No. No. You just didn't think I was coming back? That was it, right? You thought I wouldn't make it back so you settled on the first rat that would provide for you? *(leaning across the table directly into MAXIMILIAN's face)* Listen pal, you were a substitute, a back-up plan. I'm back now, so how about you move along.

MAXIMILIAN

(dryly)

You poor, crazed, fool. Evelyn, you have two seconds to removed this nut from my face before he suffers the consequences.

EVELYN

William, sweetie—

MAXIMILIAN

Sweetie?! Brilliant.

EVELYN

William, leave Max alone, all right?

WILLIAM

No way, Doll Baby. All right, maybe you did leave me for him. I may be able to handle you leaving me for some millionaire, because God knows, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't give you all that. But he had better treat you like a queen—

EVELYN

(crossing to WILLIAM)

It's Miss Carter, William.

WILLIAM

—because you deserve *that* much.

MAXIMILIAN

Our relationship is none of your concern, child.

EVELYN

(desperately, to MAXIMILIAN)

Don't be offended. He just needs—

MAXIMILIAN

Well instruct the boy to control that tongue of his and we won't have any problems, beautiful. I've had about enough of this.

EVELYN

I've gotta take him back. Now.

WILLIAM

(earnestly, pulling EVELYN downstage)

Look, don't worry about him or any of this mess; I can forget it. I can forget that all of this ever happened. Just promise me that we can leave this place. That you and I will pack up first thing in the morning and jet outta' here.

EVELYN

(vainly, pleading)

William, I told you that I—

WILLIAM

(with mounting excitement)

We'll catch the first train. No, you deserve more than some bumpy train. How about an airplane? One of those big ones all the Hollywood big shots are flying on. We may sit next to James Dean or Charlton Heston. Where do you want to go? Los Angeles? Detroit? Anywhere, you name it. We'll put the past behind us and start nice and fresh. How about it?

MAXIMILIAN

She's not going anywhere with you, boy. Tell him, Evelyn. Don't entertain his madness.

WILLIAM

I understand it now. You see, at first I thought that you just—that you didn't love me—but I see now that you were just afraid. You were afraid that I wouldn't make it home. Mack didn't make it home. But I'm home, Doll Baby, and I'm ready and willing to forgive and forget whatever happened between the two of you. Just come with me, love.

EVELYN

No, Will. I can't come away with you—

MAXIMILIAN

Explain to him why!

EVELYN

For what? What good would it do? It's not going to register. He should have had his medicine hours ago.

WILLIAM

Doll Baby, I don't need it. I don't need it anymore.

EVELYN

We need to go, William. You need your medicine.

WILLIAM

I can't go knowing that you're going to come back to this jerk!

MAXIMILIAN

Get used to the idea. It's permanent.

WILLIAM

(crossing to MAXIMILIAN)
Over my dead body!

MAXIMILIAN

We'll make it so.

(There is a pause, and then WILLIAM hurls himself at MAXIMILIAN, who isn't expecting him to attack. The two men fall to the floor, initially with WILLIAM on top. EVELYN screams. WILLIAM looks up to her and in that moment of distraction, MAXIMILIAN reverses the hold and ends up on top. WILLIAM receives a blow to the jaw. EVELYN rushes forward, pulling MAXIMILIAN off of WILLIAM with all of her might.)

EVELYN

Dear heavens, Max! How can you be like this. He doesn't know what he is saying. He can't help himself.

MAXIMILIAN

(shaking her off of him and straightening his jacket) Brilliant. This is a astounding way to spend the most important evening of my life! Get dressed now, Evelyn, we're leaving.

EVELYN

(now rushing to WILLIAM, helping him to his feet) I'm taking him back, Max.

WILLIAM

So you're set on this.

(There is a pause. The radio, which has previously been forgotten, can now be heard in the silence. It softly plays "Linger in My Arms a Little Longer" by Peggy Lee.)

