

**CRAZY
WRITER COUPLE'S
CRAZY ANTHOLOGY**



A Crazy Short Story Collection

By

"The Crazy Writing Couple"

Elizabeth Horton-Newton

Neil Douglas Newton

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Forward
Neil Douglas Newton

I'm not much for life philosophy; I tend to think of life as a bit of random series of events. That said, the only even in my life that seemed to come from the stars is meeting the co-author of this anthology. It's obvious we are both writers but it's relevant to how we met; it wasn't simply a "meeting", but something based on a life passion. I was living in New York City where we both come from. She had moved to the south years before. When I started a writer's group, she joined. Over time I found out she was from New York and, stranger still, she went to college in a small, little known university, where my father had taught for over thirty years.

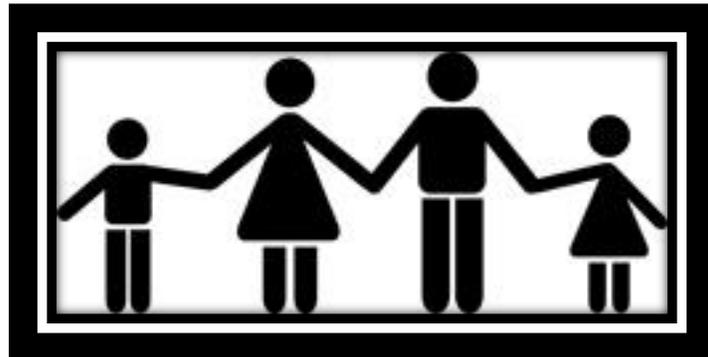
For those of you not familiar with New York, the chances of having that kind of connection is small. Eventually I got to meet the smartest woman I've ever met and, while I tried to be skeptical as is my nature, it was clear that it was meant to be. Once I moved south, we continued to write. For years we kicked around ideas of what we could write together. One of those ideas can be seen at the end of this anthology in the form of a preview of a co-written murder mystery in the vein of the old Nick and Nora Charles series.

After both of us spent years writing short stories for anthologies we decided that our first shared work would be an anthology of our stories. Lizzie and I have a similar writing style but, in terms of content, we couldn't be more different. Lizzie likes horror, serial killer, creepy stuff. I write about dark personal journeys, depression, PTSD, falls from grace.

Both of these literary genres are represented in this anthology. We are a writing couple and our shared work shows our individual passions but also our interaction as man and wife for the past fifteen years. My wife is my best friend; I hope I am her's ☺. We speak all the time and compare notes about our writing and even my music which is not one of Lizzie's activities. This is the result of fifteen years of marriage and of our respective lives on earth. I hope you enjoy it.

*You can reach us at **CrazyWriterCouple@yahoo.com**.*

*Family
Values*



The Vineyard
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

My family has been producing one of the finest wines from Carmargue region for several generations. Although we are a very small vineyard many have said our grapes are the sweetest and our wine has an indefinable “something”. Of course the distinctive color known as “grey of grey” contributes to the uniqueness of our wine.

What very few people have had the opportunity to sample what is a special wine grown from select grapes. Behind the old and crumbling home where my ancestors first lived is a very small vineyard. Cultivated by family members only, these grapes give off a strange and delectable scent as they grow. The land is rich and moist and the grapes grow large and beautiful.

Only twenty bottles are prepared each season and these are stored away apart from our other wines. In the cellar of the crumbling edifice is the original wine storeroom and it is here, in the cool darkness of centuries old stone, that the barrels are stacked.

When a child in our family reaches the age of thirteen they are permitted their first sampling of this wine. It is an event marked by both a birthday celebration of family and friends and a more private gathering. All living family members enter the cellar with the birthday celebrant. No matter where they are in the world, they are expected to return for this event.

There is an old superstition claiming that any family member who misses the introduction of the birthday child into the adult world of the family business will die violently before the year’s end. Oddly this has happened a few times, though not in recent history. Of course that’s how these silly superstitions begin.

I remember my introduction to our special wine, Sangre de Camargue. We had partied all day and almost all the villagers were entertained at our estate. There was music, and amusements for the children, tables of food, and of course wine. The celebration began early in the day and by sundown everyone was filled with food and exhausted. After the last few stragglers wandered back to their homes, my family members gathered in the great hall of our home.

Suddenly the evening grew somber. The younger children were sent off to bed and the spouses of the blood family members were left to care for them. The remainder of the family prepared for the walk to the old estate.

There was no electricity in the old house and we were each provided a lantern to light our way along the path. As we grew closer to the vineyard the odor of the rich soil and the plump grapes filled my head. If I close my eyes I can smell it still.

Entering the house we descended to the cellar, the lantern light flickering on the damp stone walls. Younger adults assisted the elders down the somewhat slippery stone steps.

My grandfather was already in the cellar. A long wooden table was set out with more lanterns. A line of wine goblets stretched the length of the table. No two were the same. Some were silver, some glass. My grandfather held one goblet in his hand. I recognized it as what was known as my baptism cup. It had been given to me when I was an infant and baptized in the town church.

The room was silent except for the rustling of clothing as each family member took a goblet and moved in a line to stand around my grandfather. My father filled a large carafe with wine from one of the barrels and began to fill the cups of my family members. When every glass had been filled my grandfather went to the barrel and filled my goblet. Then he turned to face me.

“This wine was produced in the year you were born Gerard. It wine born of the vineyard our family has owned for three hundred and fifty years. It is a wine that will not be tasted by any tongue that does not have our family blood running through his veins. It is the lifeblood of family, the heritage of people. Today you are a man and today you will learn the art of making this wine. This is a secret you will keep as long as you live. This is a secret you will pass on to your children and your children’s children. No one outside of our bloodline must ever know this. No spouse is to be included in this knowledge.”

Grandfather took a sip from the goblet. “This is the blood of our blood, the heart of our family. Drink and take you place among your ancestors.”

My heart was beating rapidly as he extended the cup to me. I cannot describe that first taste of our family wine. It was sweet, yet somehow salty. I had grown up drinking wine as any vintner’s child does. But this was unlike anything I had ever tasted. I could smell the richness of the soil in every drop. The color was a strange pale red, not a rose but something new and different.

I drained the cup and found I craved more. I watched as everyone raised their cups to toast me and then they also drank.

“Gerard, here is the story of our family and our wine.” He set a large book on the table, its pages curling and yellowed. “It too is a secret. This is what makes us successful. As long as these secrets remain within our bloodline we will prosper. This secret is now yours as well. Treat it with respect.”

That was seventy years ago. For seventy years I have held the family secret. Today I will fulfill its promise. Tonight I will be led to the cellar. My youngest grandchild turned thirteen years old this year. He has been introduced to the magic of our family. However, his mother, my daughter expects her second child this month. And wine must be made. The harvest will come and the rich grapes will be gathered. Until then the soil must be cared for, loved and nurtured. I must be part of that nurturing. And what better way than to feed the grapes that will provide wine for the baby when she turns thirteen.

The long table has been covered with a clean white sheet and my son stands beside it, the knife still sheathed. I stretch out on the table and smile up at him. I hope the wine will be particularly sweet when my granddaughter turns thirteen. She will be named Geraldine, after me. And my blood will flow in her veins.

Seed Money
Neil Douglas Newton

I lay back, satiated, listening the strains of the jazz we had put on before we'd stumbled home, drunk and silly. The result of our inebriation was what you'd expect from a pair of thirty somethings that had been in a monogamous relationship for the past six months; Selene lay beside me, a patina of sweat a testament to what we'd just done.

Things hadn't always been so perfect. We had met three years earlier and, somewhere around a year and a half into our relationship I had made a stupid mistake. Her name was Jeniffer and she'd come into my life right after category five argument with Selene in which we'd said the worst things we could have possibly said to each other. She was the jealous type and her assumptions about my intent to cheat on her were fueled by past bad experiences. They were irrational and the entire issue had started to wear on my patience. This particular argument was over a woman at a party who had acted friendly toward me. While she was drunk and a bit to effusive, the entire incident was blown out of proportion.

Once the constant accusations of infidelity had reach critical mass, I had decided that Selene should be a thing of the past and it was in the back of my mind to expedite that state of affairs. After the argument, Selene had stormed out of my apartment and I was on my way to my favorite bar. Anger accelerates the ingestion of alcohol, at least in my case and what followed was the expected compromise of my judgement. A certain Jenifer appeared through my alcoholic haze and, on finding I was a writer, albeit a technical one, went out of her way to monopolize my time. I saw a few other women give me a look but Jennifer had made it her business to seem like my girlfriend.

I was a waste as far as defending my interests and, fueled by anger, I'm not sure I had any interests, only an agenda and not a particularly important one. I was at her apartment, down in the Village, a couple of hours later. I won't go into graphic detail; suffice it to say that she did her best to act like a porn star. She was perhaps the tenth woman I'd met in my life who thought that porn sex was a turn on to any man they met. I performed well but was less than enthusiastic, finding her over the top ministrations distracting and silly.

And so, I committed a stupid act for a stupid reason. Of course this became obvious the next morning as I looked at a woman sleeping next to me who I barely remembered. My head was pounding and I stumbled into her bathroom to look for aspirin. Jennifer came in behind me, putting her arms around me; she obviously remembered the previous night differently. When I didn't turn around and respond she got the idea. I finally turned and gave her a sad smile.

"What?" she asked. I wasn't sure what the question was.

"You found a drunk angry man. Though a lot of it is a blur I wonder why you expected anything to come of it."

She dry washed her hands; I suspected she had been through situations like this before. "I thought that we had shared something. What we said..." She trailed off.

"I don't know that nothing will come of it. But right now I don't know you well enough to confirm anything."

She pivoted around so she wasn't looking at me. "So this is it."

"I don't know. I just met you. I don't think that any woman who meets me for the first time is required to decide the future right off. The same goes for me."

I realized I had come off as angry. "I'm sorry. I need to go."

I left her standing there. And that seemed like the end of it. But Selene continued to be a butt. The smallest indication that there might have been flirtation between me and any other woman, meaning none, would set her off. She would grill me if I stayed late at work. And every few weeks I would become enraged and I'd end up back at that same bar. And Jennifer was a regular. And each time I saw her I was angry. Again.

This pattern persisted for about four months and finally I had had it. I told Selene about Jenifer and put an end to the whole relationship; knowing her level of jealousy, Jenifer was a perfect lever to destroy my relationship with Selene. I stayed away from that bar; I didn't need more pointless drama in my life even though I was alone. For a year I stayed away from Selene. It wasn't difficult; with actual evidence of infidelity she would be time bomb and there would have been months of rehashing my affair with Jenifer. Of course I knew that I should have just broken it off with Jenifer in the first place but we are never so wise under fire.

I'll admit that I missed Selene. My only sense of enjoyment was that I knew that, more than anything else she would have wanted to rub my infidelity in my face and she couldn't. It was almost a year before I met her again, by accident, at a mutual friend's party. We spoke and I was more than hesitant to even have a conversation with her. As the evening went by I was shocked to find that, again and again, she would take the high road where before she would take offense over just about anything. There were no recriminations about my affair and no apparent jealousy.

I finally asked her about it. She smiled and told me she'd taken stock of herself during the last year. I was shocked enough by her transformation that we ended up in a bar afterward. In the weeks that followed, our time together increased exponentially though I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. To my unutterable amazement, it never came. No angry outbursts. No self-righteous speeches. No accusations of infidelity.

I found myself in a comfortable rhythm with Selene. And six months later, as I lay in my bed feeling satiated, I marveled at the bizarre nature of life, how things could morph so completely. I rolled over and grabbed my plastic running bottle full of orange juice and took a healthy swig. Then I lay there, debating whether I should find out what Selene was doing and why she wasn't with me. As I pondered the possibilities I fell asleep.

I woke up suddenly, noticing immediately that I was still alone. I became a bit suspicious at Selene's long absence. A look at the clock allowed me to estimate that I'd been sleeping for two hours. There was no sound from the television so that only left the bathroom.

I waited until my curiosity got the better of me and overcame my desire to go back to sleep. I padded out to the living room and saw the light spilling out beneath the bathroom door. Three hours in the bathroom? I suddenly got a bad feeling; how many stories had I heard about sudden, debilitating illnesses. I debated what to do and my fear got the better of me; I pushed the door open.

And saw the oddest thing anyone could have imagined under the circumstances. There was Selene laying a vial into some bubble wrap at the bottom of a heavy duty plastic cooler. The vial was surrounded by at least ten more. There was a bit of frost on at least a few of them, suggesting some time in a freezer. Her head jerked around and she made a noise somewhere between a scream and a sob. I leaned forward and saw that the vials contained what looked like milk. And then there was only one conclusion that fit.

“What the fuck?”

Her face hardened. “I hate you,” she hissed.

“What have you been doing all this time? Has this been a joke? This is the real you isn’t it? Hate. Just like always.”

Her lower lip trembled. “That’s me. You cheated on me. I always knew you would.”

“I’m not having this argument again. I got away from you or at least I thought I did. Here we are again. If you have any concern about anyone else finding out about this you better tell me know what you’re doing.”

“Punishing you!”

“For what. For doing exactly what you kept accusing me of when I never did anything! Until I couldn’t stand you anymore! I should have just told you to go away. You can’t blame me for not being responsible. Not when you dumped your psychosis on me for months.” I gestured toward the cooler. “And what the fuck is that? What are you going to say to justify that? What is this all about?”

She lay on the floor and put her head against the tiles, not looking at me. Then she told me a story.

It had been during the year when Selene had mercifully been out of my life. I had been so agitated that I took three of the many vacation weeks I’d accumulated at work. For reasons I’ll never know, I went to the Falklands. Maybe it was as remote and unknown a location as I could think of; I had never met anyone who’d actually been to the Falklands. I wanted to be in a place where the idea of a Selene was as far from reality as possible.

It was everything I hoped it would be. I arrived in a new fairytale land that I’d never seen before, as far from what New York is that I was felt free for the first time in years. Selene was non-existent, a memory, one I knew would recede from my consciousness like an old stomach virus. The Falklands was so clean and “non-urban”. The lack of so-called sophistication was beyond refreshing. I wandered down the beach, eating myself into near insensibility at various restaurants. At night I would find a bar and become the resident Yank. There were a few indications that I could have had some “assignments” but, after Selene, I wasn’t really interested in any possibility of romantic drama. I was free and I liked it.

It was the fourth day of my vacation. I was sitting in a restaurant by the beach when I let my guard down. I was staring at the water, letting my mind drift when a voice knocked me out of my reverie.

“A Yank I’d guess.”

I turned to see a face staring curiously at me. Dark blonde hair, big butt. Curvy but not my type. I was a willowy leggy enthusiast. Still there was something childlike and charming about her. “I can’t deny it,” I answered. “I’m not good with accents. I can’t pretend I’m not American.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York.”

Her eyebrows raised. “Really. I had a friend from upstate. Do you mean the state or the city?”

“The city.”

“Oooo. Big city man.”

“You get used to it. Like anywhere else. It seems normal.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true.”

She paused. “Am I bothering you?”

I realized I was probably not being very friendly, winding down from the fires of hell as I was. “No. Sorry. I’m just sort of recovering.”

“Were you sick?”

I laughed. “No. Nothing like that. The end of the armpit of all relationships.”

“A divorce?”

“Thank God no! If it had gone that far I’d have killed myself.”

She nodded as though she knew what I was saying. “I think I’ve been there.”

I nodded back. She waited a second to see if I would show some enthusiasm. “Well, I guess I’ll leave you to your winding down.”

I felt like a jerk. My staying with Selene for so long was my fault, not this woman’s. I didn’t need to be an asshole to someone who hadn’t done me any harm. “I’ve spent the last few days alone. Why don’t you have a drink? On me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. I’m here to enjoy myself. I need conversation with someone who isn’t from New York.”

“I don’t think I can keep up with a New Yorker when it comes to conversation.”

That made me laugh, harder than I thought I would; I think it startled her. “Sorry,” I said, still laughing. “Everyone in Manhattan is so suave. You can get tired of it sometimes. Sit?”

She came over and sat across from me. “Are you hungry?”

“Actually yes. Mussels?”

“I could go for that. They’re better down here. Deeper and the flavor is less funky.”

“Funky. Real American word.”

“I guess I’m quaint here.”

“I wonder if you think we’re quaint.”

“I guess so. It’s really beautiful”.

“So what do you do?”

As I engaged in conversation I realize that I’d opened myself up to flirting. For some reason, despite Selene, this didn’t bother me; I was free and I had just met this woman.

Her name was Tessa. We had dinner that evening and she seemed fascinated by my life as a tech writer, something that I considered to be like watching paint dry but a lot more annoying. I found her to be charming but there was something missing. That something kept eating at me while I was trying to remain enthusiastic. Perhaps it was her obvious intense interest in after knowing me for such a short time. Whatever it was, I couldn’t quite pin it down.

We walked along the beach and we talked about what we were doing vs. what we really wanted to be doing. It seemed like a preparation for a closer relationship. My antennae went up; I was interested but not enough to jump into bed with her that night; I was getting the feeling that that was her goal and it both frightened and annoyed me.

Somewhere around eleven I felt it was time to make my break. I begged off before she could even invite me to her house. I actually had developed a fever on the trip down which didn’t seem to be going away; I’m not one who travels well. I told her I needed to get some sleep. Once I left her I considered whether I wanted to start a relationship that I knew would end in a few weeks. Certainly she’d made it clear that a relationship was welcome. But who would put themselves in that kind of position?

Maybe she was just the type who liked to have fun and I was being prude. But I wanted it to be my choice, not hers.

She was not gracious but remained under control. I wondered what she expected of me, someone she had just met. I left things vague, letting her think I'd call her but not letting her think it was going to lead anywhere. While I considered another bar, I wasn't sure that she wouldn't find me; there were only so many bars on the island. So I ended the evening in my hotel room watching "Back to the future".

The next day I was spared deciding whether I should call her. Around 9:30 she called me. While I was wary, I was still attracted to her. Despite her living in an isolated community she was extraordinarily intelligent and sophisticated. I wanted to ignore her but I couldn't quite let it go.

I met her at the same restaurant where we first met. When I got there she was drinking a margarita.

"Ah, you are brave."

She giggled and I felt my stomach turn over. I was hooked. Damn.

I sat down. "I happen to hate tequila."

"Well, I noticed that you were drinking gin yesterday. Gin is the devil's drink."

"I never looked at it that way." Just then the waiter came up and I ordered a beefeater Gibson. Tessa smiled. "Are you going to behave?" she asked archly. It was a cheap remark, designed to excite me. To my surprise it seemed to work.

"Well I am on vacation."

Four hours later I was at her house where she offered to make me dinner. I noticed some serious weight lifting equipment and commented on it. Her back was to me and I could see her stiffen. "Left here by a friend. He stayed here for a while. I've had some financial troubles and he helped me out by helping with the bills. He slept on the couch." She never turned around.

"So he's not here now?"

"No, that was just for a short time."

"Why did he leave his weights?"

"Uh... he had to leave quickly. Something about his job."

"Big guy, huh?"

She giggled again. "Yeah. We used to call him "Gorilla".

I nodded, taking in the couch. I doubted I could sleep there. If "Gorilla" was bigger than me, which seemed likely, he could never have fit his body on that couch, much less slept there. It began to occur to me where he most likely slept. I supposed it was none of my business.

She brought me a Martini. "The second liquor store had Beefeater. I thought you should see that we're not unsophisticated here."

"Thanks. I could have made do with wine."

She shrugged. "Dinner should be ready in about half an hour." She went into the kitchen and checked some sauce she was making. "So that armpit of a relationship? Was she mad that you left?"

"She would have been mad if I stayed. Or if I had tuna instead of bologna. Mad is what she does best."

"So there's no chance that you'll make up?"

I guffawed. "That's like asking if there's a chance I'll eat glass!"

She smiled softly. "Sometimes it's time to move on."

"I guess so."

"Have you ever considered just leaving New York? Going somewhere else?"

"Whoa! That's a big question. I've lived there all my life."

“Sometimes change is good.”

Throughout the rest of the evening, that little exchange stayed in my mind. What sane woman would start talking about the future with a man she’d just met? But I knew that’s what she was doing. And later on when I found some action movies I found out there was another “Gorilla”, this time named Spike. He also had stayed on the couch to help her out. I began to put it all together.

After dinner she sat on that same couch. Even in my drunken haze it seemed that she was a little too close. “I hate to ask you. But I’ve hit some hard times. Do you think you can lend me twenty pounds. I promise I’ll get it back to you before you leave.”

I debated leaving but I figured her request gave me a good reason to give up on the idea of whether we were going to sleep together, something that I could tell was going to be an issue. Once she asked me for money, I felt I was no longer obligated to consider a relationship. “Sure.” I pulled out my wallet and counted out the unfamiliar money with difficulty before I handed it to her. Then I stood up. “Well I’m still feeling crappy. So I’m going to go to the hotel. Thanks for dinner. And the Beefeater.” I smiled as though I’d just made a joke.

Her face fell. “Oh. Okay. I hope the twenty pounds didn’t put you off. I wouldn’t have asked you if I wasn’t desperate. Things haven’t been great the last few months.”

“I understand. I’ve been there. I’m just not feeling well.”

“Well I hope I’ll see you again.”

“Let me see how I feel tomorrow. Honestly, I’m not feeling very confident about relationships right now. I just got away from the buzz saw that I was with for over a year.”

“Oh. Okay. Well thanks for the money. Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Let’s see how I feel.”

“Okay.”

“Good night.”

I wondered, as I walked back to my hotel, if I she had planned for me to be the next “man on the couch”. I wanted to kick myself. I had just left New York and Selene a few days ago and here I was fending off another attack by a female. I guess I had fooled myself into thinking that Selene had made me tough but maybe she’d made me hungry for anything that made me feel like I was worthy of a decent relationship. Tessa had seen me coming and, for some reason, she thought I was stupid enough to fall for it. Maybe I was and she had just been more obvious than she thought she was.

I sat at the bar in my hotel and knocked back a few martinis, feeling like a fool. I looked at some of the women around me and wondered if I should just get it over with and sleep with someone else, washing away the stink of both Selene and Tessa. Somehow it didn’t seem like an answer.

The next day I slept late. Walking through the lobby of my hotel I saw the one person I didn’t want to see. “I just wanted to apologize for putting you off last night. I probably shouldn’t have asked you for money. I’m just desperate.”

My night’s sleep hadn’t improved my mood and my sense of failure. “I understand. The money isn’t an issue. I just got out of the worst relationship ever. I’m not ready to even think about another relationship.”

I began to walk past her but she followed me. “I don’t know what I did wrong. I didn’t ask you to get into another relationship. Maybe you have the idea that you’re such a great catch that I couldn’t help myself. I was just wanted to get to know you. Is that so horrifying?”

I wasn't in the mood to ruin the rest of my vacation considering how much I needed it. I thought of the other "guys on the couch" and I felt sick. "No. But I told you I can't do anything but try to get my head back together. Sorry."

I walked farther. She walked behind me. "You're just like the rest of them! You treat me like shit and then you leave. I hate you! I shouldn't have given my affection to you. You don't deserve it! I have to survive!"

I turned around. "What kind of relationship are you going to have with another human being if all you're going to do is survive?"

She gave me a look of complete incomprehension.

"I hardly know you. Two days. That's it. What do you think I owe you? Is this the way all your relationships go? Take two days to create what takes years to build? How could it ever work out?"

"You're just a--"

"Find someone else for the couch. There's always someone who'll be willing. That's the top of your ambition isn't it?"

Her mouth flew open and she began crying. I walked away.

I spent the rest of the day sitting on the beach. I knew she wouldn't be looking for me. The next day I took a taxi up the coast to a bed and breakfast I'd read about on the internet. The rest of the trip was a confrontation with myself and my sense of failure. In a way I couldn't blame Tessa for that. It was really where I was in my head and I'd just been running away from it.

I should have expected that Tessa would not go quietly, though at the time I couldn't have known why I'd see her again. It was only days before I found Selene with the cooler. I was making coffee when the doorbell rang.

And there she was, a smirk on her face. I shook my head. "We spent two days together, barely. We had no relationship to speak of. Don't you have better things to do with your life than waste all the money and time to come here? I suppose you think I owe you something."

She snorted. "I'll have you know that I am a businesswoman, here on some very important deals that I'm working on. I'm not just the little poor girl you met back home. You just found me in a bad part of my life. There's more to me than that."

"Yes I know. There is the couch. That was a career in itself."

She shrugged. "It served its purpose at the time. You do what you have to do."

"I know. To survive. How did you get up here?"

"I told your doorman I was your cousin. You may not remember how drunk you were when we were together. I know a good bit more about you than you know. He's the suspicious type so it took me a while to convince him. We had a nice long talk and he grilled me. A lot of your neighbors got to hear some of it. Including a Mrs. Garvotti who I think must have been a government interrogator at one time. Are all Americans so curious?"

"Oh God. Mrs. Garvotti thinks she's fighting crime and corruption in our building. You've gotten to see a dying breed in New York: the annoying busybody old lady. Most people in the City mind their own business."

"Are you going to ask me in?"

"You hate me, remember? Why do you want to come into my home?"

"I figure I owe you an apology. I am here on business. And I figure I was a bitch back home. Poverty will do that to you. The couch wasn't the only shameful thing in my existence

back then. I had to do a lot of things that compromised my dignity. But I shouldn't have blamed it all on you. Things are better now. Time to make amends."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I don't care if you do or not. I'm offering an apology. Take it or leave it. What other reason would I come up here?"

I debated it in my mind; I didn't trust her but I couldn't think of a reason that told me she was lying. In the end I figured it was easier to spend a little time with her than it would be to throw her out, with all the arguing that would follow. Tessa wasn't stable enough to take rejection with a smile.

I gestured her in. In a few minutes we were sitting on the couch making small talk and drinking some of my cheap red wine. I watched her carefully for signs that this wasn't what she'd told me it was: a simple making of amends and not a play for more of my money and a possible relationship. I didn't see any negative signs; she sat calmly and discussed her business venture and, without any recriminations, our ill-fated two days together.

An hour later she was up and moving to the door. "Sorry I can't stay longer. I have to meet someone. Say hello to Mrs. Garvotti for me."

"I will. Good luck."

And she was gone.

"How did she find you?" I asked Selene.

She wiped at some tears in her eyes. "She'd seen some old posts that included me on Facebook. So she contacted me. You'd told her about me."

"And her appearance a few days ago? I can guess but I'd like to confirm it."

She paused. "Proof that you spent some time alone with her. People will draw their own conclusions about what happened."

"As I thought. What were you hoping to accomplish? I know what you were going to do with those vials. But how would it have helped you?"

"I've already answered that. You hurt me. You hurt her. You deserve to lose something. Your freedom. Your money. Whatever. I figure we could ruin your life. Anything short of killing you for what you did."

"Oh God. After two days she thought she owned me. And treated me like a bank. I don't owe her anything. Or you."

"I'm not going to discuss this with you. You don't understand."

"No I don't understand insanity. The question is how much you want to stop people from hearing about what you've done which is like something out of Frankenstein."

"What do you mean?"

"If you don't want the entire world to know about this," I shouted, pointing at the cooler, "then you'll do what I say."

She looked like a deer in the headlights.

A year later Tessa came to New York. When I picked her up at Kennedy Airport; she had a shit eating grin on her face. She carried a baby in her lap. I smiled at the sight of him. I've always loved babies.

"You didn't think this would happen, did you?"

I kept my face blank. "Of course not."

“I’ve always wanted to live in New York.” She stared at me, waiting for a reaction.

“I can say with confidence that it doesn’t live up to its hype.”

“Sour grapes.”

I dared a smile. I didn’t want to give it away.

“You could have worked with me,” she taunted.

“Worked. Are all your relationships work? An arrangement? Do you think something like that is going to last?”

“You’re too romantic. You believe in love.”

“It hasn’t always seemed possible but I remain hopeful.”

“You’re a fool.”

“And I think that your life is over. Has been over.”

“We’ll see. We have a meeting with a DNA expert.”

“Whatever he says doesn’t change anything I’ve said.”

The baby, who I’d come to know was named Terrance, made a typical baby noise. “Terrance knows what is true, don’t you, sugar?”

“He’s cute. Do you love him?”

Her face darkened. “Of course I do.”

“Excuse me, but I don’t see love as being part of your scheme. If you loved him you’d want to keep him for yourself. You wouldn’t need me.”

“You’re part of this whether you want to be or not.”

“True love.”

She stared at me, clearly wondering why I was being so contentious. From her point of view I should have been kissing her ass, hoping for the best outcome.

We remained quiet until we arrived at the DNA lab on the Upper East Side. Terrance began to coo as she lifted him out of the car. “It will all be fine in a few minutes, Terry,” Tessa told the baby.

“No doubt,” I said.

Paulson genetic testing was on the eighty-ninth floor. We met the receptionist who offered us bottled water. Naïf paintings festooned the wall. The carpet was deep pile in an off green shade. I could tell Tessa smelled money, something that satisfied some need she had for importance; she smiled. We were ushered into a small room with an oval shaped table. Within a few minutes a middle aged man joined us. The receptionist ran in. “Madame. Do you breast feed or would you like forumula?”

Tessa laughed. “He’s been fed recently. Thank you.”

“Certainly Madame.”

Our doctor sat across from us. “I’m Dr. Boolchand. And this must be Terrance.”

“Yes,” Tessa confirmed, smiling broadly. As though she was confirming that she had a hole card. Not like a mother.

“Well I’ll get right to it. I’ve reviewed the results of our tests. We do double testing to be sure. All part of the service.”

I nodded. “We would expect nothing less.”

Tessa gave me look; I was being far too cooperative.

“Here are the results. Mr. Garth,” he said to me. “Ms. Feld,” he said to Tessa. “The chances that Terrance is the son of Mr. Garth is one in five billion. In layman’s terms it is impossible that Mr. Garth is Terrance’s father.”

Tessa's eyes bulged. Her head shook convulsively for several seconds. "What?" she gasped.

"Well I always have to explain that this is an issue of probabilities. Meaning that while it's possible that Mr. Garth is Terrance's father, it is so unlikely as to be impossible."

Tessa's face turned red. She tightened her grasp on the baby as though it might help her cause. "That's not possible."

Boolchand smiled. "Possible but unlikely."

"No. It's bloody impossible."

"I've had this discussion before, too many times. I'm not happy to bring bad news. But the reality is that it is very unlikely that Terrance is Mr. Garth's son."

"No. It is impossible that he is not his father."

"We can run these tests again. But I think the results will be the same."

"This is some kind of trick." She turned to me. "How much did you pay them to do this?"

I laughed. Dr. Boolchand shook his head. "I'm sorry Ms. Feld. You can go to another lab but you'll find the same thing. We are bonded and our reputation is excellent. I can give you references if you like."

"I can't believe this!"

I remained silent; I was enjoying this. "Fuck you," Tessa hissed. She stood up and left. I smiled at Boolchand who seemed disgusted. "Thank you for your time," I told him.

I followed Tessa to the elevator. "This isn't going to stand!" she shouted.

"There isn't much you can do."

"There's a lot I can bloody do!"

"I'd suggest lowering your voice. This is New York. People call the police."

"I don't care! I'll sue you! You'll wish you never met me."

"Sue me for what?"

"Money. I'll get as much as I can."

"Since Terrance isn't my child I think I'd call that extortion. Or attempted extortion. But remember something. You are not a citizen here. You can't stay here more than a few months and I'm not jumping up to help you. You're on your own."

"I'm going to figure out how you did this."

"And do what?"

The elevator opened its doors and we stepped in. "I'm going to get money from you."

I shook my head as we began to descend. "Extortion. And you have no basis for a suit."

Her face hardened and she said nothing. We finished our ride down in silence. We walked out into the lobby. She whirled on me. "I'm going to fucking kill you!"

"Extortion. Threats of violence. You're racking up a lot of possible charges for an alien. You'll be deported in a few days if you go on like this."

"Do you think I can just go back home and live happily ever after? I have no money except what you've given me so far."

"You could get a job but I doubt you'd keep it. Wait! Stop talking. There's a diner down the block. Let's go there. I can help you. But you have to stop being...you."

"What?"

"Just come with me."

She stared at the floor for a few seconds. "Whatever you say."

We walked to the diner, taking a booth near the front door. Terrance gurgled. "He is cute. He would have been cuter if he'd been mine. But that's not what I want to talk about."

The waitress came; I ordered a bowl of clam chowder and an English muffin. Tessa seemed confused by the enormous menu. Finally she ordered a cheeseburger and fries.

She wouldn't meet my eyes so I forged ahead. "Terrance's father is a good man. You have an opportunity here to get what you want."

"What is that? Why do you think you know what I want?"

"Twenty pounds in the Falklands. Extortion here. It's obvious. You'd use your own child as a tool to get money. You brought him all the way here just to get money."

She looked away. "Whatever you say."

"You have two choices. I can manage to get you deported and you'll go back to the Falklands. Knowing you, things won't be good for you then. So I'm giving you a choice. You take one hundred and fifty thousand U.S. dollars, sign away your rights to Terrance and leave the country. Or you leave with Terrance and we don't hear from you again. The money would set you up for life if you're careful."

"If I'm such an awful mother why would you let me leave with him?"

"I'm betting on what I know about you."

She smiled. "Maybe I'll just leave just to rub your nose in it."

"Suit yourself."

"Can I ask who the father is?"

"A friend of mine. He...helped me a while back. He's very generous. And he's my friend. He's had trouble adopting a child. You've solved his problem."

"Is his wife unable to give birth?"

"In a manner of speaking. He's gay."

"What?"

"Terrance couldn't have a better father."

"What did he do that has stopped him from adopting?"

"Just like anyone else. Red tape. Lack of available babies."

"So my child won't have a mother."

It was my turn to smile. "Nothing new there."

She showed her teeth like a feral dog. It seemed appropriate.

Selene moved to California after Tessa went back home alone. There was always the chance that someone would find out what she'd done and how crazy she was. She was nothing if not full of pride. And there were the occasional threats I made of prosecuting her. I couldn't tell for certain that there were any charges I could level against her but I made a point of trotting out the possibility over and over. I had become the resentful one and I was able to outdo her.

I remained celibate for two years. I had thought it would be difficult but in the end not testing fate seemed a lot better than simply finding a mate and satisfying my baser urges. In the end it really wasn't that bad. Calm is good.

The Thin Place
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

“A thin place is a place of energy; a place where the veil between this world and the eternal world is thin. A thin place is where one can walk in two worlds—the worlds are fused together, knitted loosely where the differences can be discerned or tightly where the two worlds become one.”

Moira gazed out at the mist curling like a long gray cat’s tail around the bottoms of trees and the bases of fence posts. The entire day had been strange, the air charged with electric energy. As the sun set and the odor of supper cooking wafted through the house, Moira found herself looking anxiously at the clock. Sean had promised to be home early so they could get to the wake. He was already half an hour past the time he usually got home. Dark had crept upon the house until the light within struggled against the pressing night outside.

For the tenth time in less than ten minutes Moira pushed aside the lace curtains and stared into the darkness beyond. Thinking she saw movement in the thickening fog she squinted. It was only her reflection in the glass, the lights of the warm room behind her illuminating the concern in her eyes.

Once more she went to the stove and stirred the pot of stew that bubbled warmly, the thick brown gravy clinging to the meat and vegetables. The inviting scent permeated the room mingling with the aroma of freshly baked bread. It was Sean’s favorite meal on a cold night and he would never be late to sit at the wooden table and dig into a huge bowlful of the treat. Moira’s hand trembled slightly and the wooden spoon thumped against the side of the pot. Something was very wrong.

It was at that moment she heard the keening in the distance. Her hand froze mid stir and she stared at the bubbles breaking on the surface of the stew. She stood in a tableau of stunned uncertainty. Had she heard what she thought? Was it merely a stray wind blowing through the trees and over the low stone walls that separated their farm from the others near-by? Then the sound came again, mournful and pleading, and she released the spoon which stood for a moment before slowly sinking to the side of the mixture.

Moira’s heart began a tripping beat, the sound loud in her head. The name “banshee” lit up in her mind, its letters reminiscent of the neon signs over the theater in town. She pressed the word down but it still glittered at the corners of her consciousness. “Old wives tale,” she whispered. But the words were hollow and defenseless against the generations of superstition.

Returning to the window she again gazed out into the night. Her eyes straining against the darkness, she saw a form begin to take shape and recognized Sean’s ambling gait. Releasing the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding she hurried to the front door. Throwing it open, she stepped back as the icy night air rushed in. Sean stumbled inside, his face pale and waxy within the dark hood of his coat

“Sean!” Moira gasped as she reached out to embrace him. He lurched past her, moving unsteadily toward the crackling fireplace. Moira watched him uncertainly a moment before the cold air from outside began to envelop her. She closed the door never taking her eyes from her husband’s shaking shoulders.

He turned slowly to face her, his eyes dark pools in his white face, a thin sheen of perspiration lining his upper lip.

“What is it?” Moira’s voice was barely above a whisper.

Sean's mouth moved nervously before the words came out shakily. "I saw her. I saw Noreen."

Moira's hand covered her mouth and her eyes widened until they almost bulged from their sockets. "Wh-what? Where, how?"

His eyes strayed to the window and the darkness that pressed from outside. Moira's eyes followed his terrified stare then turned back to his face. The terror in his eyes seemed to fill the room, invading even Moira's heart. He lifted his hand slowly and wordlessly pointed at the window where the keening broke in and once again filled the room.

Sean's hands covered his ears and he shook his head frantically as though by doing so he could escape the sound. Moira rushed to his side, feet barely touching the floor and placed her hands over his.

"Sean, Sean. It's just the wind. It's nothing more."

He looked into her eyes and read the lie. She knew it was Noreen. She knew the wrong he had done and was now being tormented for.

Moira pulled his hands down, forcing them to his sides. "It's only the wind," she repeated more strongly now. "You must pull yourself together." She guided him to the table, his feet dragging like lead across the floor. "Sit down and we'll have supper. A good hot meal and you'll be better."

Sean sat staring out the window at the impenetrable darkness, silently praying the sound would not come again. He started when Moira set the heaping bowl of stew before him, a slab of fresh bread on the side. "I can't Moira," he whined.

"You're being silly," she chided gently. "Eat your supper. It's already late and we'll have to hurry to the wake. I've made a fine cake to bring to Noreen's family and I'll not have it wasted because of the wind."

Spearing a chunk of meat she lifted it to his lips. He automatically opened his mouth and allowed her to feed him as a mother might to a recalcitrant child. Offering him a smile she put the fork in his hand. "I'm going to change my clothes now. Finish up and then we can be on our way."

Never taking his eyes from the window Sean slowly ate his supper, picking at bits of carrot and potato, dunking his bread in the thick gravy. By the time Moira returned from dressing he had almost emptied the bowl. She nodded approvingly and poured a glass of milk. "Now drink your milk and we'll go on."

Sean gulped down the milk, holding Moira's eyes with his own. She offered an encouraging smile and combined with the silence from outside he began to relax.

Moira put the dishes into the sink to wash when she returned. Pulling a shawl around her shoulders she picked up the wrapped cake she'd prepared for Noreen's family and slipped her arm through Sean's.

He hesitated just a moment when they stood before the closed door that led outside. But Moira's tug on his arm made him open the door and together they stepped outside.

There was a chill in the air that was unnatural for that time of year and Sean shivered in his thin coat, the hood fallen from his head, thin strands of hair barely covering his balding scalp. "Are you cold, love?" he asked his wife as he slid an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. He hungered for the warmth of her body beside his. They walked together in rhythm as those who have been married for years will do. It was less than a mile to the Donohue's, a walk that should take twenty minutes or so. But they were able to cut some minutes off by crossing the field where Sean helped Moira climb over the low stone wall that separated their properties.

As he climbed over behind her he felt a frosty chill at the back of his neck and his body tensed almost causing him to fall. Moira reached out with one hand to steady him. His hand was like ice in hers and she pulled away when he regained his balance. "You're freezing Sean," she observed in a vague and distant voice.

He nodded but made no other response. She walked slightly ahead of him now and try as he might he couldn't match her pace. "Moira slow down," he pleaded.

She glanced back at him, her smile somewhat frightening in the dim light of the crescent moon. A balloon of chilly air blew from her mouth and rose slowly evaporating into the night. The sound of the icy grass crackling beneath their feet like shards of thin glass was the only sound to break the oppressive silence. A cloud covered the light for a moment and when it cleared Moira was far ahead of him moving quickly through the night. She looked back once more and the expression on her face was twisted into a sneer.

Before he could call out again, the sound of the keening came again on a rising draft. Sean froze in place. The sound came from behind him, back near the wall they had just climbed over. Moira had stopped moving now and one hand held her shawl over the lower half of her face, hiding her mouth from view.

A cold finger seemed to stroke his cheek and a whisper of ice-cold air blew past his ear. He closed his eyes tightly and willed his feet to move but they were rooted to the earth as though they had grown there generations earlier and could not be pried loose. Then the mist began to form around him, creating a barely visible cocoon. Moira watched from a distance, her fist pressed into her mouth to prevent her from screaming out. It would not do to arouse others until what must be done was finished.

The fog took shape, almost womanly when seen from where Moira stood. She had dropped the cake and it lay in crumbles at her feet. She did not know she had dropped it nor would she have cared if she'd known. She was only aware of the joining of the fog with her husband's body.

Sean opened his eyes and came face to face with Noreen Donohue's souless eyes; eyes that had no form or depth but wavered in the frigid moonlight.

"Noo," he moaned softly. "Noreen I did not mean it to happen. As God as my witness it was an accident."

The hollow mouth of the amorphous face. before him opened wide as if in laughter and a strange unearthly sound lifted on the wind. Sean's heart began to pound, the beating inside his breast like a drummer beating heartily in a parade. His breath came in slow gasps and his lungs screamed for air. But the only air he could pull in was the foggy face of the ghostly apparition that now covered him like a shroud. A sharp pain struck him in the breast as surely as a fist striking him. His heart contracted and then exploded in his chest like the rupturing of an old tire with many miles on its treads.

Sean fell to the ground. He did not drop as one who fainted but seemed to float to a reclining position as though he was being gently laid to rest. The mist lay with him for a moment before rising to its full height in the night and turning to face Moira.

The woman stood staring at the ghostly form wondering if she had made a deal with the devil and would now be consumed as her husband had been. The vaporous form raised what seemed to be a hand as though waving a grateful farewell before dissipating into the night leaving the scene clear.

Moira moved backward toward the Donohue home afraid to draw her eyes away lest the specter return. When she was only a few yards from the house she turned and ran, bursting

through the door and into the room of weeping mourners. For a moment all sound stopped as heads turned to see what had burst into the room and Moira stood speechless.

Then she called out, "Sean's fallen by the wall and I can't rouse him."

As one of the crowd moved forward and hurried to the prone body, prepared to help their neighbor. Moira followed behind, her breath heavy and uneven. She knew there was no hope. As the men bent to lift their friend one of the women murmured, "It's right where they found Noreen's body a week gone."

Once inside the lighted home it was evident Sean was dead. His eyes stared blankly and try as they might the mourners could not close them. It resulted in an expression of horror on his face and many of the women turned away and blessed themselves, muttering prayers beneath their breaths.

