

NORTHERN NARRATIVES

A Collection of Poems, Essays, and Short Stories
by Citizens of North Dakota and the
Red River Valley

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Red River Valley

Volume 4

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements | v |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Northern Focus | 3 |
| Poetry | 5 |
| Sky Dance <i>by Sarah Adams</i> | 7 |
| Early Service <i>by Barbara Beckman</i> | 9 |
| Prairie Spirit <i>by Mark Bratlie</i> | 10 |
| Small Town Bars <i>by Cara Braun</i> | 11 |
| Villanelle: At the Beginnings of the Pandemic <i>by Loretta Cantieri</i> | 12 |
| Winter Sky <i>by Terrie Rae Enlow</i> | 13 |
| Thee Creeping Creatures Sly <i>by David Johnson</i> | 14 |
| Vanilla-y <i>by Ian Keyes</i> | 15 |
| Blood Words <i>by Atiya Khan</i> | 16 |
| Late Night Thoughts of Gold <i>by Atiya Khan</i> | 17 |
| On a Warm January Day <i>by Bibi Khan</i> | 18 |
| When I Look at Her <i>by Sredna Kunowski</i> | 20 |
| Count to Ten <i>by Annie Nigma</i> | 22 |
| Buzzcut <i>by Hannah Nyland</i> | 25 |
| Ghost Farms <i>by Victor Pellerano</i> | 26 |
| Hjemkomst <i>by Lana Pulst</i> | 27 |
| Ever Ridden a Kangaroo? <i>by Dave Springer</i> | 28 |
| Sic Gloria Transit <i>by Dave Springer</i> | 29 |
| Essays | 31 |
| The Summer of Tomatoes <i>by Jennifer Hoffman</i> | 33 |
| Magic Pizza Box: On Being Human <i>by Karen Van Fossan</i> | 39 |
| Short Stories | 49 |
| Dead Roads <i>by Andy Ayash</i> | 51 |
| A Family Story <i>by Andrea Fox</i> | 59 |
| A Fish Tale: How it Was? <i>by Dean Hulse</i> | 71 |
| The Heart Mender <i>by Grace Loughheed</i> | 81 |
| Baby Teeth <i>by Travis Michael</i> | 91 |
| Medora Bighorn <i>by Randal Ness</i> | 109 |
| All We Trapped Rag Dolls <i>by Caden Nestler</i> | 119 |

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the fourth volume of *Northern Narratives*.

Northern Narratives is an annual anthology published by the Fargo Public Library to highlight and preserve the writing of local and regional authors. Our aim is to promote the sharing of our stories and the creation of content that is meaningful to our community; therefore all poems, essays, and short stories featured in this volume were written and self-edited by residents of North Dakota and the Red River Valley. To learn more about the *Northern Narratives* project, please visit our website at fargolibrary.org.

Selection to this anthology was done by the NDSU English Honor Society and volunteers based on the following criteria: voice, style, cohesiveness, and the ability to engage readers.

We hope you enjoy this book, and fall in love with the creativity, passion, and humor of our region's writers, just as we did.

The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Fargo Public Library or the City of Fargo.

Support for the *Northern Narratives* writing project was provided by The Friends of the Fargo Public Library. To learn more about the Friends, please visit fargolibrary.org/friendsofthelibrary.

NORTHERN FOCUS

Front Cover:

“Home in the Middle of Nowhere” (2019) by Hannah Borsheim

The photograph on the front cover of this book was chosen as a part of Fargo Public Library’s first annual Northern Focus Photography Project. Northern Focus is a project conceived by the Fargo Public Library for regional amateur photographers. We aim to provide a free space, for artist and viewer alike, where we can showcase amateur artwork and share local perspectives.

Photographers from North Dakota and parts of western Minnesota sent in their favorite photographs taken anywhere within the region. All received entries were on display at the Main Library during September and October 2020. Find the permanent digital gallery online at <https://www.facebook.com/fargopubliclibrary>.

POETRY

Poetry

SKY DANCE

by Sarah Adams

Leaves crunch in the descending darkness
Night songs punctuate a deepening silence
It echoes a wolf beckoning his mate
While the Owl sounds an alarm

A human form approaches the theatre
Water teases his toes
Twilight loses to the growing night
A camera readies for a celestial gathering

The trees sigh in the growing quiet.
Moon and stars dangle on delicate celestial threads
The diamond twinkles await a spiritual awakening
Terra's dark water draws them to a closer stage

The noise scatters for parts unknown
Whispers circle the water's edge
Eyes shine from the timber's shadowy depths
Curiously studying the alien form

Dark silence quiets the rustling leaves
An alien form seated on the log
Rounded with a long, odd-shaped snout
Clouds ring a heavenly audience

Stars offer a heavenly glow
The orchestra is summoned
Restrained clouds reveal a black stage
Water provides a reflective dance floor

With bated breath eyeing the heavens
The dancers appear
Greens and yellows shimmer and smile
Water becomes a willing partner

Ripples from melodic waves
Reflecting a colorful dance
Sighs of contentment
Water kisses the heavens

Whispers in the wind tickle their ears
The wonderment of a celestial delight
Weaving and twisting across a dark stage
Euphoric joy at heavenly gifts

Harkening a spiritual awakening
Our ancestors dance in the pillars of light
The ancient are not forgotten
Humankind, animal-kind embraces the songs

The dancers bid a brief respite
Then return emboldened by the embrace
They continue their dance uninhibited
Human lights can't distract the dance

Memories of joy bury the sadness
Ribbons of color
The life force never forgets the songs
Celestial simplicity feeds the ancient memories

The colors leave
The dance wanes
The clicking ceases
Twilight beckons a different light

Poetry

EARLY SERVICE

by Barbara Beckman

Of all the people at the 8:30 service
on a subzero Sunday morning,
it's the young families I like best.
It would have been so much easier to stay home.
Those kids with their clean shirts and combed hair.
(What time did they have to get up?)
The mom with her tote stuffed full of Cheerios, toys and
workbooks.
(Did she pack it the night before?)
The dad fussing with his cell phone, trying to find the off
before the first hymn begins.

By the second Scripture reading,
the kids have one-by-one unpacked every item.
They have snacked, played and drawn.
Now empty-handed, they crawl across the pew
to sit on their parents' laps. They reach up, touching their faces.
The parents don't flinch or scold or turn away.
Instead they pick pieces of lint off their kids' clothes,
pat down hair still electrified from stocking caps,
tuck in a tag. The grooming looks so familiar.
And the tolerance. And the patience.
Monkeys in church?

And how lovely that I -- a worn, gray monkey -- get to sit in the
middle of such a wondrous, vibrant zoo.

Welcome to worship!

PRAIRIE SPIRIT

by Mark Bratlie

I gaze on vast spaces
not empty
not disturbing
but settled and inviting

I gaze on vistas of stillness
not rushing
not anxious
but calm softness

I gaze on distant tree lines
not unruly
not intrusive
but green contentment

I gaze on endless sky
not threatening
not overwhelming
but bluer than blue

I gaze with awe and wonder
as my inner spirit expands
not to compete
not to fill
but to be with
with vastness
with stillness
with Prairie Spirit.

Poetry

SMALL TOWN BARS

by Cara Braun

You must bring bars!
Signed, the PTO
Some places call them pan cookies,
Canadians, just “squares”
But here in North Dakota they’re the everlasting bars
You must bring bars!
They’re the toast of every town,
The sweetened condensed cement of neighborly relations,
The tasty ties that bind,
The oatmeal foundation of every function,
You must bring bars!
Be it basketball or volleyball,
football or fellowship,
Funeral parlor or fire hall,
Quilters guild or legionnaires,
You must bring bars!
Whether brownies, Scotcheroos,
Special K, Rice Krispies,
Fudge Jumbles, Date Dreams
Or delicious Danish Apple
You must bring bars!
Cut them evenly,
Wrap them individually,
(preferably extra large)
But, no matter how you slice it,
You Must Send Bars!