WILLIAM

You settled on him, Mr. Moneybags, here. All right. That's fine. Just tell me something, though; I want you to be true—don't worry about sparing me. Why?

EVELYN

Why? Oh William, come on, we've gotta go.

WILLIAM

No, better yet, I'll leave alone. I'll go quietly. Just tell me what I did wrong. What did I do to make you stop loving me?

MAXIMILIAN

You heard the man, beautiful. Just tell him why and he said he'll go quietly.

EVELYN

Dear God, it's not that easy, Max; I can't just let him go. *(sitting beside WILLIAM)* I can't tell you why she did it, William. I'm not sure why anyone, any woman in her right mind, would leave a great guy like you. But you've got to understand something for me: I'm not Marilyn, sweetie—

MAXIMILIAN

Don't encourage him, Evelyn.

EVELYN

—I'm not who you think that I am. I'm Evelyn Carter, I'm your nurse. I take care of you.

WILLIAM

I don't need anyone to take care of me.

EVELYN

You've been at Meadowbrook for seven years now, Will.

WILLIAM

I just... I'm not sure that... Miss Carter, I...

EVELYN

Yes, Will?

WILLIAM

I'm gonna—

(WILLIAM folds over slowly, laying on his side.)

EVELYN

(To MAXIMILIAN)

I'm going to need your help to get him to the car.

MAXIMILIAN

You think you're taking my car?

EVELYN

I can't take him back on a bus like this, Max.

MAXIMILIAN

Fine. As I proposed before, I'll take him back while you get dressed. I'll call ahead and tell father that we met up with traffic or something. As soon as I get back, you'd better to ready.

EVELYN

I gave him my word that I'd take him back.

MAXIMILIAN

Drop it, gorgeous. I'm taking him back. Now, get dressed. You haven't much time.

(EVELYN remains on the couch, staring vacantly to the floor.)

MAXIMILIAN

Did you hear me, Evelyn? I said to go get dressed.

EVELYN

He's sick, Max, but not as sick as you.

MAXIMILIAN

(sharply) Pardon?

EVELYN

(reminiscently, near to tears)

He didn't take well to anyone there for a while, they say. Then when they hired me they say he became a new person. *(facing MAXIMILIAN, as though for the first time)* I don't know who he thought I was, now, but I don't think it really matters. He was sick, yes. He didn't know what was going on in the world around him, or even that the world had changed... James Dean is dead. He said we may sit next to James Dean but... William is a good man, Max. I wish I had known him before the war. He's a good guy. He has a better conception of love than most people I know.

MAXIMILIAN

(wearily, wishing to end the conversation)

Does he? The man is a fool, Evelyn. He isn't in his right mind; you said so yourself. He lives in a world that we can't understand—not even those of us who are crazy enough to try.

EVELYN

One with love.

MAXIMILIAN

What? With love? Evelyn, the man is a nutcase. He can't tell day from night without shoving down a couple of pills. *(mockingly)* The blue or the red today, dear! Swell. And you are telling me that he has a conception of anything?

EVELYN

Did you not hear him? He was willing to forgive and forget the woman who left him and move on, just like that, because he loved her.

MAXIMILIAN

Wake up, love. Her, Evelyn. Not you, her. He doesn't know who you are.

EVELYN

(crossing to table)
You weren't listening again.

MAXIMILIAN

Enough with the games, Evelyn. What was that supposed to mean. What are you saying?

(EVELYN rubs the petals of an orchid between her fingers. A petal falls to the table top.)

EVELYN

What am I saying to you, Max? Nothing? I'm not saying anything at all. I'm never saying anything.

MAXIMILIAN

Stop it, gorgeous. Go get dressed. You've still got that red dress, haven't you? The one my mother—

EVELYN

Yes.

MAXIMILIAN

Swell. Then put it on. We haven't much time.

EVELYN

Yes, swell.
(pause, picking up the fallen petal)
I bet I'd look beautiful in it. Gorgeous even.