Less than a week after Noreen Donohue's body went into the ground, Sean was laid to rest. There was no question but he had a heart attack. Moira welcomed the mourners into her home, gratefully accepting the food they brought. She shed her widow's tears. The night Sean was buried Moira stood at the window and watched as two strange wisps of fog that seemed to glow in the darkness ran through the field. One looked like a woman, arms stretched out before her as she pursued the man shape that fled before her.

Closing the curtains tightly against the vision she dressed for bed. That night she dreamed of Sean. He stood at the foot of her bed and crying softly confessed his crime. It had been an accident. He had been chasing Noreen, just playing, trying to get a kiss when she had tripped and her head hit the rock. Afraid he would be accused of something untoward he chose to hasten home and leave her body there until she was found hours later by her own brother.

Moira knew it was a lie for she had seen what happened as she hurried home from the field where one of the cows had wandered. She had seen Sean and Noreen embracing, his hand sneaking up beneath her skirts, her hand pushing his away. She stood and watched in horror as he tried to take what he seemed to think was his right. She'd watched Noreen climb onto the wall and heard her shout down to Sean that she would tell her brother what he had tried. As she turned to run home Sean had hefted a large stone and threw it hard at her head. The thump of the impact had split the air and Moira had covered her mouth and ducked down so he would not see her watching.

When Noreen's ghost had come to her, the desperate keening for vengeance splitting the night she could hardly refuse. So she had prepared the stew he loved so much, happy his last meal would give him pleasure. And she knew the terror of seeing Noreen's spirit coupled with the small addition she'd added to his dinner would take him into the ghostie's waiting arms.

What was done was done. Now Noreen would have her peace. Moira started awake as the dream ended. From outside her window came the low weeping of a man in agony. Pulling the coverlet up to her chin she shivered as Sean's voice called out, "Moira, come out and warm me love. I'm so cold."

And so it was there were three fresh graves the following week. The murdered do not rest easy in thin places.

THE CHACONNE
Neil Douglas Newton

It was a dream and I knew it. Not a lucid dream, where I might possibly control what was happening, but a disturbing dream that barreled through my mind like freight train. Like many dreams it lacked a plot in the classic sense, yet there was a theme that was noticeable.

In the waking world I am an account manager in a mid-sized ad agency. In the real world there are two copywriters: an intern and an administrative assistant. In the dream, they were there but, unlike the real world, our section of the office I work in was sinking as though we were in quicksand. My employees were screaming and doing their best to save their computers, notes and anything else that might be important enough to be saved. Surrounding us, floating in space were wind instruments, heavy on the French horns. French horns were my mother's favorite instrument, something that seemed relevant during the dream. They and a variety of instruments, including trumpets and oboes, danced around us. Somehow they seem to be the source of our floor's descent.

The descent increased in speed and even I, in my dream state, began screaming. The oboes floated near, pointing at me, or so it seemed, accusingly, as though I was the reason for the whole disaster. I waited for them to hit me as the floor finally broke up into pieces, tossing all of us into the air before descending towards the lower floors.

I jerked up, feeling the sweat on my face. This was the fourth similar dream I'd had in as little as a month. Though the dreams didn't always take place in my office, there was always a reference to my career and some sort of musical instruments. I reached over and took a drink from a bottle of flavored water to clear my throat. Then the phone rang and I jumped. I looked at my phone; my sister.

"Ted?" she croaked.

"What's wrong? You sound strange."

"I'm sorry to call so early. I just wanted you know if you were coming."

I stood up and stepped into my slippers. A robe was next; it was the beginning of winter. "Well coincidentally you caught me at the end of a bad dream. Maybe you sent it to me." I smiled.

"That's not funny, Glen. You know how I feel about these things."

"Yup. New age to the end."

"Hah hah. What was the dream about?"

"Oh no. I'm not involving you in this. Next thing I know you'll have sheep entrails laid across my floor, reading my future."

"You're an asshole! Just because I believe in the paranormal doesn't mean you have to make fun of me. I'm not the one who's having weird dreams. What was it about?"

I explained the dream as best I could. My sister gasped. "That's Mom. I know it. She wants you to come."

"We've been through this ad nauseum, Anne. I'm not coming."

"Your mother is being honored by an entire school of vocal music in her name and you can't come to the dedication?"

"No. My mother is having her memory exploited. And she's not here to defend herself."

She groaned. "You're going to regret not coming."

"No. I won't. I already went through enough pain. No more. If I thought this would honor her I'd be there."

My mother was a source of many bad dreams and trauma. A famous, world-class soprano, she had died young at the hands of her manager who took his own life immediately after. My sister and I both lived with the lurid legacy of her rise and fall for years. It probably was one of the reasons I had left music in the first place. The ability to free myself of my mother's *sturm und drung* was far too tempting.

"So why do you think you have this dream two days before the dedication?"

"Oh please, Anne. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

"You know I don't believe in psychology. Except Jung of course who included dreams and the collective unconsciousness. But Mom warned you not to give up on your birth right when you were in college. You broke her heart."

"You are a freak, Anne. I gave up on music *after* Mom died. You've conflated reality as usual to satisfy your eldritch fantasies."

"You broke her heart anyway. Somewhere, wherever she is."

"Prove it."

"I can't prove what I know by faith."

"Faith? Faith as in religious faith? Believing my mother's ghost has a broken heart is not faith. It's not a religion."

"Suit yourself. You should have gone on with her work."

"Yes. I've heard this before. Mother didn't have to live my life. Schleppling my violin and amp out to the car or a cab at three in the morning. Giving lessons to brats who were just doing it to make their mother's happy. Struggling to make my bills."

"I've done okay."

"You got lucky. And not all your success is artistic. What about all those commercial voice overs? I doubt Marilyn Horne sang for commercials about cars."

"You always bring that up. I've sung at the met and in Europe. You know that."

"How many classical singers have done as well as you. And you're still struggling"

"It's because I believe in what I do."

"I'm sure all the struggling singers say the same thing."

"You have no faith. That's why you're selling dogfood."

"I'm not in the mood for this. These arguments always go around in circles."

"Ted, you're an idiot! This is to honor our own mother. Thousands of young men and women will be learning the craft from our mother."

"Not from our mother. From professors."

"What is wrong with you?"

"I don't like exploiting my mother's memory. If I had to guess, I think she would have been horrified by this idea. It was yours, not hers."

"She deserves to have her memory preserved."

"What is the point of making her into a legend or a myth. Her work stands on it's own. I...you know her better than most. Let's let her be our mother and not a myth."

"I've worked for this for years. You've never been on my side."

"The only good thing is that you'll have an income being the director. That's the only good thing that will come of this. But I think that in the wake of yearly concerts and graduations and the students making a name for themselves, in a way she'll be forgotten because no one will remember who she was amid all the fuss."

There was silence for a moment "Do you think I'm doing this for myself?"

“No. I don’t think you’re trying to do anything to make up for the fact that she’s been taken from us. So you’re doing the next best thing. You’re creating an empire in her name. Will people know who she was in a hundred years? She’ll just be a sound byte.”

“I’m not arguing with you about this. If you want to insult our mother’s memory by not coming to the ceremony, that’s something you’ll have to live with.”

“I’m trying to be able to live with myself. That’s the point.”

“You’re an idiot but I love you.”

“Back at you.”

“Bye Ted. Pick up your violin, won’t you?”

“It’s been years.”

“Pick it up. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Whatever crappy feeling I would have brought to work with me was now compounded by the usual arguments I always had with my sister. Always wonderful to go to a job I hated feeling like poo.

As I entered my office David, my senior copywriter, caught my eye. I sat down next to him, interpreting his sickly smile as a sign that something was wrong. “What?” I asked him.

“Petroff petfood called today. They want to make a change.”

“Oh God! We had the whole thing worked out. Dogs jumping over fences. What could be wrong?”

“They want their granddaughter in the ad.”

“Where?”

“They weren’t clear on that. They asked me and I had to improvise. I thought she could be at the other side of the fence encouraging the dogs to jump. But they wanted several shots of her.”

“And of course that screws up the shooting script and the timing of the entire commercial. It could push it past the time slot we were going to buy.”

“I suggested to them that they might have to pay more if we did this. They suggested that we could rearrange some stuff to keep the price where it is.”

“Ugh.”

“Yes. Ugh”.

“I’ll have to call them.”

A slow grin spread across his face. “Make it seem like leaving it the way it is was their idea. That’s your talent.”

I thought of my conversation with my sister. “At least I have a talent.”

“You have more than one.”

“Thanks, David. I guess I’ll get this out of the way.”

Mr. Petroff became hostile at first when I suggested we leave his commercial the way it was. It had been obvious from the first that he thought that he was an important man because he was the richest person in his small town. I ran it down a few times and explained, diplomatically, that rearranging a commercial was like changing the recipe for his dog food. I had gone out there to see how he did things; a special touch I always offered my clients. Like any decent factory, in the tradition of Henry Ford, Petroff had broken down his production methods and had made them as efficient as possible. A Six Sigma course had tightened things up.

I was able to make him see that the commercial was just like any other manufacturing process and changing a piece of it changed all of it. Eventually he saw the logic behind what I was saying and we were back on track. I finished the conversation feeling relieved and like I needed to take a bath; there was an element of sleaze that was part and parcel of client based business. It was hard having to convince another adult what should have been obvious.

I went back out into the war room. David looked up. I nodded, telling him what he already knew. "I grovel at your feet master." He told me.

You can start by getting me lunch. Kung Pao chicken."

"You got it. We have kept the visigoths from the gate once more. Kung Pao chicken shall be our reward."

"Sometimes working in a creative office can be hell."

He smiled. "Do you want to be bored?"

"I want to be peaceful."

"Good luck with that. Off the to the Big Wok."

I spent the rest of the day finalizing the shooting script and working with the film makers. We'd have the commercial filmed in a month and on the air in two. It would be a coup for me after three previous successful campaigns. I left the office feeling somewhat satisfied.

I walked out into the parking lot. There was a strange shifting haze in the air, something I attributed to the fall light. Even though it was late evening, it was strangely quiet as I made my way through the reddish light of autumn. My car was perhaps thirty yards away. I thought of my evening: a couple of scotches, a movie or two. If I felt lonely enough there might be some time spent in a bar I knew of where there might be young ladies as lonely as I. Not the best prognosis but not the worst.

The red light seemed to shift. As I watched, rubbing my eyes, it formed into a shape that was vaguely human. As it coalesced into a form that seemed to represent something biped, it began to scream, setting my hackles on edge. I was reminded of A Christmas Carol but this was far worse than any Hollywood attempt at horror; this was horror. The scream resolved itself into what sounded like a melody. Eerie and plangent, the melody scared the crap out of me; all I could think of was my mother.

As I waited for my mother's voice to come to me from beyond the grave things got worse. A crimson stream made its way down the sides of the figure. I was confronted by a screaming, bleeding figure and I couldn't help but think that this was some form of my mother. There had been years when I was much younger when I saw my mother in my dreams, screaming her pain and fear as the kitchen knife that killed her plunged into body. I thought I'd left those feelings behind but here they were again, in spades. I wondered if this was the nervous breakdown I'd been expecting for years as a teenager. Why now?

"What do you want from me?" I screamed.

The figure threw its head back and bellowed even louder. "You!" it shrieked. "You!" "You!"

I fell to my knees, closing my eyes and keeping them towards the ground. It sounded like whatever this was wasn't able to talk, like someone with a traumatic brain injury. "Me? This has nothing to do with me! You left me! I needed you and you stayed with that maniac! We told you to leave!"

"You!" it screamed again. "You! You! You!"

It kept screaming the same word. I covered my ears but the voice was just as loud. I put up with it as long as I could.

And then I stood up. “You! You were so selfish that you wouldn’t listen to us. You stayed with a psychopath. Didn’t you love your children enough? Didn’t you give a damn? You go. Go! Go! Go! Go!”

The last word was screamed with such intensity that it made my voice raw. “Go!” I finally rasped. “Go!” I whispered.

And, unexpectedly, it did just that. I found myself on my knees on the pavement of the parking lot, the red light gone. A man half a block away stared at me. The wind blew across me, moaning slightly like an anemic imitation of the specter that had just assailed me. I stood up, looking at the man staring at me. Would he come over? Would he call the cops? I wasn’t sure I could stand it if I had to talk to someone. So I ran to my car, slamming into the front seat and gunning the engine.

As I passed the same man who’d been watching me, only feet away from me as I came abreast of him, I could see he was horrified. Tears ran down his cheeks. He seemed almost ready to say something. But I was passed him in a moment and he was gone. I wondered what he would have said.

I got home, though I had to stop three times. I called the only person I could. I dreaded the new age “told you so”; the conversation began with my making her promise to listen and not judge. I could feel the tension coming through the phone as I told my story, despite her silence. When I finished the story, she grunted.

“Yes I know you think it’s Mom. I think it’s probably Mom.”

“Then what do you think you should do?” she asked.

“Even if it is her, I’m not going to let her chart the rest of my life. I’m out of music. Why would she force me to do something she knows I don’t want to do?”

“Because she knows what you really want to do. And it isn’t selling dog food.”

“How can you know that for sure? And why am I asking questions about someone who’s been dead for twenty years?”

“This can’t be meaningless, Ted.”

“I’ve figured that one out. Unless I’m having a psychotic break. Then it could be meaningless.”

“If you were going to go in this direction it would have happened already. Unless it’s physical, like a tumor, in which case you’ll need an MRI. I can call my friend who’s a neurologist and we’ll—“

“Anne! Shut up! I have to think it’s Mom. It’s the only thing that makes sense. But I can’t believe that it’s what it seems.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Go pick up your violin and play the Chaconne. Maybe it will jar something loose in your head.”

“I’m not ready to go that far.”

“Have it your way. I have to go to sleep. Call me in the morning.”

Sleep didn’t seem like an option. I kept glancing at the closet where my violin was. Anne’s suggestion kept playing through my mind. The Chaconne wasn’t exactly an easy piece

and I hadn't played it in years. Though I supposed whatever magic that might come of this wouldn't require virtuosity.

I did something I hadn't done in ten years. Unbeknownst to anyone, I had built a shrine to my mother. I went to a cabinet and unlocked a door. Inside was a picture of my mother, one of her best recordings and some dried flowers she received at the white house. And a teddy bear she had given me as a child.

I poured a glass of wine, turned on the recording and sipped the wine. I closed my eyes and sat.

And sat. And sat. The air seemed so paranormally charged that I expected to see the bloody specter I'd seen only hours before. All that happened was that I ran out of wine.

So I went to sleep. What else?

Morning. It would be sensible for me to say that the night before seemed like a dream but, in fact, I could still feel my nerves singing to the sound of my...ghost? Alternate personality? Psychosis? No explanation was satisfactory after years of surprising sanity after the murder of my mother. I had spent years in therapy, waiting for the explosion. And while my life wasn't what I considered fully on track, I thought I had made it through.

I called my assistant. He would be petrified but I was leaving him to deal with the Petroff dogfood account for at least a day. In reality, Petroff was going to get his series of commercials; it was all set up. All David had to do was to hold Petroff's hand. And that was only if something set him off. His wife and her roses not growing due to a short unseasonable cold snap. Or his favorite football team losing a game. Or re-runs of Gunsmoke being preempted for a news report. Petroff was not a Zen master. Or even an adult.

The phone call to David lasted three minutes. A lot of stammering and a final hang up. Then I put together what my sister liked to call a "go bag". My sister was fond of action movie phrases. I think it made her feel competent. In this case the go bag was a useful; I wasn't sure if I'd be back that day.

It was a six hour drive to my destination. It wasn't a place I liked to go. My aunt looked far too much like my mother for my comfort, much like she did when I was a child. I hadn't seen her in fifteen years. The family grape vine painted her as an alcoholic. Not all of us had made it past my mother's murder with a healthy attitude. I had had my business aspirations. My sister had her new age schtick.

My Aunt had nothing. She had lost her twin sister.

Just as I was walking out the door I stopped. Something was eating at me and, after a few seconds, I could tell what it is. I smiled. Though it seemed like I was giving in to my sister and her whole new age, paranormal, analysis, I went and dug back into my coat closet. There, beneath bags, boots, and other junk was my violin. I hadn't seen it in years.

The go bag had been bought for business trips up to a week. I hadn't put much in it and the violin fit easily. I zipped up the bag and walked out to my car.

It was six hours to my Aunt's house. A lot of it required me to drive back roads. After my mother's death my Aunt, who had been somewhat of a pretentious sophisticate like the rest of my family, had left the city and moved to a place that was conspicuously difficult to get to, far away from any major highway. The town she lived in had an honest to God town square with a Gazebo. At night's you could hear very little besides Cicadas.

Even for a small town, my Aunt lived in an out of the way house. Right off a residential street, her house, small and decidedly ramshackle, was down a private dirt road. I stared through the window, half hoping that she might not be home. It had been so long since I'd been there that I was shocked at the old sixties era wall paper that was so far below her former interior decorating glory I had to wonder if she was entirely sane. The look on her face when she answered my knock confirmed my decision to show up without calling.

"Ted. I don't hear from you for years and then you show up without calling. Thanks."

"Is it that much of a problem?"

"Played your violin much lately?"

"Touche."

She stood to the side. "Come in. I was just making a drink." She laughed, clearly tickled by her alcoholism.

I put down the go bag and took in the house. "Late era depression style," she quipped.

"Excellent example."

"Why don't you sit on the saggy old lady couch and I'll make us both a drink. Gin and tonic as I remember."

"Close enough".

She busied herself in the kitchen and I tried to remember what it was like when we would have fabulous parties with my father, my Aunt and my mother's entourage. It seemed sort of like a movie that I had seen somewhere. I sat down just in time for my Aunt to return with two cheap supermarket glasses. I stared at mine after she had handed it to me.

"A far cry from cut crystal."

"It has a sort of Walmart charm."

"Ah, Ted. Always quick with a clever remark."

"I inherited it from my mother."

There was a moment of silence as I realized I'd said the "M" word. Finally she sat in a chair across from me. "So this isn't a reunion, is it? You need to speak to me about something."

"I'm not sure how to start."

"Are you having trouble with your mother's memory?"

"I wish it was that simple."

Her eyebrows rose up. "What is this about?"

I paused, wondering how I could gracefully describe my experiences the night before. In the end I just opened my mouth and let it out. While I spoke my Aunt took only one sip of her drink, putting it down once it was clear this wasn't going to be an ordinary story. When I finished she blew out her cheeks. Then she gulped her drink.

"I have never known you to be dramatic or even psychotic, Ted. I'm not getting that from you now."

"I considered the psychosis angle."

"I'm not a professional but I think there would be some evidence of...diminished capacity."

"Believe me. I plan to see someone. Anne suggested it could be a tumor."

"Beware of free advice."

"I'm aware of my sister's deficiencies. But something made me imagine a ghost. Or see one."

We made small talk for a while, avoiding the issue.

Suddenly, she stared at my bag. "Did you bring it?"

I laughed. "Who's new age now?"

"It seemed to make sense."

In the waning light I went to my bag and pulled out my violin. She studied the case. "That was where I knicked it with a screwdriver by accident. Daddy wanted to kill me."

It had been my grandfather's, a much better musician than I had ever been. "I've always thought that it gave the case character."

"I know."

"Well, where do we go from here?"

She looked out the window. "Well it's sufficiently dark to be creepy. Why don't you play it."

We both knew what "it" was. The Chaconne, the last part of Bach's Partita for violin. It had garnered incredible praise throughout the history of music. Violinist Joshua Bell described it as "not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It's a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect."

I put the case on the couch and opened it. I immediately saw one of mother's earrings; I'd forgotten I'd put it there. "I gave her those," my aunt whispered. There was a slight smell of mustiness resulting from the fact that the case hadn't been opened in years. I picked up the violin, finding it felt strange in my hands. I wondered if the lack of use might have loosened the strings on the bow but it seemed to have kept its bounce. There were two cakes of rosin in the case. I chose what looked like the newest one and rosined the bow, something that seemed unnatural and weird.

"I'm not sure how this is going to sound." I tuned it, carefully.

"I know. Just do it. If anything is going to shake something loose, it'll be this. Your mother said it gave her chilly bumps."

"I'm glad she's not here. It's going to be rough after ten years. Or more."

"Go and do it, Ted."

I put the violin on my shoulder and poised the bow, offering a little prayer that I wouldn't butcher one of the greatest pieces of music ever written. My Aunt smiled at me. *Do it*, I told myself.

The first few measures came out abominably. I was reminded of the first few years I played violin, the scratchiness, the awful tone. I remember that our cat had to be removed to the other end of the house or I could look forward to an hour of wailing cat while I practiced. But after a minute or so I began to get my bicycle riding skills back. The tone evened out, sweetened. And I began to remember what I had felt about this particular piece years ago and all the emotional peaks and valleys it had created as I played it. I closed my eyes and I began to feel it.

Just as I hit the point where the piece started to shift from slow and mournful to more active and angry I got another feeling; I felt a chill going through my body and slight singing in my head. I opened my eyes, still playing. And there was what expected to see: my friend the specter.

Only this time it was silent and unmoving and there was no blood. If I could say that a being that had no eyes was staring at me, I could say it at that moment. I felt tears run down my face as I continued to concentrate on the piece. I looked toward my Aunt and her eyes were wide. She felt it too. This was my mother.

I wondered what Bach would have thought if he could have seen his piece being played in a scene that was more emotional and strange than any he could have imagined. My mother

stayed silent during the piece. When I got to the last few drawn out, agonizingly extended notes, the specter let out a moan. I put the violin in its case and both my Aunt and I looked toward our faceless visitor.

I expected a performance like last night's but, instead, my mother bowed her head and said, "Please," she moaned, again sounding like someone who had trouble speaking. "Real killer."

And she was gone. I fell back into the couch. "Oh shit. Oh God. What just happened?"

My Aunt's eyes were stuck wide open. "I don't know, Ted. I think we just saw some form of your mother. That's what I think."

"I need a drink."

"You're on your own." She began crying.

"Are you sure it was her?"

"Oh Ted. I remember the way she would hold her body when she watched you play the Chaconne. It was her."

I stumbled into the kitchen and made both of us generous drinks, light on the chasers. Back in the ugly living room I handed my Aunt her drink. She was still crying.

"I miss her so much. I know I was an ass to have a tantrum and move out here--"

"Aunt Grace I don't think--"

She waved her hands impatiently. "Let me finish. I've been waiting years to say this. I loved...love my sister. And it just wasn't right that she was murdered. And I was angry. And I took my bat and ball and went home. I don't want to be separated from you and your sister any more. I'm sorry."

I put my arms around her and we stayed that way for a long time. Eventually she stirred. "You're keeping me from my drink, Ted?"

I smiled. Our family sense of humor was back. Back on the couch I asked her, "What does *real killer* mean?"

"Do you think I know?"

"I'm thinking. The only thing that is obvious is that her manager, Gary, didn't kill her. I can't see that anyone else killed her. And that would be what blinds us if there is a different explanation."

"Oh, come on, Ted. You're not going to make an Agatha Christie mystery out of the biggest disaster in our lives."

I shrugged. "Then who was that? And why did she say what she did? If you want to try to convince me that we both had the same hallucination and we can ignore this as D.T.s I'd be very happy."

"I'm the one with the D.T.s."

"Hardly the point."

"We need to go to that dedication, Ted!"

"You know about that?"

"Don't you think Anne called me?"

"She disgusts me some times."

"I'm not saying I agree with this whole "School of vocal studies" thing. I agree with you. But I think if we go..."

I leaned forward. "Do you think Mom will be there?"

We walked in with Grace on my arm. We were royalty here, despite the cheesy nature of the whole affair. People stared at us, wondering who we could possibly be. Finally one woman ran up to us. “Ted! My God. It’s been years. What are you doing? What have you been playing?”

It was Bethany. She had done two or three duet albums with my mother. She was still a powerhouse in the music world. I had always thought she was an air head, despite being one of the best coloraturas that ever existed. I couldn’t quite tell if she was stupid or just so narcissistic that she missed anything that wasn’t about her.

I did the air/cheek kiss as required. “Sorry Beth. I haven’t played in years. Though I did play the Chaconne last night.”

“Oh! I remember your mother would rave about that. Oh. I’m sorry. Should I have mentioned that?”

“Tonight is about her. Don’t worry, Beth. It was something that I treasured.”

She kissed my cheek. “Of course. Sorry, let me speak to someone. We’ll talk later.”

As she walked away Aunt Grace snorted. “It’s always amazed me that someone with talent like that is so vapid.”

“It’s been one of the greatest mysteries I’ve ever encountered.”

We walked up the stairs up to the balcony that surrounded the room. As we crested the stairs we saw Anne. Her mouth opened and for a second I felt like she wasn’t happy to see us. But then the moment passed and she ran forward and hugged both of us. “Aunt Grace! What brought the two of you here? I just spoke to Ted and he said he wasn’t coming.” She laughed somewhat shrilly.

“We thought it would be good for us to come,” my Aunt said airily.

“This is wonderful”

“Are you okay?” I asked. There was something off about her.

“Of course.” She looked around the room. “Why don’t you come upstairs? We can have some champagne.”

“Okay,” I answered. “But don’t you want to be here with your friends. With Mom’s friends?”

“We can have a family moment. We haven’t had one in years. Aunt Grace is here!”

“Well, when does the ceremony begin?”

“Not for an hour. We have time”

“People will be upset.”

“Okay. Twenty minutes. One drink.”

Aunt Grace tapped me on the arm. “Okay. One drink.”

We followed her up to what would be her office. She fussed around with the champagne. Finally she twirled around. “I think that you were right, Ted. You don’t need to be here.”

“What? You’ve been harassing me to come. I bring Aunt Grace. What the hell are you talking about?”

“I don’t want you to ruin it. You’re going to be sarcastic. You told me I was exploiting Mom’s memory.”

“She was my mother too. We’re here. We’re staying.”

“I think you should leave! I set this up! I sweat for years getting funding and setting up the program. You’re just a hanger on!”

Aunt Grace shook her head. “What are you doing, Anne?”

“Who cares what you think? You’ve been drinking yourself to death for ten years. If you weren’t there when we needed you, you can leave.”

“What is wrong with you?” I asked her.

“I don’t have time for this. I have a dedication to do.”

She lifted a box from the table behind her. As she walked out Aunt Grace grabbed her arm. The box fell to the floor, spilling the contents to the floor. I saw a dress, clearly my mother’s. There was a libretto, a tuning fork, pictures, any number of important items that represented my mother’s life. Near the dress lay a dried rose that looked like it had some black substance on it.

Aunt Grace stiffened. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” Anne said stiffly.

“No it isn’t. I remember that. Roses. They found them next to her body when she was killed. And that looks like dried blood.”

“So. It is something to remember her! I want them be part of the dedication!”

Aunt Grace turned to me. “Those roses were found by the police when she died. Anne wasn’t there.”

I stared at both of them. “What does that mean?”

Anne looked down at the floor. “It means that Anne was there when she died before the police showed up.”

“What? What does that mean? Anne. What does that mean?”

Anne stared at the wall. “What the hell does this mean?” I screamed.

“Maria Callas”, Anne whispered.

“Oh God!” Aunt Grace shouted. “Are you serious?”

Maria Callas was one of the greatest singers of all times. She had deteriorated early and died young, making her a legend, a mythical figure.

“She was greater than Callas. She was at the top of her game. What was left but decline. When she died she was the best. And everyone who came after her was nothing. I used to think of her sitting on some news show with talking heads when she was seventy and couldn’t sing anymore and I couldn’t stand it. She knew it too. She talked about it. So I prevented it from happening.”

“You can’t make that kind of decision for someone!” I screamed. “You don’t know what her life would have meant to her when she was older! What she might have done. You did it for you! Because you wanted to be the daughter of a Maria Callas. You haven’t honored her.”

She smirked. “You weren’t with her. You didn’t hear what she said.”

I walked forward and before I realized what I was doing I had grabbed her around the neck and started squeezing. She grabbed my hands and tried to pry them loose but she couldn’t. I started to watch her die, happy to let it happen. Her eyes started to lose focus and I kept on squeezing. That continued until I felt a heavy impact on the side of my head.

I fell to the floor and rolled over on my back. My Aunt looked down on me, a heavy ash tray in her hand. “Do you want to be like her, Ted? She insane.” To my left, Anne grabbed at her neck gasping. She saw me and began to crawl backwards though she lacked the strength to really move. I stood up, holding my head. Leaning over my sister, I screamed at her, “Did you kill her manager too.”

She stared at me, eyes wide. Her face gave me her answer. “You’re worthless. An insult to our mother’s legacy.”

No,” she said softly.

“Do you think that she would have wanted this, that it wouldn’t have violated everything she looked for in life? Even as an artist!”

She began crying. My Aunt sneered at her. "Her legacy will go on," Aunt Grace whispered. "But you won't be making the dedication. Nor will you be running this school. You want to honor her? Then Ted will be the one who does everything."

"We should send her to jail!" I shouted.

"Do you want that?"

"I don't know."

"Then she'll be committed. And you'll take over. There are thousands of students who will want this opportunity. Don't take it away from them because her daughter is a murderer. Many of them will be scholarship students."

I gritted my teeth and collapsed into a chair. "Whatever. I need a drink."

"Me too," my Aunt said. "And I don't feel ashamed of it."

We never saw my mother again. I supposed it had been hard enough for her to communicate as it was. But she had gotten what she wanted. I considered telling my sister about her ghost. It would have made her see that she was wrong. But there was no point.

I returned to music. I even made a CD. The first cut was the Chaconne.

Chloe's Dream
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

Standing at the side of the bed, I brushed her soft blonde hair away from her forehead. When she slept she looked like a small child again. Gently taking her hand in mine I studied her slender fingers much as I did the day she was born. All mothers seem to do that; count the fingers and toes. Her nails were perfectly manicured, polished a delicate pink. She still had some of her summer tan.

Her dark blonde lashes lay on her cheek and I was yet again amazed by how long they were. She certainly didn't get that from me. I had to use a couple of layers of mascara to even come close to that perfection.

Watching her breast rise and fall with each breath I found myself matching the pattern. Looking at her lying so peacefully it was hard to believe she wasn't simply sleeping. More difficult to accept was the fact she would never open those eyes again. I would never see her lips curve into that familiar smile or her forehead crease into that puzzled frown.

The machines beeped around me, the sound both annoying and comforting. The sharp noise seemed to echo within my head yet the sound also meant Chloe was still alive and breathing.

I became aware of movement behind me and turned my head slightly to see a woman in a navy suit standing at the door. I wondered if I had seen her before. So many people had come by to talk to me about things I did not want to discuss. Casting a glance at Chloe I went to the door to find out who this new intruder was.

She stuck her hand out and in a soft voice introduced herself. "I'm Rina Davis, Patient Relations."

I resisted the impulse to tell her the patient was my sixteen year old daughter who was incapable of meeting with her since she was currently in a coma. Instead I nodded my head and waited for her to proceed with whatever her mission was.

"I wonder if I could speak with you. Maybe we can go to my office?" Her eyes were a brown the color of melted chocolate and I immediately thought of s'mores. I had helped Chloe pack the marshmallow, the graham crackers, and the chocolate bars so she and her friends could make the treats on the campfire. I wondered if they had even gotten to do that. Although I resented leaving Chloe I sensed Rina Davis had something vital to share with me. Briefly I wondered if there was some miracle procedure that would lessen the swelling on my only child's brain and give her back to me, whole and happy.

We walked silently down the hall, the beeping of machines echoing off the walls from every room we passed. How many of those patients were going to be awake the next day? How many families, mothers and fathers, stood by bedsides looking down at their critically ill child and prayed for a miracle. I shook my head, knowing in my heart there was no miracle for Chloe.

Rina's office was small and tucked into a corner behind the nurse's station. I caught the sympathetic glances from the staff as Rina closed the door behind us, blocking out the hissing of voices and the swishing of garments passing in the hall.

Rina shuffled some papers on her desk before looking directly into my eyes once again. "Ms. Webb I am so sorry for what you are going through. I know you must have a lot of questions and I hope I can answer them for you. I also want to present you with a variety of options."

I controlled the harsh laugh that threatened to erupt from my tightly closed lips. Options; I had no options. The rock that stuck out of the waters in the rushing Nolichucky River had taken all my options and all of Chloe's options when it reached up and caught the back of her head.

"As you know the doctor has requested your permission to remove Chloe's life sustaining equipment tomorrow morning. I realize that is a difficult and painful decision for you to make." She took a deep breath. "Of course once Chloe passes there will be arrangements for you to make. I am here to assist you with those as much as you need."

I hadn't given any thought to the afterward, the moment when Chloe would cease to breathe and the amorphous part of her that made her eyes sparkle would disappear into some void. We were not a particularly religious family, Chloe and I. We had been far more concerned with living our lives rather than thinking about what would happen if we couldn't do that any longer.

"I have no idea what to do." I admitted it in a flat, toneless voice. It was easier to keep my tone emotionless than to let the hysteria that brewed just below the surface bubble over and spew into this woman's annoyingly kind face.

"That's why I am here." I think she sensed my fragility. "Before we begin, would like some water or something to drink?"

I imagined asking her for a large margarita on the rocks. Would she be shocked? Had anyone ever been seated in this small and airless office and asked for a stiff drink? Instead I declined. I only wanted to get on with it.

"You have a few options. Are there other family members you would like to include in your decisions?"

There wasn't anyone else. It had been only me and Chloe from before she took her first breath. It would be only me and Chloe when she took her last one.

Responding to my head shaking Rina continued. "Chloe is a very healthy young woman. Other than her brain injury, her organs are in excellent condition and she has "o" positive blood which is virtually universal."

My mind screamed, "Yay. Thanks! Glad to hear I kept her nutritionally healthy. I was always careful with her diet and she was an active young girl. She didn't drink, smoke, or do drugs. She should have lived to be one hundred. But that damned rock was there waiting for her like a curled snake waiting for a misstep."

After waiting a couple of seconds for a response Rina dove in, "How much do you know about organ donation?"

Organ donation was the little box I checked when I renewed my driver's license. What did this have to do with Chloe? She didn't even have a learner's permit yet. As awareness slithered into my mind I felt my stomach do a flip and thought I might vomit. This woman who knew nothing about my baby girl wanted to cut her open and take pieces of her away. She wanted to recycle her like plastic water bottles or magazines that were no longer useful.

"No." I stood up. "No, no, no."

Rina remained seated. Without looking away she picked a brochure from the pile on her desk and extended it to me. "I know this is painful for you. If you feel up to it, please look this over. If you have any questions I am always available to answer them. The only thing you need to know right now is time is crucial."

I glanced down at the front of the brochure. Who creates things like this? I wondered. Wordlessly I left her office and went back to Chloe's room, past the beeping, humming, buzzing of other rooms. Did Rina have the same polite conversation with the families in those rooms?

Chloe still laid silently, the machines studiously keeping her lungs breathing, her heart beating. I resumed my seat at the side of the bed, the brochure held loosely in my hands. After several minutes the soft shushing sounds and the warmth of the room made my eyes heavy and I jerked when I felt myself falling asleep. The brochure slipped from my hands and I bent to retrieve it.

The pale blue cover had the words “The Gift of Life” printed across the front with the generic and faceless drawing of a family beneath them. I didn’t want to read it. Part of me hated it. Another part of me began to digest the information. Leaning back in my chair I stared at Chloe. Chloe wanted to be a pediatrician. Her dream was to help sick children. She often spoke of working in poor neighborhoods where it was difficult to find doctors willing to have practices. I had listened politely but in the back of my mind I had decided to influence her to consider working somewhere safer. But Chloe wasn’t about being safe. She was about living life to its fullest and doing whatever she could to help others do the same. She was the girl who befriended the outcasts, tutored the learning challenged, and was always there to lend a hand for friends and strangers alike.

I don’t recall walking back down the hall. I just found myself standing in front of the nurse’s station and looking at Rina Davis who was talking quietly with a nurse. Our eyes met and she nodded. Slowly and gently she went over the process, asking what I felt comfortable about donating. I momentarily balked when she mentioned donating skin. How could I bury Chloe without her beautiful skin? I closed my eyes tightly. Rina explained burn victims. I remembered Nancy Kelly, a classmate when I was in the first grade. Her family was poor. They had no electricity and they were using candles to light their small, poorly heated house. Somehow Nancy’s clothing had caught fire. Our class collected donations for her and her family. Nancy’s funeral was the first I attended. There was no talk of organ donation in those days. Certainly no one would have considered using one person’s skin to help another.

In the end I allowed all of Chloe’s usable organs to be harvested. That sounds like a cruel word unless you consider when crops are harvested, they are used to nourish and sustain others.

The service for Chloe was small. Friends from school and their parents, my co-workers, and several of her teachers as far back as elementary school came by to pay their respects. I didn’t give much thought to the recipients of Chloe’s organs until several weeks later.

There was an article in the paper about a ten year old girl who needed a heart transplant. That started me wondering about the people who receive Chloe’s organs. I called Rina.

“I can’t give you that information,” she told me regretfully. “What I can do, with your permission, is give them your contact information. It’s possible they will get in touch. If you want to, write a letter and I will see they get it. You might tell them about Chloe, what kind of girl she was, why you chose to donate her organs.” So I did.

That brings me to this moment. I was parked across the road from a small house with a neat yard overflowing with flowers. A woman and a small girl stood on the porch looking at me expectantly. I approached slowly, my eyes glued to the pale and delicate face of the blond haired child.

“Ms. Webb?” the mother reached for me and suddenly we were hugging. “Thank you so much. God bless you.” She stepped back and I saw the tears rolling down her cheeks. I felt the wetness of my own tears.

The child stretched her arms up and pulled me down to hug my neck. “Thank you and thank Chloe.”

Savannah was thirteen years old although she looked barely ten. She had waited for years for a heart. Chloe's was a perfect match. Savannah had never been to a school before the year she received Chloe's heart. Her health had been considered too fragile. She was going to start taking ballet when the school year resumed. We went inside the house and as I sat beside her on the couch and sipped fresh lemonade I listened to her tell me about school, friends, and her dreams for the future. She grew more excited moment by moment.

"I want to be a pediatrician when I grow up," she smiled. "I want to help kids like Chloe helped me."

My heart flipped. "Chloe also wanted that," I told her.

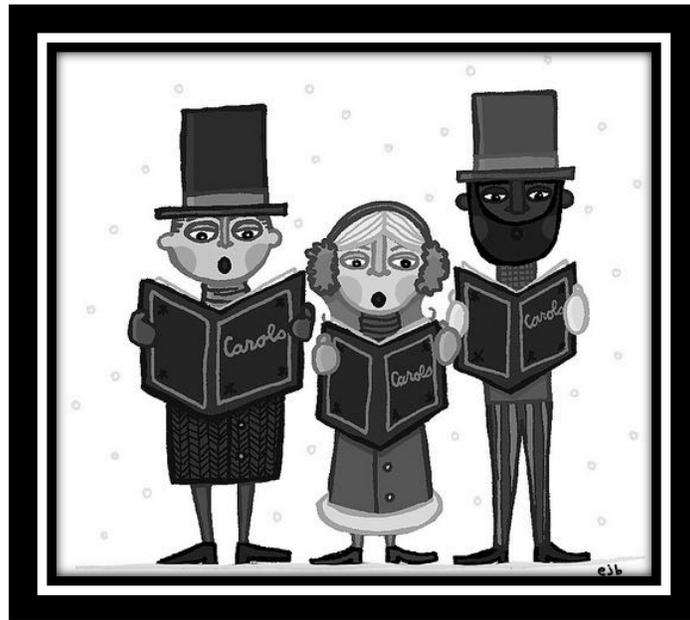
Time passed and I met Savannah's younger brother and her father. As the shadows grew longer and the crickets began their nightly chorus Savannah's mother took my hand. "I don't know how to ask this. I guess I'll just plunge in. Would you like to hear Chloe's heart?"

As I placed the eartips into my ears I struggled to keep my breathing regular. Then the steady thump-thump of Chloe's heart filled my ears. I was filled with wonder. Parts of Chloe were still alive; in a man who needed a kidney, her liver went to a mother of two small children; Chloe was saving lives. In looking at this child I saw her as the fulfillment of Chloe's greatest dream. She had saved the life of a child.

Taking Savannah's small, smiling face into my hands I murmured, "Thank you. Thank you for making Chloe's dream come true."

Dedicated to Mandy Harrell May 19, 1988 – September 5, 2006
Please consider Organ Donation

Christmas Carols



A Test of Faith
Neil Douglas Newton

You don't expect things to change after fourteen years on the job. A nerdy accountant with a hardware giant in in the garment district in Manhattan doesn't expect change.

I was letting my spreadsheet recalculate when I heard some raised voices. I ambled over toward the source of the noise and found Karen in a heated argument with our head of HR, Beth Dahlberg.

"I've been putting this crèche on my desk every Christmas for the last twelve years. What is the problem?" I heard Karen say.

Beth puffed herself up a couple of notches. "We've already been through this. There are people who aren't Christian and they're offended by this."

"Who's offended?" Karen answered. "No one has ever said they're offended?"

"Well maybe people are being polite."

"In New York?"

"Karen I'm just protecting the company. If someone is offended they can make a complaint." She leaned in closer and whispered conspiratorially. "We could even be sued. It happened in Denver."

"I don't care what happened in Denver. This is like a family. Everyone understands here."

"Well what about Bob?"

"What about Bob?" I asked.

Beth jumped. "I was just telling Karen that...well I know that you're Jewish and I was telling her that...well maybe you didn't feel comfortable."

I started to laugh. "I'm not offended at all. Karen is Catholic. I have five Catholic neighbors."

"Well then you should understand what I'm--"

"I'm God father to my next door neighbor's daughter. They're Catholic too. How offended can I be by a crèche?"

"But Karen needs to understand--"

"How long have you been in New York?"

She stared at me, her mouth open. "Uh...well...I moved here from Des Moines two years ago."

I heard a voice behind me that I recognized. "What's going on? Things are getting a little loud."

Beth winced. Gail had come to pay us a visit. In all her encounters with Beth sparks had flown. Gail was an agnostic and Beth had used her as an example of someone whose beliefs needed to be defended, something Gail didn't appreciate.

"Are you telling Karen that she can't have her crèche?" she asked Beth.

Beth huffed. "I've already discussed this with Bob. This is company policy."

"Who developed the policy?"

"I did."

"Due to a complaint from who?"

"Well we have Bob and other people who--"

"Bob obviously isn't offended. And since you're going to ask, neither am I."

"Bob is just trying to be polite. It seems to be what everyone in New York is required to do."

“Last year Karen made me Latkes. A bit beyond politeness.”

“Latkes? They are...”

Karen smiled. “They’re potato pancakes for Chanukah. I make them every year for Bob and Tessa.”

Beth seemed panic-stricken. “I don’t understand.”

“That’s obvious.”

“Excuse me. I have a call to make.”

She stalked off, her back stiff, radiating anger.

“What should I do?” Karen asked me.

“Ignore her.”

“Maybe I should put the crèche in my desk.”

Gail snorted. “Don’t cave, Karen. We all have your back.”

“It’s going to become a big hassle.”