VILLANELLE: AT THE BEGINNINGS OF THE PANDEMIC

by Loretta Cantieri

Together or apart we feel our thirst
My father drinks his water when I go home
Many mouths are dry and hands are left unwashed

More and more we hoard water, more and more
We slam shut our border and our doors, but
Together or apart we feel our thirst

Dehydration is a death twist for him
At ninety he spouts a lung liquid cough
Many mouths are dry and hands are left unwashed

Water rises dough inside his feet, but
A pill each day flushes the pounds away
Together or apart we feel our thirst

Water weight erodes the river's bank and floods
grasslands emitting a rotten rank
Many mouths are dry and hands are left unwashed

His infected kidneys spill urine and blood
Our survival and his rivals gods and dumb luck
Many mouths are dry and hands are left unwashed
Together or apart we feel our thirst

WINTER SKY

by Terrie Rae Enlow

Day shines in the winter sky,
On our snow fort palace.
Night glows in the winter sky:
Aurora Borealis!

Crystals hanging in the air,
Twinkle in the light.
Misty, hazy, crooked moon,
Glowing in the night.

Sun dogs stretching yellow and long
On both sides of the sun.
Stars come out against dark sky,
Signaling day is done.

Winter sky-How curious!
Winter sky-Mysterious!

THEE CREEPING CREATURES SLY

by David Johnson

O, twisted shadows dark and evil creatures sly;
Thee that howl, shriek, and cry;
May ye be crushed before mortal harm;
Ye do to those ye disarm.

By twilight ye creep, by midnight ye hide;
To leap upon a mortal, to drink the blood inside;
To snuff the light, to bring the fire;
To raise the hate, this is what ye desire.

But for us, God still loves and cares;
He hears our cries, He hears our prayers;
He will defend us, for alone we can not;
And He will win, when the war is fought.

So, twisted shadows dark and evil creatures sly;
Thee that howl, shriek, and cry;
Fly shrieking back to your den, God has won;
Thee are crushed, finished, done.

VANILLA-Y

by Ian Keyes

I don't mind if it doesn't mean a thing.
I'm sitting on the porch eating icecream.
Sensations such as this appeal to me.

I delight in anything that's real.
I smell the pines and see the color green.
I don't mind if it doesn't mean a thing.

Some people look like out of movie reels.
With smiles and sexiness they walk toward me.
Sensations such as this appeal to me.

It's nice to ponder theories and ideals.
The world I love smells all vanilla-y.
I don't mind if it doesn't mean a thing.

To us the ancient secrets are revealed,
absorbing books and coffee and vape steam.
Sensations such as this appeal to me.

We're born to romp about in daisy fields.
The universe does not mean anything.
I don't mind if it doesn't mean a thing.
Sensations such as this appeal to me.

BLOOD WORDS

by Atiya Khan

I do not write
My heart just bleeds into the paper
Writing in blood
Because the ink in my pen
dried up long ago

I do not speak
My words just swirl around in the wind
Speaking the words of others
Because my words stopped being
valuable long ago

I do not sing
My melodies just talk through my fingers
Singing false praises of others
Because I lost
my voice long ago

I do not dance
My feet move of their own accord
Dancing around inconvenient truths
Because desire to frolic
left me long ago

I do not live
My heart beats a robotic rhythm
Living vicariously through others
Because life became a dream
I buried long ago

Poetry

LATE NIGHT THOUGHTS OF GOLD

by Atiya Khan

I told you that I wanted a golden star
And you told me that is your heart
But if your heart is a precious mineral
It is only a thing to be desired
To be admired
To be collected
Not to love

But maybe you misspoke and instead meant that your heart is golden
Golden, like the color of a field of wheat
As the sun turns its face towards the east
Golden like the honey that drips down sticky fingers
The labor of the worker bees to please their queen
Golden like leaves at the time of parting from their tree
Falling from grace in their finest hour

I would like to believe your heart is golden
Though it is not made of gold
The light that emanates from it
Causes the fickle gleam of gold to seem dim in comparison
And you, my love, you are my golden star

ON A WARM JANUARY DAY

by Bibi Khan

I knew it wouldn't be easy walking out back to the deck on this warmer than usual January afternoon. The sun was sitting low in the sky and all too soon it would kiss the horizon and sail to the other side. I could not hurry in my footsteps. The snow was too deep and in certain spots, half of my body disappeared in all that whiteness. I was sinking deep and held on tighter to the shovel, using it as a crutch, or more precisely, a lifeline. Drawing one pious breath after another, I eventually made it to my destination. The mountain of snow topped with rabbits' poop that greeted me on the deck was more overwhelming than I had anticipated.

I wanted to give up even before I'd begun. But I was determined to get this eye sore out of my line of vision and to keep a secondary escape route open. So, with the sun at my back and work piled up before me, I painstakingly began to shovel the deck clear. Half-way through I started to convince myself that I had done enough for now; that dinner still had to be prepared; that I was tired and had been on my feet all day. My several attempts at quitting failed. Even when I heard and saw the plane overhead bringing my hubby home.

I could not deny the power I wielded over myself never to leave a job half done. Or the mantra I had drilled into my daughters' heads that something worth doing should be done right. These were constant companions in my life. No matter how I try sometimes to leave them by the wayside, they continually plagued my semi-consciousness. Today, on this warm January day, they stuck to me like crazy glue on plastic. Though my back and arm muscles were sore, and I wasn't sure I'd make it back indoors through the mountain of snow in the yard, the euphoria that filled my being was more than I could ask for.

Poetry

As I took in the “beauty” of the cleared deck, I also admired the last vestige of the sunset with its reddish-pink glow. I was glad that the sun had been a witness to my work and that I, in turn, had the opportunity to view its uplifting brilliance at the end of the day. Like two friends after a long chat, we now had to say goodbye and go our separate ways.

WHEN I LOOK AT HER

by Sredna Kunowski

When I look at her, I see
The dirt hidden underneath transparent fingernails
They are too long again but she can't cut them
Doing everything for her makes my bones weary
I stare at the hard clumps of dandruff between her hair follicles
She can't even bathe herself; I have to do everything for her
Her short black hair makes swirls on the top of her head
She makes grunts, sighs, moans, and hiccups loudly
I feel her body jolt as the biggest burp known to all
Reverberates throughout her entire body, like she's trying to throw up
her soul.
Sneeze and germs spray on my hand, I feel the sharp acute knife-like
nails tear into my skin
Toes so cold linger occasionally on my warm leg; I move abruptly
trying to get away
I'm trying to get away.
But she can't take care of herself
At quiet times like these I look at her and smile
She looks just like me
Then her tiny mouth makes such terrifying screams
And I feel like I'm getting stabbed in the heart, betrayed for all my
hard work
I want to flee the scene of the crime, but time stands still
I can't breathe
These expectations are suffocating me
I have to do everything
She can't even lift a finger to feed herself
It's me who warms her food or keeps it cold
I bring it to her lips with a heavy heart
Wishing I was anywhere but here
As she drifts off to sleep

Poetry

I think of the peace I will have while she dreams
And when she wakes, she'll want something else, more of me
But I have nothing else to give.

COUNT TO TEN

by Annie Nigma

One

The first thing I noticed about you was your smile. It pulled me in, and I was a fool for not resisting.

I guess you could say I loved your smile more than I loved you.

Two

We watched a thunderstorm from your porch, leaves and rain falling down, wind howling, thunder roaring.

You said the flashes of lightening were beautiful, and you watched them with your eyes closed.

But I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes, not even for a second.

I was too busy staring at you.

Three

We were standing on a bridge, watching the water run run run beneath us. Fireflies danced in the air, playing a game of tag that I could only watch; never join.

Your voice broke my thoughts. "Isn't it amazing how humans can link one piece of land to another with bridges like this one?"

I could only nod and wish someone would invent bridges to link people.

Bridges that no one would ever knock down.