MAXIMILIAN

(halting at the doorway to speak and then entering her closet)
Of course you would. You are always beautiful and gorgeous to me.

EVELYN

Well I can't help that.

MAXIMILIAN

What's that?

EVELYN

(coldly)
Nothing.

MAXIMILIAN

(returning to the room with the dress)
This is ridiculous. You're willing to ruin a monumental event for the both of us, for the sake of some mental patient. What do you want from him, Evelyn? What do you want him to do? He's a loon, Evelyn; all that jazz about love was the cry of a madman. *(looking down at the dress)* Stunning, isn't it?

EVELYN

(releasing the petal, allowing it to drift to the ground)
Beautiful. Gorgeous, even.

CURTAIN**One-Act Play by Bobbi Kornblit****Wedding March****CAST:**

Sissy Van Owen – Bride-to-be with brown eyes
Patricia Van Owen - Mother of the Bride
Martin Van Owen - Father of the Bride
Buzz Barons - Groom
Private Carlos Suarez –Friend of the unseen brother
Radio Announcer

1940s—Set in the small parlor in a modest home in Pasadena, California. The simple middle-class furnishings consist of a wooden table and chairs, a sideboard with an old radio and a full rack of pipes, and a well-worn easy chair. With the exception of a brother, the family has gathered to put the finishing touches on the planning of the wedding of the daughter Sissy, scheduled to occur in two days. The groom hasn't arrived at the house yet.

At the table, the mother goes over the seating chart for the wedding reception. The father melds into his easy chair, puffing on his pipe, with his nose in a heavy book. The radio plays Bing Crosby performing "White Christmas" by Irving Berlin. Sissy dances around the room with an imaginary partner.
It is Thursday, December 21, 1944.

SISSY

(stops at the window and draws back the curtain) Good thing it's an indoor winter wedding. It'd take an army to get this garden in shape if we had waited until spring. The gazebo looks like it'll blow over with the first Santa Ana winds. Been sitting there neglected for almost two years.

MOTHER

Somehow we'll squeeze thirty people in here. There isn't even room for a Christmas tree until after the wedding. You're right—ever since Mr. Yoshi left, the yard's gone to seed. There are a few victory gardens with vegetables trailing all over the place, but nobody seems to grow flowers anymore. Martin, you said you'd tend to it. The only digging I ever see you do these days is in those pages of your precious poetry books.

(Father turns the page with a flourish, without ever looking up at the women).

FATHER

Yes, dear.
(He smokes his pipe).

(Sissy stands at the window and outlines large intertwined hearts on the glass with her fingers).

SISSY

The swallows even didn't return to their nest last year. They probably flew right by and didn't recognize the yard, since it looks such a fright. We never heard another word from Mr. Yoshi; he just seemed to vanish one day like the birds.

FATHER

(looks up into the air and closes his eyes)
Oh, say not so!
Those sounds that flow
In murmurs of delight and woe
Come not from wings of birds.

They are the throngs
Of the poet's songs,
Murmurs of pleasures, and pains, and wrongs,
The sound of winged words.

SISSY

The only words I'm itching to hear are 'I do.' Papa, promise you won't invite Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to the wedding. Try to talk like a normal dad, for just one day. Okie-dokie?

(Father grunts and returns to his book. Sissy waltzes over to his chair and kisses the top of his head).

MOTHER

Let's go over the seating chart one more time, dear. Boy, girl— boy, girl. You and Buzz in the center, then your father and me next to you, Mr. and Mrs. Barons next to Buzz, and we'll leave an empty chair for Charlie. That makes seven... but we need an even number at the head table.

SISSY

Mother, we haven't heard from Charlie in two months. We can't even be sure he got the wedding invitation. We don't know exactly where he is or how he is. I told you I'd wait to plan the wedding until we knew he was safe.

MOTHER

Of course your brother's safe. A mother knows these things. We were all blessed when he made it through Pearl Harbor in '41.