I put my hand on the crèche. “She doesn’t get to cause trouble unless she has a good reason. This is about her and control.”

“What can we do?”

“I’ll go talk to her.”

“Bob I-“

“Don’t worry.”

I walked down the hall to Beth’s office. She was typing something. When she saw me she jerked her head back to her screen and proceeded to pretend I wasn’t there.

“Beth?”

“I’m busy.”

“I’d like to speak reasonably with you about this.”

“Whatever you have to say, you’ll have to hold it until a meeting I plan to have. With Mr. McDaniel”

“We don’t need to have a meeting. There isn’t anyone who is offended by anything here.”

“You don’t know that. We have Fatima downstairs. She’s the only Muslim in the company. She might not be too happy seeing Christian or Jewish decorations. Have you asked her?”

I smiled. “Fatima and bunch of other’s came to my house for the Passover Seder last spring.”

“What does that prove?””

“It proves no one is offended by other people’s holidays or their happiness. Why don’t you let Karen keep her crèche?”

“What you aren’t taking into account is that Karen’s desk and all of facilities here are owned by the company which recently developed a policy that exists to defend the sensibilities of anyone who does or will work for us.”

“Who is offended?”

“I don’t know. We might hire an atheist tomorrow who might find Karen’s crèche offensive.”

I found myself getting angry. “I’ve lived with these people forty hours a week for years. They’re my friends. Not generous tolerance, but real friendship. If someone was really offended we’d deal with it. But Karen, the crèche, this is part of my life. To be honest the only attitude this is offensive is yours. You have no right to tell me who I can like and who I want to respect or

make happy. So until you can provide me with an actual living person who is offended, I think you need to back off.”

I realized I was breathing hard. Beth’s eyes were wide and she seemed to be searching for something to say. I turned and walked out.

Fatima passed me in the hall. “Just wanted to you to know we all heard that.”

“Sorry. Did I do the wrong thing?”

She laughed. “The thing that most people who aren’t from New York don’t understand is that our grandparents all had to wallow in the same shit to survive and raise their children so they could have a better life. It makes you feel a sense of kinship with all your fellow sufferers. It’s a little too deep a concept for Beth.”

I just groaned.

“It’ll work out, Bob. Look I have to go to a meeting. We’ll talk later.”

The next day I came in to find the crèche missing from Karen’s desk. She looked up as I came by. “Better keep her off my back. No one will miss it.”

“It’s part of my life. I never thought about it being important to me because it’s been here year after year. I miss it”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to do.”

I thought for a second. “I’m taking an early lunch.”

Later that day Beth walked past my cubicle. Her eyes widened. “What is that?” she asked pointing to my desk.

“A very nice devotional scene. I bought it at a very upscale store. They specialize in reproductions of renaissance art. This is a copy of a statue created in the sixteenth century.”

Her face got red. “That a crèche.”

“I guess it is, technically. You know I have seen things like this in galleries and museums. A lot of art from that period is based on religious themes.” I smiled sweetly.

“I’m going to have to verify all this. Where did you get it?”

“I can’t remember the name. Let’s go ask Gail.”

“Why Gail?”

“It was her idea to go to the gallery. She loves that place and she wanted to show it to me. We’ve been talking about it for weeks.”

A couple of twists and turns through the cube farm took us to Gail’s desk. She looked up when she saw us. “Sorry to bother you, Gail. What was the name of that store we went to?”

“It’s called the Gallery Store.” She turned to Beth. “It’s a Gallery that sells reproductions.”

But Beth wasn’t listening. She was staring at the menorah on Gail’s desk. “What is that?”

“A reproduction of a twelfth century menorah. An amazing piece.”

Beth dry washed her hands. “You can’t have religious paraphernalia on your desks!”

Gail smiled slightly. “I have no religion. This is art.”

“Same for me,” I said. “People have these things in their homes. They’re in offices all over the city. Do you think I’m trying to express my faith with my sculpture? It’s not my faith.”

I thought Beth was about to cry. She walked away from us without saying a word.

The holiday party went like it always did. There was a short talk about all our respective holiday traditions. And then of course, there was food. I zeroed in on the grape leaves which I didn't get much of during the year. While I was downing my fourth one, Gail came up to me.

"Do you miss Beth?" she asked, smiling.

"I think it was a bit extreme to resign. It was like she lost a battle. I thought HR came about to help people."

"It was all about her."

"How many Beths are there in this country? I see this crap on T.V. all the time."

"No doubt we've become confused. I think we need some reform."

"True. But right now I don't want to think about Beth. Another glass of wine?"

She smiled and nodded. "Certainly".

A Christmas Treat: Spicy and Sweet
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

The snow had been falling for over two hours and I had to fight lanes of traffic to get to the cabin. When I saw the brightly lit windows, the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree winking a warm welcome, I smiled. Cinnamon would be inside preparing another of her delicious dinners. I patted my pocket and felt the hard square of the jewelers' box. Her divorce was final and tonight I would propose. Grabbing the bag with the bottle of champagne from the seat beside me I stepped carefully from the car. It wouldn't do for me to slip on ice and break both the bottle and possibly my own leg on such an auspicious occasion.

My boots left large prints in the virgin snow, but they had already begun to fill by the time I reached the door. As I entered the house the wonderful scents of something cooking tickled my nose. Cinnamon had promised a special Christmas Eve surprise. Although I didn't know what was cooking I had no doubt it would be a treat. The girl could cook.

"I'm home," I called up the stairs. I could hear her moving around upstairs and the sound of running water let me know she was running a bath. My hand was on the newel post when I saw the bright yellow note. "*No Peeking*" was written in bright red. Laughing and shaking my head I turned toward the kitchen where the promise of a delightful meal floated in the air.

Going into the kitchen I put the champagne in the refrigerator and turned to look at the oven. Surely a little peek wouldn't hurt. It was then I noticed the post-it on the range hood. "*No Peeking!*" was written in big, black letters. I had to chuckle. "She knows me so well," I thought.

Before heading back into the living room I poured myself a double scotch. Plopping down on the couch I stretched out my legs, propping my feet on the coffee table. The Christmas lights danced on the tree hypnotically. Cinnamon and I had worked hard to get to this night and I couldn't wait to see her face when I presented the two carat diamond to her. I'd played the scene over several times in my head. Soon the warmth of the room and the tumbler of scotch worked with my exhaustion and I dozed off.

Cinnamon and I had met at the gym where I worked. She was a member and I spotted her the first time she walked through the doors. I angled over to her and persuaded her to let me be her personal trainer. I admit I was surprised when I met her husband. Ray was a wealthy, dour man who was obviously quite a bit older than she was. In less than two weeks she was in my bed. In a month she was talking about how she wanted to leave old Ray.

I had no problem with marrying Cinnamon but I couldn't see leaving Ray with full pockets. I wasn't exactly the highest earning guy in the neighborhood. Cinnamon hadn't worked much in her life. Some of Ray's money would go a long way toward helping us set up housekeeping. At first she had been resistant; she just wanted out. Little by little I educated her. It wasn't too difficult. She liked her Chloe bags, Louboutin shoes, and Stella McCartney dresses. I couldn't afford those. Heck, I couldn't afford the dust bags you store them in.

In time Cinnamon saw things my way. The only question was how to have Ray see things my way. In her innocence Cinnamon provided the key, or the lever if you will, to push Ray over the edge. Ray had early onset dementia. If word of his illness got out his company stock would

plummet and with it his fortune. After some negotiating with Ray and his lawyers we came to an agreement. Cinnamon would receive two million dollars up front and twenty thousand dollars monthly until she remarried. Of course that would require our having a rather lengthy engagement. But we could acquire a considerable nest egg of goodies and see some exotic places while we continued our romance.

Cinnamon had no problem setting up a joint account for us so I would be able to access funds as needed. That was one reason I could afford the gigantic rock I would place on the third finger of her left hand. It should hold her off the marriage train for a while.

Don't misunderstand. Cinnamon is a hottie. She's a dynamo in bed too. Considering she reported Ray was pretty much a limp noodle in that respect I was really reaping the rewards. So you see, it wasn't just the money.

Anyway, I woke suddenly and realized I could hear the oven timer buzzing irritably in the kitchen. "Cinnamon, the timer went off," I called as I stumbled, slightly inebriated, into the kitchen to silence the buzzer. I headed back to the foot of the stairs to call up to her again and heard the bath still running. She was something of a hedonist when it came to baths. Shrugging I went back to the kitchen.

Opening the oven door I pulled out the roasting pan and set it on top of the stove. Glancing at the warning, "*No Peeking*" note, I decided it no longer applied since I had to see if the food was done. Lifting off the heavy lid I was hit full in the face with steam and closed my eyes momentarily. As the steam cleared I gazed down at the wonderfully scented main course Cinnamon had prepared. It took me almost a full thirty seconds to register what I was seeing. Cinnamon was staring up at me. At least she would have been if she still had eyes. They had cooked away into her head and down her cheeks. Her once full lips were drawn back tightly over the perfect white teeth Ray had paid big bucks for. Gagging and back pedaling from the stove I dropped the lid which clattered loudly on the floor.

Turning, I ran for the stairs and took them two at a time until I reached the upstairs hall. The carpet squished beneath my shoes and I realized it was saturated with water. Bouncing off the walls of the narrow hall I made my way to the bathroom. Flinging open the door I stumbled back, my feet tangling and landing me in a heap on the floor. Cinnamon's headless body floated in the garden tub, her perfect paid for breasts bobbing provocatively in the pink tinted water.

Turning my head I saw the opened bedroom door. Ray sat on the edge of the huge sleigh bed smiling at me. "Hello Steve. Is dinner ready?"

My screams echoed off the walls challenged only by Ray's maniacal laughter. I scooted toward the stairs on my backside, desperate to escape the horrors I was seeing. In my frantic state I miscalculated and tumbled head over heels down the stairs to lie crumpled at the bottom like an abandoned puppet. Ray appeared at the top of the stairs holding an axe and still laughing. My mind screamed at my arms and legs to move but my body wasn't obeying.

As Ray slowly descended the stairs he began to sing, "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why..." He lifted the axe high over his head, his arms trembling at the weight. "It's going to be coal in your stocking Steve. You've been a bad boy."

*Bad,
Bad
Boys*



OLD HABITS
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

Gaunt Thibideaux was a man of habits. Some people in the town of Burkesville said he was set in his ways. That's the way folks talked in Burkesville. In the summer Gaunt would mow his yard three times a week, Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, whether it needed it or not. If it rained, as it frequently did in summer in Burkesville, Gaunt would wait for a break and mow between showers. In the fall he raked his leaves on the same schedule. In the winter if it snowed, which it rarely did in Burkesville, he would shovel on the same schedule.

Every morning in fall, winter, and spring Gaunt would drive to work along the same route. Down Hickory, the street on which his eighty seven year old semi Victorian sat, left onto Pine and past the school bus stop, then onto Old Woodmill Road until he came to Route 117. However in summer he would change slightly and take Hickory to High School Road where the town's only high school sat, along with the community pool and park where families would gather in the summer to splash and play and generally relax in the hot Burkesville sun.

Gaunt Thibideaux was a creature of habit, because Gaunt had a secret. Gaunt enjoyed watching the children. He mostly liked the younger ones. Something about their innocence touched his heart. He would watch them on the first day of school every fall, gathered at the school bus stop looking slightly anxious in their shiny new shoes. The boys would group together sometimes punching one another lightly on the arms in an effort to overcome the uneasiness they felt at the prospect of facing new teachers and new lessons. The girls would stand in small clusters, whispering among themselves, casting glances at the boys and making unkind comments about the other girls and their new school clothes. He would slow his truck as he passed, always careful in case some impatient youngster ran across the road, eager to greet a friend. This also allowed him the opportunity to scan the groups of children and observe them in the scientific manner of a researcher noting the habits of strange yet somehow familiar creatures.

Fall was his favorite time of year. It was the time when the children were most vulnerable, when their uncertainty throbbed with a visceral energy. In winter they would be bundled against the cold; thick coats, wool hats pulled low over eyes, scarves wrapped securely around throats, protected from chill winds and observing eyes. In spring they were filled with energy, ready for the school year to end and the freedom of summer to begin. No longer unsure of the rules of their teachers and bonded now with their school mates, they were fearless.

Gaunt lay quietly in his small bed and struggled to stay awake. Each time he would begin to doze his eyes would pop open. Eventually he fell into a deep sleep as any nine year old who went to school and played hard would. He woke in the morning to the covers being pulled from his body and the sheet ripped from beneath him, rolling him off the wet mattress and onto the cold wood floor. She stood over his bed, hair flying around her face. "Pissy, pissy baby." She flung the wet sheet at him and the strong odor of his own urine hit him in the face.

"Day's wasting Gaunt Thibideaux. Better get up and wash off or you'll be late for school. Get these pissy bed clothes in the washer before you go." She always said "washer" with an added "r" making the word into "warsher", sounding like the name of some monster that chewed the stench from his messy sheets before spitting them back all cleaned and ready for another soaking. Gaunt wet the bed on and off until he was almost thirteen years old. He was doing his own laundry by the time he was ten. In the fall he would return home from school to see his Superman bed clothes hanging on the line. After a couple of years Superman's bright red

cape had lightened to an almost pink color and he had finally taken a pair of sewing shears to the sheets.

His thin mattress had been flipped from one side to the other until both sides had uneven stains that ran dark brown around the edges. He didn't get a new mattress until he went to live with his aunt and uncle. Aunt Sadie also got him a waterproof mattress pad. Unlike the thin mattress of his childhood, the mattress pad caused his urine to pool around him and he would wake in the middle of the night. Gaunt would quietly remove the wet bed clothes and start them washing before returning to his small bedroom and curling up on the thin rug that lay beside his bed, his coverlet wound around him like a death shroud.

Aunt Sadie and Uncle Bud never discussed his night time problem. He did overhear them one time ascribing it to the horror of finding his mother and step-father sliced and diced. It may have been their kindness that got him past that humiliating part of his life. By the time he was thirteen the bed wetting had stopped entirely. He continued to do his own laundry. He didn't want Aunt Sadie to discover the other new type of stains that had become part of his nightly routine.

Gaunt's first vehicle was his late step-father's old red pick-up. It sat in his Uncle Bud's back yard. It sat there from the day Gaunt went to live with Uncle Bud after the misfortune that took his mother and step-father. Gaunt was twelve when it happened. He came home from church to find his mother laying in a pool of drying blood on the kitchen floor, flies buzzing merrily around her dead body. The hot August sun shone through the open kitchen window and the hole in the screen where the flies gathered in a hungry frenzy.

Amazingly Gaunt kept his cool and called the police. Long before the recording of 911 calls, the police dispatcher recalled the call clearly. It was the biggest crime in Burkesville in fifteen years.

"This is Gaunt Thibideaux. I just came home from church and my mother is dead on the floor."

Jessie Lee Bowen inhaled sharply. "Gaunt? Gaunt Thibideaux? Are you sure she's dead? Did you try to wake her up?"

"No m'am. I didn't try to wake her."

"Well Gaunt maybe she's just passed out from heat. Can you try to wake her?" Jessie Lee was already signalling Deputy Floyd who sat tilted back in the Chief's office chair sucking an icy Coke from a glass bottle.

"M'am there's blood everywhere. I'm pretty sure she's dead." Gaunt's voice remained steady as though he was discussing finding a dead and bloody mouse.

The mention of blood got Jessie Lee's attention and she began to gesture at the deputy more frantically. "Well Gaunt, can you tell where the blood is coming from?"

"Everywhere." Gaunt said it simply.

Wordlessly Jessie Lee handed the phone to the deputy. Her mouth hung open, the beads of sweat on her upper lip creating a translucent moustache.

"Gaunt this is Dep'ty Floyd son. What's going on there?" Deputy Floyd hooked his thumb in a belt loop, thrusting his hips slightly forward.

"Hello Deputy Floyd. I just came home from church and my mother is dead." Gaunt began again.

Deputy Floyd and Jessie Lee stared at one another as Gaunt repeated his cool and dispassionate revelation. "Son is anyone else in the house?" Deputy Floyd struggled to pull his gun belt off the back of the chair where had so recently reclined, knocking the glass Coke bottle

to the floor in the process. Jessie Lee never moved but continued staring at the deputy as though entranced by his ungainly acrobatics. Holding the phone between his chin and his shoulder the deputy put on his belt. "Now Gaunt I want you to listen to me boy. I want you to get outside the house as quick and quiet as you can. You hear me boy?"

"Yes sir. Get out quick and quiet." Gaunt swatted at a fly that landed on his hand that was resting comfortably on the table.

"We're on our way. Now go on son." Without waiting for a response Deputy Floyd dropped the phone into its cradle and headed for the door, calling back over his shoulder, "Jessie Lee get on the horn and get the Chief and see if you can get Doc Martin on the phone."

Jessie Lee was about to point out there didn't seem to be much need for the doctor but the deputy was already out the door. It took him less than five minutes to pull up in front of the Thibideaux residence and he was relieved to see Gaunt outside although he was not too pleased to see him sitting on the front porch swing.

"Get off there boy and go stand by my car," he hissed, gesturing somewhat frantically at Gaunt.

Obligingly Gaunt got up from the swing and moved down the front steps passing within a few inches of the deputy who had drawn his service revolver. Floyd glanced at the boy quickly and noted he was in shock, his eyes staring straight ahead and his movements almost robotic.

As soon as the deputy moved into the house the coppery scent of blood assailed him. One hand went up to cover his nose and mouth as he followed the odor into the kitchen. Gaunt's report had not prepared him for the mess that lay on the kitchen floor. Slapping his hand over his mouth he stumbled back out the front door and ended up vomiting over the side of the front porch knocking several wine cooler bottles into the dirt. As he wiped his handkerchief across his mouth he looked up to see Gaunt standing beside the patrol car, arms hanging loosely at his sides. A chill touched the back of his neck and he shivered slightly. For a brief moment a warning light went off in his head but he shrugged it away. He put Gaunt's odd behavior off as shock. After all, what twelve year old boy wouldn't be horrified to find his mother stabbed to death on the kitchen floor?

Gaunt had never known his biological father. He knew what he looked like from the pictures in the old album his mother kept on the top shelf of her bedroom closet along with an assortment of strange items he could not identify until he was an adult. He knew some things about the man from those evenings when his mother became inexplicably depressed and would sit on the front porch drinking wine coolers with exotic names and colors like red Bahama Mama, blue Hurricane, and bright yellow Hard Lemonade. He'd tasted the remains of a Hard Lemonade once and spit it out quickly. It didn't taste anything like the sweet/sour drink he enjoyed on hot summer days. On those occasions when Mama would start lining up empty bottles on the porch rail she would speak vividly of his father. "You look just like him," she'd say in a wistful tone. She talked about what she called silly music, poetry, rabbits with French names, and something called a Prairie Home Companion. Sometimes she would sing songs like "Dead Puppies", "Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road", or "Nature Trail to Hell". The morning after one of these episodes she would religiously clean off the porch, ask if she had been particularly loud, and warn Gaunt earnestly about the dangers of alcohol and how he should never drink because he was born to like it too much. It was the one piece of advice she gave that he took and stood by. Except for that one swallow of Hard Lemonade he never touched alcohol.

Even after his step father came along and Mama and Big Walter would drink and dance around the house a couple of Saturdays a month he never felt the urge to drink. Part of him didn't care for the taste but a larger wiser part knew that alcohol could loosen the tongue and what was it his Mama used to say, loose lips sank ships. He had no interest in sinking any ships, especially any he happened to be sailing through life on.

Gaunt's only other passion (that neighbors knew about) was gardening. Something about digging in the cool moist soil on a fresh spring morning made him feel peaceful. He would be standing at the window that overlooked the garden out back and the sky would turn a certain shade of blue, cerulean. Gaunt loved the word cerulean. He had learned it the year his mother died when a guidance counselor at school advised he begin keeping a journal of his feelings. The counselor, well-meaning but never understanding, had tritely stated that writing down his feelings might better help him when he felt "blue". He had restrained the giggle that threatened to bubble from his tightly compressed lips and nodded wordlessly, looking down at his hands in his lap. Determined to find a more accurate word to describe this "blue" feeling he was supposed to deal with he had read dictionaries, poems, and short stories before stumbling across cerulean. And it was then he recognized that cerulean was the color of his eyes, the color of the sky the day his mother and step-father were buried, and the bright free blue he felt when he emerged from the shell he had been encased in for years. It was the color of the sky the day Cindy's blood had run into the sparkling creek, the color of the dress his mother wore when the knife split the fabric and blooms of red rose across the front like spring's blossoms.

Cindy Hensley may have been the first one. It may have been deliberate or the result of an accident, games played too roughly, violence gone too far. Whatever the reason, Cindy was the one accepted as the first one. Cindy was petite, dark hair often worn in short ponytails, skin pale and almost translucent. Cindy was fifteen but looked barely more than twelve. Ostracized by most of her sophomore class because she was considered "strange", "unfriendly", or just because she was different, Cindy usually walked to and from school and usually did it alone. Perhaps this made her an easy first target. Perhaps she wanted to be a target. Being an outcast could be a lonely and painful existence.

Gaunt had seen the other kids teasing her. He'd watched her lower lip tremble and her eyes fill with tears when she walked past Barrett's Drugstore where most kids gathered after school or on Saturday afternoons. He'd heard the laughter and the comments about her clothes when she came to church with her step-father. The man always walked with his hand at the small of her back and something about it made Gaunt feel strangely excited. It was almost as if the man was her boyfriend escorting her to a school dance instead of a parent taking her to church. Cindy's mother no longer attended church. She'd had a bad accident several years earlier shortly after marrying Cindy's step-father and was confined to a wheelchair. "Pity," Gaunt thought, "She was kind of pretty for someone's mother." Cindy had inherited her mother's previous good looks and Gaunt thought she might someday be kind of pretty too.

Cindy walked with her eyes downcast, avoiding the catcalls and comments from the school crowd. Gaunt was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the drug store, casting surreptitious glances at the posturing boys and flirty girls who gathered on the corner. Gaunt watched Ashley and Heather, known as the Grimley sisters, break off from the group and start to follow Cindy. Although he couldn't hear what they were saying it was apparent Cindy could for she began to walk more quickly. As he turned to take the broom back inside the store he heard Billy Ray comment, "They said she smelled like piss at gym class today and Ashley said her granny panties had a yellow stain in the crotch. Pissy pants."

The crowd giggled and muttered pissy pants repeatedly. Gaunt made no comment and after placing the broom in the back room he said good afternoon to Mr. Barrett and grabbed his books from the shelf under the counter.

“You want to grab a cold one,” Barrett joked as he always did when Gaunt was leaving.

And, as he always did, Gaunt replied, “I appreciate it Mr. Barrett.” He took a cold bottle of Coke from the cooler, icy water dripping into the melting cubes and popped the top off using the opener that hung on a string beside the cooler. “Thanks again Mr. Barrett.”

“Have a good one son,” Barrett called as he turned to make a milk shake for Veronica and Stevie, the most popular couple at school.

Gaunt stood on the sidewalk for a few seconds watching the retreating backs of the school crowd as they headed to their homes, or to ball practice. Then he looked in the direction Cindy and her tormentors had taken. They were crossing Main and heading down to the bridge that crossed into Morning Glory Woods, aptly named for the woods that grew on both sides of the bridge. Beneath the bridge a thin trickle of a creek struggled over small stones. When the weather cooled it would become a shiny streak of ice. Gaunt saw Cindy hesitate a moment then watched as the Grimley sisters threw back their heads, obviously laughing at some joke. Suddenly Cindy bolted and ran down the small path that led to the creek. Ashley and Heather turned and headed back in Gaunt’s direction. Tipping the bottle, Gaunt let the cool sweet liquid run down his throat. Then he started the walk home. As he passed the Grimley sisters Ashley called out, “Be careful on the bridge Gaunt Thibideaux. Something smells mighty bad over there.” This reduced the girls to hysterical laughter and they dashed down the street as though they had told the funniest joke in the world.

Gaunt continued on his way. As he started across the bridge he glanced back over his shoulder. Main Street was empty. It was that quiet space of time when mothers were home starting supper, daddies were still at work, and kids were either engaged in homework or the practice of a seasonal sport. Quietly Gaunt moved down the skinny path to the creek. He didn’t see her right away. And she neither saw nor heard his approach. She was leaning against an old beech tree and something about the way she was standing looked odd. Gaunt realized she was standing with her legs squeezed tightly together as though she was holding something between them. He heard a muffled snuffle and then the odor of fresh urine hit him.

Something hot turned in the pit of Gaunt’s stomach, something hot and heavy and dark. “Hey,” he called softly.

Cindy gasped and spun to face him.

He proffered the Coke bottle. “Want some Coke?”

Cindy shook her head. “Go away.”

“It’s okay. I know how you feel.” He took two more steps toward her bringing him close enough to reach out and touch her if he wanted to.

Cindy tried to move away and a dark stain spread across the front of her capris. Her face grew red and she crossed her legs as though the action might hide her sin.

Gaunt watched the stain spread and a pounding began in his head. “Why do you let them do that to you?” His voice was soft and curious.

Cindy did not respond but fat tears began to well up in her eyes (her strange sky blue eyes, Gaunt thought from a distance) and then they streaked down her face. A bubble of snot appeared in one nostril. She looked for all the world like some stupid animal brought to the slaughter. Her eyes widened in surprise as the bottle slammed into the side of her head. She stood staring at Gaunt, eyes wide and mouth opened in a silent “oh.”

The bottle came back across the other side of her head and broke, the slivers of glass looking like a cloud of crystals in the speckled sunlight that danced through the leaves.

“Why?” Gaunt asked again as Cindy staggered and leaned heavily against the tree trunk before sliding jerkily to the ground.

Gaunt moved closer and squatted before her. She stared at him her breathing coming in small gasps. Her mouth opened and closed but no sound came out. The broken bottle slid across her the vein that throbbed in her throat and the blood burst out in the sun like rubies. Spatters flew across his face, warm and salty on his lips. “Why?” he asked one last time as release came and he felt the hot flood of completion. He watched as her breathing slowed then stopped. Gingerly he felt for a heartbeat like they did on the doctor shows his mother had liked to watch in the afternoon. There was a little pulsing, like the vibrations when a car passed in the distance, and then there was nothing.

Gaunt stood up and looked down at the bright red drops of blood that speckled his shirt. “Now that’s gonna be a problem,” said a strange voice from somewhere behind and above him. He glanced up to see the older man looking down at the mess Cindy created at the base of the tree. “We need to figger this out quick son.”

It only took Gaunt a moment to recognize his father. The red plaid flannel shirt, the glasses a tad too big for his narrow face, the baggy jeans that hung low on his slim hips, and most peculiar of all, the facial resemblance. “I didn’t mean to Daddy,” he had never used the word out loud before and it felt strange rolling off his tongue.

“Well that’s neither here nor there,” Daddy said matter-of-factly, “It is what it is and we need to get this mess straightened out.” Daddy rubbed the fine blond stubble on his chin. “First off I’d take the rest of that bottle down to the creek and smash it real good on the rocks so no fingerprints can be found.” Scratching his cowlick he continued, “Then take off that shirt and start heading home. Stay in the woods till you reach Cotter’s field then cut through his corn until you get to the road. When you’re sure there’s nothing coming down the road take off to the other side. It’s less than a quarter of a mile to your backyard. I’ll think about the rest while you get going.”

Gaunt immediately set to obeying his father’s instructions. He only improvised slightly by walking in the creek and washing the blood off his leather tennis shoes and leaving no trail of footprints from the Cindy mess. It was still blazing hot and no one would think anything of a young boy walking in the cool creek without a shirt if anyone saw him. As he cut through the corn he heard his Daddy breathing hard beside him. “Okay here’s what you need to do.” The next set of instructions came quick and soft, interrupted by an occasional deep breath, as they ran through the corn. “You gotta burn the shirt.”

Gaunt slowed as he digested the suggestion. “Where?” Silence met the question and he could hear the sound of a lawnmower not far off. It was probably coming from home. Uncle Bud had asked him to mow the sparse patch of grass he called the front yard. He should have been home earlier. Uncle Bud would figure out he was late because... Gaunt stopped suddenly. The sound of the lawnmower had ceased and he could hear his uncle swearing loudly. The old machine locked up every so often and Gaunt was the only one who could get it started. The screen door slammed in the distance as Uncle Bud’s voice faded. The lawn mower had blades. Blades Gaunt had sharpened earlier in the week in preparation for the mowing.

Moving quickly and stealthily through the corn Gaunt emerged in the yard. The lawnmower sat silent and stalled.

“Don’t do it boy!” His father cautioned. “You could lose a finger or even a hand messin’ with that old grass cutter.”

“Shut up old man!” Gaunt hissed and moved to the lawnmower, kneeling beside it. Keeping his eyes on the screen door he put on his blood speckled shirt and took a deep breath. He rolled the machine onto its side and looked at the grass clogged blades and the piece of rock wedged between them. The blades glittered invitingly in spite of the coating of green. He waited a few seconds to hear if his father would protest again but the only sounds were the breeze crackling through the corn, the sound of the TV from inside the house, and the chirping of insects and birds. Gaunt watched his own hand reach down to the rock and just before his long fingers touched it he closed his eyes. The rock flew free and the blades whipped into action and Gaunt heard the scream before he realized it was coming from his own mouth.

Something warm and wet hit his face and the screen door slammed and Uncle Bud was screaming too as he ran across the scrappy old yard. The screen door slammed again and his Aunt Sadie’s scream joined the cacophony of screams and birdcalls as a flock of crows rose in a dark cloud momentarily casting a shadow across the liquid garnet of his hand.

“Christ on a cross!” Uncle Bud swore as he ripped off his sweaty yellowed tee shirt and wrapped it around Gaunt’s hand. Gaunt stared at him blankly. Concern etched the lines on Uncle Bud’s face. Then Aunt Sadie was pushing the old man aside and shouting for him to get the truck. As Bud ran off to get the truck she tied the tee shirt tightly around his hand ignoring the speckles of blood that dotted the front of her faded yellow blouse and the reddened dust that soiled her bony knees below her cut off shorts. Somehow Gaunt was bundled into the front seat of the truck between his aunt and uncle as they sped toward town. Sadie continually stroked his head murmuring words that made no sense and Bud cast quick nervous glances at him. When they reached Doc Miller’s, Bud pulled haphazardly into a parking spot and half carried Gaunt into the office.

It was cool and strangely quiet inside. Mary Miller, Doc’s wife and secretary, stood up behind the newly installed counter that separated the waiting area from the office. “We’re closed for the day...” her voice trailed off and her eyes widened behind her thick glasses when she saw the bright red tee shirt wrapped around Gaunt’s hand. “Oh my stars!” she exclaimed before calling “Doctor!” and hurrying down the hall toward the exam rooms.

A flurry of activity ensued and Gaunt struggled to stay conscious. Sometimes he would see that red flannel shirt in the background and think how he was smarter than his daddy had ever been. There wasn’t a lot of pain but the rich coppery scent of his blood filed his head making him retch. Mary Miller shoved a puke bowl under his chin causing his mouth to snap shut and his teeth to clack loudly.

“Jesus Mary! Be careful!” Doc muttered.

Mary’s hands were shaking and she never answered. Gaunt briefly wondered if she should be holding the puke bowl under her own chin. Her eyes were popping like two dark bubbles about to burst behind her chunky lenses.

In the end, when the blood was cleared away, Gaunt had only lost the tips of one thumb and two fingers on his left hand. But his shirt was covered in blood and had to be thrown away. He watched as Mary Miller rolled it up and marvelled that both his and Cindy Hensley’s blood was now blended in a deep dark design forever linking them as shadowy lovers. He shivered at the thought and was stunned as Aunt Sadie’s arms went around him comfortingly. “It’s okay Gaunt. You’re gonna be fine.”

Gaunt nodded wordlessly. He was going to be fine. Cindy Hensley was going to be fine too as she lay at the foot of the old tree. No one would tease her until she wet her pants and cried ever again. Cindy was free. He had set her free.

Gaunt had worked at Claudie's Diner since his junior year in high school. It was his first job. It was his only real job. In middle school he'd helped around Barrett's Fountain and Drugs for change and pops. But his job at Claudie's was his first real weekly pay check job. He had started working after school until close, washing dishes, bussing tables, cleaning up. Then old Frank, Claudie's live in, started teaching him grilling. Grilling was more of a skill than most people realized. It required knowing exactly how long it took to go from raw to rare to medium, to well and all the stages in between. Scrambled eggs soft were nothing like the more rubbery scrambled eggs well. Gaunt paid close attention and when Frank had the stroke that left his left arm paralyzed into a hook and his legs as rubbery as well cooked eggs Gaunt stepped into the role of grill cook effortlessly. When he graduated high school he blew off the chance to go to college and took on full time hours at Claudie's. There were those who believed he was afraid of leaving home. But most were glad he chose to remain in Burkesville where he was known as the best grill cook in a "hunnert" miles.

Gaunt enjoyed grilling. Gaunt enjoyed everything about his job at Claudie's. Grilling and all the side labors kept part of his mind busy while freeing the other part, the secret part, to explore darker work. Gaunt worked every day, switching off with whoever Claudie hired to fill in part time. No one stayed in the job long. High schoolers would work long enough to earn the money to buy a car or prom tickets, drifters worked long enough to earn enough money to move on to greener pastures, and sometimes single mothers would take up working at the diner to buy Christmas for their kids. But Gaunt and Claudie were the only permanent fixtures at the diner. Except for Frank who would sit in his wheelchair by the side window, staring blankly out at the Gas-N-Go watching truckers fill up their rigs, and kids on bikes run in and out with ice creams and soda pops. Every hour or so, Gaunt would replace the cup of coffee by his right hand, whether Frank had drank from it or not. He'd pat Frank on the shoulder and set down the cup, neither saying a word.

Gaunt wasn't one to venture far from home. He couldn't say what drew him to the State Fair almost two hundred miles from home. Maybe it was the ad in the daily paper. Maybe it was the radio commercials advertising games, prizes, circus acts, and more! Most likely it was the poster the young girl in the gypsy costume asked to place in the window of Claudie's. Claudie was home sick that day and Frank was home with her.

The short, slender, dark haired girl in the colorful attire came into the diner, chains and bangles jangling and flashing in the strong fall sunlight. It was pretty clear she was young even though she wore heavy make-up in an effort to appear older.

She leaned on the counter, her small breasts straining against the corset type bodice of her short flouncy dress. The bright purples and peacock blues, the black mesh stockings, and the over the knee faux black leather boots made her look like a wayward trick or treater out a month early.

"Hey meester," she called across the counter, assuming an unidentifiable accent. "The fair is coming. We be there. Me and my family we tell fortunes, have lucky tokens, take off curses. You come see us?" Her bow mouth turned up at the corners. It might have been appealing except her lipstick was a dark red and caked on her lips, smearing slightly outside her lipline as if to make her lips appear fuller and more sensuous.

She held up the poster. "See here, meester. Can I put this in your window? Tell everybody come see the shows." Then pouting slightly she added, "You let me put sign I tell your fortune right now, no charge."

Gaunt stared at her in fascination. Her dark hair was covered by a colorful scarf, but stray strands escaped and clung to her forehead. "You can tell my future?"

"Sure can. Me granmama come from the old country. We special people. Have special gifts. You show me palm, I tell you future."

Gaunt laid his hand on the counter never taking his eyes from the strange woman child. She took his hand in her tiny one and ran her fingers lightly over his palm. "Ah I see much here. Very much. You lucky man." Looking up at him from below her long and obviously false eyelashes, she ran her tongue over her lips. "Usually I charge for reading. But you are so kind to let me put sign in window so I give you a taste of what I offer. You come to fair and see me, I give you big discount."

Gaunt watched her mouth as she spoke. She had a slight overbite and her two front teeth were a little crooked. "Okay."

Her smile widened and she bent forward causing her breasts to press up almost escaping the confines of her bodice. Her warm, moist breath blew across his palm and she ran her fingertip lightly along the lines that scored his skin. "You have very long life line, very long. And I see good fortune soon in your future." Then, a small frown creased her forehead. She gazed up at him sorrowfully. "Oh but you have had broken heart. Mean girl hurt you." She went back to his palm, drawing his hand closer to her body, his fingertips almost touching her breast.

Brightening, she tilted her head. "Ah but I see new love coming to you. Very soon she will come. Maybe, maybe even already here. Very special love. She come from far away to find you." Licking her lips again. "But you come see me at fair and I be able to tell you more."

Gaunt studied her eyes. "I will definitely see you at the fair. Do you have flyers as well as your sign? I'd be happy to hand them out for you. I'm sure a lot of people would like to know their futures."

"Hmm, no. Maybe I can get some and come back to see you before the fair." Her accent slipped for a moment and a thrill went through Gaunt.

"Okay. Go ahead and put your sign up." He drew his hand slowly from hers allowing his fingertips to graze her palm as he did. "What's your name so I know who to ask for when I go to the fair?"

A shadow seemed to cross her face and her eyes grew hooded. He wondered if she sensed something and he quickly straightened. "Of course I do work a lot. I hope I get there."

This seemed to clear any concerns she had. "I am Zina. You must come. I see so much to tell you. And I give you very big discount for your kindness."

Gaunt nodded. She was caught like a bug in amber. "I'll make sure to be there."

Offering a smile she turned and, skirt flouncing, went to the window to tape up her sign. As she left the diner she cast one final look at Gaunt and waved with her fingers like a little girl saying "bye bye" to a favorite uncle.

Old Bill had been sitting at the counter watching the whole exchange. "Gaunt Thibideaux don't you go spending all your money on that one. She's a huckster. You can't trust carney folk."

A wide grin split Gaunt's face. "Oh I know Bill. I'm not going to the fair. I was just having a little fun."

Bill laughed and shook his head. "I always say you're a smart one, too smart for Burkesville."

With that Gaunt went back to the grill humming softly as he began to clean up. It took him a few minutes to realize he was humming a tune his mother used to sing to him at bedtime. "Dream A Little Dream of Me." Gaunt chuckled.

A few hours later as he turned out the lights and closed the window shades he pulled the poster from the window. It would be better not to have the fair advertised in his window.

That Sunday Claudie closed the diner early. Traffic was slow and she opined a lot of folks had gone to the fair.

"Why don't you go on over there and have a little fun Gaunt? A young man needs to play sometimes." She winked conspiratorially.

Gaunt cocked his head to one side as if contemplating the suggestion. The memory of the small gypsy girl with tiny hands filled his mind. Shaking his head Gaunt responded. "No thanks Claudie. It's going to be crowded and noisy, two things I don't care for. I think I'll head on home and watch a little television, maybe rent a video."

Shaking her head Claudie followed Gaunt to the back door, holding it open as he ducked outside. "You need to get out Gaunt. You ain't gonna find a wife in your living room."

Gaunt chuckled; a strange gurgling sound that began deep in his chest and erupted more like a donkey braying than a human laugh. "I'm not looking for a wife Claudie. I'm fine just the way I am."

Gaunt did not like being in crowds, surrounded by people who pushed and shoved, bumped into him without apology. Parking his truck at the far end of the parking lot adjacent to the fairgrounds, he made his way slowly to the ticket booth. The scent of frying food, farm animals, and the cloying odors of crowds of people pressing past one another assailed his nostrils. Gaunt glanced at the map that had been provided with the price of his admission.

Moving through the crowds, avoiding contact as much as possible, he made his way past concession stands, games of chance, and hawkers enticing the passers-by to play. He walked past the fortune teller tent as an older woman called out to a group of teen girls to come find out who they would marry. The girls giggled, pushing one another to go in and have a palm read. They annoyed him with their gullibility, the ease with which they could be seduced by a smooth talker to part with their money and their dignity.

Stopping at a food stand he purchased a cold drink and wound his way back to a bench from which he could observe the comings and goings of fortune seeking fools. Soon the old woman was replaced and Gaunt's eyes narrowed as Zina called out to a group of young boys, flashing her smile and touching one boy's arm possessively. Even as his friends continued on the boy remained, head cocked to one side as he listened to what Zina was telling him. Gaunt watched as she took the boy's hand into her tiny hand and ran her finger across his palm in a familiar movement. She tilted her head, smiling seductively, stepping toward the entrance to tent and gently tugging on the boy's hand. He looked helplessly after his friends who disappeared into the throngs oblivious to his discomfort.

Gaunt watched as Zina and her prey disappeared into the tent and the older woman stepped outside. She was soon joined by a middle aged man dressed colorfully in what might be considered gypsy attire. They spoke briefly and then they laughed. The man shook his head, an expression of distaste on his face. Time seemed to pass slowly as Gaunt waited. Finally Zina and her customer emerged from the tent, the boy's face flushed. Zina said a few words to the gypsy man before taking the boy's arm, pulling him close to her and guiding him toward the parking

lot. Tossing his empty drink cup into an overflowing trash can Gaunt followed discreetly behind them.

The sun had set and the bright lights of the fair cast strange shadows on the faces of revellers. As Gaunt strode purposefully past them he blinked hard to clear the vision of cadaverous faces and sometimes smiling skulls that assaulted him. The odors of sweat and decay caused him to almost gag. Focusing on Zina's colorful costume he pushed all thoughts from his mind. She led the boy through a gate at the back of the park with a large handwritten sign that read "Employees and Vendors Only."

Debating only a moment, he looked quickly around before moving quickly through the gate. He thought he had lost them when the sound of a giggle and the jangle of her bracelets caught his attention. He rounded a corner in time to see them dart into a camper.

Moving to stand beneath the shadow of the trees that bordered the parking lot and the fairgrounds he murmured, "As Moliere said, 'the best reply to unseemly behavior is patience and moderation'."

Leaning against the thick trunk of an old oak he watched as a dim light went on inside the camper. A few cicadas still chirped as the fall had not completely set in. Occasionally a small animal would rustle through the leaves and grass. Gaunt would move his foot slightly and it would scurry away. Time seemed to pass slowly like the moments spent waiting for the medication to kick in and the headache to pass; craving the second when the agony would end and blessed relief would come. He struggled to keep his breathing regular and heartbeat steady.

It was only fifteen short minutes before the camper door opened and the young man stepped out. Zina followed him, tossing her hair back over her shoulders, her scarf no longer confining those dark locks. Gaunt watched as they returned to the employee entrance and when the gate closed behind them he moved quickly and quietly to follow. They parted with no sign of affection, Zina returning to the tent and the young man heading along the midway. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and head turning from side to side as he searched for someone, he made a call. Stopping dead, his voice raised but his words not clear, he stopped, looking around. Evidently whatever he sought in the crowd was not going to appear. Shoving the phone into the pocket of his jeans he hurried toward the parking lot.

Gaunt watched him go. He glanced back toward the tent. A sweet smile touched his lips and for a moment he looked like a teenager again. Zina was talking to the gypsy man and laughing as she handed him what appeared to be a wallet. His decision made, he headed purposefully toward the parking lot.

The young man stood beside a late model sports car and dug in his pants pocket obviously searching for his keys. Suddenly he stopped and began patting his pockets. "Damn it!" He swore loudly and slammed his hand on the roof of the car. Gaunt approached him cautiously.

"Excuse me young man?"

Head turning sharply, eyes narrowed angrily, the boy responded, "What?"