Poetry

Four

“Love is a lie,” you told me. It was winter, snow falling around us, and I reached for your hand in the cold only for you to pull away.

“Love is a lie,” you repeated, “just like everything else.”

But then, who’s the liar?

Five

I was on your couch, half-asleep and saying nonsense things about the weather and how flowers are lonely and didn’t that tree’s leaves look reddish-purple?

And you put your arm around me, and the sound of your breathing drowned out the television, and...

Six

You were smiling.

Seven

I wrote my name on your wrist.

When you asked why, I just said, “So you won’t forget me.”

But it faded of course, just like I will.

Eight

“You’re beautiful,” you said, kissing the spaces between my fingers.

That’s when I found out who the liar was.

You, you,

You.

Nine

You were gone for the weekend, visiting family members. I was on my bed, hopes and phone in hand.

“Do you miss me?” I asked.

I won’t try to say how much it hurt when you said “No”.

Ten

I had a dream of you driving away in autumn wind, waving goodbye, and I could do nothing but stare and think this can’t be happening.

And I woke up to find you gone. The only reminders I have of your existence are these photographs and a post-it note.

“Goodbye” is all it says.

Goodbye.

Poetry

BUZZCUT

by Hannah Nyland

The stylist asks me three times if I'm sure.
the unspoken question is
(you're a girl, aren't you?)
Wave her off with a laugh
hooked against the inside of my throat,
blurry with sweat, hands oil slicks
against the patchwork blue chair.
I'm drowning in the sleek misery of fluorescent lights
hitting the cloudy tiles below like a slap
her hesitation is almost mythic
But when the razor purrs up
like an arthritic old tomcat
and sloughs me clean,
I know that I've kept everything I wanted.
This is no Samson story.

GHOST FARMS

by Victor Pellerano

The wind whistles through the broken window panes
As the silhouette of the barn accents the sky
I can recall the stories of all the days gone by
Has the handiwork of a Farmer's dream slowly dies

I walk among the grasslands and feel the earth beneath my feet
Generations of farming, the victories and defeats

Ghost farms on an open prairie
Their lives and times now faded dreams
Ghost farms on an open prairie
How I wish you were here with me

The sun slowly sinks behind the horizon line
And washes all the buildings in red
The rusty machinery that was left behind
Now weeps in a soft grass bed

I find a faded photograph under the orange skies
And through the lines and creases, I can see the sorrow in their eyes

Ghost farms on an open prairie
Their lives and times now faded dreams
Ghost farms on an open prairie
How I wish you were here with me

HJEMKOMST

by Lana Pulst

Hjemkomst
Viking ship of olde
dragon's head reborn

Your tall mast pierces a
hole in the sun
and your heritage shines through

Your curved timbers have tasted
the salt of the sea
and borne your people home.

EVER RIDDEN A KANGAROO?

by Dave Springer

Have you ever ridden a kangaroo?
The rides a bit bouncy, O so true!
You may get the hang of how it jumps,
Tho' harder adjusting to the jarring thumps;
For as the kangaroo leaps and lands,
The rider suddenly understands,
As his mount prepares to spring from a crouch.
Why the babies choose their mama's pouch.
And so too in life, where we take a seat,
May make our travels an ordeal or treat,
And sometimes just by taking things in stride,
Helps to cushion a bumpy ride!

Poetry

SIC GLORIA TRANSIT

by Dave Springer

In the Coliseum
Ruin of Time and Blood
Timeless in the Eternal City
Monument of Gore and Glories past
Circus of sin, Senators and Caesars

In the Coliseum
An old hag bends
Her face a ruin itself
Timeless and Eternal
Her youthful glory long past
She might belong to any age

In the Coliseum this night
She bends gathering
The dust of Rome's past
Into little bags
To be sold the next day
To American tourists
Sic gloria transit!

ESSAYS

THE SUMMER OF TOMATOES

by Jennifer Hoffman

My first vegetable garden was an abysmal failure. It was on a small plot of borrowed land three-quarters of a mile from my parents' house. I was only about twelve years old, and in my youthful enthusiasm I wanted to turn over a giant swath of land and plant every available inch of it. My parents wisely wouldn't let me. It wasn't an ideal location, and the distance from home made my visits infrequent. Couple that with the fact that most of the water for irrigation had to be hauled in five gallon buckets and you can imagine how it all turned out. I don't remember the exact result, but I remember being underwhelmed, and I don't think I gardened the next year.

Time passed and I moved on to other activities. I graduated from high school, then moved away from home for college and, eventually, a job. My dorm rooms and apartments weren't the most plant-friendly places, but I never really got over the allure of gardening even after that first disaster. After college I grew tomatoes and peppers in pots on my apartment balconies with mixed success, so when my husband and I bought a house I was ready to try "real" gardening again. It helped that my husband had grown produce successfully in the past, so between the two of us we figured we could make a decent go of it.

In late February we started a few seeds indoors on a sunny southwest windowsill, and to my great surprise they sprouted and thrived. Seven tomato plants and five pepper plants came up, and though we had intended to thin them down to three of each, we were both so thrilled with the results that we couldn't bear to do it. The plants grew through March, and by the middle of April we were itching to start putting them outside for part of the day. However, the weather would not cooperate. Spring was coming slowly whether we liked it or not. The plants appeared to be anxious to move outdoors as well. They were growing leggy and tall, stretching for every bit of sunlight they could gather, and they were outgrowing their pots. Soon we were forced to pot them up into larger containers, so instead of twelve little containers I had six big ones littering my dining room floor. When temperatures could finally

sustain a plant outdoors we eagerly hauled those six containers outside, but then the weather turned cold and we had to lug the plants back indoors at night and out again during the day.

Late May arrived and with it came decent temperatures. By that time the plants were a sorry bunch indeed and we were glad we hadn't thinned them. Who knew how many would make it? They had spent too much time crowded into too-small pots and it was high time that they were planted in the ground. At the first opportunity I worked up a patch of soil, dug in a massive amount of compost, and planted. My husband was busy with something else in the yard so I was left unsupervised. The sum total of my tomato experience was with pleasant, well-behaved vines grown in pots, and my peppers had never done much, so I planted accordingly. Just as I placed the last plant and pressed in the soil around it my husband came around the corner of the house. He stopped and looked skeptically over my work.

"They're too close together," he said.

"But I followed the directions on the seed packet; they're three feet apart."

"That's way too close. Remember the tomatoes at my parents' house? They get everywhere."

I looked back at the plants. I remembered the tomatoes he referred to. He had gardened at his parents' farm before we were married, and his tomatoes were monstrous vines that bludgeoned all other produce in their way.

"You feed those with farm fertilizer," I tried. The excuse sounded a bit weak even to me.

His eyes shifted between the plants and me, and his expression spoke volumes. He was not convinced. Suddenly I wasn't so sure either. We paused, staring at the newly-planted vegetables.

Finally I said, "Well, it's too late now."

And it was.

For the first couple of weeks the plants did well. They adapted to being outdoors and dug their roots in deep. We watered them regularly and gave them a quick shot of fertilizer, but otherwise left them alone.

Essays

It didn't take long for them to take advantage of the empty space and heavily-amended soil. Within a month my well-behaved tomatoes were larger than I could've ever imagined. The poor pepper plants couldn't keep up and the tomatoes were starting to shade them out. I tried to stake the tomatoes up and train them into better shapes and directions, and it worked at first, but as the vines grew longer they defied my every attempt. Before long I gave up and untied them from the stakes. My new plan was to spread the vines on the ground and send them away from the peppers. It was not as successful as I had hoped. Instead of just growing longer the tomatoes bushed out from the original vines. It was as though they had a specific vendetta against the peppers and were bent on destroying them.