SISSY

I'd say seven's a lucky number, for us.

FATHER

I'm sure the army's got bigger plans for him—to stop Emperor Hirohito before he reaches the shores of California. If Santa Anita were open for bets these days instead of being an army camp, I wager that Charlie's a no-show. Last we heard he was in the Philippines.

MOTHER

I won't hear such talk. You never know. He might just show up at our door. We'll put the reverend at our table. That breaks the boy-girl pattern, but it'll round things out nicely. Eight

it is. The florist said we couldn't use any chrysanthemums in the arrangements because they symbolize the Emperor. How can a flower be our enemy?

FATHER

They put mum designs on the boats, uniforms and even on their medals. But I think we've gone a bit overboard around here. Mr. Yoshi did his job for fifteen years, and then our government shipped him off to who knows where. Did they think he was going to take over this country with his rake and hoe?

MOTHER

You never can tell what those people are really thinking. Always so polite, bowing and smiling. But I was awfully upset when Mr. Yoshi didn't warn me he was leaving. I had my garden club coming over, and the grass had grown as high as a patch of tulies.

SISSY

I remember how that sent you into a tailspin. Poor Mr. Yoshi. *(beat)* Well, who needs chrysanthemums anyway? Roses will look much more romantic at the wedding. We're lucky to have found some, with the Rose Parade coming up in a few days.

MOTHER

Sissy, take a look at the diagram I drew of the tables. We've got to lock this down if we're going to make the seating absolutely perfect.

SISSY

We've gone over this already a million times, Mother. You decide. It's peachy keen, just as long as I'm sitting next to my new husband.

MOTHER

Did you try on cousin Margaret's dress again? Let's just do a final check to make sure it still fits.

SISSY

Think I look fat? I swear I won't eat another morsel until the wedding.

MOTHER

No dear, you're going to be a dream walking.

SISSY

Her old gown's not really my style, but it beats wearing a dress suit like many of my friends are doing, along with their grooms in uniform. Even their cake toppers have little soldiers on them. I always dreamed of a real wedding dress dripping with beads and lace, and the guy at my side wearing tails.

MOTHER

Cousin Margaret's dress is lovely, and new silk is supposed to be used for parachutes for the boys. It's a small sacrifice for you to make for your country, Sissy. Buzz will be just fine in his rented tux. Tails in the afternoon is gauche.

SISSY

Unless it's on Fred Astaire. Wasn't he dreamy in *The Sky's the Limit* as a singing and dancing air corps Flying Tiger? I love the way men look in uniforms. Hope I look as pretty as a movie star when I walk down the aisle.

FATHER

You'll be a princess. "Maiden! With the meek, brown eyes..."

SISSY

...Papa, you promised.

FATHER

No, dear girl, the question was asked, but not answered.

MOTHER

(shuffles through seating charts)

The rest of the tables look fine. We'll make a splendid meal from soup to nuts. Too bad we can't get any of those pastel sugar coated almonds, but plain roasted ones in little crystal dishes will be just as nice. Luxuries are so hard to come by these days with rationing. The pastry chef from the Huntington Hotel is going to moonlight and make your cake since they closed the place to civilians when the war

broke out. Nice of my garden club to pool their sugar stamps so we'd have enough for the frosting. I wish the reception could have been at the hotel. That's where my parents were married in '07 in the horseshoe-shaped garden when it was the Wentworth.

FATHER

And I wish John D. Rockefeller had left me his fortune. It's going to be hard enough to cover the bill for this shindig, as it is. I don't get commissions for all of the actuarial tables I calculate. I'm just a working stiff with not enough dough and not enough time to spend on my books.

(The DOORBELL rings).

RADIO ANNOUNCER

This one is dedicated to our boys who are fighting on both fronts to keep our country safe. *(Then the music on the radio plays "Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B.")*

SISSY

I'll get it. Betcha it's Buzz.