"I'm plain clothes security here at the fair and I wondered if I could ask you a few questions." He kept his voice soft and even.

The boy looked nervously at his car then back at Gaunt. "Yeah sure. Is there a problem?"

Gaunt moved closer, keeping his eyes locked on the boy's. "Would you mind checking to be sure you have your wallet sir?"

Eyes widening the boy patted his pants pockets as though he had not already realized he'd been ripped off by the Gypsy Girl. "It's gone! Someone must have picked my pocket."

Now Gaunt was only a step away and even though he spoke softly the boy could hear him easily. "It's okay son. This doesn't have to go any further. I observed you with the gypsy girl and I believe she lifted your property. I will be happy to escort you back to the scene and we can confront her and get your wallet back. I saw her returning to the camper after you parted. If you'll follow me we can go in the back way and avoid any embarrassment."

The boy nodded. "Will she be arrested?"

Gaunt began walking and the boy fell into step beside him. "If you choose to press charges, that can be done. Now that would create a bit of a stir and of course we'd be looking at a trial. I'd be happy to lock them all up but most of the guys prefer not to raise a ruckus. You know considering the situation..." Gaunt left the sentence hanging, the implication clear.

They had reached the edge of the woods that circled behind the employee parking area. Trees still thick with leaves in spite of the carpet that had begun to fall surrounded them. "Yeah maybe if we can just get my wallet back..."

"I understand. It's embarrassing. Did she ask you for money?" Gaunt angled so the boy was slightly ahead of him now.

Clearing his throat uncomfortably the boy nodded, glancing back over his shoulder. "After..."

"I have to admit I don't get it. You seem like a nice kid; attractive and smart. Why would you even want to hit that?"

The boy stopped short and turned to face him. "I-I don't know. She was just so persuasive." He was sweating slightly and even in the darkness Gaunt could see tears forming in his eyes.

"How old are you?" Gaunt asked gently, slipping his hand into his pants pocket.

"Sixteen. My parents will kill me if they find out." His voice shook.

Gaunt reached out and patted his shoulder comfortingly. "Hey we all make mistakes. It pissed me off when I saw them laughing at you." He glanced down at the front of the boy's pants and noted his fly was partly opened. "Zip up."

Further embarrassed the boy reached down to zip his pants smiling gratefully at Gaunt's kindness and the knife came up swiftly, slicing easily across the young throat, freshly shaved that morning and still smooth. A look of surprise crossed his face and his mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Then his hands clawed at his throat as he felt the heat of his blood begin to spread down the front of his shirt. The look of surprise had turned to one of questioning, his eyes seeming to ask why. Gaunt spun him around and tenderly lowered him to the grass and leaves. Kneeling behind him, allowing the body to lean against his he whispered in the soft ear, "Shh. It's alright now. You should never let them laugh at you. Don't let them make you cry."

The boy's body jerked as he tried to move away from Gaunt, his feet digging into the leaves, crunching them as he struggled. Soon the struggles became less and the gurgling slowed and stopped. The body rested limply against Gaunt's hard body as both men felt the release of the moment.

Bending his head back, Gaunt could see the stars through the trees and off to the west a full harvest moon hung low in the sky. The face seemed to smile kindly at him, pleased with him.

Laying the boy's body in the foliage he rose and pulled off his own shirt. Amazingly there was very little blood on it. The boy's face glowed in the thin moonlight, streaks of glistening black stretching down the front of his body and onto the leaves that surrounded him.

Gaunt took a deep breath and plunged the knife into the moist soil to clean the blood. Pulling the body to a sitting position he managed to get his own shirt on over the boy's blood soaked garment. Gaunt was strong. It took little effort for him to pull the body up and slinging the limp arm around his neck he half carried, half dragged it to the edge of the woods.

A crowd of young people were piling into a van toward the front of the parking lot, far away from where Gaunt's truck sat, its outline barely visible as the moon disappeared behind clouds. He waited until they had driven off before moving quickly to his truck. Placing the body on the tarp he had already laid out in the truck bed, he rolled it up and anchored the dark package with his landscaping tools and bricks he had purchased for a garden project. He drove back to Burkesville watching the speed limit all the way. Gaunt felt a thrill every time a car sped past him; his heart raced when a state trooper drove by not giving him a second glance.

Pulling in to his late uncle's place he turned off his head lights and sat quietly in the truck for several minutes. The only sound was the clicking of the truck's engine as it cooled. Leaning his head back against the seat he stared out at the full moon that hung lazily over the dilapidated house. No one lived there now. It stood empty, a ghost of days gone by. The old shed sat in the deeper shadows beyond the house and at its side, the truck that had offered his first freedom. It gleamed in the moonlight, a beacon calling him to join it, to once again climb into the driver's seat and ride to new adventures. Of course the motor barely worked now, struggling to turn over when the key was turned in the ignition. Yet it still served a purpose.

Gaunt stepped out of the truck and stretched, his bones and joints creaking as the tension was released from his body. After a glance around he climbed into the bed of the truck and set about removing his secret package. The boy's body no longer held any fascination for him. The lifeless form was nothing more than a used up object to be disposed of, hidden away from prying eyes.

Climbing into the old truck, inhaling the familiar scent of mold and decay, he turned the key. The engine struggled to life, the seat beneath him trembling with anticipation. Gaunt rolled it back several feet, revealing a large wooden board that had been hidden by the vehicle. Humming under his breath, he jumped out of the truck and pulled the board aside exposing a deep hole. The moonlight barely revealed the sides of the gap in the ground. A sweet and sickly scent rose into the night air. Bending his head back so the moonlight shone on his face, Gaunt sniffed the air appreciatively. An expression of pleasure lit his visage. Eyes closed, a subtle smile on his lips, he stood a few moments, revelling in the peace that flooded his body. Then in one neat and quick move he grabbed the corners of the tarp and rolled the boy's body into the hole. The thump of the corpse landing at the bottom seemed to split the night and Gaunt looked quickly around. Other than the soft rustling of the grass and weeds in the slight breeze, the distant scrambling of some small animal, and the occasional click of an insect, the night was still.

Gaunt pulled a small flashlight from his pants pocket and directed the beam into the pit. The boy's body had landed face up; arms spread wide, one leg tucked under his body, the other leg bent at a strange angle. Around him lay other bodies in varying stages of decay. Most of the remains were small, obviously children. Some were clothed, others were nude, and a few were reduced to bones. Gaunt started when he caught movement in one corner of the pit. A small wave of dark gray moved around causing some of the bodies to stir slightly, almost as though they were coming to life.

Gaunt watched for a few moments, fascinated by the rats that celebrated his latest donation to their gory feast. With a sigh he replaced the board, got back into the old truck and

drove it back over the hole, once again concealing it from the prying daylight that would soon spread across the deserted property.

Driving through the now deserted streets of Burkesville he hummed softly. In his head he heard his mother's voice singing "Dream a Little Dream of Me". He was still humming as he stepped into the shower and let the warm water wash away the sweat and dirt of the evening's activities, cleaning away the scent of the fair and the crowds that had brushed past him on the midway.

As he settled into his bed, the bed he had brought with him when he moved from his uncle's house to his own home in town, he smiled. The comforting sound of the plastic sheet rustled beneath him. In a short time he had drifted into a dreamless and satisfied sleep.

The years passed like clouds drifting lazily across a summer sky. Sometimes in thick, fluffy puffs that seemed to hang gently, other times in thin streaks that almost stretched endlessly. Then there were those times when the clouds were heavy and dark, threatening to shower Gaunt's life with disaster.

Strangers passed through Burkesville. Some moved on, some stayed a while. There were those that chose Burkesville as their new home and those that took root involuntarily. Some folks up and left and no one really questioned it. People kept to themselves in Burkesville. If they spoke about one another it was in hushed voices behind closed doors.

When Frank finally passed away all the life seemed to go out of Claudie as well. She seemed to take his place and sit at a front table, staring out the window. The old Gas-n-Go finally went and was replaced by a shiny new truck stop, gas station, convenience store. They even had a grill where a driver could grab a burger or hot dog for a buck or two. They didn't have ice cream sodas but they did offer soft serve. It wasn't real ice cream of course but the kids liked it.

One of those heavy clouded days Claudie approached Gaunt, pulling herself up on one of the counter stools. Several had been mended with duct tape, a thing Frank would never have permitted. Claudie grunted and shifted around trying to get comfortable on the seat that was too small for her prodigious bottom. "How do people sit on these?" she grumbled.

Gaunt offered a slight smile but said nothing. There was a thickness in the air that threatened to cut off all his oxygen and send him gasping out the door.

"Gaunt, we need to talk." With that she began to tell him how she was getting old and with Frank gone she didn't have the heart to keep the diner opened. She hmm-ed and haw-ed and danced around, the words sometimes getting tangled in her mouth. Eventually she told Gaunt what he already knew since he had found the papers for the sale in the old desk in the corner they jokingly called the office. Gaunt was gentle, telling Claudie he not only understood but thought it was the best thing for her.

"I've been thinking of starting my own business," Gaunt told her brightly. "Maybe a landscaper. People are always talking about my garden."

"You do have some *wondermus* garden," Claudie agreed, using the made up word she'd abandoned years before. "Your flowers and veggies are the finest anywhere."

Gaunt nodded and patted her hand gently. "I'll have to bring you some of my Stripy tomatoes. I know you like them."

Claudie was thrilled with the offer. She certainly did like Gaunt's tomatoes. In fact there wasn't a thing in his garden she didn't like. From his daylilies to his cukes and 'maters, Gaunt had two green thumbs and eight green fingers to go with them.

“What will you do when you close down Claudie?” Gaunt began cleaning off the counter and checking to see if the sugar, salt, and pepper shakers were full for the morning. One thing that hadn’t slowed over the years was the daily breakfast rush.

A faraway look came over the old woman’s jowly face. “I’ve always wanted to go out west. Not to California but the old west where there were cowboys and Indians. I was thinking I might take one of them bus tours. Heck, I might even settle out there for a minute.”

Gaunt nodded. “Good for you Claudie. You should enjoy yourself. You’ve worked hard all these years.”

“Indeed I have,” she agreed.

“I am a little curious about something.” Gaunt leaned back against the pie case. “How come you didn’t offer me the chance to buy the diner?”

A deep red flush began across Claudie’s massive breasts and worked its way up across her chins to her face. “Well Gaunt, it never occurred to me that you would want to buy it.”

Gaunt raised his eyebrows wordlessly.

The red grew even deeper. “And, um, I figured you wouldn’t be able to afford it.”

Gaunt continued to stare at her.

“I reckon you might have got a loan.” She was wiggling on the stool now, her discomfort as apparent as the sweat beading on her moustached upper lip.

“I reckon I could have. But I guess I could never match what that big company offered you. And the money will come in handy for your trip.”

Claudie slid off the stool and began fiddling with the napkin holders. “Yeah, I do need the money.”

“Between what they pay you and what you got from Frank’s insurance you should be set. Heck you could even take a trip around the world.” Gaunt leaned his elbows on the counter, fingers laced in front of him.

“Frank’s insurance?” Claudie’s voice has risen a couple of octaves.

“Yes. I was kind of hoping you would have used it to fix up the diner. But I understand. I mean, after all those years taking care of him you needed something for yourself. There had to be some reward for all that hard work.” Gaunt’s eyes were steady, unblinking. They hypnotized Claudie the way a snake might hypnotize a rabbit.

“I-I thought about it. B-But there were so many bills...” her voice trailed off.

Suddenly Gaunt slapped his hands on the counter. “Well it’s all water under the bridge. You go ahead and count down the drawer and I’ll finish cleaning up.” He came around the counter, went to the front door, locked it and flipped the sign to close. Then he reached out and flicked off the outside lights.

When he turned back, Claudie had circled around to the cash register and was pulling out the cash and the cash bag. He walked past her into the kitchen and stood at the grill for several minutes. Frank had been a good man. His death had been hard for Gaunt. He’d watched the man waste away. Every day he grew weaker. It got to the point where he couldn’t keep any food down.

Claudie had attended to him religiously. She kept jugs of the sweet tea he loved in the refrigerator, refilling his glass frequently. Gaunt figured it out the day he poured a glass of tea for himself and Claudie had paled. As soon as he took a sip he knew something was wrong. He didn’t let Claudie know. He didn’t tell anyone. Instead he waited. Now the waiting was over.

Tessa and Tommy Barrow leaned against their car and listened as the real estate agent extolling the value of the property. Although it hadn't been kept up since the death of the owner it offered a lot of perks. "The property itself is flat and if you're looking for a place to keep your horses it would be very easy to rebuild the fence and extend it to make a corral. The shed and the house are actually in pretty good condition. The plumbing still works." Grinning, Debra Ryan gestured toward the old truck that stood near the shed. "I wouldn't be surprised if that truck is worth something."

Tommy moved toward the shed and Tessa followed with Debra at her side. "You can see where someone kept up both a vegetable garden and a flower garden pretty recently."

Tommy had reached the truck and finding the door unlocked, opened it. Keys hung from the ignition and Tommy climbed in.

"Be careful Tommy!" Tessa called out.

Debra laughed. "Men and their trucks."

Tessa shot her a look of annoyance. She was far from impressed with what Debra called a "bargain". The sound of the engine struggling to turn over broke the quiet. "How long ago did you say the owner died?"

"Almost a year. The county spent some time trying to find next of kin. Once it reverted to the county they put it up for sale." Glancing at the sheaf of papers she carried she continued. "It belonged to Gaunt Thibideaux."

Tessa stopped short. "The guy who used to do gardening in town?"

"I really don't know," Debra admitted. "I've only lived in Burkesville for six months."

The truck engine caught and roared into life. Tommy stuck his head out of the window, grinning from ear to ear. "How about that?"

An alarm went off in Tessa's head. "Tommy!" She began to move quickly toward the truck as Tommy began to roll back toward her.

Debra hurried along behind her, her heels sinking into the soft earth of the yard.

Suddenly Tommy stopped the truck and got out. There was a wooden board where the truck had stood. It had cracked down the middle and sagged toward an indentation in the yard. Tommy pulled one side back exposing a hole in the ground. A strange sickly sweet odor rose from the earth.

Tessa's hands flew to her nose. "Oh God! What is that smell?"

"Something must have fallen in and died," Tommy held a handkerchief over his nose as he pulled the other board to the side. Stepping up to the excavation he gazed down into its depths. The bright sun lit it up all the way to the bottom. Gagging, Tommy stumbled back from the pit. "Get back Tessa!"

She should have listened. But she was a woman whose curiosity far outweighed her common sense. Staring down into the cavity she felt the bile rise in her throat. Beside her she heard a scream that seemed to echo off the very air. Debra was screeching and staggering away. No sound escaped Tessa's throat nor did she move away. Hypnotized by the scramble of bones, flesh, clothing and rats she froze in place. It was only when Tommy grabbed her arm and pulled her away that she moved.

The trio hurried toward their cars, Tommy already pulling his cell from his jeans.

"He did my parents landscaping," Tessa was murmuring. "I went for rides in his truck. He took all of us for rides."

Neither Tommy nor Debra heard her. Debra has collapsed into the front seat of her car and she was sobbing as she fumbled for her phone. Tommy was shouting directions into his

phone. Tessa stared back at the old truck, its engine still rumbling. Gaunt had wanted to take her and her friend Ashley to the fair one fine fall day. When he pressed them to go without telling their parents Tessa had resisted. She insisted Ashley talk to her mother also. Gaunt told them he didn't have time to wait and maybe they would go another day.

Three days later Ashley had disappeared while riding her bike to the park. She was never seen again. Tessa had never mentioned Gaunt and his offer of a trip to the fair. It never crossed her mind that the kind old man who gave the kids rides and often brought them suckers had anything to do with the disappearance of her friend.

When she looked into what would come to be known as the "pit of horrors" she saw something that brought it all sharply to the surface. She and Ashley had matching tee shirts. The cheery yellow tee shirt with the brightly colored parrot, dulled but still visible, had enshrouded a small body in the center of the pile of cadavers. Her body lay across the partially consumed body of an older woman clothed in a tattered dress and the remains of an apron. Her legs stuck out from beneath the dress, one bare foot half devoured, the other long gone to decay and the hunger of woodland creatures.

It would take many months before the full scope of Gaunt's crimes was known. In the end no one was certain they had found all his victims.

Gaunt Thibideaux was a man of habits. With his death, they rose to the surface.

One thousand one hundred and eight miles away in the small town of Wiley, Colorado, Elvis Patrick stared at the television news report. Then his eyes drifted to the screen door and the truck that was in his backyard. The sound of children's laughter drifted into the house from the yard on the other side of his fence.

Sighing and shaking his head he picked up the newspaper. Folding it in half he studied the advertisement. The fair was coming to nearby Oakley, Kansas. He always did enjoy a trip to the fair. In fact he made it a habit to always go at least once when it was close to home. And everyone knew, Elvis Patrick was a man of habits.

April Showers
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

It had been a long, hard winter. The freeze had begun in October and, as March drew to a close, it seemed it would never end. Then April Fools' Day came, bringing with it warmer temperatures and the sun shining brightly on soil that had been icebound for months. The runoff was fierce and flooding hit hard. Those of us who lived near the river watched the banks with trepidation. My little house was not as close as some of my neighbors' homes, but when a small community experiences trouble we all share it. The melt was bad enough; the rains that followed only compounded a bad situation. The whole town pitched in to stack sandbags around the foundations of the houses nearest the river. Jo and Glenn Baker lived closest to the river; their house had been built on stilts in an effort to avoid the possibility of flooding. But as the river edge grew closer to the stilts and eventually made its way up, foot by foot, it was apparent the stilts might not be enough to keep the house dry.

Jo and Glenn moved their sheepdogs to their cousin's house on the hill. There wasn't much they could do but watch the water rise and move valuables like family photos and treasures to the upper floor. In the end their back deck was washed away when the soil that held the stilts gave way. Piece by piece it floated off in a rush of gray water with white caps like an ocean storm instead of a raging river. About that time they decided enough was enough; they got a storage unit in town and started moving as much as they could out of the house.

Dewey Parker lost his shed, but by some miracle the house stayed put. The sandbags kept most of the water out, but his carpet was ruined and the tiles in his bathroom floated in an inch of dirty water. His wife Ella ran screaming from the house when she jumped off the commode after seeing a fat rat swimming vigorously in the bathtub. Dewey actually got a laugh out of it and retold the story for days.

By the second week of April things began to simmer down. The rain lessened and the sun peeked out every so often, making a valiant effort to dry up some of the soil. The third week into April, the rain stopped and the waters began to recede. Folks stopped making jokes about building an ark. It seemed as though the nightmare was over and life could begin the slow process of returning to normal.

The last week of April is the week we all remember. That was the week the first body floated past the boat ramp. Four of the local boys had disobeyed their parents and gone down to the river to see if there was anything worth collecting, the way small boys like to collect things. Joey Fisher thought it was a mannequin and even considered trying to swim out and get it. The boys ran along the river's edge, following it as it bobbed along. It was Mike Mills who got the closest to it when it got hooked on a tree that had fallen into the river and extended several feet into the murky waters. The boys were arguing about the likelihood it was a body when two more bobbed along like they were joining a death dance party. That sent the boys running to the road where they flagged down the Nelson twins who were heading into town for the first baseball practice of the season. The Nelson twins pulled over and chewed the boys out for their stupidity and followed them back to the river's edge. Bobby Nelson pulled out his cell phone and almost dropped it when he dialed the sheriff to report five bodies stuck out in the middle of the river, bobbing around, arms and legs entangled as though they were performing a bizarre group hug.

By the time the sheriff got to the spot in the river where the boys were all staring silently at the growing number of bodies, the count was up to nine. The Nelson twins had taken pictures with their cell phones and news was already making its way through town. Within an hour the

riverbank was crowded with spectators trying to count the tangle of bodies and discern their genders, some of which were as naked as newborn babies. When all was said and done, seventeen bodies were pulled from the river in varying states of decay. Nine were women and seven were men. The males looked to be young, barely out of their teens—although it was left to the state medical examiner to make the final call on that.

The rains of April finally gave way to the warm, sunny days of May. More bodies were discovered further up the river. State investigators, joined by federal investigators, sealed off the riverbank for several miles north. The Nelson twins and the four boys who had first spotted the macabre display became instant celebrities—they'd discovered the biggest thing to happen in the area since Clara Woodstock shot her husband for chasing skirts in the next town over twenty years earlier.

Amid all the fuss and attention, the adults began to look at one another with a degree of suspicion. Steve Bumpus first pointed out the obvious in his soft, steady voice, "Guess someone around here has a taste for killing."

He had leaned on the checkout counter at the IGA, a long line stretching behind him and every checkout backed up with Saturday shoppers, when he'd made his statement. It was like someone dropped a thick quilt over the whole store as the hush spread from line to line and heads swiveled about to check the reactions of those nearby. A few of the older folk asked.

"What did he say?" and were answered in whispers that sounded like the soft hissing of steam from a kettle with a busted whistle.

I was stocking at the IGA that year. I didn't hear the remark but I did hear the silence that followed, if it could be called hearing. I guess it was more like not hearing. There were no more kids fussing for the candy that lined the displays at the checkout, no more grumbling about the rise in the cost of eggs and milk, and no more huffing and puffing from impatient shoppers who thought the lines should always be open and available for them and them alone. I moved down the cereal aisle where I had been stocking the cornflakes that were on sale and had been cleared out twice that week already. It was creepy, like watching a DVD on pause — people just standing, some with mouths hanging open like they'd been saying something and stopped mid-sentence. Steve picked up his two bags of groceries, gave a quick glance around the store, and then strode easily out the automatic doors with no look back at the mess he'd just started.

Then, as if the door swishing closed behind him had thrown an unseen switch, the registers started binging, voices rose, and kids resumed fussing for candy that would keep them spinning like dervishes for the remainder of the afternoon.

Billy Lawrence, the other stocker, passed me on his way to the back of the store, carrying empty boxes from the endcaps. "What happened?" I asked.

He gave an uneasy glance back at the front of the store. "Nothing important."

If there ever was an understatement that was it. And the weeks that followed proved just how much of an understatement it was.

I lived with my grandmother. My grandfather had disappeared over ten years ago. That was the year after my parents were killed in a car crash on Old Highway 63.

My grandmother was not an easy woman to live with. I suspected she was half out of her mind. She was my mother's mother but she was nothing like the mother I remembered. My mother had always been bright and sunny. She and my father had been high school sweethearts. I

was about fifteen when I figured out I had been a big surprise for them. My mother had just turned seventeen when I was born, the age I was now.

Anyway, Granny talked to herself. It was something that had started shortly before Grandpa went off into the sunset without so much as a 'bye, see ya later, guys. ' I woke up one morning and Grandpa was gone. He had been retired from the railroad for over fifteen years, since he'd injured his leg on the job. Within the year Granny had sold the house which she suddenly announced she hated like hell and moved us into a little house nearer to town. I asked a couple of times if she was going to ask the police to look for Grandpa. She'd given me what I called her crazy eye look and laughed — not a big ha-ha laugh nor a giggle. Just a sort of harumph ha. Then she would shake her head and go back to whatever she'd been doing, mumbling to herself the whole time.

Don't misunderstand — Granny was not mean to me. In fact, I'd have to say she loved me more than she'd ever loved my mother. There was nothing she wouldn't do for me and nothing she wouldn't give me. Maybe she loved me because I didn't take advantage of that. That was because I was always a good boy. I figured if she was crazy I sure as hell didn't want her to go crazy on me.

When the floods had gone and the bodies had washed up, I spent long hours glued to the television reports. I'd sit on the edge of the couch, my heart pounding like a bass drum in the high school marching band. Sometimes the reports were so detailed my foot tapped in rhythm to my heartbeat. It was the talk of the town. It may well have been the talk of the county or the state. It didn't get much past the borders of town. Anyway, Granny might have been wandering through the living room as I watched on the big television she had bought because I'd wanted it. She would stop and look at the screen.

"Wow Granny do you think we know any of those dead bodies?" My voice trembled with excitement at the prospect.

There was no response, and I would look up to see the hem of her dress disappearing into the other room, the mumbling agitated. Granny did not approve of violence. I mean, she really hated it. I had to play video games in my room. I had my own DVD player because she didn't like fighting in a movie. Her idea of a good movie was a comedy from when movies were in black and white. I sat with her sometimes and watched them. Don't laugh. It was the least I could do. I didn't get the jokes. The stories didn't make any sense either. But she did everything for me, so I could spare a few hours now and then to watch some old movie or television show with her.

Once the bodies from the river were taken to Murray's Mortuary and Flanagan's Funeral Chapel it seemed like the story might die down. They called in some kind of investigators from the state and big, fancy SUVs were seen on the streets of town while examinations were made behind closed doors with no comments forthcoming.

The best part was the news crews that came to town. We even made the national news. Newscasters speculated that some cemetery or graveyard upriver had been flooded, releasing their precious sleeping inhabitants to swim leisurely downriver until they made a pit stop in our town.

It was almost a month into what we called The Investigations that two men arriving in one of the aforementioned black SUV's wearing matching black suits knocked on Granny's door. I opened the door and stood looking dumbly at the two men. Of course they could tell straight off that I was a kid and they asked for my parents. Before I could respond, Granny came scuttling up behind me and shoved me unceremoniously out of the way.

The poor guys didn't know about Granny's mumbling or sometimes bad temper so they were quite stunned when, upon announcing who they were and where they were from, she slammed the door hard in their faces.

"Granny! You can't do that!" One of the few times I defied her was that moment when I reached past her and opened the door. The two men stood in exactly the same positions, the only change being the looks of surprise on their faces.

In a few minutes they informed us that Grandpa was no longer lost. He was one of the river dancers who had washed up. Granny stood silently as they offered their condolences and assured her that as soon as their investigations were complete, they would return Grandpa to us for a proper burial. Granny mumbled before turning and going into the living room. The men apologized for upsetting her. I explained she was likely shocked and horrified to learn her husband had not run off but had in fact died somewhere from some as yet unknown cause.

The men exchanged glances then and one cleared his throat before he informed me in a confidential tone that, apparently, my Grandpa had his head smashed in by some unknown instrument. I imagine I looked like a fish out of water with my mouth hanging open and my eyes bulging at the revelation. After a few more moments of chatter I can't recall, they got back into their big black cars and headed back to town.

Going into the living room, I saw Granny sitting in front of the television watching an old episode of Father Knows Best. I wondered if she had heard any of the conversation regarding Grandpa's head. I also wondered if I should impart this information to her. Finally, I decided not to. If she hadn't heard, she would soon enough because news like that travels fast in a small town.

But there was more news yet to come. And we would all be hearing it soon enough, along with the rest of the state. Heck, along with the rest of the country, maybe the world.

Going to school and working at the IGA afterward was not my idea of a fun time. We couldn't live on Granny's money from Grandpa's pension alone. The house we lived in was not mortgaged but there were other bills. I confess I had a few things I liked to have. I liked going to the movies with my friends. Fast food was a weakness I had no desire to give up. The occasional date with a girl cost a few bucks even if we went really cheap. My biggest expense was the money I'd been setting aside to buy a car. I knew it wouldn't be a new car. No one except Max from Max's Chevrolet dealership and Joe Ford from the Ford dealership across the road drove new cars. I always wondered who bought the shiny new cars that sat in their showrooms. It certainly wasn't anyone in our town. But every year, when new models began to appear in television ads, the showrooms had the same new models on their floors. The real moneymakers were the old cars in the back lot. Those were the cars that sold. Those were the cars I would choose from.

As weeks went by and no answers were forthcoming from the strangers who entered and exited the various town businesses, the rumors began to fly. The notion of a flooded cemetery had long since floated off with the last of the muddy waters from the river banks. Local news which came from the county seat eighty miles away stirred those waters up with talk of suspicious circumstances. It was Sunday afternoon and Granny was in the kitchen making a roast chicken. I was getting ready to watch a baseball game, the Yankees versus the Red Sox. I wasn't a big fan of either team but I did like baseball. I had played for years growing up and my glove

still gathered dust in a closet somewhere in the house. My old bat sat by the back door. Granny claimed it was as good as a gun for protecting us against any possible thieves that might attempt to break in and steal our property. I didn't have the heart to remind her we didn't have anything worth stealing.

The evening news was just beginning when I switched on the channel for the game. Pictures of our downtown, the river, and the outside of the community services building slid across the screen. The reporter stood outside talking to some of the seniors and single moms herding three or more kids with snotty noses who had lined up for commodities—what some of us jokingly called government cheese. It was funny watching the guy in his nice suit and tie talking to some woman holding a boogery toddler on one hip, obviously keeping enough distance so he didn't get slimy streaks on his navy blue. Then he dropped the bombshell.

“What do you think of reports that the bodies found in the river were the victims of a prolific serial killer?”

I recognized the washed-out blonde he was interviewing from the market. Her kids usually ran through the store grabbing bags of candy and boxes of sweetened cereals off shelves, begging for them like sugar-addicted maniacs. She never returned the products to their assigned shelves. She just stuck them wherever she passed and the kids would run and find something else to toss in the shopping buggy for one of us stockers to round up and replace later.

Now the mother with the kids from hell was staring at the reporter as though he had told her that the next Publishers Clearing House winner lived in our town. Her head turned from left to right, a strange expression of something akin to fan fever lit up her eyes. “A serial killer here?”

The reporter tried to cut her off and explain that just the bodies had been found there, but mama was lined up for her fifteen minutes of fame and she wasn't about to let it get away. “I thought something was funny when all them bodies turned up. There's crazy people in this town. I'm not surprised.” She pulled her kids closer as though protecting them from an axe-wielding maniac hiding behind the camera. “I hope they find him and fry his ass.”

This last statement caused the reporter to turn away and the shot zoomed in on his obviously distressed face as he went on to inform viewers that state investigators were looking into the possibility the bodies had been secreted somewhere upriver for a number of years. “The bodies of girls and young men along with the body of Floyd Vann, a former resident who disappeared six years ago, remain in the custody of the state police. Federal investigators have been called in to assist in the investigation.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard the loud crash behind me. I turned to see Granny standing there, pale as a ghost, not mumbling, with the shards of her CorningWare baking dish scattered around her feet.

“Granny!” I saw the fear in her eyes and I knew it had to be scary for an old woman to think there was a crazy killer running around town. The idea that said killer might have taken the life of her husband — the man she thought had deserted her — must have been pretty hard to wrap her head around. I put my arms around her shoulders.

“It's okay. I'll clean this up.” I guided her into the kitchen and pressed her to sit at the table where a bowl with partially peeled potatoes sat. “You stay put. I'll get this.”

Taking the broom and dustpan into the living room I began to carefully sweep up the pieces of the dish, bending to coax a few shards from between the wood slats of the floor. I carried the dustpan back into the kitchen, telling Granny I was going to run the vacuum over the floor to be sure I got all the pieces when I heard her sniffing. I emptied the debris into the trash can and

turned to reassure her. As soon as our eyes met she began to sob, softly at first, and then louder until she was wailing.

Granny had never made a sound like that, at least not in my presence. I just stood there with one hand holding the dustpan and the other hand hanging loosely at my side. When she said what she said next I dropped the dustpan and fell into a kitchen chair across from her.

“I killed him. When I found out what he was, what he did, and what he was doing, I bashed his damned brains in.” That released the flood of words that had been dammed up for years.

“I thought he was cheating. I thought he had to be having an affair. I’d believed it for years. For years.” She stared at the kitchen door as though it was a time portal and she could see into the past as clearly as she could see me sitting there in the present. “I watched him go out that evening. He had that bad boy look that said he was wanting something I could never give him. I went into the garage where we kept the washer and dryer. I kept getting madder and madder. The washer was on spin cycle and it was shaking and rattling. I realized it had slipped off the wooden blocks he’d put underneath to keep it level. I bent down to shove a block back underneath the lower corner—sliced my finger right open. I was cussing and swearing and went to dig around on his bench for a bandage or something. Pulled on that old cabinet he had stuck back in the corner of the bench and it came falling down spraying nuts and bolts and screws all over. I was really pissed off then.” Her eyes grew darker and she squinted at the door. “I started pushing those little pieces into drawers not paying attention to whether they were mixed up or not, and then I noticed the cardboard pressed into the wall where the cabinet had been. One corner of it stuck out. It’s funny but I remember the way it smelled in there that day. I pulled out that piece of cardboard and the envelopes came flying out. I almost didn’t open them. I guess I knew.”

I wanted to tell her to stop talking—to tell her I didn’t want to know. But like her I was pretty sure I already knew. I looked down at her hands as they twisted on the table, the joints swollen with arthritis. I remembered those hands, thin and nimble, as they bandaged cuts, cooked meals, and wiped my fevered forehead when I had the flu one time. Then I imagined those hands opening long, white envelopes.

“There were pictures. Those old Polaroid kind you can’t get anymore. It wasn’t the cuts or the marks that bothered me as much as the looks in their eyes. They all looked the same. Their eyes were opened real wide and glassy, just staring. Only they weren’t seeing anything because they were dead. More than a dozen, some with things like scarves tied around their necks like fashion accessories. I put them all back in their envelopes. Then I went inside to make sure you were in bed. I took them with me when I got into my car. I knew where I was going. I didn’t have to wonder where he was anymore. I knew where he was.”

“Where?” My voice came out squeaking like a boy entering puberty.

“In some of the pictures I saw the old fireplace from his grandfather’s house. That house had lost its roof years before; the walls were falling in, but that old stone fireplace stood as strong as the day the house was built.” Granny sighed heavily. “Maybe you don’t need to know anymore.”

I didn’t prompt her. I waited. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear the rest. Her eyes flitted over the Louisville Slugger that leaned against the wall by the back door. I turned my head slowly, following her gaze. A sick feeling spread through my body and I could feel bile rising in my throat.

When I turned back she was looking at me. Our eyes locked.

“There was an old root cellar. They were all sitting down there, most of them naked, just sitting in a big circle all facing a chair in the center. I imagined him sitting there looking back at them. I knew what he did to them. I knew what he did looking at them. I knew because when I

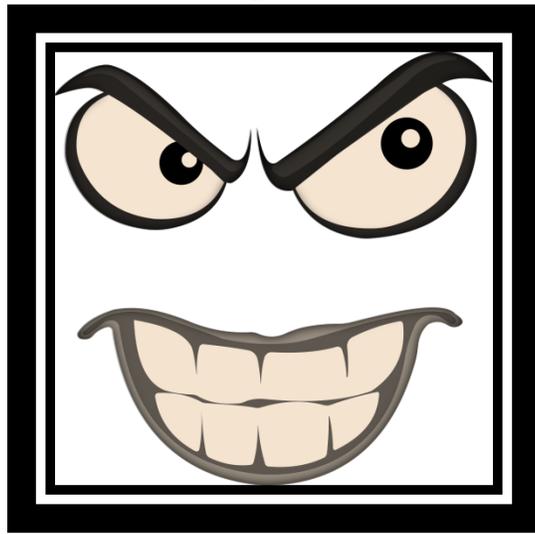
snuck in he was busy with his hand. Busy the way he sometimes got when he'd sit on the front porch and the little girls and boys from the neighborhood would come to play with you."

She leaned forward. "Did you know I played softball in high school? I was good too. Most girls didn't play, but I liked it. I liked the feeling of the heavy bat in my hands, the swish sound it made as I swung at a ball, and the crack it made when it connected — sending the ball flying out into the field." Granny sighed. "That was the last time I swung a bat, that night I bashed your grandfather's head to pieces. I left him there with his audience, the weeds growing up all around the foundations of the house, more than half the ceiling inside the house, and the storm door that led to that root cellar covered with the heaviest rocks I could drag to bury it."

Granny stood and went to the kitchen sink. She held on to the edge, and I could see her body trembling. "Every year when the rains came I would imagine that root cellar filling up with water like an indoor swimming pool in an upscale hotel. It certainly was exclusive." She laughed bitterly. "I never imagined them getting out and floating down here. I guess he was coming to see me and he brought his lady friends with him."

I suppose I should have told her then. But she was already so wounded. She didn't need to know. I'd read about it in the library in Newtown. Sometimes it skipped a generation. It did in our family. I guess if I ever have kids they'd be okay. But I hope like hell I'm not around when my grandchildren grow up. That old root cellar isn't going to work anymore. Now that I have a car I can do a little exploring, and soon I'll find a place of my own — a cool, dark place where I can take my dates. And I think I'll hide that old baseball bat somewhere. There's no sense in tempting fate or Granny.

Vengeance



Burned Toast
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

I awoke to the odor of burned toast. Thus began the first day of the longest journey I would take. I struggled to open my eyes, sticky with last night's mascara. With one eye opened at last, I scanned the dimly lit room. Bars of light filtered through the window blinds so I knew it was daylight.

Searching my memory I tried to place where I was and how I got there. I didn't have to think very long. I heard the bedroom door open and I tried to sit up only to find I was handcuffed to an old-fashioned iron bedstead. I stared stupidly at my wrist and jiggled the cuffs as though they would fall away.

"What the hell...?" I began. The question was answered before I'd even finished asking.

"Hello Melly. Did you miss me?" His voice was like an oily slick across the surface of my mind. I had believed I would never hear it again; I would never again feel the tentacles of his vitriol invade my head.

My brain was scrambled and I struggled to understand how I came to be in this position. How had Jim found me? I had moved over three thousand miles away, left my family and friends behind, and recreated myself. In spite of all that I now lay handcuffed to a bed, in a room I didn't recognize, with a man who had beaten me, stalked me, and threatened to kill me, smiling coldly at me.

His mouth was moving and he was speaking but I couldn't hear him over the pounding of my heart. I ordered myself to calm down and think. I was alive. He hadn't killed me. Although he had frequently threatened to, I always suspected he was far more interested in keeping me alive so he could torment me. Killing me would have eliminated his greatest pleasure, watching me suffer.

Taking a deep breath, I steadied my voice and asked him coldly, "What do you want Jim?"

He giggled. It was that familiar high pitched giggle that usually preceded what I had come to term "an event". Soon the cruel words would begin. As hours passed and his words became more bitter, he would begin to pace. He would throw out questions and accusations. If I responded he would insist I was lying. If I didn't speak he would maintain I remained silent because I was guilty. There was no way I could win in the situations he would create. Eventually the physical torment would begin. He would get in my face and screaming, with spittle flying, he would demand the truth. A tug on my hair, a slap to the side of my head, perhaps a harder shove; an escalating attack on my sanity. Then the smacks would become punches, at first only to my body. As his anger bubbled hotter like a kettle left too long, the whistle would scream to boiling over and no part of my body or mind would be left unscathed.

In the seven plus years we had lived together I had suffered bruises, cuts, a broken nose, loosened teeth, and both tragically and mercifully, two miscarriages. It was all my fault. Jim had made it perfectly clear I brought these misfortunes on myself. He drummed it into my head day after day. I was disrespectful. I was stupid. I was fat. I was skinny. I was a whore. I was frigid. It was all true.

Then I woke up in the emergency room, my face barely recognizable, my hand in a cast, and a thick pad between my legs as my baby washed away in the bloody tears of my emptying womb. A young woman stood at my bedside. Slowly and patiently she went over my options. Jim had been arrested. Chloe stayed with me every step of the way; during Jim's trial and

conviction, through months of therapy, and finally, while I created a new identity and moved across the country. Chloe was only one of three people who knew where I lived and what my name was.

“You aren’t listening, Melly. That’s always been a problem. I want what I’ve always wanted. I want us to be together. I want things to be the way they were before people interfered in our lives.” His eyes glittered and I could see the madness lurking there.

Swallowing hard I asked him the one question that I feared hearing the answer to. “How did you find me?”

Jim giggled again. “Were you hiding from me Melly? You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

Cold fingers ran long sharp nails down my spine. Something in my facial expression must have changed because Jim sobered.

“No one is going to interfere this time.” He moved toward the bed and I drew my legs up, as far from the foot of the bed as I could manage. “Don’t pull away from me. I’m not going to hurt you. I know it wasn’t your fault. She brainwashed you, turned you against me. That lesbian. She wanted you for herself.”

I wanted to cry. “She has kids, a husband. She wanted to help...” I bit my tongue. I suspected if he hadn’t killed Chloe, he had harmed her and possibly harmed her family.

Jim slammed his hand on the bed and the mattress bounced. I scuttled back toward the headboard as fast as I could.

“Don’t try to run from me Melanie!” He shouted and spit flew from his mouth showering me. Grabbing my ankle he pulled me back to the foot of the bed. “No one will ever come between us again.”

It had been a long time since I played the game; the pacify Jim game. “You’re right. I’m not running Jim. I’m just trying to get comfortable. These cuffs are cutting into my wrist.”

He loomed over me, his eyes boring into my head as he tried to read my mind. Some skills can be rekindled in a heartbeat. I still knew how to work Jim. A small smile touched the corners of his mouth, saliva still dripping from his lips. Sliding his hand up my calf and over my knee, he brought his face close to mine. The rank smell of his breath made my stomach tighten. I wanted to look away but I knew if I did the game was over.

“You’d like it if I uncuffed you, wouldn’t you?” He ran his finger over my lips and I forced myself not to pull away. “My pretty little mouth.”

“Jim, my mouth is really dry. Do you think I could get some water or something?”

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. Then he stuck the tip of his finger into my mouth. “Well, well. Your mouth is dry.” Raising his head he sniffed the air. “I’m afraid I might have burned the toast.” Without another word he got up and left the room, locking the door behind him.

As soon as I heard the lock click I looked around the room. Other than the bed I was cuffed to there was an old dresser which held a lamp, a lumpy looking small couch, a floor lamp, and in addition to the door from the room, there was another door which I thought might be a closet. The blinds on the single window were yellowed and hung unevenly. I couldn’t see what might be outside that window, another house or buildings, or perhaps we were far from any other residence. I wondered if I screamed if anyone would even hear me.

Turning my attention to the metal cuffs that chained me to the bed, I tried to slide my wrist through the hole. The metal cut at my skin. If I spent enough time working at it, I might be able to pull my wrist free. It would be difficult and I would probably sustain some injury. Even if I was able to get loose I had no plan for escaping from the house. For the time being I would wait

and see if any opportunity would arise that would allow me to not only free my hand but also to get away from Jim.

I heard a creaking outside the door, and listening more closely, the soft footsteps of Jim returning. Quickly repositioning myself, I leaned against the back of the bed. The footsteps hesitated momentarily outside the door as though Jim was listening. Then the lock clicked and he stepped in carrying a tray.

His eyes flicked around the room as if he suspected I might have somehow gotten free and performed some magical escape tactic. His eyes then settled on me and once again those eyes glittered dangerously. There was no mistaking the madness in those eyes. It chilled my soul to see the insanity that had always been there, but had grown even deeper in the years we'd been apart. Stepping into the room he left the door partially open and I saw his key ring hanging from the lock.

Setting the tray down on the table he inadvertently pushed the lamp closer to the edge. He opened a bottle of water and held out to me. Using my free hand I took it gratefully and immediately chugged half of the lukewarm liquid down. With a twisted grin, he picked up a half slice of slightly burned toast and held it up to my mouth. Hesitating only a second I took a bite. The bread was dry and tasteless. I chewed it slowly, never taking my eyes from Jim's.