Even though the plants were not living up to my expectations, I took great pleasure in coming home from work every day and checking on them, and was delighted when the first blossoms started to show on the tomatoes. The thing was, it was way too early - only the first week in July. Usually tomatoes didn't start producing until the end of the summer. However, I wasn't going to argue with early produce. My husband and I both liked tomatoes, and we had family members who would be happy to receive any spares we managed to grow. I had high hopes for a good crop of tomatoes even if the peppers only turned out to be marginal. I had never had much success with peppers anyway. A couple dozen tomatoes would be just the thing to make me feel more like I had accomplished something in the garden and make up for my past failures.

A couple of dozen tomatoes in total would have been delightful, but by the beginning of August I was harvesting a couple of dozen tomatoes every week or two. It was absurd. I started out my first few harvests using a medium mixing bowl from my kitchen to hold the fruit, but a few weeks later I was bringing out at least one eight quart mixing bowl if not two, and I was filling them. I gave piles of tomatoes away to family and foisted them on coworkers. I tried to tell my neighbor to pick whatever she wanted. I don't know if she ever did, because if she did, I probably wouldn't have noticed. There were simply too many. Tomatoes became a constant feature in the recipes in our house. And while I had never before thought that I could get sick of BLT sandwiches, I was certainly heading that direction.

I've always loved harvesting produce - it's like a treasure hunt for food. However, by the end of the summer the treasure hunter started to take on a hunted look. I would go and check the plants every other day, and it seemed like whenever I turned my back on a vine a new tomato would crop up. I would finish with one plant and move on to the next, and then do a final sweep, and every time I found tomatoes I had missed in the first round. It was as though the fruits were taunting me. The peppers, however, were not faring nearly so well. I celebrated when the first blossoms appeared on those plants, and when tiny fruit began to form I was careful to check on their progress. Unfortunately, they were quickly being swallowed up by tomato vines. Soon I had to beat my way through tomatoes to check on my pepper plants.

When the first freezes were predicted that fall I was almost relieved. My husband and I considered trying to cover the vines to protect them, but that idea didn't last long. We were both so tired of tomatoes that we agreed it was time for them to go. Unfortunately, we were too stubborn to just leave the whole mess there to rot - there were still plenty of good tomatoes on those plants. So out we went into a swiftly-cooling evening. We figured it would take us an hour or so to pick the last fruits and pull up the vines. How wrong we were. I don't think we went to bed until 11:00 that night. By the time we were done we had nearly thirty pounds of tomatoes in varying stages of ripeness in the house and a giant pile of tomato vines on the compost pile. The only thing left to do was figure out how to use all that produce.

I have a pasta sauce recipe that is excellent with homegrown tomatoes, so we decided to take the last of the summer produce and use it that way. We assumed it wouldn't take long and would be a good use of the bulk of the fruit we had. Again, we were wrong. We spent several consecutive evenings peeling, chopping, and cooking tomatoes. We used entire heads of garlic and bought out the local food co-op's available basil. By the sixth or seventh batch we were tossing in other random vegetables and herbs just to see what happened, including the few sad peppers our plants produced (yes, we did manage to get a few despite our bullying tomato vines).

The marathon continued beyond that first round. Tomatoes ripen slowly if they're brought in green off the vine, and we had picked a large number of green tomatoes. We collected them into groups of

Essays

similar ripeness, and when we had enough we would make another batch of sauce. And another. And another. We ran out of basil before we ran out of tomatoes, and when we couldn't make more sauce we ate BLTs later into the year than I ever had before or have since.

Winter brought a welcome respite and we didn't touch tomato products for quite some time. But when we finally did it really was gratifying to be able to go to the freezer and pull out something which we had produced on our own. We were (and still are) far from self-sufficient, but we found great satisfaction in "putting up" food for the winter like the pioneers did so long ago. The fact that it tasted better than anything we could find in the store was a great perk as well. As winter stretched on the products of our labor helped to brighten our opinion of tomatoes. When spring finally started to show signs of returning we began to anticipate gardening again, just with fewer tomato plants than the year before.

Since the summer of tomatoes I've branched out in my gardening, and I've developed a newfound love of cooking and experimenting that I never would have expected given my first flailing attempts at growing my own food. I have never since started tomatoes as early as that first year – I don't need a repeat performance – but I've started new and different varieties of vegetables, tried my hand at canning, and have done an infinitely better job of planning my gardens and planting schedules than that first year. My tomato plants are still thugs, but I've learned to expect their actions and have begun to take countermeasures so they don't overwhelm the rest of the planting. That being said, the war for the garden is an ongoing battle, so if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go plan out this year's tactics.

MAGIC PIZZA BOX: ON BEING HUMAN

by Karen Van Fossan

I finally mustered the wherewithal to give away the Holstein-patterned fabric I'd been storing, just in case, for over 10 years. And the make-believe stage-pastries made of foil wrapping and sponge. And the make-shift, mismatched, garden-pea costumes – Kindergarten size. And the rock-headed monsters – very convincing. And the person-in-the-hospital costume made out of PJs, a broken calculator, a phone cord, and love.

Of course, I had to save the carrot, potato, and onion costumes. I'm not going to be caught unawares when the next root-vegetable role comes along.

After years as a traveling, theater-making, creative-arts therapist, transitioning into a non-traveling, theater-loving, one-address psychotherapist, I'd been trying to sort it all out –

Faded pirate hat?

Life-sized hiking boot?

Five-feet-long pretend-greenery?

Out.

Adjustable animal ears?

Life-size calculator?

Five-feet-long pretend-spoons?

In.

Who knows why I made some of those sweeping decisions, frankly.

If my kids hadn't been with me, sharing their steady presence, hearing the stories that accompanied the fake banana, the giant cardboard house keys, and the like, I hate to think how much Holstein fabric I'd still have.

The more I sorted, and the more I shared, the more I began to marvel at the various ways I'd witnessed children and teens – dressed as animals, movie stars, tricksters, vegetables, and any combination thereof – teach me about life.

Over the years, I had witnessed hundreds of young people create original, show-stopping plays together, in which they had practiced one thing over all others –

Being human.

On the first day of each visit, I almost always wore my magician's hat, pointed and black, bedazzled with silver moons and stars. I'd push my borrowed cart, over-stacked with costumes, long fabrics, cardboard props, and a sturdy, round drum, through the doors of whatever facility I was visiting.

On the second day, I generally chose my largest, most outlandish hat – purple, exaggerated bandolier style, three feet long, as many feet tall, and stitched with a giant, pink peace sign.

These hats, combined with the teeming cart and my accompanying nonchalance, were meant to say one thing to the children and adolescents receiving mental health treatment –

This spectacle is for you, because you matter.

When they had bedecked themselves, and each other, mixing costumes as well as motifs, I would offer any number of warm-ups, generally involving the drum, a little sign language, their names, and my painstaking efforts to remember all 5 to 25 of them.

Then, with the adolescents, I often held up an empty, bone-white pizza box.

“What is this?” I would ask.

“A pizza box!” someone would answer, amid a chorus of requests for pepperoni and the like.

“How can you tell? What about this tells you it's a pizza box?”

The size, the shape, the weight, they would tell me, as if bored, but not quite.

Essays

“Yes, all of those things,” I would say. “We need to do that in theater – to draw on our experience. We also need to do something else.”

Ideally, a dramatic pause would insert itself here.

“In theater, and in life, we need to be able to imagine something different, something that hasn’t happened yet – or doesn’t even exist yet. This is what makes it possible to change our lives.”

I would invite them to pass the box from one to the next, visualizing that their dreams for life after treatment were contained within that squat, square box. They would share a longing to see family, or some bravado about basketball stardom, or sometimes just the hope to get outside under the sun.

“Throughout this weekend,” I would reiterate, “you will be invited to draw on your experience and also use your imagination to experience something else.”

When they were ready to make their plays, I would give them a couple of challenges to support this practice.

First, everyone lives, which means nobody dies. Because many of the young people were in treatment following suicide attempts, I would say, “It’s important that you live. It’s important to me and to all the staff here; it’s important to the world. Even in our imaginations, we want you to live.”