(Sissy darts out of the room and returns with her arms draped around Buzz's wide shoulders. They enter the parlor).

SISSY

I'm so glad you're here with me and not in some jungle fighting. Or in Europe chasing the Nazis and having those French mademoiselles run after you.

BUZZ

Sorry I'm late Mrs. V. I couldn't leave until we finished restocking the shoes. It seems like every fancy lady in town was holiday shopping. Set a record, even with the clothing rationing. I might eventually jump ship when that new Bullocks Department Store gets built on South Lake Avenue. I heard it's going to be as posh as Beverly Hills, and they're going to give the sales associates big commissions.

MOTHER

Well, that's just fine, Buzz. Maybe you'll be a manager one day.

BUZZ

Let me know if you want to use my employee discount if you still need some new platform heels for the wedding. I think my boss will consider my bride-to-be as immediate family already.

MOTHER

And your new mother-in-law. Pretty soon you'd better start calling us Mom and Dad instead of Mr. and Mrs. V. Next thing we know, you'll be thinking about baby shoes.

SISSY

Geez, Mother.

FATHER

*Standing, with reluctant feet,
Where the brook and river meet,
Womanhood and childhood fleet!*

SISSY

Papa, I'm flattered that you think of me when you recite "Maidenhood," but every once in a while I'd like to hear from you and not some dusty poet. Remember to keep Hiawatha on the shores of the Gitche Gumee and not anywhere near my wedding.

FATHER

You two women never seem to pay any mind to what I say, so I might as well commune with the greatest wordsmith of all time. Not since Charlie shipped off have I had a decent conversation that didn't involve wedding bells or dollar signs.

BUZZ

I'm saving up for us to get our own place, so we won't have to live with my parents forever. There just isn't much affordable housing available right now. I've got big plans for us.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Let's all hope and pray that our boys will return home soon safe and sound. Here's a little tune for our friends and loved ones who are far away during this holiday season.

MUSIC

"I'll be Home for Christmas" (Music fades)

SISSY

I'm so glad I don't have to worry about you being shot or missing in some God-forsaken place. This is where you belong, right here with me.

BUZZ

Sissy honey, you know I love you, but I'd gladly give my eyeteeth to be in there fighting. I would have gone to hell and back to stop Hitler and Mussolini. I tried to enlist, just like Charlie, but they wouldn't take me. These size-twelve wide gunboats are as flat as pancakes. I begged them to give me a desk job, but I was slapped with a 4-F, unfit for military service.

FATHER

(looks up and puts down his book)

They said I was too old to go fight the axis. Alas,
*Life hath quicksands, Life hath snares!
Care and age come unawares!*

MOTHER

(fans herself briskly with the seating charts)

Who said what? Do you mean to tell me that you tried to enlist?

(DOOR BELL rings)

(Sissy runs to answer it and calls back to the group from the other room).

SISSY

I can see a soldier's cap from the peephole in the door. Should I open it?

MOTHER

Men in uniforms come bearing sad tidings. Martin, I'm frightened.

FATHER

I'll go see what it's all about.

(Father gets up to walk toward the door, still holding his book. He comes back with a young man on crutches, with his foot bandaged. The soldier has a backpack. Sissy trails behind him).

SISSY

Mother, Buzz, this is Private Carlos Suarez.

PRIVATE SUAREZ

Sorry to bust in on you, Mrs. Van Buren. I didn't have your phone number—only this address on a scrap of paper. Me and Charlie were buddies stationed in the Philippines. Stuck in the trenches along with a couple of thousand other guys trying to make a major dent in the Japanese forces.

MOTHER

(lets out a deep sigh of relief)

Private Suarez, take a seat. Make yourself comfortable.

(Private Suarez settles into Father's easy chair like it's the most comfortable position he's been in for ages. He takes his backpack off and puts it on his lap. Father, longing for his favorite chair, reluctantly sits at the table with mother. Sissy and Buzz stand arm in arm looking at the soldier).