He nodded, content that I was playing along. He liked seeing himself as a generous benefactor. He could humiliate me and beat me. But he was also kindly and giving. He was forgiving me for my lapse in judgment.

"May I have some more water please?" I asked softly.

Using my free hand I accepted the plastic water bottle and took a few more sips. I had so many questions but I had to be careful with what I asked and how I asked it. As Jim sat down on the bed beside me, my hand shook nervously, spilling water all over the front of my shirt.

"Tsk, tsk. You have always been so sloppy Melly." He took the bottle gently from my hand and reaching back, he set it on the tray. The lamp moved another few centimeters bringing it perilously close to falling. With a salacious expression he began to unbutton my shirt. I inhaled sharply and he stopped, looking into my eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"N-no." I stammered. In my mind I screamed, terrified he would attempt to ravage my body in that degrading manner he had in the past. Jim's idea of lovemaking was one of vicious control. There was no giving of pleasure. Once he finished unbuttoning my blouse he pulled it off one arm. Using his other hand he began to run his finger down between my breasts before sliding his hand around in back to unsnap it. It had been many years since he'd attempted such a feat and as hard as he tried he couldn't seem to get it opened. He tried to turn me around but the handcuff proved an obstruction.

I watched the frown crease his brow. He glanced down at his shirt pocket and I noticed the slight outline of a key. I knew he was debating whether or not to free me and whether or not he could control me if he did. He decided he wasn't ready to risk it. Instead he moved closer to me, his face just a couple of inches from mine and continued to struggle with the hook and eye at the back of my bra. As his fingers brushed my skin I felt as though I was being touched by a snake.

Without thinking, I drew back my head and brought it sharply forward, my forehead smashing into the bridge of his nose. For a moment I saw stars, but as my vision cleared I watched bright red blooms explode from his nose and he rose and stumbled backward. With my free hand I grabbed the lamp that was now falling toward me and struck him over the head. The paper thin shade crumbled and the glass bulb shattered across Jim's face leaving a bloody streak

from his forehead and down across face. Unhesitating, I raised the lamp again and brought it down on the top of his head with all the force I could muster.

A look of surprise lit up his face, as though someone had told him something so astonishing as to be unbelievable. I made one final attack at his face driving the top of the lamp, its metal shade holder bent and sharply broken, directly at his eyes. A portion of the metal lodged between his eyes and when I pulled the lamp away a round hole appeared where it had connected. His eyes crossed as though he was staring at the wound, then rolled up into his head as a bead of blood bubbled forth before running down his nose in a perfectly straight line.

Jim began to fall backward and as he did I grabbed the front of his shirt. It tore free from his body, the buttons popping and flying around the room like tiny projectiles. I was left with the tattered garment half on his body and half in my hand. His body hit the floor with a loud thump. Frantically I dug into his shirt pocket and pulled out the tiny key. With a fast glance at his inert body on the floor I set to freeing myself from the handcuff. My hand shook so badly it took several attempts before I could get the key in the hole. Once I was free I slid off the bed.

Jim was still lying on the floor amid broken glass, shattered wood and twisted metal. His eyelids fluttered and I was terrified he would awake at any moment. I was almost to the door when I heard him groan loudly and begin to crawl after me.

His fingers grazed my ankle as I darted out the door pulling it closed behind me. Swiftly turning the key I pulled it out of the lock, dropped the keying to the floor, and headed for the stairs that were barely visible in the poorly lit hallway.

Practically flying down the stairs I hit the front door and turned the door knob only to find it was locked. The sound of Jim banging furiously at the door upstairs made me frantic. Realizing the key to the exit was still upstairs, lying on the floor in front of the old door that was the only barrier between a madman and myself, I steeled myself and ran back up to the dim hallway. I could see the metal of the keys glitter in the faint light and grabbing them, I dashed back to the stairs.

Jim was throwing himself against the door now, roaring like a caged beast. His words were unintelligible, the insane utterances of a madman bent on reaching me and tearing me apart.

I struggled with the keys, trembling as I tried one after the other. The sound of breaking wood reached my ears, the loud thumping of my heart challenging the sound. Suddenly a key fit and turning it, I pulled open the door and stumbled out into the daylight. There were no other houses or people in sight. Instead a white van sat in a gravel driveway. I raced to it and once again battled with a key. The lock sprang open and I heard a bellow as Jim reached the door I had left open. I leaped into the driver's seat and locked the car door behind me.

As I forced the key into the ignition Jim threw himself against the windshield of the car. His eyes were wild; his mouth opened wildly, teeth flashing in a furious scream. He was swearing and pounding his fists against the glass. The engine caught and I threw the van into gear, hitting the gas.

Jim's eyes opened wide and his fingers seemed to splay against the windshield as though he could grip it and hold himself on the front of the car. But the attempt was futile and as I burst forward he flew in the air, and as I watched he slipped beneath the vehicle. The tires bumped, and bumped again, as I drove over his body. I didn't even glance in the rearview mirror as I fled.

Hours later when the police returned to the house they found his body halfway down the driveway. In his last moments he had dragged himself after the car, still pursuing me, still determined to recapture me.

The police had already been searching for me because he had not killed Chloe. He had beaten her badly and she was in the hospital. She would survive. We would both survive.

I was admitted to a local hospital and treated for shock and some minor injuries. The admitting doctor prescribed something to help me sleep. I did sleep; a deep dreamless sleep.

Waking in the morning I was relieved to find myself in a clean hospital bed, the blinds opened to admit bright sunshine. It was over. There was nothing left to fear. I felt relief wash over me.

Closing my eyes I stretched my arms above my head, reveling in my freedom.

Then I smelled burned toast.

GRIEF
Neil Douglas Newton

“I’ll help you.”

Deirdre leaned over her husband Cecil as he tried lift himself off a couch where he’d spent most of his time for the past three months. As he waved his wife away and raised himself with an intense effort, he considered how odd it was that cancer had meant only some inconvenient moments only a few months ago. Now it meant pain, always and far worse when he had to move. Dying had turned out to be an undignified process.

He waved his wife away once more as he struggled down the hall to the bathroom, wondering how long it would be before she had to help him despite his resolve. Or perhaps a wheelchair would eventually be in order. Depressing prospect.

He sat on the loo and endured the pain of defecation with stage four metastasized cancer in the lower organs. He wondered how long even this basic act would be possible. To distract himself, he reflected on what he’d accomplished recently. His position as a senior research scientist in a Swiss R and D firm had allowed him endless experimental muscle. What he’d achieved would probably be both controversial and groundbreaking once he died and his colleagues got to evaluate what he’d done. But that was for later. For now he’d see an avalanche of his own making. If he was still hale and hearty he might partake of one of his favorite single malts to celebrate the revolution he’d set into motion. Perhaps he’d risk a little gastrointestinal chaos with a bottle of Oban just to thumb his nose at his enemies. Sic Semper Tyrannis.

Tom sat in a bar in Johannesburg waiting for what he liked to call an associate. The fact that their common endeavor was illegal didn’t change his penchant for sanitized terminology. Tom had come to South Africa to evade some nasty trouble with his wife and their divorce. Rather than submit himself to a financial rape he’d cashed in his secret savings and moved them to offshore accounts. Then he’d come to Johannesburg. As a professional hunter and guide, falling into the rhino trade had been natural. At first he’d thought that it might be a dicey prospect. But after being approached by several local officials fronting for Chinese concerns, dealing in Rhino horn, he’d found that it was like falling off a log. Of course there was the chance of being arrested and the specter of avengers like Black Mamba and Park security made it somewhat of a strategic nightmare. But the market was there, in spades. He wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The door opened, letting in a shaft of sunlight, exposing a collection of questionable people. This bar wasn’t a place to come and have a friendly drink and no man who considered himself “legitimate” would bring a woman here to impress her. Men and women around him shielded their eyes, almost as if the sun was an unwelcome sign, exposing their nature.

The door shut, revealing the man Tom was waiting for. The man took his place on the stool next to Tom, throwing what Tom would have called a “go” bag, up on the bar. Tom stared at the bag. Terrance smiled. “Time was I would put it on the floor. But one time someone managed to abscond with it while I was on my fourth beer. I don’t take that chance anymore.”

“You never found the contents?”

“Some nice ordinance in there. Since the police didn’t come to visit me, I have to assume it was sold and no questions were asked. Love to know what they did with my silk underwear?”

Tom smirked. “I’d burn it. Of course. So how’s it hanging?”

“Love those American phrases.”

“I save them for you.”

A female bartender moved forward and put a beer in front of Terrance. He smiled. “They know me here. Life is okay. Enough money, drink and females and I’ll be okay.”

“Your son?”

“That’s where the money comes in. He’s in a private school just outside the city. We’ll have him in a top flight Uni in four years. That’s what I do this for.” He paused. “Sorry, mate. I know your situation back in the States.”

“It could have been better if my wife wasn’t such a bitch.”

“Can’t kill em...” Terrance chuckled.

“So are you up for a job?”

“Always. Where. What?”

“Kruger. Rhinos.”

“Hmm... Any Black Mambo’s?”

“My intel tells me that they aren’t in this particular area. Of course you never know.”

Terrance shrugged. “No risk, no reward, eh?”

“Unfortunately”.

“I’ve got two more ready to go. Two weeks from Saturday. We move and get there around 3:00 A.M. Rifles, radar, motion sensors.”

“Who are the other two?”

“Katzenberg and Martinez.”

“Good men.”

“Only the best for us, Terrance.”

“If we encounter hostiles, do we pull back?”

“It depends where we are. If we’ve got a truckload full of Rhinos and they come after us, we’re not dumping them. We just have to fire towards them and drive fast. If they try to take us out...you know. I’m not ready to die for this.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll call you two days before we move out. Just to check with you.”

Terrance finished his beer. “Always a good mother, mate. I appreciate it. You always plan and minimize risk. Better than the last contractor I worked with.”

“You want another beer? It’s all on me.”

“Sure. And it better be all on you.” Another chuckle.

As Tom waved to the bartender he thought back to his experiences with Terrance. They had been guides and hunters for years in the States and in Africa. They’d shared a lot of hard times, including Tom’s acrimonious divorce. He couldn’t think of a better friend.

They only wanted to stay in the bar for so long, to avoid any prying eyes. But conversation with a friend wasn’t something he got to experience very often. He stared into his drink. A few more missions and he was going to go back home and fight his wife for joint custody and more favorable divorce conditions. He wondered how his son was doing.

Anashe walked in the hot sun, her backpack bouncing on her back. She reached down and took a plastic bottle from the hook on her belt. The water had turned from cold to near hot by that point; still the two swallows she took helped her thirst. Returning the bottle to her belt she scanned the area for the proper area for her task.

To the right she saw a shady spot beneath a tree, the dirt thick, filled with small flowers suggesting an especially fertile patch of ground. Kneeling beneath the tree, she pulled off her backpack and removed a small plant shoot. Being careful to place the shoot near to the flowers, she planted it, pouring some powder around the roots. This was followed by her pouring a bit of water over the shoot. Finally she tamped down the soil around the plant.

She smiled. She had learned quite a bit from Dr. Cecil and hoped to get her doctorate in Botany. And now Dr. Cecil was gone, back in Geneva with little time to live. She had cried herself out, thinking about him. Now she was buoyed up by doing his work and creating his revolution. She would name her son Cecil, one day when she got married and had a boy. And she would know that the future was something she'd contributed to, the future that Dr. Cecil worked for.

Cecil Boehm sat in his back yard, enjoying the world-class view of the mountains he could see from his suburban home. Time was short and he found himself obsessed with the past. On his lap he held a small tablet. He scrolled through pictures of his parents with him as child. Each summer they would leave Johannesburg for a vacation to Kruger National park. Like many children he'd fixed his attention on one animal. Not lions, like most children, but the Rhinos. When he was four he had imagined, as he fell asleep, that he was Rhino. He began to bother his parents to buy him stuffed Rhinos and they complied, knowing it was a child's caprice. He lived for his trips to the park where he could see his favorite animal. His mother would hold him and call him her "little Rhino". He was never happier.

He put the tablet down. He remembered when his mother had contracted cancer, similar to the type he had now. He had put some of his stuffed Rhinos around her bed, hoping they would work their magic. The last place they had gone as a family was the Park. One night his mother had sat on a bench near their tent, bald and impossibly thin. "Remember the Rhino's Cecil. They will need your help when you are older. They need your help now but you're too young. But someday..." She had fallen asleep suddenly. Six months later she was dead.

He knew it was a child's fantasy. But what she had said that night had burned its way into his brain. And now that he was taking the same journey he remembered what his duty was. But he'd done his duty. His beloved Anashe was putting the finishing touches on his work. He had no children except for her. She would inherit his fortune. And she would be his instrument of justice.

Off in the darkness of Kruger Park, the small shoots sprouted heads. To anyone's eyes they would be seen as weeds but strange weeds. They reproduced, consuming the nutrients in the soil around it, in essence consuming the essence of the flowers around them. When the sun came out, after they had matured enough, they sent a special brew into the atmosphere. Half spore, half viscous liquid, the brew floated on the breeze. After a time, they broke, pumping more of the liquid into the air. A silent birth and a silent offering with no one there to see it, simply waiting for those who would receive its bounty.

Tom stood with his team. Behind him, in a thick stand of trees, stood two flat beds, the type you'd use to tow autos, covered by camouflage material. "Fan out," Tom told the three other men. "Just click the transmit button if you find any Rhinos. We don't need full broadcasts. People are listening." He took out a map and put it on the ground. "This is where we are and this is the area where my friends have told me we'll find rhinos. It's only perhaps ten clicks square.

Martinez you take this quadrant. Katzenberg, you're to the southwest. Terrance you're here. I'll take the northeast quadrant.

If you see anyone, security, Mambo, whatever, don't engage. We can't win that fight and it isn't worth it if we don't have any rhinos. Just lay low and click the transmitter button once if you see security. No words. Just a click. You can repeat the click but wait ten seconds before you do. If you hear one click, we meet back here and we drive away. If you see rhinos, three or more, you will click the transmitter button as follows: Martinez, two clicks. Katzenberg, three. Terrance four. I've got five. Repeat ten seconds later. We'll act accordingly and follow the encrypted GPS to find the first one who sees rhinos. It's possible that we might get nothing tonight. So we regroup. No casualties are acceptable. There'll be another night. And whatever information we get from tonight, we can use later."

Martinez nodded. "It's good, Tom. We've done this before. We know how it works. We know the technology. You don't have to treat us like children."

Tom snorted. "A death is not a small thing. I know we all know what we signed up for but..."

Martinez slapped him on the back. "We all know you're a good man, Thomas. That's why we work for you."

"Thanks. Okay, fan out guys."

Two hours later, Tom was checking his radar. The motion sensors fanned out ahead of him automatically. Nothing. He had a bad feeling. Some nights he'd feel a sense of calm that told him everything was going his way; but not this night. He wasn't sure if it was just his own anxiety or if he was getting a sense of what might happen. His wife had always called him superstitious, like a baseball player with rituals he followed.

Without warning he felt dizzy and disoriented. Falling to his knees, he shook his head, hoping it would clear. He began to hear what he thought were words that, try as he might, he couldn't quite understand. It was like two people were conversing behind a wall and all he could hear was the vibrations of their voices.

He began to panic; there was no explanation for this besides his being drugged or something worse, something physical or psychological. There was a sudden sense of urgency as though he was witnessing, mentally, a burning desire to drink water. Not his desire. Someone else's.

"Oh God," he moaned, holding his head.

After several minutes the sensations began to recede. Tom reached into the long pocket in his jacket and pulled out a large flask. Standing slowly, he unscrewed the top and took several swigs of whiskey. The sense of pressure he had been feeling faded enough for him to take stock of his surroundings. His walkie sat on the ground along with his radar and motion sensors.

He checked the radar and motion sensor; nothing. Sitting on the ground, he took two more pulls from the flask. After a few minutes he was found that he was relatively calm. As he sent his mind out into the night, following his ritual, he lost himself in the sound of the park. Someone had once told him that he was meditating, something that made him laugh. But he knew that he was in a state where his senses were stretched wide. He stayed that way for ten minutes.

And suddenly there was a sound. Three clicks. Katzenberg. He looked at his compass and began moving toward the southwest quadrant.

They all moved toward the GPS position that Katzenberg was broadcasting from. Short, soft whistles closed the final distance between them. They all hit the ground by Katzenberg, starting out into the night. He passed his infrared glasses to Tom. "Maybe seventy meters. Six of them."

Terrance shook his head as though he was trying to clear it. And Tom knew.

"You're hearing things."

Terrance jerked his head toward Tom, his mouth slack in surprise. "What?"

"Something from outside is coming in. To your head."

"You too?"

"I felt...thirst. Not mine. Someone else's. What did you hear?"

"Nothing I heard. It was feelings. And eighteen."

"Eighteen?"

"The number keeps coming into my head. It's...important. It drives...whoever this is." He grabbed his head and squeezed it. "Shit!"

"Can you keep up?"

"I'll be fine."

Tom pulled his gun from the rack on his back. A rifle, long range, but equipped with a silencer. "Guys. We'd like three tonight. That's the contract. Of course we could go for more but I've never believed in being greedy. And taking all six will probably get us more attention from the Angels of Mercy. One at a time gentlemen. Less noise from the guns. You first, Katz, We'll wait. I'll take the next."

Katzenberg shouldered his weapon and put his eye to the scope. He lined up the shot, taking his time. "Stand still child," he said. He waited another thirty seconds. "Right to the head. No pain." He fired.

In the infrared glasses Tom could see the rhino go down. "Excellent, Katz. Excellent." They sat on the ground for a while, preparing themselves for the next two shots. Suddenly, Tom sat upright. "Let's go get it."

"That's not efficient, Thomas." Martinez said. "We always shoot them all then go get them. Otherwise we have several minutes of travel for each kill. Not feasible."

Tom looked toward Terrance; his head was hanging. "Terry. Terry!" As he called to his friend, he felt a sense of panic. There was a hint of pain and a hint of horror. He had to work to keep control of himself. And it wasn't coming from him. If he was feeling this, what was Terry feeling?

"Let's go get it. No argument."

"Your party."

They moved out, gathering their equipment. They pulled Terrance up and walked back to the copse of trees where their vehicles were hidden. Once in the flatbed they drove only a few minutes until they were next to the fallen Rhino. Terrance stayed on the back of the truck breathing heavily. Martinez and Katzenberg jumped down, looping two chains around the fallen giant.

"Wait until I get Terry into the cab," Tom said.

Tom stood still until Terrance was leaning back in the passenger seat. Tom gestured to the other two men.

Then they started the winch. The rhino moved slowly up the angle of the bed, dripping blood from its head. They watched for a moment before Katzenberg said, "Why just get his one?"

"Something is happening," Tom answered, his voice demonstrating his pain. "Not sure. We need to get Terry to a hospital."

“What about the contract?”

“Fuck the contract. We can come back. I can put off the Chinese for a few days.”

“Will Terry come with us?”

Tom looked at his friend. “I don’t know.”

The rhino finally lay flat on the bed. Tom got behind the wheel as Martinez and Katzenberg jumped up on the bed beside the Rhino. After three minutes of driving they heard the sound of a motor off in the distance. “Fuck,” Tom whispered as he pushed down on the pedal. “We’ll need the other truck.”

They all looked behind them. It was a pointless gesture; the truck could be a mile away, invisible. “How did you know we’d be out there?” Martinez asked Tom.

“Maybe they’re hearing the same thing that Terry and I are. In their heads.”

“And what is that?”

“Pain. Pain of a death. Grieving. I feel it now.”

“What?”

“You don’t feel anything?”

“I have a headache. But that’s about it.”

“You’re lucky.”

They drove in silence. Terrance groaned. “Eighteen,” he whispered.

They heard the sound of the motor behind them accelerating. “Kruger Park Rangers! Stop your vehicle and exit it! On the ground!”

“I’m not going to jail,” Katzenberg growled.

“No one is going to jail,” Tom answered.

“I’m not sure you can guarantee that.”

“Shut up!” Tom hissed. He accelerated the truck.

“Stop! Exit the vehicle,” the amplified voice shouted behind them

They drove for another ten minutes before they could see the lights of their pursuer’s vehicle. “Stay calm.” Tom told the others.

“Sure,” Katzenberg snorted.

They drove into the copse of trees where the other truck was hidden. Tom jumped out. “Take him to the hospital. Go!” He ran to the other truck, doing his best to suppress the panic and grief he was experiencing by proxy. He put his hand to his eyes and found that they were wet. How could this pain have come from anywhere but the rhino that had been shot. He found, beneath the odd feelings he was feeling, he was angry. Someone had made this happen. He was sure of it. This was not the kind of thing that happened naturally.

He jumped into the truck and gunned the engine. He looked back and saw that the Ranger’s truck was still far enough away that it was doubtful they could see the truck he’d arrived in pulling away. Perfect. His first move was to gun the engine several times, getting the attention of the Park Rangers. Then he pulled out, with the pedal practically on the floor of the truck, creating noise from the tires spinning on the ground and rocks and dirt flying into the air. He could only hope that the Rangers didn’t realize that there were two trucks.

Driving off, he took a path that was at an angle slightly to the right of the other truck as it pulled away. He heard some more words from the loud speaker atop the ranger’s truck but he couldn’t make them out above the sound of his truck’s movement. After five minutes it was clear that the truck was following him and not the other vehicle that Martinez was driving.

He bounced along over the uneven ground, moving perhaps seventy miles an hour. Occasionally he heard the pro forma warning from the rangers behind him. He drove another five

miles, accelerating so he could put as much space between himself and the rangers as possible. When the lights from their truck were barely visible he looked for a large copse of trees. After finding a thick stand, he drove the truck into the small opening between the trees, finally coming to an abrupt halt. Diving out the passenger door, he went to a chest on the flat bed that ran the length of the cab. Pulling open the latches, he pulled out ten sizable spike strips. Running behind the truck he scattered the strips across the path he was sure the ranger's truck would take.

Returning to the truck he gunned the engine and waited. As the truck came closer Tom began to drive slowly, grinding the gears by manipulating the clutch, trying to do as little real damage as possible. The grinding was loud enough that he could be reasonably sure that his false car trouble would be audible across the distance between him and the rangers. When he could finally see the outline of faces in the windshield he began to move forward, slowly. By the time the truck had come near to the spike strips he was perhaps a hundred feet in front of them. He smiled; they would chase him and they would have to hit the strips. He heard the warning to stop, the voice louder and more strident than before; he was so close they thought they had him. In the middle of the third round of warnings he heard a satisfying explosion. *At least two tires*, he thought.

Behind him he heard shouts. He didn't wait for the first shot but gunned the engine and drove away as quickly as possible.

Tom walked through the hospital corridor to Terrance's room. He was somewhat disoriented from the medication they'd given him. Numb was good after the last twenty four hours. He'd gone back and forth between periods of reasonable stability and intense depression. And it wasn't only the rhinos. Whatever had attacked his body had made him sensitive to the feelings of other animals and even, to a lesser extent, humans. There were still odd background sensations that assailed him, but, with the help of the medicine he was able to control his emotions.

Terrance was a different story. He lay in a hospital bed in a stupor. While he was able to speak, he was in pain both physically and mentally. As he entered his friend's room Tom wondered if there would be conversation or just a period of him sitting by the man's bedside as he slept. To his relief, Terrance looked up as he came in. His friend tried to smile but it looked more like a grimace.

"Tommy," Terrance said softly. His voice was breathy and his speech slurred. "Excuse my speech. I've got an IV that is supplying me with some sort of happy juice."

"Feeling any better?"

"Yes. Though I suspect it's the medication that's responsible."

"We'll beat this, Terry. Give us a few weeks and we'll be back at Kruger."

Terrance closed his eyes. "Do you really think that's realistic?"

"Why not!"

"Did you feel that grief last night? Do you know where that came from?"

"Well...I can't think of anything but the rhino we killed. And...well this is just a theory but I think it also came from other rhinos. I think they felt that rhino die the same way we did."

"I agree. That's my point. Do you think we can just go back out there? A repeat of the same symptoms aside, are you going to forget those feelings?"

"Well...no. Probably not. But once we get used to it..." He smiled. "And with the help of Johnny Walker, I think we can make it."

Terrance remained silent for a good minute. Just as Tom was about to fill the verbal void, Terrance spoke. "Why did you cut off the mission with only one rhino?"

“Do you have to ask? It was you. I had to get you to a doctor.”

“Right. So what’s the difference between the grief you felt for the rhino and the fear you felt for me.”

“They’re rhinos.”

“I can’t see the difference any more. It was easy to kill them when they were dumb animals. But I know what they are.” He was silent for a few more seconds. “Eighteen,” he said finally.

“You said that before. What does it have to do with anything?”

“I can’t really translate all the feelings I got from them. I felt some things that might be memories. I think I felt a memory of fear as a family of Rhinos ran from a predator. I felt something that had to do with mating. But I also have these odd ideas. Eighteen? It’s important to them. I think it’s some form of numerology, something basic to their existence, like a greeting. In some ways I think they may be more intelligent than we are. It’s hard to compare because the standards are different. I’m not sure I know what rhino intelligence is. But I think I’ve experienced it.” He shook his head. “Eighteen.”

Tom snorted. “Come on, Terry. You felt some weird shit. And it’s knocked you off your perch. Do you think this will last forever?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter to me. I can’t kill another rhino. I know what it means now.”

“You’re kidding me. This is how we make our living. What other way can we make money like this?”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something. Perhaps security. We’re both ex-military. There’s a lot of money in consulting.”

“And we get ourselves killed.”

“It’s just an idea.”

“So you just going to give up?”

“That sounds like I’m just being pissy. I’m not giving up. I’m deciding I can’t kill rhinos. I doubt it would be any different with elephants. Has it occurred to you that this is not a disease? More likely a drug of some kind.”

“It occurred me to me.”

“How are Martinez and Katz?”

“Martinez started to have nasty headaches about an hour after he started the drive back to Johannesburg He’s being kept overnight by the doctors. His symptoms are close enough to ours. Katz is having bouts of dizziness.”

Tom sat down in a chair by Terrance’s bed and ran his hand through his hair. “I guess I still have Katz. But it won’t be the same. I can’t really count on him to have my back. He’s a good soldier and a decent shot. But I need a team that’s...adaptive. That’s the best word. Katz doesn’t think on his feet.”

“You may have Martinez. You don’t know.”

“But I don’t have you.”

“No, friend. You don’t.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic. Life will go on. If you want to continue poaching, you can find a team. But you’re already compromised. And there’s no telling whether the people you add to your team will experience when they get out there. If this drug is in the air... Honestly, I think that poaching in Kruger park is a thing of the past.:

“This sucks. I wonder who did this”

“If you found out would it change anything? I guess our brains have been changed. Too late to go back.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Have it your way.”

“What do we do now?”

“We have some money that will carry us for a while.”

“I was saving that for my bid to get my son back.”

“I’m still your friend. We’ll find a way to make money. As I said, this poaching thing is over. If whatever it is gets spread to other parts of Africa, the poaching industry is done.”

“Maybe we should go live with the rhinos.”

“Not a bad idea.”

Tom adjusted his tie for perhaps the tenth time in an hour. It had been years since he had to wear one and he found it unbearable. He and Terrance sat on a bench outside a conference room. They were minutes away from their first presentation. The pitch was for a program of corporate security for a German mega-corporation, in Germany and abroad. The still had Martinez and Katzenberg and, through contacts, they had hired ten other people. Tom leaned back against the bench, his body tense. “I really hate this, Terry.”

“I know. You need to embrace change. What happened happened for a reason.”

Tom grimaced. “How zen.”

“You can be such an asshole.”

“I had a source of income. It’s been taken away from me. This,” he pointed at the conference room, “is an unknown. I hate unknowns.”

“We have skills, Tommy. It will work out.”

“Maybe.”

“Eighteen”.

“Oh god. Not that again.”

“I find it soothing. Like prayer.”

Tom glowered at his friend. Then he laughed. “Okay. Eighteen. Let’s go in.”

Red Queen Check
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

The red gown clung to her body like a second skin. It was apparent to everyone she wore no undergarments. Her short platinum blond hair stood out in strong contrast to her tanned skin. The head of every man in the room turned as she passed. Every woman's head turned as well, some envious, some desirous. Mark turned as she approached and a smile lit his face. He loved it when she came into a room looking like this. All eyes were on her and she was his, all his.

He slipped an arm around her waist, his hand grazing her naked lower back where the silken fabric of her dress ended. With his other hand he gave her a glass of champagne. The bubbles tickled her nose as she lifted the crystal to her moist pink lips and sipped delicately. "Um. That's nice."

Moving his mouth next to her ear he murmured, "It should be nice. It's the best they have." Noting the small lines that had begun to appear around her eyes he frowned slightly. Studying her face closely he saw no additional signs of aging and nodded imperceptibly.

Her eyes blinked slowly, the long, full lashes complimenting the sky blue of the irises. "I wouldn't expect any less."

Turning back to the two gentlemen who stood nearby, Mark introduced her. "My girlfriend, Vayda."

Their arms bumped as each man attempted to shake her delicate, long fingered hand. A sultry, throaty chuckle escaped her full, pouting lips. She was well aware of the effect she had on men and women. She allowed each man to touch her fingertips, gracing them with a flash of her perfect white teeth.

As Mark continued to converse with the two men Vayda gazed around the room, sizing up the other guests. Quite a few caught her eye and nodded, indicating their awareness of her presence. Finally Mark brought his lips close to her ear again, the sultry scent of her perfume that smelled of summer filling his head. "Let's blow this popcorn stand."

Offering him a dazzling smile she allowed her lips to graze his cheek as she whispered, "I definitely feel like blowing something."

Mark felt a swelling in his groin as he waited for the valet to bring his car around. Running his hand up and down Vayda's back he leaned closer allowing the rich musky scent of her to tickle his nose. He held the car door as she slid into the passenger seat, the high slit in her dress opening to reveal a long shapely leg. He noted the valet's eyes travel up that leg and thrilled at the expression of envy that crossed his face.

Once behind the wheel he put the car in drive and guided it out of the parking area. As they rode along the dark and winding road to his ocean view home he laid one hand high on her leg. She spread her thighs slightly, encouraging him to slip his hand between them. He accepted the invitation and delighted at the heat coming from the moistness of her silky panties.

Mark didn't bother to pull into the garage. Leaving the car in the driveway he hurried around to pull Vayda from the front seat and into his arms. They kissed passionately, his hands roaming over her body, eager to feel every inch of her.

"Let's go inside." Her voice was honey, sweet and luxurious in his ears.

Taking her hand, he led her to the front door and inside the darkened front hall. As he turned off the alarm she moved away, heading for the bar in the living room.

"Where are you going?" His voice cracked slightly, his eagerness throbbing against the front of his tailored tuxedo pants.

She tossed her head, then, gave him a sultry smile over her shoulder. "I'm going to make us a couple of drinks."

Following her, he slipped his arms around her waist pulling her back against his obviously aroused front. Nuzzling her ear, he said, "Let's go upstairs."

Vayda wiggled her tight bottom against him. "Go on upstairs and slip into something less restrictive and I'll bring us drinks." Then she bumped her backside against him a little more insistently. "Go on."

Sighing resignedly he headed for the stairs, pulling off his bowtie as he went.

Moving behind the bar, Vayda poured two tumblers of single malt Scotch and added ice to one. Sliding her hand beneath her dress and into her panties she stretched her long fingers inside her vagina and pulled out a tiny vial. Glancing quickly toward the stairs to be certain Mark was not going to reappear, she emptied the contents of the vial into the beverage that didn't contain ice. Stirring it with her finger until it was blended she then carried both glasses up the stairs.

The sound of Mark emptying his bladder reached her ears and for a moment she grimaced, her lips twisting into an unattractive snarl. She quickly regained herself and set his glass on the night table at his side of the bed.

Mark came into the bedroom, naked and semi erect. He reached for her as she darted past him toward the bathroom, her drink in her hand.

"Hey!" He lost his balance and grabbed the side of the dresser to prevent himself from falling.

Vayda giggled. "I need to pee and wash off. I left your drink. Give me a few minutes. I promise it will be worth it."

Slightly annoyed at having to wait, Mark grumbled and went to his side of the bed. His took a long swallow of his drink as he sat down heavily. The sound of running water and Vayda humming drifted into the bedroom. "*She could be such a tease.*" He took another swallow of the Scotch, enjoying the burn as it ran down his throat. But he knew she was right, the wait would be worth it. Her body was glorious, young and firm. He chuckled as he looked down at his own body, middle aged and running to fat in spite of his regular exercise. Still, it didn't matter. He had enough money to get any woman he desired.

Sprawling across the bed some of his drink splashed onto the satin bedspread. "Shit," he swore softly. Sitting up he quickly downed the remainder of his drink and set the glass on the night table. As he was pulling the cover from the bed Vayda returned to the room.

Her body glowed in the low lighting of the room, the bright red of her silk panties contrasting with the shimmery gold of her skin. In a moment she was pushing him back onto the bed, climbing over him, and trailing kisses down the front of his body. The heady and familiar scent of the expensive perfume he supplied her aroused him further, increasing his lust. It was the brand he always bought for his women, the fragrance teasing at the corners of his memory, drawing him back to that very first girl. He had not been attractive in high school and he was far from wealthy in those days. He'd gotten a job cleaning pools for the home owners in the better neighborhoods. There was something delicious about watching the lithe bodies of young, rich girls as they lay in the sun, bodies glistening with oil that smelled of coconut. One hot afternoon he observed them drinking the booze their parents kept out in the bar, unlocked and available but still forbidden.

The combination of heat and alcohol was a prescription for danger. The youngest of the girls, no more than fifteen, her skin smooth as a polished gem stumbled around the pool before tumbling in. He dove in after her and pulled her to safety. They begged him to take her home before their parents returned and found out they had been drinking. They begged, offering

anything he wanted, to help them. He recalled the way he hardened, actually aching at the possibility he could have every one of them if he chose.

They helped him lift the petite semi-conscious girl into the front seat of his truck. She was only fifteen but had the body of a woman. As he drove he watched her out of the corner of his eye. If it hadn't been for the seat belt she would have fallen over. As it was, her firm young breasts strained against the skimpy swim suit top. Eyes half closed she groaned.

He'd asked if she was going to be sick and when she didn't respond he pulled off the road and down a trail that led to the river. The feel of her skin, slick and hot, beneath his hand aroused him further. Ever so gently he loosened the tie of her top and the strings fell. Watching her face closely for any reaction he slipped one of her breasts free and stared at her hard, pink nipple. Even as he undressed her she didn't react. It was only when he moved on top of her and forced himself inside her that she began to resist. Her struggles were feeble, her hands flailing as she tried to push him away. By the time he got to her driveway she had managed to put her swim suit back on. Her tan no longer glowed golden but was pale and pasty, shocked by what had happened. As she reached to open the truck door he'd grabbed her arm. He'd warned her if she said anything he would tell everyone she asked for it; he'd ruin her reputation. Reminding her he had friends and he knew where she lived he added fear for her to life to fear of humiliation. For weeks he would jump when someone knocked at the door, certain she had overcome her panic and revealed what he had done. She never said a word to anyone. He never even knew her name. But he knew that scent; the sweet scent of coconut and vanilla, and the odor of her pussy on his fingers. He didn't wash his hands that night. Instead he laughed to himself when he ate dinner with his parents, taking biscuits from the bowl, using the knife to spread butter, picking fries from his plate and smelling her as his bit into the hot crunchy potato. And that night in his bed as he remembered how she had thrashed beneath him he'd held his fingers beneath his nose as his other hand relived the intense experience.

Groaning loudly he turned himself over to Vayda's attentions. Fueled both by her ministrations as well as his memories his passion grew so intense he felt lightheaded, almost dizzy with desire. Yet his limbs felt oddly heavy and when he tried to tangle his fingers in her hair in order to push her hot mouth where he most wanted it, his arms flopped uncontrollably.

Then she was on him and her heat enveloped him. She was grinning down at him, her eyes like strange blue lights piercing his brain. The room grew blurry and her face seemed to grow larger until it filled his vision, blocking out everything else.

"What the hell is happening?" he wanted to ask, but his mouth and tongue would not move.

She read the question in his eyes and grinned. "Theda DesJardin." The name rolled off her tongue smoothly. Although his expression did not change she knew instinctively what an impact the name made on him.

He heard the name and a dozen thoughts and images filled his head. Theda, the first time he saw her, sixteen years old in a tiny string bikini on the beach. Theda, barely five feet tall, her hair a dark halo around her deeply tanned face. Theda, those piercing blue eyes filled with terror the first time he took her after weeks of controlling his rapidly growing rapacious hunger. Those piercing blue eyes that he realized looked identical to the eyes now staring down at him.

"She was my cousin; she was like a baby sister to me. We were closer than sisters actually. I knew you were pursuing her. I warned her you were dangerous. But she loved the attention, the gifts, the parties. She believed you would help her with a career as a singer. She had a voice like an angel. She was an angel. You chose to still that voice with your disgusting desires. I knew

your money and your dishonest connections would rally to protect you. I knew to attack you with facts would prove fruitless. I also knew your weakness. So I became your weakness.”

Mark felt a sharp pain in his left arm radiating into his chest and his breathing, which had become difficult, became more labored.

Vayda leaned to the side and pulled a long thin knife from beneath the mattress.

“Oh God,” Mark thought in terror, “She’s going to kill me.”

Instead she drew the blade along the inner part of her arm and blood began to run down across his chest and onto the bedclothes, the crimson spreading slowly.

He wondered if she was going to murder him and then commit suicide. Taking the knife she closed the fingers of his left hand around the handle. Dropping the knife onto the bed she proceeded to scratch frantically at his chest and face leaving long red stripes across his flesh. The sharp pain in his chest spread down his arm and he felt as though a fist was lodged beneath his breast bone.

Vayda hopped off the bed and raising her arm above her head she spun in a circle, first to the left, then to the right. Blood flew from the gash on her arm casting a spray of bright red beads around the room as though a ruby necklace had broken into pieces, stones like flying projectiles.

Mark watched the display unable to flinch when slightly salty, metallic drops landed on his parted lips and insinuated themselves into his open mouth.

Breathing heavily now Vayda stopped spinning and ripped her panties from her body, tossing them to one side. Her full lips curled into a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“I could have killed you. But then you would be dead and you would not suffer. Theda suffered. She suffered your vicious attacks. Did you know the medical examiner told us she had not only been raped in every way possible, she had also been penetrated by large objects.” Pointing at his limp phallus she laughed. “It certainly wasn’t that pitiful thing which couldn’t give pleasure to a flea. Is that why you chose instruments?”

Vayda’s voice seemed to be coming from a distance and her form was surrounded by a wavering outline. “I’m dying,” Mark thought. All sound was gone then. All sight no more than a memory.

When Mark’s eyes fluttered open he had no idea how much time had passed. Struggling to a sitting position he looked around for Vayda. She was gone. All that remained was the carnage she’d created; broken lamps, overturned chairs, streaks of drying and dried blood. He swung his shaking legs out of the bed and stumbled to the bathroom. Catching sight of himself in the mirror he felt fury building. She had clawed him leaving shocking red streaks across his chest and face. He touched them lightly, his fingertips tentatively exploring the wounds. “Bitch!” he thought furiously. “I’ll find her and beat her to a pulp. When I’m finished with her, no man will look at her with anything but disgust.”

As he reached toward the medicine chest to find some ointment he heard a crashing sound from downstairs. Eyes narrowed, he rushed from the bathroom to catch her destroying his home, his beautiful home. “I’m coming!” He roared as he burst from the bedroom.

Mark stopped short at the top of the stairs seeing several policemen, guns drawn, climbing toward him. They were already aiming for him, the shouted announcement of his arrival warning them. “Hands above your head and turn around slowly,” one of the men instructed.

“You don’t understand,” Mark began. The chest pain caught him once again and all the air seemed to leave his body in a whoosh. He reached up with his right hand to rub his left arm. A look of curiosity lit his bulging eyes.

“Sir! Place your hands on your head and turn around slowly.” The man commanded more sternly. The cop had seen that bulgy eyed stare before. It usually signified a cornered criminal was getting ready to do something stupid.

As Mark opened his mouth to protest again he was hit with fifty thousand volts of electricity. His body spasmed as he fell to the floor close to the top step. Suddenly he was sliding and jerking his way down toward the policemen who were quickly moving backwards. The entire scene was almost comical as the naked man danced down the stairs obscenely and the battle-garbed police fell over one another in an effort to avoid contact with him. Reaching the bottom of the stairs two of the policemen at the rear of the descending mass tripped over one another and fell awkwardly, one atop the other. One man leaped over the railing and landed indelicately on the highly polished floor, sliding several feet on his ass before flipping over and coming to a hard stop against the wall. The other two officers managed to scatter away from the tangle at the foot of the stairs leaving room for Mark to come to a full and deadly halt, his head twisted at a peculiar angle, one leg bent crookedly, a bone protruding boldly through stretched skin. He had stopped his gruesome boogie and now lay still, staring blankly through the railing at the cop who was struggling to remove his helmet and swearing loudly.

One of the men who had avoided the jumble of bodies pulled off his helmet shouting, “Shit, shit, shit!” at the top of his lungs. Whether this was an expression of anger or a comment on the stream of feces and urine that trailed down the stairs behind Mark is still in question. Whatever he meant by the exclamations, the fact was Mark was definitely deceased.

Within thirty minutes the house was flooded with crime scene investigators searching for evidence of the crime that had been reported hours earlier. Evidence of the bloody struggle in Mark’s bedroom seemed to give confirmation to the account of the murder of Mark’s vivacious girlfriend Vayda. While there was no body, there was more than enough blood and debris to confirm something deadly had occurred in the shambles of the bedroom. Bullet holes were discovered in the wall behind the bed, a large and bloody machete type weapon was found in the bathroom. The bathtub appeared to have been recently cleaned and there was a strong odor of bleach in the air. In spite of the scrubbing, blood spatter remained on the exterior of the tub as well as the base of the toilet and on the dark tiles.

No information would be forthcoming from the presumed to be innocent suspect. However, his threatening response to the police virtually confirmed what the police emergency operator had been told. Someone had heard screams in the still night along with breaking glass and what sounded like gunshots. A while later a car was heard speeding down the road that led away from Mark’s home. The caller speculated either the house was being robbed or someone was being killed.

A car had been dispatched and the two officers found Mark’s Mercedes parked haphazardly in front of the house, which was ablaze with lights. Knocking on the door they received no response and called for back-up.

As the sky began to lighten, casting thin streaks of pink and melon above the dark ocean, neighbors gathered on their lawns, murmuring questions and speculating answers.

Reporters with cameras and television trucks were stopped at the foot of Mark’s driveway. Some stood, microphones in hand, as they related what little they knew of the events that had occurred in the home of the well-known millionaire. While far from being the wealthiest man in the world, he was rich enough to make the news worthy of an early morning bulletin.