Second, no weapons. Since some of the children had had extraordinary experiences with violence, I would say, “If nobody’s going to die, we might well not kill each other. We can see stories with weapons just about any place. Our challenge is to solve our problems with some creative imagination.”

Inevitably, someone would complain, “No weapons? What are we supposed to do?”

The chorus would follow –

“How about a sword instead?” “Is a bomb a weapon?” “What if I use my fist?”

My answers would come in kind –

“A sword is a weapon. A bomb is a weapon. A fist can be a weapon.”

One afternoon, one particular boy told me I'd ruined his whole idea. "How am I going to save the president's daughters in my play?!"

But his acting group rehearsed, and whispered, and gave me the notes I would need to introduce them.

Show time.

He and the other secret agents came bursting onto the scene. They had make-believe devices, clues that came from the ceiling, cell phone calls with President Obama, lots of moving, talking, plotting – fast, fast, fast.

Then the moment came. Our hero faced the kidnappers. The kidnappers were invisible. But I could tell where they were because our hero told them, "Stop!" He reached forward, and he grabbed something. Crack! He broke the invisible something over his knee. Then he took something else from the other invisible bad guy. Crack! He broke that invisible something over his other knee.

He had saved the presidents' children by breaking the guns in half.

He had imagined, and then experienced, another way to be human.

On a later weekend, there was a group of teenage girls who wanted to work together, creating a play about how to be a princess. They held eating contests, walking contests, dancing contests. Some of the princesses tried very hard to be good; others made a scene about how they couldn't eat or walk or dance the way a princess should.

After the girls exited, and the boys were left with a room full of costumes, the boys got discouraged. What could they do for their play? If they didn't get focused, they'd have nothing to offer the girls, no way to show off – and be seen – as the girls had done and been. One of the boys suggested, "Let's imitate the girls' play back to them."

"What do you mean?" another boy asked.

"We could make a re-do of the girls' play."

Another boy, already wearing a tutu, quipped, "I'll be a princess!"

Together, we figured out that the girls' play was telling us about the pressures of being young women.

Essays

“What pressures do you face?” I asked. “What are you supposed be, if you want to be a man?”

The answers came fast: “Provider.” “Supporter.” “Tough.” “Strong.”

Then they created a contest, as the girls had created a contest, about all the things they were supposed to do and be.

Category one: Sports.

Category two: Building things.

Category three: Provider.

Show time.

They had five boys in the contest.

At one point, as the boys moved to the starting line of the contest, I could only see their backs. As the narrator, I declared to the rapt audience of girls, and to the backs of the nervous boys, “It’s not easy, these days, for boys to learn to be men.”

Suddenly, five boys stopped, including the one who’d decided to play a boy and not a princess. Five boys turned to face me.

That’s true, their faces said, it’s not easy.

Whatever it means to be male, to be female, to be transgender even, whatever it means to be human, it takes practice.

Another day, another trip, I pushed my cart, full to overflowing with tutus, sport coats, adjustable ears, and some of the coolest sunglasses you’re ever likely to find in one spot.

I was due in the adolescent wing again. At the time, I joked with them that there were a hundred people on the wing that day. Probably it was just over 25.

They did what doesn’t often happen; they cast themselves in a story they already knew, making modifications for various talents and concerns. The title was some clever variation on “The Wizard of Oz” – The Wizard of Such-and-Such Hospital.

A girl played the Lion. A boy played Dorothy.

“I want to be Toto,” said one.

Even though they really needed a Wizard, they told her, yes, she could be Toto, the dog.

They knew all the parts, all the characters, all the lines. All the ideas came from them.

What they didn't know is that I was so very sad at that time, I'd scarcely mustered the energy to be there. I had recently moved from Bismarck to the Twin Cities for my studies. I missed my kids, my friends, my river, my church – my self.

I called my mother almost every day. I wanted to go home.

But where was home?

I held my question close to my heart, as I listened to the teenagers in the psychiatric unit. They were also far from home. Some might never return; some had never quite found one.

Show time.

Dorothy and the rest made their journey all around Oz, all around the group room.

One of the girls reminded the others, "The poppy field. This is the part where we fall asleep in the poppies!"

So they slept in the poppies, followed the yellow brick road, arrived before the Wizard.

Meanwhile, I'd been cast as the Wizard, since Toto was already claimed.

I couldn't quite remember the Wizard's part; I hadn't seen the movie or read the book in over a decade.

So I did my best.

"Where are you from? Where are you going? What do you wish?" I asked, with grizzled voice.

The boy playing Dorothy looked in my eyes. And he said the words of my heart.

Right into my eyes, right into my soul, he said, "I want to go home."

That, right there, that moment of eyes meeting eyes, tears brimming in both, with someone playing Glinda, someone else, the Tin Man, of

Essays

young people wearing costumes, telling a story, taking a risk, that was real life. Real human life, theirs and mine.

Then, during one of the final weekends in my role, I faced a group that was not so full of heart, it seemed.

So challenging, so willful, they were – I began to question not only the value of my training, not only the value of my work, but the relative value and meaning of my life.

Did they listen to my guidance? No.

Did they cooperate with one another? Hardly.

Did they participate in the activities I offered? Way too much.

Then, if there is any such thing as guardian angels, it seemed as if one young woman's guardian angel – or mine – had whispered in her ear.

“Let's do a play for the little kids!” she exclaimed.

I exchanged all kinds of glances with the staff.

Then I laid out the boundaries for entering the children's unit – safety, age-appropriateness, and so on.

Yes, yes, yes – they said they got it.

The teens started brainstorming, as they put it, about “what little kids like.” They chose all kinds of characters that make younger children laugh, characters from movies, their own made-up characters. They chose costumes. They rehearsed.

Outside the door to the children's unit, I coached the teens –

“These are your younger siblings in the world.”

“We got it,” they said.

“You promise to remember that?”

Yes, they promised to remember that. “We got it,” they repeated.

Show time.

As soon as the teens entered, inching along in their staggered line, with their outlandish costumes and stage-fright eyes, the children of the unit, the audience of the day, wiggled with excitement. They called out

in their joy, “Who are you?” “Are you Pikachu?” “Are you Mr. Funny Man?” “Look! That’s the Incredible Hulk!”

With that kind of rousing welcome, the eyes of the performers began to shine.

Now they made the entrance they’d planned on all along – with exaggerated steps and silly gestures.

Their audience erupted into laughter.

The performers offered their skits, their dances, their improvisational comedy.

As the liveliness grew, the laughter grew. As the laughter grew, the liveliness grew.

Taking a bow, the performers beamed. The children beamed. Even the tired staff beamed.

From one play to the next, one unit to the next, I have learned much about being human.

We thrive when we can give.

We thrive when we can find courage.

We thrive when we are vulnerable together.

In other words, we love. In other words, we love to love. In other words, we love to love, maybe even more than we love to be loved.

All the while, we practice –

With many possibilities in each pizza box.

SHORT STORIES

DEAD ROADS

by Andy Ayash

*We don't need to/
Rise Up/
We've already risen/
We've already/
Burned Down/
Your walls and your prisons/*

“You could die out here and no one would ever know,” Jessica said. She exhaled, sending a haze through the cab.

Jessica Dickens, the only reason to come back to this gravel road and the town it leads to, liked to talk about death, especially when they were getting high. Corey liked music, liked to discuss song lyrics and riffs and rock-stars.

“You think so?” Corey said, and he took the joint from her. “I’ll try it sometime and let you know.”

*We will never/
Fade Out/
We've taken your venom/
We've survived your timecards, your laws/
and your heaven/*

Jessica crossed her feet on the dashboard. “These guys suck,” she said. “Let’s listen to something with a beat.”

Jessica was wrong. If you died here, if you keeled over right on this rutted stretch between two wheat fields, everyone would know before your corpse hit the dirt. Expanses expose. Isolation is not peace. It’s crosshairs.