MOTHER

How's my boy? When did you last see him?

PRIVATE SUAREZ

About a week ago, before I was shipped states-side. I guess Charlie was much better at ducking the kamikazes than I was. Right now, he's probably up to his huevos in mud clearing airfields on Mindoro to launch the next attacks. Excuse the language, ma'am.

SISSY

Need to cushion that foot?

BUZZ

(kneels to help him like at the store)

I'll assume the position.

PRIVATE SUAREZ

Before I left, he asked me to stop by here and give his sister two things. If you don't mind, miss, one is a kiss.

(Sissy leans over and let him kiss her cheek. She closes her eyes and thinks of Charlie. The soldier opens the backpack. He pulls out a brass cylinder carved with two intertwined hearts with a "C" and a "B" inside them. He hands it to Sissy).

SISSY

What's this? It looks like some kind of ammunition.

PRIVATE SUAREZ

It's your wedding gift from your brother. Some of us guys passed the time in the trenches carving patterns on old spent bullets and shells. The mortar casings make great flower vases. This is your wedding present. He said he'd get you a crystal one when he returns, but hoped this would do for now. Charlie thinks the war will be over real soon.

SISSY

(traces her fingers along the carved hearts)
I love it. I'll fill it with roses and put it on our table at the wedding reception. Look, Buzz--two entwined hearts with our initials etched in the centers.

BUZZ

Thanks, pal. You going to be in town long?

PRIVATE SUAREZ

I'm glad to be home for Christmas with my folks in Altadena, but I didn't mean to have it happen this way. At the Vista Del Arroyo Hotel, not too far from here, they work on my bad

foot, my *mala pata* as Mama says. The army's taken over the place to rehab the wounded troops.

SISSY

Then you've simply got to come to our wedding this weekend on Saturday. You can still be with your family on Christmas day. We've got a great seat for you at a very special table.

MOTHER

(starts to write)

How do you spell Suarez? With an "S" or a "Z" at the end?

PRIVATE SUAREZ

With a "Z." I'd be honored ma'am.

MOTHER

Eight will make a wonderful table.

FATHER

(stands up and walks over to Buzz)

It'll be a fine wedding. Son, I think you've got a bright future ahead of you. Those size-twelve clodhoppers are going to take you anywhere you want to go in life. *We can make our lives sublime, And departing, leave behind us Foot-prints on the sands of time.*

PRIVATE SUAREZ

Shakespeare?

MOTHER, SISSY and BUZZ *(in unison)*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow!

(Father puts his arm around his future son-in-law and then ceremoniously passes out pipes to Buzz and Private Suarez).

(Sissy stands before them with her arms crossed Native American style).

SISSY

Let Charlie come home safely and let there be peace in the world soon.

*"Bathe now in the stream before you,
Wash the war-paint from your faces,*

*Wash the blood-stains from your fingers,
Bury your war-clubs and your weapons,
Break the red stone from this quarry,
Mould and make it into Peace-Pipes,
Take the reeds that grow beside you,
Deck them with your brightest feathers,
Smoke the calumet together,
And as brothers live henceforward!"*

FATHER

A-a-a-ah...Longfellow for the best and the last word.

MUSIC

"God Bless America" sung by Kate Smith

THE END

WRITERS' FESTIVAL GUESTS

- 1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garret
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne Rivers Siddons, Memye Curtis Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone, Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
1998 Jamaica Kincaid, Thylas Moss, Sherman Yellen
1999 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, Memye Curtis Tucker
2000 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, Robert Earl Price
2001 John Updike, Marsha Norman, Sharon Olds, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
2002 Marilyn Nelson, Bapsi Sidhwa, Scott Russell Sanders
2003 Julia Alvarez, Greg Williamson, Cary Bynum
2004 Chitra Divakaruni, Bo Ball
2005 Edward Albee, Linda Hogan



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