Mark's funeral was a spectacle. His long ignored daughter Gennifer didn't know any of the people who attended other than his lawyer. Within four hours of Mark's death Sweetner, MacMillian, and Jones represented by old man Sweetner himself was on the phone. She acted appropriately shocked. In some ways she was shocked. She had no remorse and no regrets; in fact she experienced a sensation of relief. He'd abandoned her and her mother years before, but not before he'd introduced his then ten-year-old daughter to his depraved world of sexual deviance. When threats of financial ruin were presented to her mother the woman had signed a statement agreeing she would not reveal what she had seen one hot summer day when she'd returned from a trip to the spa. Money managed to dull the memory of her daughter's frightened and stricken expression and the image of her husband rising from between the child's legs. He hadn't even attended her mother's funeral, instead leaving his eighteen-year-old daughter to deal with the arrangements.

Lenore, no longer Vayda but returned to her true identity, also attended the funeral standing well back in the crowd of mourners. Her hair was now its natural blue-black topped by a small black hat with a veil that discreetly covered much of her face. Without the stiletto heels she always wore when socializing with Mark she was six inches shorter. The breast implants had been removed along with the layers of makeup and she appeared much smaller and younger. She was lost in the crowd just the way she wanted. Her eyes scrutinized the throng from downcast eyes.

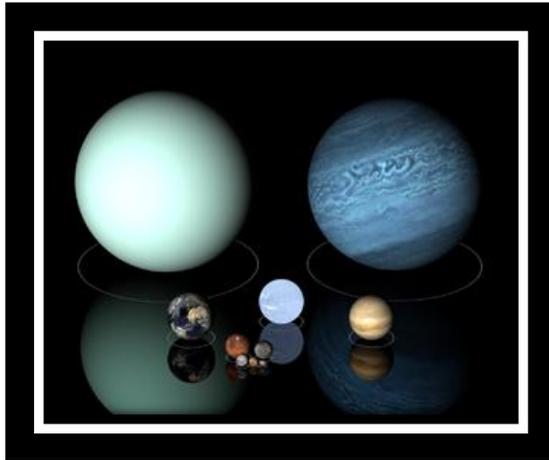
Gennifer's eyes also passed over the crowd; men accompanied by beautiful young women. How many of these wealthy men were as immoral as the man who lay in the ornate casket covered with blossoms? She had no idea there was a woman in that mass of mourners who could easily have answered that question.

The heady scent of the assortment of flowers was making Gennifer nauseous. Several times she felt lightheaded. If anyone had noticed she would have explained she was overcome with sadness. Scanning the crowd her stomach tightened.

The media covered the funeral not only because of Mark's wealth and reputation as a great negotiator but because of the scandal surrounding his death. Although lawyers had attempted to conceal the horrors found in his home, copies of letters, photographs of very young girls, DVDs of bondage and S & M, and pictures of the crime scene were leaked to every type of media. While the case of his missing girlfriend, Vayda, remained unsolved most people suspected he had done away with her. Perhaps she'd discovered his stash of pornography and his taste for very young girls. In his mid-forties he still lusted after girls as young as fourteen. News reporters speculated she had threatened to expose him.

In the end Gennifer used a large portion of his money to set up a residence for women who were escaping abusive husbands; men who had sexually abused their children and beaten their wives. Lenore was lying on the beach when she read about the girl's generosity in the paper. It pleased her to know Gennifer had done so. She expected the girl would have done something similar. After all Lenore had seen the Polaroid photos of the girl child who stared into the camera lens, eyes filled with fear and pain. Setting the newspaper down by her chair she leaned back and closed her eyes. The air was filled with the sounds of children playing in the surf and the laughter of a group of girls who sunbathed nearby. "Rest in peace my Theda." She did not see the gull that rose high in the sky, dipping its wings in gratitude before flying out over the waves and celebrating its freedom.

In Other Worlds



Weather the Storm
Neil Newton

Dr. Messenberg slapped some papers on his desk in front of me. “I suppose you knew you’d get this,” he grumbled.

I just smiled. Being the star of the linguistics department I usually got what I wanted. I had to admit this grant was a bit more spectacular than anything I’d previously proposed. It was, by all standards, the linguistic study to trump all past linguistic studies.

I was at the end of a long line of dialect geographers, all searching for the secret of how a dialect is contained in a geographical area. Like any fringe discipline dialect geography has become an orgy of different core subjects coming together to create...something. Geographers, socio-linguists, linguists, statisticians, economists. The works. I’d been handed a major mystery. Though most laymen were convinced that American English was leading toward total standardization, thanks to the English used by television talking heads, the reality was that there was a previously unexplainable mystery that had all linguists talking. It was a vowel shift, a strange pronunciation of a vowel that had no known origin. It hadn’t come from any source anyone could identify.

While I know that dialect geography isn’t exciting and hearing about this epic mystery would make most people’s eyes glaze over, the truth is that for those that study mankind, it is a fascinating change in the history of how our languages work.

I look at my work this way: In a world of chaos, lack of cohesion, entropy and other forces, what makes people speak with the same dialect in a geographical area? What’s an even better question is, what forms the borders between those areas? Is it a gradual change or are there sharp geographical divisions in dialect?

What makes a phrase spoken by one person become part of slang that is on everyone’s lips within a year? Why is all soda called *pop* in some places and *coke* in other places? Why would certain soci-economic classes of people rather die than leave off the final “g” in words ending with “ing”? These mysteries reflect our history and our culture and tell the story of a nation.

And why would a small part of the population suddenly pronounce a vowel differently for no apparent reason? What historical forces made this happen? I was going to find out.

It’s been a question that has plagued all dialect geographers. And I’d developed a mathematical model to explain the way accents morph into a new dialect across a physical geographical plain. Unlike many of my predecessors, I’d injected a strong dose of economics into my model, treating areas like Chicago differently than a small city like Mobile. A large metropolitan area that has people commuting to work from miles away does its magic on a much wider area of people in terms of their dialect.

I’d decided that I’d put my model to a real test. Up till then I had done some dry runs, targeting small areas of perhaps thirty miles. This time I would show my stuff. I knew that I’d be hated, both for my success and my arrogance. I was used to that. Solving the mystery of the odd vowel pronunciation in only a few states would be my ticket to scholarly fame.

My life didn’t start with the success I’d experienced in academe(?). My childhood was what I’d have to call average until I was seven when I started having headaches which recurred several times a week. They only became worse as time went by. When I began having mild hallucinations my mother, a nurse, decided that things were serious. She was proved right; they found a benign tumor that was still small enough to be removed without significant damage.

The surgery was a success, but I was never to be the same. The headaches continued though I was able to fight them off with migraine medicine. The hallucinations, which had been horrific before the operation, became an occasional problem. But they never completely disappeared. When they would plague me, I'd spend a day or two seeing people that weren't there. Usually they were people I'd never seen before, but occasionally I'd see a face I'd see a face repeated. That made me think the people were real. Despite my panic, it was easy for my parents to pass it off as the after effects of my surgery and they'd ignore my childish expressions of fear in the way adults do. "They're only dreams," my mother would say. My father would tell me to stop being silly. "It's your vivid imagination." They ignored my complaints of flashing lights, long tunnels, and the peculiar halos that sometimes surrounded the heads of these strangers in my mind. As a child I had no reference to describe the odor of what I later came to identify as sulfur.

I walked out of the humanities building into a beautiful spring day. I'd been obsessing about the logistics of the study. In my mind was a map of the study area, with the city as a node in the middle and growing areas of suburban settlement moving out from the center. I played out the gradual changes in accent and language elements, seeing the changes in language that I knew would be there.

Like an expectant father I hurried to the computer center to run the model, even though I knew what the results would be. I walked back to the terminal room and brought up the program; for the sake of shaking out any problems it was being run over a small sample of test data taken from a small city sixty miles from the university. The program had been developed to show language change over a geographical area. This rendered the results as shifting colored lines. I could see the geographical area we were targeting as a series of lines moving across from the inner city to the outlying areas. The lines changed colors as the dialect of one area morphed slowly to the next incrementally changed dialect of a new geographical node. The change was gradual, moving through all the gradations, through the primary colors and the non-primary colors. There was an expected series of color change if the model was working correctly, something I knew would happen, this being the tenth time I'd run it this week.

I smiled as I saw everything moving according to plan. I was keeping the model in my head, following it as I'd done many times. Then I heard someone call to me. I turned to see one of my students. We waved and I turned back to the screen.

To my horror something had gone terribly wrong. The one color I didn't want to see was pink. That meant the model had failed. And all of the lines, the entire study, was a bright pink that screamed failure. I had run this model on computers a hundred times. I had played it out in my head repeatedly. I leaned back and felt a wave of dizziness come over me and I knew in a second that a headache was coming on. While I rarely got headaches, the sad fact was that what constituted a headache for me made the worst migraine seem tame.

I ran to my car, falling into the driver's seat and immediately reaching for my pills in the glove compartment. I pulled out a bottle of water and downed the pills quickly, hoping I could stave off the worst of the headache.

I sat there, colors washing across my sight. A ghost image of my model floated at the edge of my vision, still an accusatory pink. It was time to go; I started the car and raced out of the parking lot.

I didn't go in to the office the next day. I had to start interviewing my linguistic research interns if the study was to start on time. As I lay in bed, I began to see colors in my right eye. It was a migraine plus whatever leftovers remained from my surgery. The pain was tolerable, thanks to some excellent medication. I tried my best not to think of my timetable for the project and all the people I wasn't interviewing that day.

I could handle pain; I was so used to it. What was really eating at me was my odd experience with my model. It was foolproof; we'd tested it in computer simulations and it gave the same results no matter who ran it. So why did it fail? Or did it fail? Was the complete shutdown of the model due to my surgery years ago? I'd had hundreds of episodes where I stood with people and saw something that no one else saw, usually followed by a headache. Maybe it was just a biological anomaly in my brain. I'd spent my whole life in fear that somehow my surgery would ruin me. No more star of the linguistics department. No more grants. No more lordling it over my jealous and belligerent brother at Christmas.

My brother had been a sore subject all my life. He'd laughed when he heard I was going into linguistics, saying, "You'll be eating beans for the rest of your life. That's if you get a job teaching in the first place." It had been sweet going back home in the last few years, wearing a Rolex watch and driving a Mercedes. Being a prodigy, writing books, working for computer companies on their voice recognition software, and guest speaking had changed my life completely. My brother had a used tire store. He had thought it would make him a bundle and that he'd be able to open a hundred stores, becoming the tire king of Philadelphia. Somehow it had never worked out. I knew it ate at him.

When I'd come home from the hospital as a child I'd spent quite a while with bandages on my head, going to physical therapy and being generally creepy. My brother called me Frankenstein for years, even when the surgery was a distant memory. Being a big success gave me a chance to look him in the eye and laugh. I was getting mine back.

The next day I was almost functional. Even if I hadn't been pain free, I'd have gone in. There was a brief time window for this study; it had to be up and running within a short time. That meant that I had to start interviewing students for the positions I'd have to fill. Dialect changes had to be tracked over a geographic area. Each of my interns would have to work with other interns to track the various changes in language as the team moved across the geographical area of the study.

I went into the office early and ran my model again. No problems; it was perfect. I ran it again three times before I convinced myself that the failure was due to an anomaly. I lay back in my chair and closed my eyes, drifting off into a state of semi-sleep. Suddenly there was a knock on my door that shattered the uneasy reverie I had fallen into. I opened my eyes and took a deep breath. I knew I had to be on my game for these interviews. Even one unperceptive turd could ruin the study with incorrect data and inept conclusions. There would be very little time to remedy any mistakes made. These interns had to hit the ground running.

My first interviewee was a young woman who I'd had in my semantics class. Her movements were quick and jerky, a twitchy type. She looked at me with a face full of earnestness as I sat down behind my desk. I immediately disliked her; I wasn't a fan of idealism

but I needed interviewers so I put my bias aside. I saw that she held the abstract of the study; it was dog-eared and ruffled, giving me the impression that she'd attempted to memorize it. I winced.

I looked down at her references. "Susan Boyd. I see that you've read the abstract. What do you think makes you the type of person to be an interviewer in this study? I'll start by saying that we have a really small window of time. We aren't in position to perform re-dos on gathering this information. It could kill the entire study. Now what do you see as your role?"

She straightened her back. "I thought about this last night. I would suggest the use of minimal pairs combined with readings of" "Hold it. Did you read the abstract?"

"Several times."

"Did you read the part about the importance of commuting to work daily to the city from semi-rural areas? Did you read the part about retirees moving to the rural areas from out of state? The socio-economic characteristics of the speaker?"

Her nose twitched. I found that very disturbing. "Yes. I did read that. But the classical field work emphasizes the interviewing process"-

"I'm aware of the importance of the interviewing process. Of course we have to interview people to measure change in dialect over a geographical area. But I know that in the abstract I emphasized a more agile approach, including elements of socio-linguistics and economics. Not just vanilla pronunciation issues and vowel shifts. This is a bit more subtle than the classic interviewing techniques you learned about in Linguistics 101."

I suddenly had the awful feeling that she was going to cry. Her mouth twitched. "I would really appreciate the opportunity to work with you. You're considered the most cutting edge scholar in the field. I realize that I have a lot to learn but I will read the abstract again and make sure that I look for the elements that you're seeking."

I'm not big on politeness which has been my downfall in the past. In the end the supply of potential interns wasn't large. While I wanted to tell this oh so sincere soi-disant scholar that she wasn't intelligent or experienced enough to tell the difference in dialect between a Chinese monk and a southern Baptist, I had to be realistic. *She can be taught*, I told myself, not quite believing it.

I interviewed five more. One was perfect; the rest not so wonderful. Susan Boyd was right. My work was cutting edge. But as good as that was, it also guaranteed that the average linguistics student was more than likely to misunderstand what I was trying to establish with this study.

What caused my department chairman to fall in love with me was the basis of the study. Though for most people linguistics is like watching paint dry, for linguists I was chasing after the holy grail. Consider this: most people believe that American English is becoming standardized across geographical boundaries. Put in simpler terms, the idea is that watching the news, movies and television would drum the standard American dialect into everyone's head until, eventually, all Americans would sound approximately the same.

But nature abhors a vacuum. Sometime in the mid-twentieth century there was significant change in the pronunciation of certain vowels in five Mid-west states. This was not caused by the talking heads on the news; the variation in the way this vowel is pronounced is different than the dialect laymen call "American Standard", the dialect used by new anchors.

So why was this happening? No one knows. And what I have in mind is to find the geographical boundaries of this linguistic oddity. And once I do, I can use statistical analysis to find the most likely source of the vowel shift, to define what caused it. The implications were enormous: if my model worked well it could be used to analyze other dialect anomalies across the country, or even across the world.

In the end I did choose Susan Boyd. Enthusiasm was better than an indifferent student simply wanting extra credit and a few bucks. There were two more, one a Masters student named Daniel who seemed to get the idea of the study, the other a linguistics student close to getting his M.S. His name, Spike, worried me until I found that he was more than able to follow the basis of my study, I took them to dinner a few days before we left for our jumping off point in western Wisconsin. That would be the place that we'd staked out as the western edge of the vowel shift.

I watched them closely as we worked at our Thai food. Any kind of conflict could make a study into a nightmare. Data collection takes focus and petty spats can make that into oatmeal. Though the outcome was still murky, I was happy to see that this crew was getting along. Susan Boyd seemed like she was in heaven, trading witty repartee with two male students way above her level. By her second glass of wine she was laughing and, to my great disgust, flirting with Daniel, the graduate student.

I was drinking scotch, the drink of writers and intellectuals. As I watched the three of them I got a strange sensation in my head. It wasn't like a migraine coming on but more like some of the sensations I'd had after my surgery when I was a kid. I saw the far wall recede and then rush forward as though it was going to hit me in the face. The three students became indistinct, going in and out of focus.

What came next scared me. I saw people who were not in the restaurant, popping in and out of existence every other second. I took a good gulp from my scotch, hoping it would clear my head, but my phantom guests continued their disappearing and reappearing act. I stared at them though they didn't seem to notice me. Not a strange thing for non-existent men and woman to do.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked.

"Uh...yes. Fine"

"You look strange."

"I always look strange." I did my best to smile while I watched my phantom friends act like Christmas lights.

"I'm just wondering if you need to go home. There's no color in your face."

I had been staring at the phantoms the whole time. I was scared but not half as scared as I was about to be. One of them got an odd look on his face. He popped out and when he returned, he was pointing at me. In seconds all of them were staring back at me. Another pointed in my direction.

I stood up quickly, knocking over my scotch. The three students stared at me. I was breathing hard, looking away from my phantoms in the hope that shaking my head would make them go away.

I looked up slowly. I got a brief glimpse of them. In that second I saw the one that had pointed at me move his hand laterally. And that was the last thing I saw for the next few hours.

I woke up in the hospital. My first image was of a nurse standing over me. I sat up with a jerk, the fear I'd felt just before I'd passed out still at work in my mind.

"Whoa!" the nurse said. "You need to lie back. We don't know what's wrong with you."

For a second I debated whether I should tell her that I'd seen phantom people while I was eating green curry, just to see the look on her face; in the end I decided that they needed to know what had happened if they were going to help me. I followed her order and lay back down. "I guess I should tell you I had a brain tumor as a child. I've had odd...episodes all my life. Nothing much lately. Tonight I saw-not saw- but it seemed like I saw people in the restaurant. They faded in and out from my sight. They weren't there. I know that."

She stood stock still for a second. "I'm going to get the doctor".

Ten minutes later a doctor walked into the room. He pulled up one of the visitor's chairs and sat near to my bed. "Nurse Cortez told me what you told her. I appreciate the honesty because we could have taken hours to find out your basic problem. This surgery you had as a child; what were the after effects?"

"Headaches. Sight issues. Hallucinations. Balance problems. I still get mega migraines but not that often."

"What about the hallucinations?"

"Recently? Rarely. Tonight was an unwelcome reminder of my childhood."

"Did you feel pain when you had this hallucination."

"No. Not pain. But it was like there was some pressure in my head and I felt disoriented."

"I think that we'll need to do an MRI. I'm sure there are some physical abnormalities in your brain from the surgery."

"But why now after all these years?"

He spread his hands. "The brain is still mostly unknown territory. Changes take place in everyone's brain as they grow. In your case there's probably some damage that is being exacerbated by any number of factors as you get older."

"Oh god. I thought I was done with this."

"I wouldn't panic if I were you. Remember that you had hallucinations. You didn't have a hemorrhage or sight loss. Have you been under a lot of stress lately?"

"Frankly...yes."

"It could be that. Let us do the MRI and we'll see."

"Is there a chance the tumor could have regrown?"

"Possible but unlikely. You went through this the first time so you'll remember. The symptoms of having a large tumor are a little more spectacular than one anomaly involving hallucinations."

"Okay."

He put his hand on my arm. "I wouldn't worry. Let's see what we find."

For those that have never experienced an MRI, it's like sitting near a bad conga circle that can't keep time. The sounds that you have to endure are awful, much like someone is outside the machine with a hammer. What's worse is that you can't move enough to make yourself more

comfortable. Forty-five minutes of this hell before I was able to get up and stretch my legs.

I went back to setting up the study, meeting daily with the three students to go over the plan. For Susan, in her inexperience, I had to emphasize the use of intuition and statistical methods to validate that our results were significant. I was happy to see that she seemed to be becoming more relaxed and even brought some good ideas to the table. Considering my health issues I was going to have to rely heavily on the judgment of my interviewers.

A week later I met with my doctor. I found that I was more nervous than I thought I would be. It had been years since my tumor had been an issue and I supposed that I was living in denial, thinking that I was over the hard part when I had no reason to believe that. Over the previous week I had remembered things that my doctors had said when I was child about possible “complications”. Somewhere along the line I had buried my fears and ignored the possibilities. Undoubtedly this was due to my parents influence and their own fears of admitting their child was less than healthy.

I sat down across the desk from my doctor. He studied me, his face darkening. “Are you okay?”

“This is very undignified. As you may have realized I’m not very tolerant of frustration. People often find me irritating. This *problem* threatens my work and my reputation.”

I became more annoyed because he laughed. “Excuse me,” he said. “Most of my patients are consumed by fear. That’s a perfectly reasonable reaction. . You just seem pissed off.”

“Let’s just say I’ve had it with the whole brain tumor thing. I was a freak when I was a kid. My own brother picked on me mercilessly. I’ve made a name for myself and want the brain tumor and any residual effects to just go away.”

“I understand. Really. I was a nerd as a child. I know what demons little kids can be. But I think you should feel relieved. I’ve looked over the MRI results and I can’t see that there has been any degradation in your brain’s structure near the site of the surgery; your brain has healed well. I got to look at your imaging from when you were a child. I can’t see any problems. If there was a consistent, growing change in your brain you’d have far more serious episodes than one hallucination. If there was a real problem it would have manifested itself by now.”

“So what was the *manifestation* I experienced the other night?”

“Stress. Indigestion. Sinus issues. You do have a volatile region in your brain. It will show itself when other factors enter the picture.”

“So what is your prognosis?”

“I would guess that you may have episodes like this again in your life but not often. You should go ahead and continue making your name in your field.”

I snorted. “I guess I have to accept that.”

“Are you unhappy? Would you rather that I told you that your tumor has returned?”

“Onward, ever onward!” I answered. “Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die.” I smirked. “Is that positive enough for you?”

“Glass half empty, eh?”

“Being a freak and missing school for two years has a negative effect on the psyche”.

“Understandable. A lot of my patients don’t have a good outlook on life.”

We stared at each other for a moment. “Well, I would like to have you come back in a month to check on you. You never know about these things.”

“I suppose.” I had to love this doctor. He encouraged me on one hand and covered his ass on the other.

I left feeling angry. I didn't have any reason to be. It seemed I was okay. Yet I started having feelings I hadn't had since I was a child; feelings I had suppressed for years and was now being reminded of.

My medical issues had put me back a few days; I flew out to Madison to meet my team. The previous couple of days they had been interviewing people according to my schedule. There were recordings I had to go over. I got there at night and was so bummed out that I just went to sleep, not being my usual bulldog self. Susan Boyd wanted to show me what she had accomplished and was crestfallen when I begged off from drinks in the hotel bar and went to bed.

The next morning my mood wasn't much better. I had had nightmares the night before, something that had plagued me as a child. I was hoping that as long as I hung on, things would go back to normal. I hadn't realized how much I'd enjoyed being a star at something. It had eclipsed the sickly freak I'd been as a child.

I did my best to put my mind on auto-pilot. I'd hidden my anger and disgust with humanity all my adult life by playing a part. I could do it again. My team came to my room. I ordered room service that included two bottles of wine. I wanted to maintain the image that we were elite; that this was a party for our success, even though we hadn't succeeded yet.

I lay on my bed and listened to the interviews. In this phase of the study we were concentrating on what I felt to be the most fascinating part of the vowel shift. Think of the word cat. We learn in school that the vowel sound in that word is a short "a". It's the same sound in words like "that" or "bat". What had happened in several areas from western New York State to western Wisconsin was that many people had started, during the sixties, to pronounce the word "cat" like "Key-et": two syllables where only one actually exists, with a long "e" sound inserted in the first syllable.

Not quite a phenomenon with the reach of the Russian revolution, but a mystery none the less. Why did this happen? No one was sure. But I would be certain once I gathered all the data. I would trace the change back in time using data collected over decades. And I'd find the "patient zero" that had brought this change to the English Language.

Each recording was preceded by a short verbal introduction by the interviewer, usually highlighted by some condescending remarks about the interviewee. "If he had four teeth I'd be surprised". "She made dinner table decorations out of light bulbs. She wrote down directions on how to make them, like we cared."

I smiled. Condescension always brought up my spirits. I followed the geographical trail in my mind as I heard each recording. I knew when and where these recordings were taken; it was part of a line west out of the Madison metropolitan area. The first ten or so recordings had the characteristic vowel shift. The word "That" became "The-yet", the "y" sounding like a long "e".

Around the sixth recording I started to get odd sensations in my head. What alarmed me most is that these were the same sensations I'd experienced in the restaurant a little over a week before. I'd been visualizing the pattern of dialect change in my head. As expected the odd vowel shift had begun to weaken slightly as the interviews moved west. Then there was a sharp pain and I heard an accent that, to my trained ear, sounded like an east Tennessee dialect.

I sat up suddenly. "Where did that come from?" I asked my team.

Daniel stared at me. "Where did what come from?"

"That fucking accent. Is this a joke?"

“What are you talking about?”

I got a bad feeling. I was good at reading people and Daniel seemed panicked and angry. With my hand shaking, I pointed at the recorder. “Replay that last interview from the beginning.”

Daniel rushed to comply, stealing glances in my direction. He went back to the beginning of the interview and hit play. I heard the interviewer, Susan in this case, asked the subject to say the word “rat”. What I heard was an East Tennessee accent as I had before. No Midwestern vowel shift. Not even close to the right dialect I was expecting. We were in Wisconsin and the interviewee was speaking with the wrong accent entirely.

“You don’t hear that?” I screamed. All three of them jumped up.

Susan put her hands out. “What is wrong, Jeff? It’s the vowel shift, just like we expected.

I felt my world moving out from under me. “It’s an East Tennessee accent!” I screamed again.

Susan’s eyes widened. “What are you saying? We’re not in Tennessee! All the interviews were done here in Wisconsin. Where do you think we are?”

I tried to speak, but what could I possibly say? Either I was being played by all three of them, an unlikely scenario, or I was going insane. Or perhaps my brain was shutting down, finally being consumed by the hole they’d created when they removed my tumor. I could almost see it happening in my head; the angry maw of the surgery site eating the rest of my brain.

I sat down and poured a large scotch and knocked it back in one gulp. That didn’t seem to do any good so I drank another four fingers or so. And then I looked up. I saw the same people I’d seen in the restaurant, the phantoms. Only this time they weren’t popping in and out of existence. They were solid and they were staring at me with horrified looks on their faces. The man who had pointed at me back in the restaurant said something to a woman in the group, in a language I didn’t recognize. Training took over; I began analyzing the language for its characteristics and probable language group. It sounded somewhat guttural. But in the end I realize that it wasn’t similar enough to any language I’d ever heard for me to even coming close to identifying it.

They all walked toward me. “You see us, don’t you?” one of them said.

I smiled. If I was going to go insane I would do it in style. “Scotch?” I lifted my glass, offering to share my libation with them. “This is excellent. Straight from Islay. I recommend it.”

The man who’d pointed at me at the restaurant smiled. “I’m Seth. I think we need to talk.”

“What about my team here. They are,” I’d turned around as I was speaking. My “team” had lain down on the floor and gone to sleep.

“They won’t remember anything. There will be logical narrative in their minds that explains the time they spent on the project. You don’t need to worry about them.”

“If I’m crazy then what does it matter what you say?”

“I can see why you might think that. The best thing to do now is to take you to our offices and explain things to you. I think there will be some relief from hearing the truth.”

“The truth?” I asked. “The truth of my life?”

“Actually, yes.”

I started to pour another drink when Seth waved his hand to stop me. “Just relax.” He smiled. “We have better stuff where were going”.

Before I could say anything I felt a sense of disorientation, as though I was spinning. The next moment found me on what could only be described as a couch. I sat up and Seth stepped into the room. He pulled up a chair and sat next to me. “We put you to sleep before we brought you here. Our method of transportation takes some getting used to. I felt you had gone through enough at that point.”

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“About six hours. You were exhausted.”

“You realize I’m having a debate in my head as to the reality of this. Maybe this is just another hallucination.”

“I think that you’ll find all of this to be real once you recover your...equilibrium.”

“*If* I do re-acquire my equilibrium.”

“We want to help you do that.”

“We?”

“Guess it’s time to spill my guts.”

“It could be useful.”

“Imagine this. Throughout the universe there is a...well I’d have to compare it to the weather. Imagine that stable reality and probability are the base state of all the universe. But like a sunny day with a beautiful blue sky there will come a weather front; cloudy days, rain, hail. So like the coming of a period of bad weather we have a period of what can only be called inconsistent probability. Or changing probability.”

“What?”

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of paper and began shredding it. After a couple of minutes he had a wadded ball of paper, totally shredded. He smiled at me. Then he threw the paper up in the air, letting the pieces fly in different directions.

“Weeeee!” I offered.

“Yes. It is a bit child-like. But I’ll ask you if you see a pattern to the distribution of the pieces.”

“No. That type of thing is, while not quite random, it’s not subject to a strong pattern. Like dice, it’s virtually random.”

“Exactly. Imagine if the whole world was like shreds of paper thrown up in the air. Would there be dialects spoken by millions of people in one area. Or would randomness create what you would call an idiolect for each person. I am using the right word.”

“If you mean that every man, woman and child would have their own way of speaking then you’re using the right word.”

“Yes. In fact it’s possible that everyone would have their own language. And even that wouldn’t be stable. And that’s what the earth is going through now. Dialects, movement, houses, mountains, even people. With varying probability things change, sometimes drastically. This hit the earth around twenty years ago. We can control some of the larger things. We can stop houses from moving or cars from turning into mud; this involves the physical safety of everyone on earth. But there are smaller things that are harder to control. Things of the mind, like language. Or memory. For those things we have to convince your minds that certain things are happening. Ironically one of these things is language. There is the story of Babel in your Bible. Without our help no one would be able to understand each other. In reality, everyone has their own dialect, as long as this probability storm persists.”

“So you’re saying that comprehensible language is an illusion? And we’re being convinced that it is real?”

“Yes. I know that is upsetting to you.”

“What about my friends. My colleagues. Is the linguistics department an illusion? Does it exist?”

“You are guided to believe that it exists. The same with your colleagues. And so it does. We strive to create artifacts like a linguistics department because such things existed before this

probability storm. The reality is that if we didn't look after you, the meaning, purpose, even the members of department might change. Or the department would cease to exist. You'd all wander off to do different things that suddenly became reality for that moment. Or some of you might disappear. This is so complex there's no way I can accurately describe the scope of the problem."

"And you and your friends. Who are you?"

"There is a race of what you define as Aliens. This problem of shifting reality occurs all over the Galaxy, like dark cloud that moves from one place to another. Or should I say, clouds. There is more than one of them. Many races have been destroyed by these clouds. Either they are physically harmed by changes in the topography...rocks grow out of the ground or move killing the inhabitants of a planet. Or changes in the mind cause insanity as reality changes. The race I'm talking about has made it their mission to allow races to mature enough to join the league of races. They saw the potential disaster on earth years before it came. They sent their own here and began to train humans to protect humanity."

"I'm confused. How does this race of Aliens avoid the effects of the changes? Do they create illusions for their own race to keep them from going insane?"

He smiled. "It's a matter of maturity for the race. Once you reach a certain stage in your evolution these reality shifts don't affect you. You create your own reality within the pockets of unreality. It's like having an umbrella in the rain."

"Are you human?"

He laughed. "Of course. I was raised and trained by...we call them Ascendants. Their name in their own language would be difficult for you to pronounce."

"So what happens to me?"

"We can work on your brain. You'd forget everything you've seen. Though there is the risk that it won't work. Yoursurgery when you were a child is the reason you're able to see things that other humans can't."

"Great."

"There's another option. One I hope you'll consider seriously. The work we do for the human race is important. You have a unique perspective. You could help us."

"What could I do?"

"A lot. There are other people like you. Sometimes it isn't even due to an accident or illness. Some people have brains that are constructed oddly and they see pieces of reality. We need those people to help us do our work. You can introduce them to the new reality." He smiled.

I hung my head. He looked at me with what was clearly pity. "You have to give me some time."I croaked. "I can't give you an answer now."

"I didn't expect you would. Why don't you rest? We have a room set up for you. Take a couple of days. If you have any questions, please ask for me."

"Okay."

I was led to a room where I simply lay down. There was a bottle of scotch on a table near the bed but I didn't feel that even alcohol would help me in the state I was in. I lay down on the bed and fell asleep.

I woke up and, looking at the clock, I realized I'd slept for seventeen hours. I went out into the hall; a man I hadn't seen before walked by. "Are you hungry?"

"Actually, yes."

"Let me take you to the cafeteria."

I grunted and let him lead me. There were only a few people in the cafeteria; it seemed I had slept passed lunch. I sat down and they brought me some pasta. I was hungrier than I thought, putting away my meal in ten minutes. Another bowl appeared before me and I got through it in five minutes.

I was licking my bowl when Seth showed up. “Good to see you have an appetite. Have you given any thought to what I discussed with you yesterday?”

“Well it occurs to me that if I decide to go for the mind meld, I’ll be an expert in dialects that don’t exist. A noble pursuit. One worthy of all my education. Which by the way is an illusion as well. I’m not sure I could go back to being an automaton. Could you give me more of an idea what I would have to do for the Ascendants?”

Six months passed quickly. I found that in addition to being taught the truth of how the universe worked, there were modifications done on my mind and body. I wasn’t able to create a personal reality but I could affect people’s thoughts if I needed to protect people from reality. Most of the illusion, including the one that created the perception of language groups, was handled by devices provided by the Ascendants. I would only intervene if it was needed. I couldn’t really call the devices the ascendants used “machines” because they were part living tissue. The complexity of what I was learning was daunting and I sometimes wondered if I wanted to go through with it. I had learned that my training would last for at least a decade. Just about everything I had to learn was so far beyond my understanding that I might as well have been back in kindergarten.

My so-called career in the linguistics department was resolved easily; as far as any of my colleagues and students are concerned, they’d never met me. At first I was horrified at the thought of manipulating people’s memories but after six months of training I learned that fooling my old colleagues was child’s play compared to what was done in an hour by people like Seth. And it was all necessary.

On a whim I took a walk through a shopping mall to listen to the dialects being used. I was horrified for the first few minutes. I was able to access their thoughts and could follow their conversations but the reality was a mess; it was like a thousand languages were being spoken in that one area, there was no consistency between the languages, no Germanic or romance group. There was only a mess of random noise that meant something to the speaker. I found my former linguistic expertise, or my pretention of expertise, embarrassing.

I tried to console myself with the knowledge that I was really going to accomplish something with my new work and that I was no longer a puppet. Yet somehow I still found myself harboring a small resentment that I’d been allowed by the universe to fool myself into thinking I was a rising star in my world and that it was all a lie.

I felt a now familiar sensation. No, not the result of my brain surgery. It was a “come hither” from Seth. He wanted to discuss my progress and where I might be most useful. I wasn’t able to transport myself, yet. I had to live with the indignity of having to ask someone to do it for me. I smiled at the vestiges of my overblown pride and wondered if it would ever go away.

From Where I Come
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

She was barely visible in the semi-darkness beneath the stairs. I wondered if she could see me more clearly than I could see her. The basement was warm, the air moist and malodorous. The slightly unpleasant smell of damp earth and sweating concrete mingled with the sour odor of my perspiration. I inhaled deeply trying to catch her scent wondering if she smelled my fear, because I was frightened.

“From where I come it is hot but not so wet.” A sound like a chuckle traveled through the darkness.

I imagined wide expanses of deserts beneath a hot sun. Heat wasn't my preference, dry or damp. I came from the northern United States, a small town outside of Chicago, where temperatures rarely topped eighty degrees. Of course this was the norm since the polar ice caps had begun melting and filling the oceans with colder water. Shorelines changed, lakes and rivers expanded, and temperature shifts occurred worldwide.

My throat was dry and my voice sounded rough as I said, “I come from a colder region. I prefer it. This heat is beyond unpleasant. I miss the snow.” I stopped speaking, wondering what had promoted me to converse comfortably with the enemy.

“Snow? You have seen this? You have touched this?” The voice was higher in pitch now and filled with a childlike wonder. “Tell me of it.”

Leaning my head against the sweating concrete column I closed my eyes. “It's white. When the snows come everything is white and clean and pure. As it falls it's like shiny crystals you can catch on your tongue.”

“They have a...” the voice hesitated as the stranger sought the correct word, “...a flavor? It is like food?”

I laughed softly. “No, not like food. It's like very cold and clear water. There is no taste. Sometimes we get pails full and pour cream over it and call it snow cream.”

“So you ingest this for nourishment?”

The idea of snow cream as nourishment made me laugh louder. “No it's strictly for pleasure.”

A peculiar crackling sound came from the corner and I lifted my weapon anticipating an attack. The crackling wasn't indicative of a threat; my opponent was laughing as well. “We do not have sufficient foods for pleasure. Here you have many options. I would like to taste for pleasure.”

Outside the sounds of battle grew louder for a few moments and we both sat in silence waiting to see if we would be joined by others forces. After a while the noise faded away and we were once again enveloped in the dim cocoon of the cellar.

“Is that why you are invading? Do your people need food?” We had suspected for some time that lack of food was one of their motivators.

Now the sound that came from the corner was a sort of breathy gasping. Was the enemy crying? I shook my head. I couldn't allow myself to feel sympathy. This could all be some sort of trick to lure me out so I could be exterminated, or worse yet captured. There had been rumors of how captives were treated and everyone in my platoon agreed we would rather be killed than taken.

“Yes. It is why we come. Our children are sickly, not thriving. Those that survive are weak and barely able to hold their heads up. Their brains, they do not grow and they cannot comprehend. We are dying.”

“Why don’t your leaders meet with ours and explain. I’m sure…”

The voice turned harsh and rough. “It was attempted and denied. No talks they were said.”

I thought of my babies back home. I hadn’t seen them in months. Birthdays had passed and I only had wavering images on my telecom to see their smiling faces. Did my enemy have babies?

“Not speaking? Something is wrong?” I noticed the side of her arm and the corner of her helmet and for a moment thought to take a shot. I didn’t have the heart. By the time I’d realized the foolishness of my hesitation she had ducked back beneath the stairs.

“I was thinking of my children.” Silence met my comment. I waited a few heartbeats then asked, “Do you have children?”

A snuffling sound followed by what sounded like a cough. “I had one. Frail he was. Not long he lived. No more now. No more little ones.”

Did that mean she had no other children or did it mean she couldn’t have more children? How could I ask? Before I could compose the question she continued, her voice raspy.

“You have more than one? And the genders are the same?”

“I have a boy and a girl. My boy turned two and my daughter turned 3 last month.”

Again there was silence and I figured she was calculating the ages. I was wrong.

“Males we keep at home for safety as leaders. Females are for battle. Not so smart.”

We had also heard rumors of this in the ranks. It was very different in our culture. Women were as qualified as men to be leaders or soldiers, decision makers or order takers. In fact it was a woman who was in charge of my patrol.

There hadn’t been any battle sounds from outside for a while. I wondered where my platoon was. I wondered if they had moved forward and broken through the ranks of the enemy.

“Noiseless it is outside,” she observed and once again her helmet peeked forward.

“You eat?”

I didn’t want to admit I had no rations because I was certain she would try to starve me out. I didn’t answer.

“I have some nourishment if you require.” There was a scraping sound and a sealed container slid within a foot of my hiding place. I eyed it suspiciously. The sound of a vacuum pack popping open reached my ears followed by the slurping of someone who was very hungry. “Take. Eat. Not much but will give strength.”

I stared long and hard at the container, my stomach rumbling. If it was a trick she could either shoot me when I reached for it or it might poison me slowly. When you’re hungry you don’t use a lot of common sense and the scent of the food she was eating was wonderful. Stretching my weapon as far as it would go I hooked a corner of the container and pulled it toward me. The enemy laughed that sputtering laugh again.

“I do not make a trap.” Silence, then a pitifully voiced request filtered through the darkness. “You have water?”

Glancing at my pack I could see the four bottles of water that remained. I had no idea how long I would be trapped in the cellar and hesitated to part with any. “No.” I lied. Popping open the container my head was filled with the salty, sweet scent of some delicious food I did not recognize. Bringing the container closer to my face I studied the contents. It looked vaguely like some sort of vegetable.

“We call it tchalita. Not much do we grow. It is only a small quantity but gives great health so it is given to soldiers to keep up strength. Do you have such?”

Hesitantly I picked out a small piece and took a bite. The flavor was intense; a cross between acorn squash and a yam. I had to control myself to keep from wolfing it down. I heard the strange laughter again and was filled with guilt. Reaching into my pack I withdrew a bottle of water, stared at it, then, rolled it across the floor to my opponent. An appreciative squeal reached my ears and then I laughed.

“I’m sorry I lied.”

There was no response except for the popping of the cap and the slow sound of long swallows. Then she said, “So good fortune you have. Very little of this is left from where I come.”

It was impossible for me to imagine being without water. I closed my eyes and tried to visualize her world. Suddenly my head was filled with pictures of a dry expanse of a bluish tinted sandlike substance. A bright orange orb which I guessed was her sun hung low over the desert. There were no life forms, no plants, nothing living anywhere in sight. “Is that what it is like on your world?”

I sensed her response, a tearful confirmation of what I believed. Earth had been overwhelmed by floods and tidal waves as the ice caps melted. Scientists warned it was only temporary and soon a freezing cold would come and our planet would be covered in ice, more than we the living had ever seen.

She must have read my thoughts. I could feel a prickling sensation beneath my scalp and shook my head, angry and frightened at the same time.

“I am sorry. I wanted to see... No harm was meant to you. No harm was done.”

The sincerity of her apology filled my mind. “I understand.”

Suddenly the door in the far corner of the room flew open and I raised my weapon, prepared to fire. But it was one of my patrol that burst in. A flash exploded from her weapon and I heard a scream, not realizing it was my own.

“Nooo...” I cried out and blended with my cry was the eerie sound of a squeal, rather like rubber tires burning on a road as an old vehicle braked unexpectedly to a stop. On my feet and moving quickly I rushed to stop my fellow soldier from firing any more. Tripping I slid the last few feet to the space beneath the stairs where my enemy lay in the dim light of the cellar.

Her bright yellow eyes were opened wide, the slits of her nose opening and closing rapidly, the tiny mouth open as she drew in air. I watched as a smoky gray fluid leaked from her midsection through the tear in her uniform. Snatching up the pack that lay beside her I dug out some silky material and tried to staunch the flow. She shook her head slightly, telling me it was no use.

“Tell me more of snow,” she gurgled.

I was only vaguely aware of the soldier behind me being joined by others from our patrol. Softly I began to tell her of snowfall, snowball fights, building snowmen, and making snow angels. A look of peace began to fill her eyes as they dimmed from bright yellow to a subdued gold. The bottle of water I had given her lay half empty near her head. I opened it and

held it to her lipless mouth. As she sipped the last drops I envisioned long winding rivers that stretched from the mountains down to the sea.

The water dribbled from her mouth and across her pale grey skin and her eyes grew dark and empty. I felt my eyes fill and hot tears ran down my face. She was free. She had escaped the horrors of the war we fought and for the last few minutes of her life she had known peace. At last she was free.

I know now that freedom doesn't come without a price. And the price was heavy. Our war continued for two more years in Earth time. I was wounded and sent home after a few more months on the front. Awarded a medal for bravery I was the only survivor of my platoon. Eventually our leaders agreed to meet with the enemy leaders. Of course we had virtually decimated their ranks. Those that we captured were placed in camps where they could be watched.

Every day my children and I would travel to the camp closest to our home loaded with bottles of cold water. We moved among the prisoners, some barely adults, and distribute the liquid. Sometimes we would sit and tell them stories of our world; stories of snow. When the winters began we made them snow cream and delighted in the joy on their faces when they saw the first fat flakes fall from the sky, teaching them to catch the crystals in their mouths. And I thought often of my friend, no longer my enemy, who had shared her food with me and for a brief moment tasted freedom.