Actually, she was wrong twice. Because Dead Roads, the band wailing through the tweeters, does *not* suck. They're the greatest rock band of all time.

"Come on, Corey, let's change the CD," she said. "Why do you like these guys so much anyways? Skid Row is better."

Corey spat smoke. Coughing, coughing, he said, "Not even. Dead Roads is way heavier."

Jessica closed her eyes. "Maybe that's their problem."

Corey turned up the volume.

*Tell me to work harder/
Promise I'll go farther/
Tell me/
where are you/
Lie to me/
Who's the fool/*

Dust rippled across the horizon- an impossibly flat beast waking with a shiver up the spine. The billow wound and grew and slowed and settled and it was Garret Lemoine in his '81 Chevy. Garret unrolled the window and leaned into dust still settling. He flicked a half-spent cigarette to the gravel. Wasteful theatrics, Corey thought. And the stick smoldered into ash.

Jessica lolled her head out the window, shading her suddenly sensitive eyes from an overcast sky. She had tossed her hair out first and, Corey imagined it was draped beautifully down the passenger door, black and blowing in the wind that doesn't quit.

"What are you doing out here?"

In constant state of near boredom, Jessica was a master of not giving a damn. Corey wondered if Garret knew- if he even cared- that she was faking it.

Garret downed the remainder of a beer and tossed the bottle into the ditch. "Drinking," he said. "You?"

Short Stories

“Smoking,” Jessica said.

Garret Lemoine, a savant of one-word conversation, offered Jessica a beer with one hand and mimed smoking with the other. “Trade?”

Jessica smiled a nonchalant grin, but the shine in her eyes, Corey knew, was pure joy.

“Sure,” she said.

One word.

Oh God, Corey thought, *she’s starting to communicate like him*. Why, Corey wondered, had he missed Jessica when he was away at college? How had Jessica Dickins slipped into his mind at all once he left this place? Not a woman. A girl.

They reached from their respective windows and made the exchange- Garret’s beer for Corey’s weed. Garret smoked and squinted, sizing up the car below his jacked-up Chevy as though he hadn’t recognized the Pontiac Sunfire at the turn a mile back. Inspecting the driver’s seat opposite Jessica as though he didn’t know the vehicle belonged to Corey Bearrunner.

“Heard you were back in town, Bearrunner.” Garret lifted the baseball cap off his head, curled the brim, and slid the cap back on. “Back living at mom and dad’s?”

Heard your Uncle gave you a trailer and land to plow, Corey thought. *Heard you’re running around with high-schoolers*. Three hundred miles away for four years, and somehow, Corey knew every happening in the life of Garret Lemoine.

“Yeah,” Corey said.

Garret handed the joint back to Jessica, and coughing through held breath, said, “Got a job yet?”

Corey reached for the stereo dial, a subconscious need to drown out noise, but stopped short and instead spun the knob for air conditioning which hadn’t worked for three years. “Not yet.”

Garret hawked and spat. “I can put in a word for you at the plant. But I’m telling ya, they don’t give a damn about that college degree.

Got to be mechanically inclined. College teach you how to turn a wrench, Bearrunner?"

Jessica turned to Corey as though the question needed a serious answer. As though the accused required a solid defense. A shadow of disappointment crossed her face when he said nothing.

*You love a mirror/
warped or clear/
So watch me bleed/
from broken glass/
But don't forget my smile/*

To Jessica, Garret said, "What are you doing out here?"

A loop, Corey thought. A goddammed merry-go-round.

Jessica fussed a bra strap. "Nothing." And she yawned.

One word. But the truth. And though Corey respected the blunt honesty, her tone could only be called condescending.

Garret stared down the road, adjusted his baseball cap. His forehead clenched as though deep decisions needed to be made. "Let's cruise over to Dinger Tree. I got a full tank."

Jessica turned to Corey.

"Come with us," she said. "Get away for a while. It will be fun."

Get away? There was nowhere he could go with Jessica or Garret Lemoine or the combination and be *away*. And definitely not at Dinger Tree, the branchless spire remaining of a once imposing cottonwood so named because it supposedly resembled the misshapen penis of Doug 'Dinger' Thompson. Not long ago, Dinger Tree and those who congregated there were punchlines for him and Jessica. On the many nights driving down these backroads, singing angsty rock and foulmouthed rap- the good stuff- and dreaming of driving further. Corey ran a hand through his hair. He wished for the unknown. Wished a right turn led somewhere besides Dinger Tree, wished a left was not the road to hell and Hank's Hardware. And that in the rearview mirror-

Short Stories

A figure, just a black speck in the distance, wandered a gray trail below gray sky between gray cropland. Some folks call wheat fields *golden*. Those folks have never been here. Anyone who has ever uttered the word Americana is a sadist.

A dog, Corey thought.

And he watched the mirror, hoping the figure inside the glass would lope back and forth, scurry into the ditch. But it never veered, never strayed the path.

“Nah,” Corey said. “I got some things to do.”

“Don’t lie.” Jessica shook her hair back and tipped the beer to her lips and the swell of her frontside swelled further. If Corey ever considered going to Dinger Tree with her and the always eloquent Garret Lemoine, it was now. She burped and said, “You don’t have nothing to do.”

But the arrival of a fellow townie had regressed Jessica’s dialect to local standard, and Corey said, “No, for real. You go. Maybe I’ll meet up with you guys later.”

Jessica was fixing her makeup in the sun visor mirror, and Corey wanted her gone. She and Garret Lemoine should be dust down the trail, not something to wonder about, worry about. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to listen to Dead Roads. He checked the rearview mirror.

Go back, he thought. And the dog that wasn’t a dog reached the bottom of the only hill down this road. *You shouldn’t be here*.

“Alright,” Jessica said. “I’m out then.” One foot out the door, she swung her upper half back toward Corey, sending him a wave of scent that caused a visceral clench below, and when she spoke her breath warmed his cheek. “Can I have one for the road? I’ll pay you back.”

Corey knew Jessica. She pays back, but only when cornered. Or desperate. And he had no intention of leaving her in either situation. He had an extra joint. He always did. It was his one-word response, his turning wrench. He slid the joint from his sweatshirt pocket and gave it to her.

Jessica pecked his cheek. “Peace,” she said, and left.

*Roads don't lead you home/
Don't make you known/
Luck, blood, darkness roamed/
take you/
Make you grown/*

Jessica gone. Garret gone. Praise Jesus. But never alone. Not on this road. Corey shifted to reverse. Rolling rolling backward, and the approaching figure became a child. And the child became his sister Savanah. He unrolled the window.

“What’s going on?” he said.

Savanah looked at him, cheeks sheened with emotion, face void of expression. A little girl. An adult.

“What happened?” Corey said. He spoke in a rough clip. Brusque, but that was the way it was between them.

“Fighting,” Savannah said.

One word.

“Get in,” Corey said. And Savanah hopped into the passenger seat. He fought the urge to slam his fist to the steering wheel, and instead handed her his catalog of CD’s. “What do you want to listen to?”

“This is good,” Savannah said. “I like these guys.” She wiped her face with the tiny pink sleeve of her windbreaker.

They listened to music and said nothing. They watched gray fields through the windshield. Folks would think their minds were racing, that words of comfort would pass between them. Those folks have never been here.

The album finished, and Corey turned to his sister. “We should probably head back.”

“Yeah,” Savannah said. She fanned through the CD catalog and selected *Heroes*, Dead Roads’s second album. She clicked the buttons on the center console. Click, click, to the third track. “Hey, Corey,” she said.

Short Stories

“What.”

“I’m glad you’re home.”