I vowed someday we would all be free; from fear, hatred, and war. Someday my children would play with the children from the other world. We would learn to appreciate our differences, celebrate what made us unique, and live together sharing our world.

*Blast
from the
Past*



The Mickey
Neil Douglas Newton

I watched as Shmuley pulled his Mickey out of the flames with a metal spike. He pushed it off the hot spike with his foot as quickly as he possibly could, doing his best to avoid burning himself on the hot metal. The potato, black and charred as all Mickeys are expected to be, landed in a pile of leaves we'd pushed together just for that purpose.

It was always at least five minutes before you could take the first bite. Shmuley was a real chazer; he watched his Mickey like he could cool it off faster if he just looked at it. I couldn't tell you how many times he'd swiped the leftovers of my Mickey. He'd tell me later on that I was a schmuck for leaving it out without watching it.

He finally gave up on the Mickey and turned to me. "Herschel! She doesn't like you like she likes me. Don't fool yourself!"

I smiled. Shmuley was about as ugly as it got. And of course he was talking about the beautiful Rachel Finkel. All the boys in our high school dreamed of Rachel. And I knew she liked me; it drove Shmuley crazy.

"You're gonna marry Rachel Shmuley," I shouted at him. "She told me. She wants you!"

My friends began to laugh and Shmuley's face turned red. For Shmuley that was bad. He had Goyishe red hair and skin and when he blushed his face turned the color of borscht. As his face got redder and redder, the laughing got louder and louder. "You're a shit, Herschel!" Shmuley shouted. "Rachel wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire. She's going out with me!"

Saul ran over and grabbed Shmuley by the shirt. "Rachel loves you! She'd do anything for you! It's like a movie with Gable. You look just like him, Shmuley. You look like Gable!"

We all laughed. Shmuley stamped his foot. "You're just a pischer, Saul. All of you." He went back to his Mickey and turned his back on us. When he picked up his prize from the leaves it was still too hot and he threw it back and forth between his hands. He threw us a dirty look over his shoulder and bit into it. He was trying to show us he was a tough guy.

The rest of us laughed again. I looked into the barrel where we'd set up a fire. Though we spent all our time in the neighborhood, I knew from the few Goyim I talked to in school that in 1938 there were vacant lots like this all over New York where boys our age were building fires and baking Mickeys. The Jews like me, the Dagos, the Micks, all of them. My grandfather, the scholar, always told me that immigrants had a lot in common, especially in a place like New York. If we ever got together we could own the world.

My Mickey looked like it was ready to be eaten, though you could never tell with a Mickey. I'd heard they all came from Long Island and the weather and the soil where they were grown would make each one different. I took a quick look at Shmuley, fat and stupid, munching his Mickey in the corner, still angry. He reminded me of the stories my grandmother would tell me about the Golem she learned about as a child in Lithuania. The Golem was only a legend but Shmuley was an honest to God monster.

I pulled my potato out of the fire by its spike. Just like Shmuley I knocked it off into the leaves before I could do any serious damage to my hand. Before I could inspect it Shmuley jumped up and shouted, running at me and grabbing my Mickey; he threw it as hard as he could. I watched in horror as it flew up in the air and found its way into the alley. As we all stood with our mouths open, my potato rolled away faster than I would have thought possible.

I jumped up from the box I was sitting on and lunged at Shmuley. The rest of my friends jumped up. "You're a dick, Shmuley!" one shouted. The rest called him names as I grabbed him.

"Shmuley. I going to ask Rachel to spit in you. And she'll do it."

I pulled my fist back and was about punch him when he closed his eyes and sat down on the ground, covering his face. Just as I was about to connect, I began to see what a putz he was and I felt sorry for him. He began to moan and I let go of his shirt. While he waited for my fist to connect with his face, I ran out of the lot and into the alley. The sun was going down and I wondered if I could see my Mickey at all. If it rolled fast enough, I knew that it could have gone all the way to the next street. I leaned forward, trying to catch a glimpse of it. As I moved along the alley, my heart sank; I knew I could have walked right past it in the bad light, a dark gray blob that would be hard to find even if the sun was out.

When I got to the next street at the end of the alley, I knew I probably lost my Mickey. Getting a potato for each of us had been hard enough during the depression. I thought about going back and beating Shmuley up but I knew that really wasn't something I wanted to do and my Mickey was gone either way. I was deciding what to do when I heard a scream. Without thinking I ran around the corner; a door was cracked and I could see a woman cowering in the corner of a small warehouse room. Lying next to her was a man who looked like he'd been gone over pretty good. In the next second I heard a Tommy gun fire and I saw both the woman and the man's body jump from the impact of bullets.

I almost screamed but caught myself. I got a quick look at the killers face; mean looking. He had the nose and face of a typical wise guy but there was something familiar, something I couldn't place. Trying my best to be quiet I stepped backwards and had the bad luck to step on a brick that was sitting in the middle of the street. I heard shouts from inside the warehouse and I didn't wait; I ran through the night, glad that the sun was about as close to setting as it could have been.

I took the first turn I could, heading away from the lot and all my friends. Another two blocks took me to a canal. I jumped down into the water and swam to the other side of boat where no one could see me from the street. It was November and the water was starting to get cold and felt my kishkes begin to cramp up after about fifteen minutes. Up on the street I heard voices, fading in and out. My feet started to go numb and I began moving my legs in the hope that I could keep my blood moving.

After what seemed like weeks, I heard the voices fade away. I waited another ten minutes just to be safe. Finally I got desperate, thinking my feet would fall off. I swam out from behind the boat and climbed on the ledge below the street. Pulling my head just above the level of the street, I looked left and right, holding my breath. No one. I could hear voices but they were at least a couple of blocks away. After a few more minutes I pulled myself up and wondered if I

should go near anyone I knew or just go on the lamb. I doubted any of the gangsters had seen me and I figured it would best if I kept it that way.

There was a warehouse about ten blocks from where I was. I knew there was a bakery behind it; my boys and me would wait for them to throw out their broken loaves late at night. I could hide in the warehouse and come out in the middle of the night and get something to eat. Then I thought of my mother and what she would think if I just disappeared and I started to cry. Hiding behind a car I thought about what it would be like if I never could go home again, on the lamb for the rest of my life. Sometimes I thought all I got from my mother was tsuris. But just then I was thinking of the chicken soup she made me and the songs from the old country she sang to me when I was just a kid. I knew that I'd been wrong about her; she was always so good to me.

I wiped my eyes and thought of what could happen to my family and my boys if the wise guys found me. It was time for me to take a powder and right away. I hugged the edge of the canal, crouching down, ready to go back into water, then jumped up and ran down the street. Before I knew it I was behind the warehouse, in front of the window I'd learned to jimmy months ago. The boys and I had spent as much time there as we did at home. Now I was going to live there.

There was a utility closet on the second floor where we had taken our cooked mickeys. I knew the warehouse was empty; in the middle of the depression, whoever owned it fixed it up good but there was nobody to rent out the space. I went into the closet and before I knew it I had fallen asleep.

I woke up hours later; it was the sound of sirens that woke me. I thought about why I was sleeping in a closet with schmutz all over me and I started to cry. I knew that I had to think, that I couldn't give up. But I was only sixteen; what could I do? I wiped my eyes and heard my stomach make a noise. I knew that I had to eat. Outside the window there was nothing, just a car now and then.

Outside I took a better look around. Down their near the water there were no apartment buildings and I felt pretty safe. A quick run down to the next block, I found the bags of bread pieces that the bakery threw away like drek. My mother used to complain about them, knowing there were children starving in places in Europe. I guess it cost too much gelt to send the drek bread back to Europe. Businessmen were so high and mighty, throwing away good food, I wondered how they slept at night. We all knew that they were the ones who ruined things and made the depression happen in the first place.

I didn't make it back to sleep. While I stuffed my face with bread I thought of all my options. Around the time the sun came up the light bulb went off. I worked my way through the warehouse. My boys and I spent half our time in the warehouse looking for stuff that had been left behind by renters that had gone bust years before. We found some tools that we sold, some pens and paper that we gave to girls and a bunch of other things. One of the things we always saw were uniforms and clothes. In an hour I had on a work shirt and pants and a tweed cap. The clothes were dirty and I knew it made me look like the all the poor schmucks I saw on the street with their hands out. No one would pay any attention to me.

I walked down the street, head down, stopping to ask for change every from I passed; if the guy who did the hit got a glimpse of me he would never recognize me now. The Italian section was on the other side of the park. I went to the meat market and snuck back into the alley behind the store. Pulling my cap down over my eyes, I pretended to go to sleep. I waited almost two hours before a young man my age came out the back door, dragging a sack of garbage. He gave me the evil eye and hurried to throw his sack into some old fruit cartons.

I raised my head and whispered his name. "Bruno."

He froze, then walked toward me. "Herschel. What is this? What happened to you? You look like a bum."

Bruno and I had gone to school together. Back then he was heading toward failing out of school. The other kids picked on him and laughed at him because his English was terrible and he had a funny accent. He would cry when he left school, keeping up a good front when the other boys were watching. I found him hiding behind a fence on my way home from school, crying like a little girl. We were always taught that we should look out for other people, even Italians. God didn't want us leave each other in pain.

I worked on his English with him and helped him get through the basic math. The called us the strange boys; not all the Jews and the Dagos got along. I think I saw some of myself in him. Once I got to know him, most of the crap I'd been hearing about the Italians turned out not to be so true. Years went by and we didn't see each other much but I knew that he walked down the street with his head held high. That was enough for me.

He kneeled down. "I need your help," I told him. "You're the only one who can help me."

"This is something bad, isn't it?"

"I saw someone taken care of. Silenced."

His eyes got big. "Wise Guys?"

"There was tommy a Tommy gun. Who else?"

"Oh shit. You came here because my cousin is a made man."

"I had no choice."

"He smiled. I know. Did they see your face?"

"No. I want to keep it that way."

"I'll tell it to you true. If this person who got taken care is someone my cousin wants dead, I can't do much for you."

"I know. But maybe he'll help me. I'm not going to say anything."

He stood up. "You've always been good to me, Herschel. I'll see what I can do. If there's a problem I'll tell you and you're going to have to go on the lamb."

“I know.”

“If he wants to know who you are I have to tell him. But I’ll tell you first so you can run. Meet me back here tonight at ten.”

“You’re a mensch, Bruno.” I began to cry.

He smiled. “I always wanted to pay you back for the way you helped me. Everyone else treated me like a bum.”

“Thanks Bruno.”

“Come back her at ten.”

I pulled my cap back down and walked back to the warehouse. I played all the angles in my head, like being at the movies. One minute I saw a happy ending, the next I saw myself dead, my mother wringing her hands and crying, sitting Shiva for a week. I had some bread left from the night before and, after a few bites, I lay down. I was too scared to sleep and I didn’t want to miss my meeting with Bruno.

I thought of my parents and my grandparents. Maybe Bubby would be making stuffed peppers like she did when I was kid. “You’re part Hungarian,” she would tell me. They were always telling us things like that. I learned what I could and could get by with the Yiddish. But I always wanted to be a pitcher for the Yankees. My parents didn’t understand. They thought I should be a doctor or maybe a Rabbi.

Still, I would have loved to be with my Mom and Dad and my Bubby and Zeyde sitting at the table with the bread and schmaltz. I never thought about it before; I took it for granted. And now I knew that I might never see it again. Why had this happened to me? Why not Shmuley? What did I do wrong? I began to cry again. I wanted to kill that Golem who had ruined my life. I wanted to kill Shmuley. Where was that guy with the Tommy gun? I tried to remember his face; maybe I’d seen him before. And why did he look familiar? What would I do if he did something to my parents? My Bubby and Zeyde? How would I live without them?

I wanted to kill him. If I could just find him.

I let myself cry in the silence of the warehouse; my cries echoed back to me in the dark.

I didn’t let myself take a nap, as much as I wanted to. If I missed Bruno at ten, it would be bad. I schlepped around the warehouse, doing my best to stay awake. The time passed like molasses. My stomach was in knots and I felt like someone had boffed me hard. After a few hours I was so bent that I could hardly breath. I was only a kid, a nice Jewish boy who hoped some day to work in math, market research or one of the new jobs. I didn’t know anything about carrying a heater or cooling anyone.

I finally fell asleep but my stomach was so bad I woke up in fifteen minutes. I figured it would just get worse if I stayed in the warehouse so I went to the alley to wait for Bruno. On the way I saw a clock in a store window: 8:40; I’d have to cool my heels for an hour at least once I got to the alley.

When I got there I was surprised; Bruno was already there. When he saw me there was a smile on his face and I knew the news would be good. I ran forward and took his hand. "What?" I asked him.

"He never saw your face? You sure?"

"I'm sure. I never even walked through the door. The most he could have seen was the shadow of a boy. More than enough boys in the Bronx that it wouldn't be easy to figure out which one is which."

"Then you have a chance. I talked to my uncle. This has nothing to do with my people. And it's a personal beef. But you have to know. The man with the heater is one of your people. He's a Hebe killer for Murder Incorporated. My uncle knows a guy who knows him. Someone was making time with his girl. So he scragged him. And the girl."

You could have knocked me over. A few hours ago I was going to be food for the fishes. And now I had a chance. But I had some things to think about. "Your Uncle? He's not going to say anything about me?"

"No reason to. He doesn't owe anyone on this one. Like I told you. It was personal. Not a hit put out by a made man. But my uncle...well he thinks this buttagots Hebe should get scragged himself. He says he's an animal and that no one likes him. He has something to tell you. This buttagots has a signature. When he kills someone he leaves bird of paradise on the guy he kills."

"A bird? It don't sound like a bird you'd see around here."

"Not a bird. A flower. My Uncle has a green house. He knows all about flowers. It's his legit business that he pays taxes on. Make the government happy. No, these flowers are hard to come by. They cost more than even the Hebes make in a month." He smiled and punched me in the arm; we were all struggling to get by. "My Uncle, I tell him all the time about what you done for me." He reached into his jacket and pulled out something wrapped in sandwich paper. "Here's the flower. Tonight there will be a hit on a made man in the Genovese Family."

"Why."

"He has a big mouth and he's got some attention from the wrong people. This is to send a message to an underboss who's this main man's Rabbi; they won't get rid of the body. That's all you have to know. But, the hit, he's got some good friend in the family and they are going to... have a conniption when he gets scragged. My Uncle is not part of this; it's another family's business. He just heard about it. Now you take that flower to the meat factory on Sedgewick. You get there around midnight. You'll hear the shots. Wait half an hour and go in. You'll see a stiff. Put the flower on his chest and scam. Your troubles will be over. No one will ask why this Hebe hitman takes this guy out, even though he didn't. They'll just think that the family hired Murder Inc. to do the job."

"What about the guys who want him dead, the ones who want to send a message. They'll be setting up the hit."

“There will be a picture in the stiff’s pocket. That’s the message. You don’t need to know about it. The underboss who’s supposed to get the message will get it. And the guys who will do the hit won’t care if someone thinks they didn’t do it. The message is the point. This Hebe is for hire. Not so strange that he would take a contract. That’s what most people will believe as long as you plant the flower.”

I began to cry. Bruno put his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t cry, Hershel! I know we’re supposed to hate each other. A Hebe and a Paisan. My uncle, he likes history. Especially about New York. All of us, we come here and they all hate us because we speak different, we eat different food that smells funny. Our clothes are funny. But the Micks and the Krauts, they all made something of themselves and then...fifty years later; it’s all different. We all fight our way out of the gutter; that makes us brothers. I won’t forget you and what you did for me. Someday when I’m a man you’ll come to my house and you’ll sit at my table and drink my best vino and my wife and bambinos will know who you are. Not just a Hebe but a real man who does the right thing. And someday, maybe our bambino’s bambino’s will play together. My uncle tells me that the only good thing about people like us...he calls them immigrants...is that we all forget what we were. New York chews us up and spits us out. And who knows what we’ll be in 100 years?”

I wiped my eyes. “What can I say?”

“I know what you call us. What everyone does. We all use these names for each other because we live apart. It’s easier. So someday when you are old, you can say a WOP made it right and paid you back for making his life better. Forever. If it wasn’t for you I’d be a foot soldier for one of the five families. That’s the last thing my parents want. I’m going to be an accountant. Because of you.”

“Thank you, Bruno. You’re a mensch.”

“I think I know what that means. I know it’s something good if you say it.”

I hung my head.

“Stop that, Hershel! You have somewhere to be in an hour and a half. Remember stay outside for a half an hour once you hear the shots.”

“I will. I owe you.”

“You owe me shit. Go.”

I took the flower and hoofed it to the meat warehouse. Like clockwork, just after midnight, I heard a tommy gun. A few shots and that was it. A half an hour later I snuck up the stairs. It took me ten minutes to find the stiff. I put the flower on his chest just like Bruno told me. I’d never seen a dead man before and I couldn’t help myself; I had to stop and look. His mouth was open like he was trying to say something. Blood was spread across the floor from the back of his head. I thought that it could have been me, Shmuley, Bruno. The world was crazy. Focacta.

I stared for a minute. Then I ran.

I waited another couple of days, staying in the warehouse just in case. I met Bruno behind the market both days. There were stories about a Jew who worked for Murder Inc. being killed. They said it was revenge for another hit that he took as a contract. But there was no talk of a young kid.

The third day I went home. My mama jumped up and screamed. “Mayn kind!”

She grabbed me and held me, crying and screaming. My father watched with his eyes full of tears. My sister and brother ran in from the back yard. “Hershel! Where have you been?” my brother asked.

“I’m sorry. I had to go away. I can’t tell you why. It was for our family.”

My mama let me go and fell into a chair. “I went everywhere asking for you. No one knew anything. I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry mama.”

“Where were you?”

The argument went on for an hour; I just shook my head, knowing I had to keep my trap shut. Part of me became frightened and angry; no one could know what happened and here was my mama asking all the wrong questions. But another part of me was happier than I’d ever been to be our house, to be with my family.

That night I came back to the lot where my boys were cooking Mickey’s. I had to stand more questions when all I wanted to do was get back to normal. Schmuley stood by himself watching me, a look on his face like he saw a ghost. I’d disappeared just when he’d thrown my mickey into the alley; I knew he was wondering what he might have had to do with it.

I didn’t even give him a look. I got myself a Mickey and started to cook it. I waited. After a half hour or so, the gorgeous Rachel Finkel waltzed in and Schmuley’s eye bugged out of his head. I smiled.

She had tears in her eyes. “We’ve all been worried about you. I heard you were gone. Your mama told me that I couldn’t ask you where you’ve been but the story’s been all around the neighborhood. I have to go home and eat dinner. But I wanted to see you. I hope you come by and have the Shabat meal with us. Soon. Promise me you will.” She leaned down and kissed my cheek.

Schmuley’s eyes followed her as she walked away. He sat down and looked down at the ground. Then he picked up a Mickey he’d brought. I walked over and stood in front of him and I know what was written on my face. I stared at him for a minute until he got up and walked away, leaving his Mickey in the fire.

Saul shook his head. “No one will miss the putz. If you hadn’t given him the bum’s rush I would have. I know you can’t tell us where you were but we’re glad to have you back. Mazel Tov!” He took his mickey out of the fire and took a bite.

I gave him a little smile. "Glad to be back." I pulled my Mickey out of the fire. I was home.

Dark at the Top of the Stairs
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

There's something about walking into a room where a dead body is sprawled on the floor. Before you even see it you can smell it. It doesn't matter how long it's been laying there. Could be one hour, could be one day, could be one week. It may smell worse or stronger over time but it smells right away. As a homicide detective you'd think I'd have grown used to the smell. I haven't.

Walking into the hall of the Foster mansion I smelled him immediately. According to the first cops on the scene he had fallen down the stairs, breaking his neck, about forty-five minutes earlier. When I arrived with my partner Joe Wilder the medical examiner was already there, poking around the stiff. It was really just procedure. The angle of his head pretty much told us he was dead and why he was dead. My job was to find out how he got to the bottom of the stairs.

Glancing up toward the dark at the top of the stairs I saw one of the most beautiful dames I had ever laid eyes on. That wasn't only my opinion. Beside me Joe let out a low whistle. "Will ya get a load of that tall glass of water?"

Although I agreed with his observation I shot him a look that I hoped said he should shut his trap. Then I let my eyes drift back to that vision. Her long blond hair framed her delicate face in waves of gold. She wore a long white satin dressing gown tied at the waist, accentuating the tininess of that part of her anatomy. It also served to show off the firm, high breasts that pressed against the material challenging its ability to confine them.

She caught my gaze and held it, almost defiantly. That kind of sparked my interest. What did she have to be defiant about? I sauntered over to one of the boys in blue and turning my back to blondie I asked in a low voice, "What's with the doll on the stairs?"

His eyes flicked up to where she was standing before leaning close to me and whispering, "She's the wife. She made the call. Said she heard a thumping sound and when she came out of the bedroom she saw him down here."

"Those her words?"

He pulled out his little notepad. "I heard a thumping and when it stopped I went out into the hall. I saw William down there, like that." He snapped the pad shut. "Those were her exact words."

I gave a little nod and looked over at Joe. He raised his bushy eyebrows slightly and I knew we were on the same page. Something besides the dead body didn't smell right.

"Well let's have a little talk with the widow." I turned back toward the stairs only to find she was no longer standing there. Before I could ask where she went the ME joined us.

"Let me guess," I said to him, "He's dead and he has a broken neck."

Glancing at the body in its grotesque position then back to me, the ME grinned. "Pretty obvious."

"Any idea what made him take a tumble?" Joe asked.

"I won't know anything until I get him on the table. He's not a young fellow. And it was dark in here when I arrived. Could have been a misstep. Could have been a heart attack. Could have had a little help from a bottle of single malt." He shrugged. "I can tell you if it was a medical problem. Otherwise it's your job to figure it out." With that he nodded good night to me and Joe and headed out into what was a cool moonlit night.

"I guess we need to talk to the widow Foster," Joe observed dryly.

"I guess we do," I agreed and headed up the stairs. The polished wood of the steps reflected the moonlight shining through a large window at the top of the stairs. Family pictures lined the wall as we passed; wedding pictures, pictures of children, even pictures of a few dogs and a couple of horses. I stopped at the top of the stairs and looked down at the hall below, watching as the orderlies placed William Foster's body onto a stretcher and covered him with a blanket.

"All tucked in and ready to go," Joe murmured as one of the men securely strapped the body down.

Several doors lined the upstairs hall which was carpeted in a thick, fluffy cream color. Something glittered in the fibers and I bent to pick it up. Joe leaned over to study the small diamond earring that lay in the palm of my hand. "Nice stone," he commented.

"Yup." I tucked it into the breast pocket of my jacket and continued down the hall. At the far end soft light shone from an open door. As we got closer I could see a king sized bed covered with a cream colored satin spread that looked a lot like the dressing gown of the woman who sat on the foot of the bed. Her long legs were crossed, the gown hanging slightly open, and her feather tipped slipper dangled from one foot, bouncing impatiently. Catching my glance at her pins she drew the robe closed but not before I spotted what looked like a bruise just above her knee. She seemed to be in a hurry to get things over with. Or maybe she was nervous. It remained to be seen.

"Speaking of nice," Joe whispered, "Get a load of those gams."

I didn't respond. I was more interested in the way she watched us approach. It kind of reminded me of a spider waiting for a fly to get close enough to get caught in its web. I didn't care for the feeling at all.

I stopped at the door to the bedroom and asked in my most polite official voice, "Mrs. Foster?"

The slipper stopped bouncing. "Yes."

I could see her eyes now, glittering ice blue eyes that were hooded by thick dark eyelashes. She may have been dressed for bed but her hair and make-up were ready for a night on the town.

Joe was shuffling around behind me obviously trying to get a better look at the lady. I don't think it was because he had an eye for fashion or home interiors.

"I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am. Are you up to answering a few questions?"

Her eyes drifted around the room as though the proper response was hiding behind the gold tieback drapes or behind one of the paintings of naked angels that hung on the walls. Finally those blue gems focused on me and her lower lip trembled as she replied, "I already answered the officer. Is this really necessary?"

A little bell went ding in my head and even Joe stopped his ogling and took a breath. There are some questions that have answers you expect. When you hear them you're okay. But when those questions get some other answers, the answers that just don't fit, a little bell dings. Mrs. Foster has just dinged my bell.

"Well ma'am it would be better if I could get the information directly from you since you discovered the body. Cops sometimes don't get things completely right." I offered a reassuring smile I had been practicing and using for over ten years.

She was on her feet then and walked over to her vanity table picking up a cigarette case from amid the jars and bottles. For not the first time in my life I wondered what the hell women kept in all those containers. Her hand shook slightly as she flicked open her cigarette lighter and lit up. After a deep inhale and a slow exhale she tossed her head. "Well then ask away."

I moved a little further into the room and allowed my eyes to search around as I asked the usual questions. What had her husband been doing before he went downstairs? Getting ready for bed. Had they been drinking? They had wine with dinner. Did he have any illness that might have caused dizziness or weakness? Not that she knew of.

"What alerted you to his fall?" I didn't take notes but Joe was scribbling away. We'd chosen our roles years before. I was good at the asking and he was good at the notes. Teamwork; it stood us in good stead.

Taking another long hit off her cigarette she looked thoughtful. I watched her through the smoke that curled around her face. "Well I heard a thumping sound. I went out to the hall and saw him at the bottom of the stairs."

I glanced back down the hall. It was close to twenty feet from the bedroom door to the top of the stairs. "So you had already dressed for bed. Mr. Foster was still wearing his suit and shoes. Had he gone out for something?"

Icy blue flutters, pupils enlarging. You have to love blue eyes when you're a detective. It's easy to note any changes. And oh those changes.

Before she could answer we heard feet pounding up the stairs. Turning, I saw a man rushing down the hall toward the bedroom wearing a tux with his bow tie flopping loosely around his neck. He brushed past Joe and me and went right to the widow. She collapsed against him and buried her face in his shoulder. "Oh David, it's so dreadful. William fell. He's dead."

As David, whoever he was, stroked her hair and comforted her he looked at us as though we were the hired help and we'd taken a crap on the carpet. "Who are you?"

I made the introductions. Joe kept scribbling. "And you are?"

"David Reese. I'm the Foster's lawyer." Pulling a handkerchief from his breast pocket he wiped Mrs. Foster's tears. She was a neat crier, Mrs. Foster was. Her make-up never streaked. I made a mental note to find out what brand that was. My wife would love it since she was always streaked when came out of the theater after seeing one of the tear jerkers she loved. A man will put up with a lot for the woman he loves, even sappy films. Attempting to stare me down with appropriate anger Reese made it clear he thought I was heartless to be putting the widow through all this when she had just lost her husband.

Joe opened his mouth to protest but I gave him the elbow. "I am sorry Mrs. Foster. We'll just get out of your hair. Again, we're very sorry for your loss."

With that Joe and I headed for the stairs. As we descended to the now empty downstairs hall I noticed that several of the pictures that lined the wall were slanted. Joe instinctively reached out to straighten them but I grabbed his hand. Glancing back toward the bedroom door I saw that David and the widow had stepped into the hall to watch us leave. So we left.

I drove and Joe looked over his notes as the sky began to streak with the pink of dawn. Muttering under his breath Joe highlighted the events of the evening. I was used to his way of refreshing his memory. The first few months we'd worked together it had annoyed the hell out of me. But like an old married couple I got accustomed to it and now it was just Joe's oddball way of making sure he had all his ducks in a row. There were even times when his barely audible rambling would hit a nerve and mention something I had missed, bringing a seemingly unimportant detail to the surface. This was one of those times.

"Don't you find it a strange coincidence that both the late Mr. Foster and his lawyer were both decked out in tuxes? Wonder if they had been at the same event?"

Joe stopped reading and I took a quick glance to see if he had heard me. He was staring out the windshield, the deep lines on his forehead telling me he was pondering the question. "I feel like we're missing something."

"The widow F looked pretty dolled up herself considering she was going to bed. Have you ever known a woman to go to bed with her face still made up like a Hollywood starlet? My wife puts a ton of cream on her face before turning in; she looks like a meringue pie when she gets in to bed."

Joe nodded his head slowly. "So you think maybe they were all out somewhere together?"

Turning into the station house I confirmed what he said. "Could be. It certainly bears some looking in to." Pulling a pack of cigarettes from my shirt pocket I lit up and took a long, slow drag. "I think I'll head home and grab some shut eye. I do my best thinking when I'm sleeping. Let's see if we can get the widow in for an interview soon."

“I don’t think her guard dog lip will like that,” Joe observed.

I felt the grin on my face. “I’m sure he won’t. He’ll like it a lot less when we interview him too. Think the lawyer has a lawyer?”

Joe shook his head as he got out of the car. “I’ll see if I can find out what the three musketeers were up to before the husband took a flyer down the mansion stairs.”

“Get some rest Joe. I have a feeling the next couple of weeks are going to be very busy.”

With that I headed home and Joe ambled into the station. He was like a dog with a bone when he didn’t have all the facts in his little notebook.

Part 2

Molly was giving the kids breakfast when I let myself into our apartment. She shot me the look that told me she was not pleased with my working all night and I gave her a shrug. She knew when she said yes that I was a cop and everything that went along with that. Her old man had been a cop until he drank himself to death. I figured she should be grateful I wasn’t much of a boozer although I did enjoy a shot of hooch now and again.

After grumbling good morning at the kids who knew Molly’s look as well as I did and just mumbled back, I headed into the bedroom. I tossed my suit jacket on the chair and loosened my tie before kicking off my shoes and flopping across the already made bed. That was another one of Molly’s wordless messages. I had just begun to drift off when I heard the front door slam followed by the click clacking of Molly’s heels as she tripped down the hall. I kept my eyes closed hoping she would just go to work. I wasn’t lucky.

“I just made that bed.” The sound of the bottles on her vanity clattering sounded like small explosions.

“I’ll straighten it when I get up.” I tried to sound like I was sleeping. Molly didn’t buy it.

“I’m going to be late for work.” I didn’t open my eyes but I knew she was standing at the foot of the bed staring at me. I kept my blinkers shut.

After a couple of minutes the bedroom door slammed making the window rattle followed by the front door slamming even harder.

“Have a nice day,” I muttered sarcastically. I wasn’t happy that Molly had decided to get a part time job. Made it look like I couldn’t take care of my own. We didn’t really need the money although she had been nagging lately about getting a house. You never knew where a broad gets crazy ideas. Anyway it was only a part time job so it wasn’t like she was gone all day or making big bucks.

I was just starting to drift off when I heard banging at the front door. Swearing I jumped out of bed, tripped over my shoes as I headed for the door, and swore again as I flung it open to find Joe standing there looking like he just saw Carole Lombard in the hall. Babbling, he pushed past me into the kitchen tossing a handful of papers onto the table.

“Whoa slow down cowboy!” I started looking through the papers trying to read the chicken scrawl he called handwriting. “What’s all this?”

He shoved his hat back on his head and took a deep breath before filling me in. “The lovely Naomi Foster is not the first Mrs. Foster. It seems the first Mrs. Foster died from, get this, a fall down the stairs. Care to guess where the stairs are?”

I let out a low whistle. “In the Foster home where Mr. Foster just met his untimely demise?”

Joe smiled triumphantly. “And who do you think was the housekeeper for the Foster’s?”

“The stunning Naomi?”

Joe nodded, his already wide smile taking over the lower half of his face. “She is also the only heir to the Foster fortune.”

I sat down at the table and using my foot pushed out a chair so Joe could join me. “And how big is this Foster fortune?”

Scratching at his neck his smile faded. “I haven’t got that yet. But I will tell you our good buddy David Reese, Esquire drew up a new will for Mr. F two months ago. Everything goes to the widow except for an old hunting cabin in the mountains where Reese and his client liked to go to hunt.”

“Who gets the cabin?”

Joe leaned across the table, his eyes sparkling like he won a bet on the bangtails in third at the track. “David Reese.”

I leaned back in the chair, the two front legs lifting off the floor as I balanced on the back two legs. Molly hated it when I did that. She said it was a bad example for the kids. I figured the kids saw a lot worse things than that. “I think it’s time we set up an appointment with the shyster.” I pictured Naomi in my mind and shook my head. “Funny but the doll doesn’t look like a round heel.”

Joe shrugged. “You have enough dough you can look like anything.”

I nodded agreement. “Hard to believe a lip like Reese would risk going to the slammer even for a looker like Mrs. F.”

That made Joe laugh hard. “I’d risk going to the slammer for a shot at that dame. Toss in some green and it’d be a done deal.”

Standing up I stretched. “Let me catch a few winks and we can meet up at the clubhouse about five.” As Joe walked out the door I strongly suggested he get some shut eye himself. He didn’t seem to need much sleep but I’d known a few coppers that had run themselves to death working cases. Maybe Joe was itching for my chair.

As I returned to bed, taking time to strip down to my boxers, I thought about how mad Molly was going to be. Maybe I could use the house fund as an excuse.

Part Three

A few hours of sleep did me good and I woke ready to roll. Before I headed out to meet up with Joe at the station I scrawled a note to Molly. Glancing at the kitchen clock I wondered why she wasn't home yet but figured she might have stopped at the store. At least I didn't have to engage in a shouting match. Setting my hat on my head I stepped into the hall and caught a strong whiff of boiling cabbage. Mrs. McGinty was cooking what she called supper. Sure enough her eight kids came up the stairs, climbing over one another like starving puppies, noses perpetually running and patched hand me downs even on the oldest boy. When they saw me they all stopped pushing and shoving one another and stepped aside so I could pass them, eyes downcast. As soon as my feet touched the landing I heard them begin to snicker and resume their greedy climb to the soggy supper that awaited them. I suspected if I was still on the force when they reached adulthood I'd be pulling at least half of them into custody at some point.

Outside a couple of the local hoods who had dropped out of school to get jobs as stoop sitters were smoking and eying the street hoping for some kind of action. Watching me with insolent eyes they barely moved to allow me to pass. My foot accidentally on purpose made contact with the back of a white tee shirt and I got a silent glare. I countered it with a tight grin, challenging the punk to say something, anything. He looked away. They always do.

A stoop sitter in training, too young to have earned a step, leaned against the hood of my car. As I crossed in front of him he made a feeble attempt at looking tough. I ignored him. As soon as the engine roared to life he jumped onto the sidewalk. He had no doubt I would drive off with him clinging to the hood ornament like a piece of cloth waving in the breeze.

Walking into the station I gave a brief nod to Wilson who sat behind the high desk like a king observing his miniature domain. I didn't much care for Wilson. It wasn't just that he smelled of booze all the time; there were rumors his wife paid a lot of visits to the emergency room at general and there was more than one side doll that often had the same problems. The woman never talked and no one confronted Wilson. I had a feeling the day would come when I might have to have a serious talk with him off duty.

Upstairs Joe was tilted back in my chair, his feet on my desk, crossed at the ankles. His hat was pushed back on his head, his tie loosened, his jacket hanging on the tree by the window. He had more papers in his chubby hands as he concentrated on some new piece of information. Joe was a work horse.

I smacked the side of his shoe knocking his feet off my desk and he jumped up ready to take on whoever had interrupted his detecting. That was what he called it, detecting.

"Jeez Lou, why'd ya do that for?" When he was taken off guard he'd slip into the language of his youth, the tough talk of the West Side.

Laughing, I snatched the papers out of his hands and he grumbled loudly. Scanning what he'd been holding I could see he'd been a busy beaver. "I think it's time to visit the widow."

I'd barely finished the sentence when Joe was on his feet pulling on his jacket. As we walked to the car he filled me in on his latest discoveries. Apparently the country cabin was used by both Reese and Foster as a place to take what they called clients. I had a sneaking suspicion

something shady went on there. Both men had perfectly good offices. You only took clients to out of the way places when you were doing something you wanted to keep under wraps. I knew enough sneaky shysters to read the signs on this little home away from home. Joe had connected with Reese's former secretary who was not happy with her abrupt dismissal when a younger and perhaps more willing applicant got her job. She would make it a lot easier getting some clue into exactly who Reese counted as clients.

Right now I wanted to surprise the wealthy widow with a visit and a few questions. Imagine our surprise when David Reese answered the door. His frown let us know he didn't welcome our appearance. "You again," he snarled, "Don't you guys understand Mrs. Foster is in mourning?"

I decided not to let Reese intimidate me. "As a lawyer I think you might understand we are investigating a suspicious death." There. I had used the word suspicious. Let the lip chew on that.

Reese's mouth moved and his face turned red from his neck up in a slow rise like a volcano about to blow. Before he could respond Mrs. F appeared behind him, looking angrily over his shoulder.

"Detectives, please come in. I want to help in any way I can."

Joe and I brushed past Reese, Joe giving him the elbow, and followed the widow into the living room. She was wearing black and it looked good on her. The dress seemed a little tight for a mourning dress but I could appreciate the swing of her full hips. A quick glance at Joe told me he found her attire as appealing and questionable as I did.

Once in the living room she sat down on the couch and crossed those long slim legs causing the dress to rise a little higher. A drink which I guessed was whiskey sat on the cocktail table alongside a silver cigarette case and a heavy looking silver lighter. "Would you care for a drink, detectives?" I thought I caught a little quiver in her voice.

"No thanks ma'am. We're on duty." Joe had already pulled out his trusty notebook; a regular Johnny on the spot. I glanced around before I decided to take a seat in an easy chair which put me in a position to watch both the widow and the lip. Joe moved to stand beside my chair. He always says he thinks better on his feet. "We just have a few questions. There are a couple of things we need to clear up."

"Of course; whatever I can do to be of assistance." She leaned forward to lift the cigarette case and her dress dipped down a little in the front. It was just enough to reveal what appeared to be a bruise at the top of one perfect breast. Now when did that happen? I tried to remember if I had seen that much of her the previous night. I couldn't say for certain so I filed it away for later. I watched her light her cigarette making note of the slight shaking of her hand. It could simply be the result of losing her husband but I suspected that wasn't the case. Then her foot started that bouncing again and my eyes drifted from the black high heel up to the hem of that little black dress. When my eyes reached her face I saw she was watching me and I thought I caught a grin on those rich red lips.

Reese cleared his throat. "Can we get on with it please? I have to take Naomi to the funeral parlor to choose an appropriate casket. There are arrangements to be made."

A curious use of words, I thought. "Of course." Turning back to the widow I began. "Can you tell us again what happened last night? Did you and Mr. Foster dine at home?"

Those blue eyes took on a gray shade and flicked toward the lawyer. Apparently this was not a question she anticipated. Before she could respond Reese interrupted.

"Actually I was with Mr. and Mrs. Foster at a charity event last evening."

I could hear Joe's pen scratching eagerly on the notepad. The sound seemed to fill the room. Blue eyes looked at him over my shoulder and the hand holding the cigarette seemed a tad shakier.

I kept my eyes on the widow but I directed my question to the lawyer. "Did you all leave the event at the same time?"

Her eyes did that nervous dancing thing again. Ah ha. There was something here. "Actually Naomi was feeling ill and I offered to escort her home since Mr. Foster was due to make a speech."

"I take it you and Mr. Foster weren't very close," I observed.

Reese straightened. "Why would you say that? He was my client for many years."

"Yes you worked for him. But he didn't consider you a friend."

The widow's foot was really bouncing now. She picked up her glass and took a sip of her drink the ice cubes picking up the beat and clinking a new rhythm.

"As I said he was my client for almost twenty years. Why would you assume we weren't friends?" He was trying to stare me down. It didn't work.

"You call him Mr. Foster." I took a moment to let that sink in. "But you call Mrs. Foster by her first name, Naomi."

A lovely shade of pink began working its way up from the collar of his neatly pressed shirt, over his chin, and settled in his cheeks. Now his eyes danced over to the lovely Naomi. "Well, I..."

"David and I have been acquainted for some time. He introduced me to William."

Now that was a tantalizing bit of information and Joe was scribbling frantically now. The sound was even louder and it caused the tension level in the room to rise.

"Was that how you got the job as the housekeeper?" I pulled no punches.

Those blue eyes flashed a deep gray now and they looked like thunder clouds. "I wasn't a housekeeper. I was an assistant to both William and his wife. I helped them plan events, kept their calendars, planned menus, all the things that keep a home running smoothly."

“Who was the housekeeper?” I wasn’t backing down. She could add all the pretty little details she wanted. She was still a glorified housekeeper.

“Exactly what does this have to do with Mr. Foster’s accident?” Reese tried to draw my attention away from the storm that was brewing on the couch.

Never taking my eyes from the widow I responded. “I just want to be straight on where everyone stands and where everyone was when the victim took a tumble.” I purposely used the word victim. The sudden whitening of Mrs. Foster’s complexion told me I had hit a nerve.

“I told you. I brought Naomi home because she felt ill and she went directly to bed.”

Now I turned to the lip. “Did you go to bed with her?”

“Wh-what? How dare you!”

“Well how do you know she went right to bed? Did you tuck her in?” Joe wasn’t writing now. I could hear his breathing pick up behind me.

“I told him I was going right to bed and he let himself out.” Roles had changed and she was the one trying to get my attention now.

I stood up and passing Reese I walked to the entrance hall and looked down at the spot where William Foster’s body had been the night before. Then I looked up the stairs at the dark hallway. Glancing back at Naomi I asked, “Do you happen to own a pair of diamond earrings?”

Her hand flew to her left ear. “Why?”

I held out my hand, the twinkling stud resting in my palm. “I found it at the top of the stairs last night. I assume it’s yours.”

She reached for it but I closed my hand and slipped it back into my pocket. “Do you have a housekeeper Mrs. Foster?”

She nodded, wide-eyed. “Yes. But the earring is mine.”

“Oh I’m sure it is. How often does she clean for you?”

“Every morning.” The puzzled expression on that beautiful face was worth a million.

“Look, what is this all about?” Reese stepped between us. “It’s Naomi’s earring. It’s her house.”

“Well that depends on Mr. Foster’s will, I would think.” I moved slightly so I could see past the lawyer. “So you must have lost this earring sometime last night. Were you wearing them when you went to the event?”

Reese may have been getting an inkling of where I was going. Naomi Foster did not. Before the lip could stop her she admitted she’d worn them the night before. “How did you manage to lose one in the upstairs hall?”

“I-I may have been taking them off to go to bed,” she stammered uncertainly. She looked at Reese. “Did I take it off in the hall?” His facial expression told her she’s made one heck of a mistake. “I mean...”

“Let’s cut to the chase.” I nodded at Joe who stepped up beside Reese. “Who grabbed your head, this shyster here or your late husband? And who knocked you around enough to leave the bruises on your breast and leg?”

Naomi’s hand went to her throat, her arm covering her breast. Her eyes were so wide I wondered if it was possible for them to pop out of her head and roll around on the floor.

“If I was laying green down on this I’d say a medical exam would turn up a few more bruises.”

“See the way I figure it, you and your lawyer here have been hitting the hay for a while, maybe before the first Mrs. Foster took a nose dive down the stairs.” Sideways glances between the two answered that question. “Getting the old man to marry Naomi here may have gone into play before the fall of the older Mrs. F. Not that it matters right now. What does matter is how Mr. Foster got to the bottom of the stairs. When Reese here came dashing in to interrupt our questions he bounced off the wall and knocked some pictures askew. When Joe and I were leaving I noticed something odd. The pictures had been hung in different places. Whoever put them back on the wall after Mr. Foster’s fall didn’t put them where they had been before. William Foster didn’t roll down the stairs below the level of the pictures. He bounced off the wall trying to catch himself because he’d been pushed.”

Reese was slowly backing up, putting distance between himself and Naomi. I noticed it. Joe noticed it. Most importantly Naomi noticed it. “Wait, wait. I didn’t push William. It was him.” Her finger shook as she pointed at Reese. “He made me do it. He killed her. He told me it was an accident, that she was drunk and slipped going downstairs. When William came home he found us in bed. They fought. William was pushing him down the hall, telling him to get out of the house. I tried to stop him and he turned on me. He hit me. Then he turned back to David and they were at the top of the stairs and all of a sudden...” She gasped. “He shoved him. William stumbled and almost caught himself so he shoved him again. Then he made me help him clean up.”

“Are you going to believe a roundheeled maid? She called me and told me William was drunk and he attacked her and they fought. She pushed him down the stairs.” Reese was sweating now. Beads of perspiration were rising on his forehead and running down the sides of his face.

Naomi leaped at him, those long red nails almost connecting with his face. Lucky for the lawyer Joe grabbed her, pinning her arms to her sides.

“Relax Mrs. Foster. You see there’s something your boy here didn’t share with you. You’ll get this house which is mortgaged up the wazoo. But he gets the cabin. Sounds like you got a good deal. But there’s something in that cabin worth a lot more than this house. Did you know your husband was a coin collector? There’s a name for that. He was a ...” I looked at Joe.

“Numismatist.” Joe offered Naomi an apologetic smile. He always had a soft spot for a pretty twist and she certainly was a looker.

Now she was really hot to get her claws into Reese and he was just as hot to turn on his heels. My iron discouraged him.

“I’m not taking the rap for him I’ll tell you everything!” Naomi was resigned. Joe and I corralled them in the sitting room and I got on the horn to the clubhouse. We had to put them in separate cars because we were sure Naomi would shred his kisser.

Part Four

Once we got to the station I sent Joe on home and I decided to do the paperwork on the arrest. I didn’t think Naomi was a golddigger at the beginning but the lure of all that cabbage was hard to resist. Reese was a crafty shyster who somehow convinced old Foster to stash his treasure at the cabin to avoid taxes. I had a sneaky feeling the old man was thinking of moving it and that made Reese antsy. He needed to get rid of Billy boy before that happened since he was going to inherit the cabin.

After wishing the crew good night I drove home, exhausted but exhilarated. A good collar is like a shot of single malt Scotch. Hits the spot and warms you all over. I parked the car and stuck my police board in the window. Most of the stoop sitters had retired elsewhere for the evening .

I climbed the first two floors and was about to hoof it that last set of stairs to our apartment thinking maybe Molly was right and we should move to a house away from the city. The hallway light had burned out again on the third floor and it was dark at the top of the stairs. I fished in my pocket for my cigarette lighter. Just then the apartment door opened and I saw two shadows embrace sharing spit. I recognized those shadows. I knew that hat pushed back on the man’s head and I knew those long legs that stuck out from under the silky robe I’d gotten her for Christmas. Maybe it wasn’t just my job that Joe was after; maybe he wanted my whole life. I counted the steps leading up to the landing and thought a person could break his neck falling down those stairs. And there weren’t any pictures on these walls.

Ain't She Sweet
Elizabeth Horton-Newton

We sat around the table after supper while night fell outside the open windows. It was pretty clear summer was over and fall was coming carrying the scent of dying flowers and plants. I was glad because it meant I wouldn't have to mow the yard as often as I had when the summer heat and sudden rains caused the grass to grow thick and high in a week's time.

Billy sat closest to the window picking corn out of his teeth, the chewed cob lying across his plate like an abandoned weapon. Mr. Waters leaned back in his chair telling some old story about fall when he was a kid and I tuned him out the way I usually did. Mr. Waters had been telling the same stories over and over every evening since he took the room next to Billy's almost four years earlier.

Mama was scurrying around the table, gathering empty plates and glasses, her brow furrowed the way it always was when she cleaned up after a meal. Five years ago when Papa passed she had started taking in boarders. It was either rent out rooms or loses the house to the bank. Papa had not been the best at saving money and he had let his life insurance lapse because he thought the three dollars a month was more than he could afford. It might have done us all better if he had given up the bottle because he was drunk when he ran his old Ford off the road and into the fence at Brewer's farm. Things might have been okay but he never took his foot off the gas and he ended up in the stream that ran alongside the farm, head over heels in the cold water.

My mind had drifted off somewhere with thoughts of Mary Louise Braden and her dimples and I jumped when the front doorbell rang drawing me back to the dining room. No one rang the front bell, ever. Well maybe the guys who went around selling encyclopedias or pots and pans. But they only came during the day. Mama came out of the kitchen rubbing her hands anxiously on a dish towel and stared at the front door before turning to look at me.

"Frank Jr. sees who's at the door."

I was fourteen years old but since Papa passed it seemed Mama relied on me more and more. I usually didn't mind but the idea of answering the door after dark to what must be a stranger made me uneasy. Mama was staring at me expectantly, and so were Mr. Waters and Billy. Shoving my chair back from the table I feigned fearlessness and went to the door. I could see a shadow on the porch through the frosted glass of the door. Taking a deep breath I flung open the door. I almost laughed at the sight before me.

A small, slender woman stood awkwardly on the porch, a suitcase beside her. She smiled kind of nervously and I noticed the dimples that creased her cheeks reminding me of my recent thoughts of Mary Lou. I felt my face grow warm and hoped I wasn't turning red. The stranger had short dark hair that curled beneath the stylish hat she wore. Her eyes were a bright sparkling blue and in some ways she looked like a grown up Shirley Temple. I half expected her to burst into song and begin tap dancing around the porch.

"Who is it Frank Jr.?" My mother called out to me from the dining room.

Damned if I knew but I responded with an “I don’t know yet.” Then I smiled at the pretty girl who wore a soft gray suit and sensible black shoes. “Can I help you?”

She nodded toward the front window. “I saw your sign. Do you have a room available?” Her voice was as sultry as her smile was sweet, with the trace of some kind of accent I couldn’t identify.

“Yes ma’am,” I answered politely. Opening the door wider I stepped aside to allow her to enter. “Won’t you come in and meet my mother, Mrs. Hawkins?”

She struggled to lift her suitcase and I instinctively reached forward to assist her. “Thank you but I have it.” Her tone was no nonsense and clipped. I drew back quickly.

Mama had come forward by this time having heard the woman’s voice. Her face wore a curious expression. The young woman held out her hand, “Good evening ma’am. I’m so sorry to trouble you this late in the day. My name is Marie Samuels and I’m travelling west to join my husband in California. He just got out of the service you see. I’ve been getting rides when I could and I just need a couple of nights to clean up and get some rest. I see you have a room for rent. It would only be a couple of nights.” Her speech grew faster as she neared the end of her sentence as though she wanted to clear it all up as soon as possible. I could tell she was upset by the husky tone of her voice, as though she was struggling not to cry.

Suddenly tears filled those bright blue eyes and she sniffled. “It’s been two years since I’ve seen him. He wanted me to wait in Omaha until he got there but I just couldn’t...”

Mama knew what it was like to be without a husband and her sympathy was instantly aroused. She drew the young woman into her arms and patted her back lightly. “There, there dear. Of course we have a room you can have. Thank the good Lord you found us.” Turning to me she instructed me to take the woman’s luggage upstairs to the bedroom directly across from mine. But Miss Samuels stopped me and insisted she didn’t want to be any more trouble. They went back and forth for a few minutes before Mama backed off and changed tracks.

“Well have you eaten dear? We have some food left from supper and meals are included with the room. It’s not much, some cold chicken. I can make a sandwich if you prefer.”

I was sort of surprised since Mama had made it clear she wanted to rent the room by the month. I was also glad because Marie Samuels was just about the prettiest girl I’d seen in my life. She was also just about the strangest girl I’d ever seen. She insisted she wasn’t hungry and lugging that suitcase she followed me up the stairs. I stood at the door as she heaved the bag onto the bed and bit my tongue to avoid telling her Mama would not like that. When she tuned that smile as bright as an August sun on me I didn’t give another thought to what Mama might say.

“Where are the facilities?” she asked as she removed that cute little hat that barely covered her dark curls.

I was tongue tied. Stepping further back into the hall I silently pointed in the direction of the bathroom. I could feel my face getting hot and I knew it was turning the color of

the Coca-Cola sign outside Jones' General Store and Post Office on Main Street. She came into the hall stopping a mere two feet from me and the scent of some sweet perfume that smelled like summer honeysuckle wafted around my head.

"I think I'll just freshen up." Her smile reminded me of Vivien Leigh when she flashed her pearly whites at Clark Gable in "Gone With the Wind". I was smitten. I didn't consider she was probably as old as Scarlett O'Hara nor did I care. I backed up far enough so she could pass me and go down the hall. She stopped at the door to the toilet, smiled again, and then went inside, closing the door softly behind her.

Mama was standing at the bottom of the stairs as I descended and shook her head. She was kind enough not to make a comment although I am certain she was aware of my infatuation. By this time my brother and Mr. Waters were hovering about the dining room, necks craned and eyes strained to see the stranger who had slipped so casually into our lives. Mama almost tripped over them when she turned to go to the kitchen. As embarrassed as I was, they cleared their throats and made way for her.

When she reached the kitchen door she turned to look at us, huddled around the newel post like suitors waiting for our date to appear. "That's enough now! Billy, come into the kitchen while I prepare a sandwich and some milk for our guest. You can take it up to her and she can have it in her room."

I opened my mouth to protest, to volunteer my services as butler but Mama's stern expression, frown lines crossing her forehead and brows almost meeting over her slightly squinted eyes, told me not to even try.

Mr. Waters once again cleared his throat and taking up the newspaper made his way to the sitting room. He had seen the look on Mama's face and must have decided his position in our home was too precarious to risk her wrath. Resigned, I followed him, secretly hoping the vision of loveliness might return to the downstairs and take her meal in the sitting room with us. However it was not to be. After a couple of minutes I heard the spare room door close and soon after Billy mounted the stairs carrying a plate and a glass. I leaned forward in Mama's rocker far enough to see him and he stuck his tongue out at me, proud he had gotten the upper hand this time. For a moment I hated my little brother.

The low murmur of their voices drifted down the stairs and I strained to hear what they were saying. There was a giggle followed by the sound of Billy bounding down the stairs. He dashed right past the dining room and into the kitchen. The high pitch of his excited voice talking to Mama grabbed my attention and with a backward glance at Mr. Waters I ventured along the path Billy had taken. He and Mama were just coming out of the kitchen and Billy's cheeks were a bright pink and Mama was sternly lecturing him.

"Billy she is a guest. We do not take tips from guests."

"But Mama..." he whined, his fist tightly clenched and pressed against his chest protectively.

She turned and her voice became sharp. One finger came up as it did when she was making an unforgettable point, "This one time Billy. Mark my words, this one time only I

will allow you to keep the money. In the future you will explain you are not permitted to take money.”

With barely a glance at me she brushed past and went into the sitting room. Soon the sound of the radio filtered down the hall.

I was even more upset with Billy. He knew as well as I did that we were forbidden to accept money from anyone, especially guests. If we were offered a piece of candy or fruit that was allowed. But Mama didn't want anyone to think we needed money, even though we did.

Shoving my face, chin first, toward Billy, I growled, “How much money did you get?”

He took a step back from me and clutched his fist more tightly. “None of your business Frankie.”

In my book he had just made two mistakes. He had called me “Frankie”, that hated baby name I'd shed as soon as I was out of short pants. Secondly, he was denying me information. I grabbed his wrist and he momentarily tried to pull away before whining, “Okay, okay!” He opened his hand and two shiny coins lay in his palm. I can't say what bothered me more; his good fortune in delivering our beautiful guest's dinner or his reward of fifty cents. As I pondered the question he ducked and darted past me, hurrying upstairs to hide his loot. After a moment I shoved my hands into the empty pockets of my pants and headed for the sitting room.

Mama was sitting in her rocker knitting yet another scarf. She would knit one every fall and we would resignedly wear them until the first spring thaw when they would mysteriously go missing. Mr. Waters had set the newspaper on the lamp table at his side and had leaned back in his chair listening to the radio. “The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes” was new to the airwaves at the beginning of October and we were all immediately avid listeners. As soon as Billy heard Dr. Watson offer his guest a cup of tea he flew down the stairs and plopped down on the floor right in front of the radio. I shot him a look that left no doubt about my feelings for him at that moment.

Mama sighed and commented the show always made her want a cup of tea and we shushed her as politely as possible. “As soon as this goes off at nine o'clock you two are off to bed,” she chided. But as the story began she too fell silent, as engrossed as we were with the tale. I was particularly excited as I had read Arthur Conan Doyle's “Red Head League” and new where the story was going. Hearing it told in that unfamiliar English accent made it even more believable. I wiggled uncomfortably with the revelation of each clue, barely controlling my desire to tell what would happen next.

When the play ended Billy jumped up and announced he was going to be a detective like Holmes when he grew up. Mama smiled at him, that smile that said he was daydreaming.

“Not me.” I stood up and crossed my arms over my chest. “I'm going to be a writer like Conan Doyle and write famous mysteries.”

“Well right now you both need to get off to bed. You have school in the morning.” Mama began to stow her knitting in the basket that sat beside her chair and rose slowly, her knees crackling in the sudden cold spell. Mr. Waters got up and his knees crackled much more loudly.

“I’d best turn in as well. Good night Mrs. Hawkins, good night boys.” He limped slightly as he mounted the stairs. I often wondered how old he was. Mama said it was impolite to ask but I suspected she knew the answer.

As was his custom he forgot to pick up the newspaper and it lay neatly folded beside his chair.

“Frank, Jr, please take the paper to the trash. Mr. Waters has forgotten it.” She said it as though it was an unusual circumstance. I opened my mouth to complain but her eyes had already narrowed and I remembered I had already dodged trouble twice that evening.

Picking it up I glanced at the article he had been reading. By the time I reached the kitchen I was stunned. The paper vividly described a bank robbery in the nearby town of Rapid City. That was something that happened in big cities, not in little towns like ours or Rapid City. I had just gotten to the description of the bank robber when Mama laid her hand on my shoulder and I jumped a mile.

“Sheesh Mama!” I gasped, my heart pounding in my ears.

She snatched the paper out of my hands. “Young man I told you before to watch your language.”

Mama was convinced “Sheesh” was swearing like calling out the Lord’s name. There was no point arguing. I told her good night and went up to my bedroom. As I passed Miss Samuels room I saw a thin ribbon of light peeking from under her door. Pushing thoughts of her to the back of my mind I got ready for bed. I was a lot more interested in the notion of a bank robber. As I dozed off I watched the bare limbs of the trees outside my window waving in the wind that had picked up. Maybe the thief was out there somewhere in the cold, fall night. Would he be looking for a warm place to hide? Had Mama locked the front door? As I finally drifted off to sleep I made up my mind I would check the newspaper the following day. Maybe I could write a story about the bank robber. Maybe I could solve the crime like Sherlock Holmes.

It was freezing when I woke the next morning. A frost had settled over the town during the night and the floor was icy beneath my bare feet. I hurried down the hall to the bathroom on my tip toes. Shivering as I washed up before getting dressed for school I had forgotten about the bank robber. Instead I wondered if I would see Mary Louise on the way to school. She lived about a quarter of a mile further down the road from us and I made it a point to dawdle in the mornings so she would catch up with me.

I passed Billy on his way to the bathroom as I returned to my room to dress. As I descended the stairs the front door opened and Miss Samuels came in holding a housecoat tightly

around her slim frame. I'd never seen a woman other than Mama in a housecoat and very rarely had that happened.

Her hair was fluffed around her head and I realized she was wearing a wig. I didn't know anyone who had a wig but I had read about them. Then she turned on that dazzling smile and I forgot all about her hair. She was carrying the morning paper. Before I could question why she had seen fit to go outside in the freezing cold wearing nothing but a housecoat just to get the newspaper, Mama came out of the kitchen.

"I thought I felt a draft." At first she was smiling at Miss Samuels but when she saw the paper and what the lady was wearing the smile turned upside down to a frown. Her eyes shifted to me and I could tell right away she did not approve of a young woman walking around the house undressed. In Mama's eyes you wore your pajamas and underthings in the privacy of your bedroom or the bathroom; not downstairs, and certainly never outside the house.

Miss Samuels must have felt Mama's disapproval because she immediately looked away. "I'm so sorry Mrs. Hawkins. You must think I am dreadful not being dressed. I just wanted to check the newspaper for train schedules.

Ignoring her apology Mama shot me her better not argue look. "Your breakfast is in the kitchen Frank. Go on now."

Although I wanted to wait and hear what Mama would say I knew it was out of the question. As I passed through the dining room I heard Billy barreling down the stairs. Mama gave him the same order she had given me and he followed me into the kitchen.

His eyes were wide. "Did you see that? She ain't dressed!"

"Isn't." I corrected him automatically. I was more interested in why she was wearing a wig. Wigs were the things our forefathers wore, French ladies wore them at the King's courts, and the judges and lawyers in England wore them at trials. Miss Samuels wig was dark and curly. Then it dawned on me. She must be an actress. Actors and actresses wore wigs in plays. Of course that didn't exactly explain why she was wearing one when she wasn't in a play or a movie. I didn't have time to give the matter anymore thought. Billy had scooped a giant serving of oatmeal into his bowl and was about to pour an equal amount of sugar on top. I snatched the sugar bowl from his hands. Mama said sugar was too dear for us to be using it freely.

Billy knew the rules but he figured since Mama was occupied elsewhere he could satisfy his sweet tooth. I carefully sprinkled a spoonful of sweetness onto his oatmeal and set to preparing my own breakfast. We both looked up when Mama entered the kitchen and I noticed her cheeks were a bright pink right away. Billy and I exchanged glances, neither of us daring to ask what had taken place between her and our new boarder.

A glance at the clock warned me I had to put some speed on if I expected to run into Mary Louise. I quickly shoved the last few spoons of oatmeal into my mouth, deposited my bowl in the sink, and hurried to get my jacket and hat. As I pulled on my winter attire I glanced up the stairs. Mr. Waters was slowly making his way down but there was no sign of Miss Samuels.

Billy joined me in bundling up for the cold. We both watched as Mr. Waters stood staring at the hall table as though there was a mystery to be solved. Finally he looked at us with a frown. "No paper?"

It was then I realized Miss Samuels must have taken the newspaper upstairs with her. Billy opened his mouth to answer but I shoved him hard in the ribs. "I haven't seen it, sir."

Billy turned wide eyes at me, his mouth dropping open in shock. We did not lie in Mama's house.

The frown on Mr. Waters face deepened. By that time Mama had come into the hall to hurry us along. He turned to her, confusion and displeasure written clearly on his face. "The newspaper?"

Mama's eyes went to the hall table and then a frown creased her forehead. Billy was backing toward the front door but I was hypnotized, wondering what Mama would do. I did not expect what she did. Her eyes were flashing angrily when she turned toward me. "Go to school Frank. Now!" The last word was almost screamed. I backpedaled to the door, bumped into Billy, and we both tumbled out the door into the raw morning.

Billy and I ran down the road, our breaths coming out in clouds that formed and rose toward the slowly lightening sky. Everything looked gray and dismal. The air in my lungs felt like needles and I realized I was panting. We were more than halfway to school when we both slowed to a walk. Then Billy stopped short and leaned over the side of the road, spewing his freshly eaten oatmeal into the dry frost covered leaves. I struggled to pull my handkerchief from my pants pocket and gently wiped his mouth. His eyes glimmered with tears. It took me a couple of seconds to realize I was crying too. I guess that scared him even more because he began to really sob.

I did something I hadn't done since he was a baby. I put my arms around him and squeezed him tight. It was only the sound of approaching voices that made me let go. We wiped our faces and with a nod at one another started walking again. If our friends noticed we were unusually quiet they probably put it down to the drop in temperature. I did see Mary Louise cast a questioning glance in my direction a couple of times but I looked away quickly.

The school day dragged by. I was usually pretty talkative in class; maybe a lot more than I should have been. That day I was silent; not just quiet but downright speechless. At recess Mr. Gilbert called me over. He was a good principal and I think he really cared about us kids.

He put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my face with his serious expression, the one he mostly reserved for discipline issues. "Is everything okay Frank? You seem a little down today."

I wanted to tell him my mother had lost her mind and yelled at me and my brother because our new boarder took the newspaper. It sounded silly so I just shook my head and told him I thought I might be getting a cold.

He stared at me closely for a couple of minutes before nodding, patting my shoulder, and telling me to go join the other kids. Billy was sitting on a swing and a couple of his buddies were shoving each other and acting the way they always did when we went outside. I could tell from the look on Billy's face and the way he was slumped on the swing that he was still upset too.

When Mary Louise came up, stood a couple of feet away, and asked me if I was alright, I had to swallow the lump in my throat. My voice came out all funny as I lied and told her the same story I'd told Mr. Gilbert. She'd pulled off one of the thick brown mittens she wore and dug into her pocket before pulling out a box of Smith Brothers cherry cough drops and offered me one. Avoiding her eyes I accepted it and muttered a thanks.

"I hope you feel better Frank. If you want another one, well, just ask." Then, as if sensing I didn't want to speak, she headed over to her girlfriends, casting one final look at me. I fell totally in love with her that day.

Billy and I dragged our feet going home that afternoon. We didn't talk about what had happened. I guess neither of us knew what to say. We were silent when we entered the house. It was as still as a tomb. After taking off our coats and hats, we exchanged glances and walked into the kitchen.

As if we hadn't had enough shocks already, Mama and Mr. Waters were sitting at the kitchen table with steaming cups of coffee in front of them. They looked up when we entered. Something about the way they looked told me something was up.

Mama got up and drew Billy into her arms. She offered me a slight smile as she stroked his hair. "I'm sorry I lost my temper this morning boys." She glanced at Mr. Waters for a moment before taking a deep breath and announcing, "Miss Samuels has left."

I opened my mouth to ask what happened but she shook her head slightly. "Billy go on upstairs and change pants. They're wet around your ankles."

As soon as he was out of ear shot she gave me another of her serious looks. My stomach did a flip. Something was coming and whatever it was she didn't want Billy to hear. "You're almost a man now Frank so I'm going to tell you something. You are not to talk to your little brother about this. Do you understand?"

I nodded. My tongue stuck to the roof of my dry mouth. She pulled a chair away from the table and with a nod of her head indicated I should sit. I glanced at Mr. Waters as I took a seat and the expression on his face was solemn. Had Miss Samuels stolen something? Had she died?

"Frank, Miss Samuels was not who she seemed to be."

I wanted to shout out that I knew it. She was an actress, probably a movie star. Nothing in my short life prepared me for what Mama said next.

"Miss Samuels was actually a..." she hesitated and looked toward Mr. Waters for help.

“She was a man disguised as a woman. He robbed the bank in Rapid City and was dressed as a young lady so he could escape.” Mr. Waters stated all this in a flat tone.

I struggled to wrap my mind around what they were telling me. How could a man look so much like a woman? It wasn't just the wig, although that now made sense. His smooth legs with the straight seamed stockings, the dimples in his cheeks, the girly curves... I had thought she was pretty. No. I had thought HE was pretty. I felt kind of sick.

Mama could tell I was upset but Mr. Waters had a better idea of what was troubling me. “It's okay Frank. He had all of us fooled.”

They quickly told me what happened after Billy and I left for school. We hadn't been gone more than twenty minutes when two carloads of police arrived. Miss Samuels had tried to climb out the window of the guest room with her heavy suitcase; a suitcase filled with bills and coins from the rapid City Bank and Trust. But she was caught because several of the officers had gone around to the back of the house anticipating just such a move.

I was absorbing all this with my mouth hanging open when Mama added the cherry on top. “Frankie, there was a reward for catching him. The bank is going to give us a thousand dollars. Now you aren't to tell anyone at all about that.”

The number lit up in my head like one of those big spotlights they used to find enemy planes during the war. A thousand dollars was more than anyone in our town had ever seen. Even the rich family, the Hoovers, in the big house on the other side of town probably didn't have that much money.

Mama was a little foolish to think news like that could be kept secret in a small town like ours. The newspaper sent a man to ask questions and take pictures of all of us and pictures of our guest room. We were local celebrities.

Mama used some of the money to fix up the house and make a real boarding house. If that wasn't odd enough, it turned out Mr. Waters wasn't as old as I had thought. A year after Miss Samuels, whose name was actually Samuel Lee Marvin, was arrested, Mama and Mr. Waters got married. A year after that Mama brought home a baby sister who they named Marie after our bank robbing roomer. Neither Billy nor I were thrilled to have a sister. But when Mary Louise began to make regular visits to see the baby and sometimes help Mama out I began to like Baby Marie a lot more.

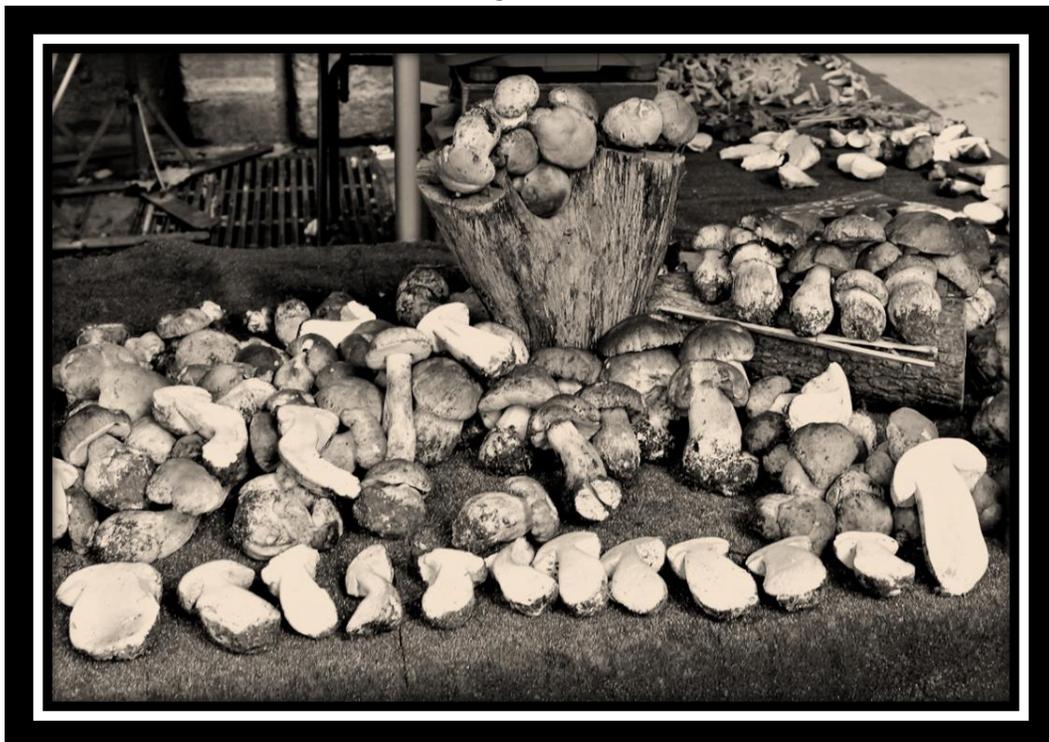
Billy never spent those two quarters the bank robber had given him. He kept them in a special place on the shelf in his room and would show them to friends who came by to ask us to tell the story again and again. Those quarters sit in a special frame on my dresser now. Billy passed away almost five years gone. A few months after that, my darling wife Mary Louise went to be with the Lord too. Now there are very few left in town who remember the story. But just last week my grandson Will heard about it from some old timer and I got to pass that old tale along. I showed him those quarters and he just stared at them like they were made of gold. They're going to be his someday. I reckon it will be someday soon.

“Fungi Fandango”

Elizabeth Horton-Newton

&

Neil Douglas Newton



Fungi Fandango (Book One in the Series)

Chapter 1:

Lancaster

I was already annoyed. The dirty water hit my pants leg as a cab passed me on Grand Street. I surveyed the leg, knowing that it was most likely a total loss. Street water in New York wasn't known for its hygienic properties. I stalked angrily to the gallery. My sister had invited me to see an opening of photography. I tried to convince that, as an art critic, this was not my bailiwick. She insisted to the point that I knew there was no dissuading her.

I suspected that she was trying to play match maker, as though she knew what kind of woman I'd want in my life. My sister was nothing, if not arrogant. What made this worse was that this was unutterably asinine: a photographer whose subjects were mushrooms. Only mushrooms. How unbearably annoying.

I expected a super-annuated teenager, finding her personal revolution in mushrooms, something no one else could consider making a career on. And I wasn't disappointed. Allegra Moore was a flighty drama aficionado, clearly enjoying the attention the opening afforded her. After we were introduced she prattled on about her photography, justifying her oeuvre by explaining that each mushroom had its own personality. I was so disgusted that I availed myself of the cheap Champagne that the passing waiters were offering. Cheap stuff, probably nothing that had ever seen the soil of France.

As we came to what was obviously Ms. Moore's favorite photograph, she took great pains to remind us that mushrooms were phallic, tittering like some high school student relishing her parents horror. I caught my sister's eye, only to see the glimmer of hope that I might be smitten. I smirked, letting her know I would rather bed a hair dresser.

I made polite noises as we passed each of her photographs. While she spoke, checking my reaction to each of her "works", I was thinking the Fra Diavolo at Bentoni's. A good white wine and a salad with arugula would make me forget the damage to my equipoise that this experience had already caused. Add some Tiramisu and cappacino and that could salvage the evening. My mind wandered as Ms. Moore began to wind down. It seemed downhill from there.

Until my train of thought was derailed by the strident tones of a female who turned out not to be Ms. Moore. While I'd been thinking my thoughts, someone new had arrived. I tuned back into the unfortunate reality of the gallery in time to listen to an argument between Ms. Moore and the new arrival. It seemed that there was some disagreement about the quality of Allegra Moore's photographs. What was most disturbing was the fact that the woman who made the claims about the inferiority of Ms. Moore's work was...I could hardly credit it. She too was a mushroom photographer.

I thought I'd gone to hell. I looked at my sister and shook my head while we listened to the thrust and parry of the argument. The bone of contention seemed to be what this new critic considered "exploitation" of the mushrooms, making them cute and patently anthromorphic. Looking at the photographs, I could see her point; there was a certain level of "cute" in all her photographs. As ridiculous as it sounded, it could be said that Allegra had "posed" her mushrooms like children in a family portrait.

The argument became more heated and I was about to leave when Ms. Allegra's critic turned to me and asked my opinion. I raised my hands to ward off any suggestion bias. "Not my area of expertise," I told her and began to back away.

"Coward!" Allegra spat.

That did it. "I came here at my sister's request. I'm not responsible for you or your friend here or the state of your mushrooms each with their own personality. In fact I think I can say with out fear of exaggeration that I don't think mushrooms have personalities. I'm not a coward. I'll go so far to say that your friend here is correct. Mushrooms, as ill a fit as they are for objet d'art, are a work of nature and that is the best you can hope to portray in your photographs. Anthropomorphizing them is something akin to arrogance and silliness."

I turned to my sister. "I'll see you on Sunday as usual. For now I wish all of you a good day."

My sister grabbed my arm and read me the riot act, as she always does, only this time sotto voice. "Barry! You're being unspeakably rude. You've no place to judge this woman's art!"

I winced. The use of "Barry" instead of Barrington, my real name, made my teeth hurt, something my sister was well aware of. "Please don't mistake this as art," I whispered directly into her ear. "And why do you think I'm required to get involved in a brawl?"

She snorted. "To you people having friendly argument over who'll pay the check at dinner is a brawl."

"I choose what level of boorish behavior I'm willing to tolerate."

"Of course. You are the arbiter of all things tasteful. But for the moment leaving would be rude. I'll handle Roxy. I've spent enough time doing it."

She took Roxy's arm in what I considered a highly maternal fashion. "Rox. I think your art is creative and unique. You don't have to listen to critics. There will always be more of them. Just walk away."

Roxy's face was beet red and her breathing was labored. "I'm sick of this...I'm sick of being attacked. This is the way I see what I do. It's one view of the whole mushroom realm. Why should I be subjected to this hostility?"

I winced again. *Mushroom Realm?* I felt like I was in a children's story I would read to any child I knew.

Her critic looked around the gallery. "Roxy, you're a fraud. And all this is a waste of time and space. They'd be better off putting a game arcade in here."

I saw a transformation in Roxy's face that I had to admit was somewhat fascinating. Waves of red and white moved across her face and I could swear her eyes changed color slightly, "Oh shit," my sister whispered.

It was done with lightning speed; no one could have seen it coming or prevented it. Roxy's arm swung from her shoulder to land perfectly executed slap across her tormentor's face. The woman reeled back and shrieked. "You stupid, bitch! What is wrong with you."

There was an evil smile on Roxy's face. "Want another?"

"You assaulted me. Look at all the witnesses. I'm going to press charges!"

My sister leaned toward me. Urgently, she whispered, "Get Roxy out of here. I'm going to have to deal with the legalities of this. I'm going to try to spin this so this woman think's Roxy's mentally unhinged."

"Not a tough sell," I retored.

"Get her out of her," she hissed.

“I’m not going anywhere with that harpy. What reason do I have to think she won’t-“

As I was speaking I saw Roxy’s arm make a familiar movement. Without thinking I jumped between her and her critic.”You have to control-“

Her arm connected with my face. I have to say that the blow was quite impressive in it’s power.

My sister grabbed Roxy’s arm. “Get her out of here.”

“What makes you think you can throw me into this. I’ts not my problem at all. You deal with her if you-“

“Adrian,” she said quickly.

My eyes widened. “You are a vile woman.”

“No contest.” My sister was always a lawyer, even ex parte.

I grabbed Roxy’s arm and said in my best “man of reason” voice, “You need to with me. This won’t end well. We’re trying to protect you.”

The odd eldritch smile remained on her face. She started working up to another strike. I pulled her towards the door. “Let go of me!” she screamed. “I’m not done.”

“Yes you are.”

Her adrenaline was elevated; pulling her was like pulling a brahma bull. Still, after years of tennis and polo, my strength seemed to exceed her’s. We stumbled out the door into the night.

Chapter 2 And in the Beginning...Allegra

For my twelfth Christmas my grandfather gave me a camera. It was not an expensive camera. There were no bells and whistles. It was a simple camera. It introduced me to a whole new world. Behind the viewfinder I learned to zero in on things I had never noticed before. The petals of flowers, the homeless lady with her layers of mismatched clothing, the veins in leaves, the way bare branches stretched toward a gray winter sky; they were all there all the time. By the time my birthday rolled around in June I was begging for a better camera.

I had seen a thirty five millimeter camera in a catalog. It came with a flash, a case, a strap, two rolls of film, and instructions. I left the catalog in all the obvious places where my parents would see it, moving it regularly to reinforce its importance.

My parents believed this new interest in photography was just another passing phase. When I was five years old I nagged for a telescope because I was going to be an astronomer when I grew up. The telescope lay abandoned in a corner of my room a few months after it arrived. When I was nine I demanded a microscope because I wanted to be like Madame Curie and discover some new life saving drug. The microscope lasted a shorter time than the telescope. There were only so many insects, blood drops, pieces of dust to be examined. None had the potential to cure any disease as far as I could tell. So the pleading for a camera was viewed with raised eyebrows.

On my birthday I received some new clothes, a few books, a couple of video tapes, and a slightly better camera but not the elaborate one I desired. I sulked. I left it in the box for over a week hoping my disappointment would motivate them to rethink their choice and return the offensive camera, replacing it with the camera of my dreams. It didn't work out that way. I eventually gave in and started taking pictures. A less than perfect camera was better than no camera at all.

My mother noticed. She mentioned my passion to my father. The walls of my room were filled with photos I had taken. People, places, and things that caught my attention because of their oddity became the focus of my world. There were things that others might view as common place or even boring grew fascinating when seen through my view finder. My parents would come into my room and stare at my walls before exchanging glances and wandering away.

That Christmas I received my first high quality 35 mm camera. It was beautiful. I unpacked it gently, lovingly. Removing the lens cap I stared at the Cyclops eye that stared back at me, challenging me to use it, to point it at some unremarkable view, bringing it to life and preserving it for posterity.

As time passed my family and friends became accustomed to my cameras; one was always in my hands if not hanging around my neck. I entered photography contests and I always won at least Honorable Mention. If my parents were surprised that my often peculiar choices of subjects were worth awards they were kind enough and smart enough not to say so. I read books on other well known photographers; many of them odd. I fell in love with Diane Arbus, Jay Maisel, and Jerry Uelsman. When I was in high school, a local community college offered photography classes for teens. Once again I begged. This time my request was granted quickly.

There was some resistance when I announced I was going to skip college and travel the world taking photos of obscure places and strange looking people. Eventually we

compromised and I took a graduation summer trip through Europe and Britain and signed up to be a Media Arts major, focusing on photography. Not a bad deal. In the end my parents were happy to think I might become a wedding photographer or maybe even a fashion photographer and I got a great vacation where I lost my virginity to a sexy Italian and ate my way across Europe. I managed to garner an internship while I was in college taking photos for a local newspaper, assisting a local photographer during the holidays with photos of snotty babies and giddy engaged couples, or families with a dozen squalling kids all dressed in variations of Santa Claus red. It was not always fun but the money was pretty good.

After graduation I met the boy I thought was the love of my life and when he announced he was going to hike the Appalachian Trail over the summer I immediately committed to joining him. We started at Springer Mountain, Georgia planning to end up in Maine several months later. Optimistic? Crazy might be a better word. LOML (Love of My Life) lasted until Damascus, Virginia. We were camping when he hooked up with a Swedish blond who was traveling with a group of friends. I don't know where they went after disappearing into the sunrise one morning. Hurt but determined to tough it out I vowed to continue on. That's when I discovered them. Mushrooms. They cuddled the roots of trees, they sprang from questionable piles of scat, they came in shapes, sizes, and colors that rivaled the rainbow. There were mushrooms in companionable clusters, mushrooms that stood alone and noble, short, chubby, childlike mushrooms, and long stemmed sexy mushrooms.

And mushrooms have brought me here; my first official show, Fungus Fandango the Dance of the Mushrooms. I'd had my works displayed alongside other photographers, but this was all my work. Some of the shots had been displayed previously but the majority of the exhibit contained new, never before seen photos of mushrooms. Some were collages of tiny mushrooms, others were six feet tall photos of single mushrooms of noble bearing.

My dear friend Sydney had assisted me in pulling the event together. An up and coming lawyer in one of the more prestigious New York law firms, she held my hand every step of the way. She was more like a big sister than merely a friend and I valued her opinion on everything except of course my art. Sydney helped me find backers, the perfect venue, assemble the guest list, and even select a menu of light refreshments. Her only annoying habit was constantly telling me about her brother, a professor and art critic for one of the uppity local artsy magazines that popped up in the metropolitan area on a regular basis. Assuring me he would write a good review of the show she added his name to the guest list with a flourish.

From Sydney's description I expected to meet a cool, good looking guy in jeans and a blazer, hair a tad too long, maybe that five o'clock shadow look that was so popular and I found sexy. Imagine my chagrin when Dr. Doolittle walked through the door. Some people just have an air of pomposity and Sydney's brother Barry had it in spades. Although he was of average height he managed to look down his nose at everyone and everything. He may not be Mr. Right but he was an art critic and that was why he was here. When Syd introduced us I offered my most captivating smile and immediately began to tell him about my work, guiding him through the exhibit and taking significant time to introduce each piece. I caught him looking at the wonderful posters I'd designed of mushrooms dancing joyfully in forest settings. Barry was doing a wonderful job of hiding his appreciation of my creativity but I could tell by the glint in his eye he was moved. Perhaps he wasn't as stuffy as I thought. He might be one of those men that was a little shy and just needed encouragement to open up. I was about to offer him a fresh glass of champagne when all hell broke loose.

I was not the only photo artist that appreciated the beauty of mushrooms in nature. Divinity Cavelli, a name I suspect she created out of thin air, also chose fungi as her subjects. Her photos were staid and prim with none of the joy and abandon I captured with my lens. We had been competing for some time on the circuit, presenting our works alongside various other artists. In fact she had a show scheduled for the following month and was obviously pissed as hell that I had gotten the jump on her.

She flew into the room, long black hair flying around her face like a halo from hell, tight black jumpsuit cut so low in the front her chalk white breasts would have been exposed if she had any to show. She immediately began to insult my art, describing it as juvenile, tasteless, and silly!

I confess I do have a temper. My parents say it's because I am a natural redhead and it comes with the territory much as my freckles and complexion do. Soon we were screaming at one another. I probably would have decked her if Sydney hadn't stepped forward to intervene. In the midst of her attempt, her brother Barry moved forward as well. I had drawn back my arm and readied my fist to punch out Divinity's lights when Sydney pushed my arm aside. Instead of connecting with Allegra I caught Barry's arm as well as the glass of champagne he was holding. It sprayed over him dousing his clothes in the delicious scent of the wine. The expression on his face was priceless.

Meanwhile someone was pulling Divinity away while she shrieked insults, and Sydney had hold of my arm and was stridently telling Barry to get me out of the gallery. He was protesting, albeit weakly. Somehow she persuaded him to be my knight in shining armor and I calmed down enough to allow him to shove me out the door past the gaping mouths who had witnessed the entire debacle. So amidst the flashes of cameras and the video feeds of local reporters I was extracted from the gallery.

Afterword

Elizabeth Horton-Newton

I opted to have the last word in our anthology. Let me begin by saying I hope you enjoyed our short stories and are intrigued by our “work in progress”. This compilation has been a labor of love. Neil and I have developed something of a following and we wanted to give the readers who enjoy our writing something special. While most of these stories can be found in other anthologies with other fine arbiters, there are a few that are being shared with a select few.

Neil and I do have similar writing styles, as he mentioned. But beyond horror, serial killers, and stories of that nature, I also write about people; real people sometimes in very emotional situations. I like to put some focus on issues that concern me; conspiracies and the government and love between elderly couples in “View From the Sixth Floor”, illegal adoption and prejudice of indigenous babies in “Riddle”, alcoholism, addiction, and anxiety/panic disorders and PTSD in “Carved Wooden Heart”. Some of my short stories have dealt with domestic abuse, organ donation, and dealing with grief.

I am currently working on two new books; “Stolen”, which deals with kidnapping, Gypsy crime families, drug cartels, teenage unwed mothers, and the Witness Protection Program. Also “Highway of Blood and Tears” (that’s the working title); a story related to the real life murders of indigenous women in British Columbia. These are crimes which have been severely overlooked by the government of our northern neighbors.

Neil also has another book he is putting the finishing touches on. It revolves around the science of Nikola Tesla and its application in modern times.

Please keep an eye on our web pages for updates on these exciting new stories.

Thank you all so much for your support, your interest in our writing, and your friendship. We love to hear from our readers so look for us on Twitter, Facebook, and through e-mail.

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