*Is my home/
just a winding road/
Am I all alone/
If heroes journey on their own/
what does that make me/*

A FAMILY STORY

by Andrea Fox

In the midst of tragedy, it seems, there is clarity. A sharpened sense of color and texture as though the sun is suddenly brighter and the wooden floors true and strong and steady. My heels clicked along the planks, and I admired the polished pew of wood smoothed from years of patrons restlessly waiting for the sermon to be done. This was my goodbye to him

My tears well up and my chest tightens, and I can't seem to catch a breath. I cannot let the anguish out; I cannot let myself go, not in this sea of people. I know this, despite looking around at the familiar faces of family and closest of friends. I slip outside and the damn bursts open, and I grab the wooden flower bed like a crutch that holds me up. As the tears fall, sobs rack my body. The pain is the exquisiteness of release. I look up towards the sky trying to take calming breaths after the initial shockwave of sorrow.

The door opens with a creak and the soft voices of murmuring condolences float out to me. Dad pulls me into a tight embrace and for a moment I am lost in the familiarity and the roughness of his beard now with flecks of grey, scratching my forehead. "Grandma needs us. Ready to come in, now, Bunny?" he asks. And, I smile at the childhood nickname.

He lets me sit and compose myself while we both take stock of the brilliantly lit day, and we scan the parking lot of cars. "Mark parked on the lawn again," I noted, motioning to my uncle's dark blue truck. Air National Guard plates indicating his flight status. Crazy driver; crazy guy.

"Can't teach an ol' dog," he said patting my back and moving to the door.

I sighed as he stood up, ready but not eager to put the mask back on. Moving about the rooms, I am thankful to see everyone: old neighbors from the lake, cousins with new babies, and some older folks I

recognize but can't put names on. The rest of the afternoon we spent reminiscing and catching up. Not just about Grandpa Jim but also with each other. For funeral and weddings do that to a family. I wonder about the juxtaposition of this, the beginning of relationships and the ending of lives. How we are all brought together in times of celebrations and of sorrow. What is the purpose, then? I wonder as I look at my own empty left hand. Perhaps it is in this bringing together of people, people who know your stories. All of the in-between, what happens amongst finding love, raising babies, giving gifts, making quilts or embroidered kitchen towels, and then the spray of roses in front of a casket?

My eye catches the slideshow of Grandpa as an athlete, with a proud red letter "L" on his chest, and a soldier, too young to be so serious. Despite these pictures, I only know one piece of him, his grandfather stories. His slow movements and calm reserve and his walks in the woods. That is who he was. To me.

I scanned the room again, and my eyes fall on Grandma who has been surrounded by others every moment today. I'm sure she was listening to others tell her of their own Jim stories, their own versions of who he was to them. Did she know all this already? Do we find comfort in knowing these pieces of our loved ones and hearing them again from another? Is it that devastatingly simple? The thoughts stayed with me until the priest offered his closing prayer with a drone and reminded us to stay and eat. Hotdish and Jell-O, most likely, but ham sandwiches also a solid possibility.

The silent drive away from the country church is peaceful, huge evergreens shooting out of the woods and the shocking birch coming through the green. Their presence made known not by size but by the distinctness, the solidity, the nuance of white. The winding road takes us back to the cabin and memories of childhood and family. We take a sandy curve and I can feel the gravel shoot from the tires and wheel wells. The old barn is our signal for the final turn onto Red Top Road.

"I'm going to get some coffee and check on Patricia. Will you check the mailbox? I'm sure it's full." My mom says to me. I head down the driveway, pull open the faded, grey mailbox. The stack is thick with cards and pre-stamped bills. The plum logo catches my eye as I flip through, my hand running over the large, course envelope. Conmy

Short Stories

Attorneys. I'd heard that name, albeit only in passing, and I move it to the top knowing that Grandma would want to see it.

Upstairs I smell coffee and hear Mom moving about getting cups out. I make myself a station at the table ready to organize the list so that we can write Thank You notes. My yellow legal pad at the ready. You cannot have a funeral, cannot sit in grief without writing 4X5 notes. Handwritten notes about how much it meant to you to see everyone, to read the cards, to take the memorials and hand out the plants and flowers to your kids. Setting aside my sarcasm for a moment, I sift through the cards. Their slanting cursive showing the sign of years of penmanship work. Many bring tears to my eyes, and I set them in the basket to bring to Grandma's room. I keep my favorite, from one of Grandpa's long-time employees, on top.

Patricia- Many people acquire a great many things in their lives, or make huge accomplishments while spending their days here. Thanks to Jim, I am constantly reminded that while these are great aspirations, they are far from what I should judge myself upon. I realize that no matter our accomplishments and procurements, we cannot take these things with us once we leave this place. Rather I would judge a person's time here more by the influence they have had upon their family and others, and in that aspect, in what regard they are held. In this quality, I can honestly say that Jim is the only individual so wholeheartedly praised and respected, by so many people and disparaged by none. He had an impact on all he crossed paths with. This has been a constant source of pride for me and has imposed a measuring stick to judge my pursuits by as well.

This one captured how I felt about Grandpa; albeit more eloquently written than I could manage. I somehow had the unfortunate talent of never being able to say exactly how I felt. At least someone can do it, I thought, creasing the card open so Grandma could see it, and I walked through to her room to find her.

"Hi Gramma." I see her rocking in the old glider with a large trunk in front of her, opened like a treasure trove of memories. "I'm sure you'd like to rest, and I've brought you some cards to read when you're

ready. They're beautifully written," I add. When she doesn't answer, I sit and help her sift through his history.

The trunk smells of old newspapers and mothballs, not unlike the garage outside. She rifles through some of the newspaper clippings, highlighting baseball games with stunning wins, college report cards with dean's list nods, local celebrities making it good by joining the army at our country's greatest need, and love letters sent overseas.

Most of this I had already heard or read from grandpa's memoirs and our long talks. He was a celebrated man, a driven man who looked out for others who needed it. I look back at my grandmother and remember her inner strength, which she would need now. I wonder if she has always been this driven, the driving force edging him along. In today's world she would have been a leader. Would she have been #1 instead of on the sidelines? Would she have had the energy for 7 children while running her own company? No sense in wondering those things; no sense in thinking about what might have been. I knew her response without having to ask. So, I kept it hidden, like so many other secrets.

We reminisced instead about the reality, and soon we neared the bottom where only a single, brown ledger remained. Sure, this was a daily account of office work or home purchases, I wasn't surprised when Grandma pushed it to the side without much thought. Before we left the room, she snatched the lawyer's envelope and slid it into the notebook.

"We should see which of the boys wants the articles, and maybe somebody wants to put it all together in an album." She said as we stacked the memorabilia back into management piles.

"Or even scan them into the computer so we can preserve them," I recommended. She smiled and nodded. That would, apparently, fall on me. I looked forward to a job that would allow me to get away from the small-talk chit chat that was sure to ensue in the next few days before everyone dispersed.

The mass of Maxwells congregating was overwhelming. Aunts, uncles, and cousins spread out, spotting the open living, dining, and kitchen. The scents of hotdish and fresh buns lingered along with paper

Short Stories

cups of wine and juice. More wine boxes littered the counters ready to be spouted and drained. It would be a long weekend.

With my paper plate balancing on my knee, I found a spot next to Lenore happy enough to let others drive the conversation all around me. Something was nagging at my conscious, something clung to my memory that I couldn't quite surrender: the binder of numbers, the attorney's documents. Why and how would they go together? Before the ruckus could continue, I snuck into Grandma's room. My absence would go unnoticed, too many other things to shout about and a game of dice ready to begin.

Emerging from the bathroom I turn my head seeing the ledger once again. The envelope sticks out, and it clicks suddenly in my head. That's it. Something is up with the business, and I'm going to find out now. I pad swiftly into Grandma's room, my feet silent on the thick carpet. More laughter and shouting from the kitchen has me feeling like a thief, but I continue. A raucous, "Lord, teach 'em NOT to gamble!" lets me know the game is in full swing.

The cheap white wine began to burn my throat as I considered the alternatives. Was there something wrong with the books? Would Grandma be left with nothing, or worse, a pile of debt? My eyes closed at the thought of all their work being reduced to nothing but an envelope of legalese. Just read what's inside. There's no use dwelling on possibilities; you cannot dream a new reality. Grandma's voice in my head. Just open the damn thing, you silly kid!

I ripped the seal with no thought of how I would explain the intrusion. Lines of explanation of a deal and business proposition, mineral rights, 300 mineral acres, Stark County, Hettinger County. I checked back to the lines of numbers. Percentages per sections of land with some of them as high as a quarter. What was all of this? Since when did Grandpa have any rigs, any oil, something with THIS kind of money?

"Mandy, where'd you go?" I heard my mom's voice penetrating my cloud of questions. I quickly swung the documents back into the trunk for later.

“Just needed a quiet minute, Mom,” I answered, already feeling guilty about the broad-faced lie. But, I needed more time, another look, and a fresh set of eyes to know exactly what I was dealing with.

I joined the others and tried to keep a light smile on with the game. For once not caring that I was losing dollar after dollar at dice. I had more on my mind, and I couldn’t wait to get back to the mystery.

* * *

August 1941

Jimmy shielded his eyes against the bright summer sun. He continued the short walk from his parents’ place to the café. The town had blossomed with the elevator next to the tracks, just like all the other towns in North Dakota. Leonard wasn’t a major stop, so it consisted of farmers with surrounding land and their families plus some small businesses to service them. The two pumps at the gas station and the small café were situated in the middle of town. Casselton, 18 miles to the north and interstate 94 on the way to Fargo offered more.

Jimmy thought of everything beyond Fargo, crossing the railroad tracks, and he could already see his buddies through the large, picture window. He raised his arm to wave. The two young men looked up and grinned at Jimmy’s greeting. They’d known each other all their lives, and were taking the next step into the unknown, but doing it together. The excitement and nerves surrounding them were palpable. Roger’s knee bounced and his hands moved constantly as he was finishing his story for Patrick.

”No, Patio. No, you don’t just walk up to a girl; she’ll know you’re enlisted, and when she sees you in the hat in the fatigues, she’s gonna go for you. See? These ladies aren’t gonna know what hit them. Farm boys from U.S invading their little French towns.” His onslaught of advice stopped as Jimmy opened the door, his long legs bringing him easily to their table.

“Jimmy, you’re just in time,” Sara smiled as she set the three slices of pie on the tabletop. Her apron smooth and faded around her rounded hips. They had been coming to the café since they were born, and she knew each of them as well as her own children. Jimmy smiled quietly accepting the pie with a quiet thank you and a nod.

Short Stories

“You boys come back in one piece, you hear?” She said as she set down the apple delight, buoyant fluffy whip already melting down the perfectly browned sides. The men did not waste a minute before grabbing forks like some old farmhouse card game.

“We’ll be back alright. Maybe with a medal around our necks and girls on our arms,” Roger smirked.

“We’re not in this thing, yet,” Jimmy reminded everyone. He thought about his enrollment in the Army Reserve Officers Training and wondered what any of it meant. If they would ever see any action. Despite his calm exterior, he was dying to get into an airplane.

Patrick chimed in, “We might still be sitting here in fifty years eating Mrs. Anderson’s pie. Best pie in the Dakotas.”

“God willing,” Sarah smiles and responded. “You’ll be thinking about a family.” It wasn’t a question around here. It was a statement. The statement lay thickly in the air as the three sat contemplating futures that were as yet, unwritten. But, there was no question in the youthful faces. There was one path, one right way, one journey.

The men moved into more talk about what to expect and what they were most excited about. Their training was sporadic, at best, and didn’t have them leaving their home state.

“Anything good in the paper, Jimmy?” Patrick wanted to know, pointing at the thin, folded newspaper Jimmy had left on the checkered cloth.

“Well, they’re selling some land in northwestern North Dakota, selling it cheap too. I was just thinking about it. You know, maybe have something to fall back on when this war is all said and done.” Jimmy looked at the two questioning faces. “No, not to live. I’m still planning on hitting the books at Silo Tech,” he said, referring to their Fargo college. “I’m going to make use of the athletic scholarship, and where else would we play ball? I just mean I think we’ve heard Dad and Hank talk about prospects up there, and I just thought it would make a good investment since we’ll be making more money soon.”

“Let me see,” Roger pulled open the section and quickly found the circled column. He was always in for adventure, and why not buy up some land if they could? “My mom’s from up by Flaxton; she would

know this area too. But, do you have this kind of money now, right now?"

"Not yet. I was hoping you two would want to invest with me."

"I, I don't know, guys. This seems risky. I mean, what if it amounts to nothing?" Patrick ran his big hands through his hair as he was prone to do when contemplating something serious. He had hair the color of the wheat that cut his hands, and his broad shoulders stretched the cotton around his arms. Arms that allowed him to throw bails like he was bred for it.

"But, what if it amounts to something?" Roger responded playfully. "I mean, between the three of us, it's not that much money. Shoot, we'll make that in our first month out of this town. I say we do it! But, let's make it interesting. We all go in, and only one of us can capitalize on the profits. If that ever happens. One guy wins it all. Like a lottery. Of the loan survivor!"

* * *

"Ahhhh, Roger Nielson. I remember stories about him." I jumped as Grandma's voice shocked me out of my reverie. The newspapers and notes scattered around me. I began shuffling hurriedly and guiltily. "No, no. Let's have a look," she said. I relaxed a bit, smiling gratefully as she pulled up a chair. "Grab the box and those clippings, and sit here by me," she said.

"Did you know these guys?" I asked.

"They were his best friends. Roger passed before I met him, but your grandfather talked a lot about them, so I felt as though I knew him." She seemed lost in reverie and then laughed. "Roger was always in some kind of trouble, usually with women. They all wanted to get out of Leonard and had enrolled in North Dakota Agricultural College." She caught my curious look. "NDSU," she clarified, "but Roger? He had to get out of town," she sighed.

"Get out of town? Why?"

"Your grandpa made it sound like everyone knew about his affair with the grocer's wife. She was a looker, and she regularly delivered groceries to all the families in Leonard. Everybody was sweet on

Short Stories

Roger. He was a good-looking guy with an easy smile and lots of charm. The story is she used to drop off cookies. . . Well, more than cookies for him at the gas station. But, you know idle gossip.”

“What does this note mean about the lottery?” I asked. “Roger’s name is there, along with Grandpa’s. What were they betting?”

“Oh, that,” she said with a wave of her hand Your grandpa had this plan, this idea that they should all strike it rich. People were just starting to talk about oil in the Bakken. So, they bought some up and made a pact, a deal. Whoever survived it all: the college, training, the war, life.... That they would win the land and the oil.”

“But Grandma, does anyone know about this? I mean, I’ve never heard Dad or Bob or Mark or anyone talk about this. Does anyone know? What happened with the oil? I looked at the ledger, and it looks to me like they’ve made money all these years. Maybe even a lot of money.”

“It was Jim’s secret. He always told me he was taking care of everything, and he did. Now, it’s in the lawyers’ hands. Nothing for you to be concerned about. It always struck me as foolish that he was sending all that money to those families. That wasn’t the agreement; he was always too soft about such things.”

Before I could question her, she turned away from me, signaling the conversation was over. I watched her, looking older than I had remembered, make her way to the door. “Don’t dig into that too far. It doesn’t concern you,” she repeated. She adjusted her necklace and composure to rejoin our family.

* * *

March 1943

Jim had his face in his hands and the towel next to him was soaked with sweat and some tears. The workout had done nothing to cool the sting of the demotion, the let-down. He could still hear the Major’s voice in his head, swirling and replaying, much like the airplane crash that had nearly ended his life, not just his career. He belonged in the Army Air Forces; he had thought he belonged in the air.

I heard Bob's rumbling steps before he cleared the doorway. "Whatcha up to?" As the eldest of all Patricia and Jim's boys, Bob was the natural leader. He was always keeping an eye on things, on everybody. He saw the picture of the plane in my hand.

"Ah, Dad's famous plane crash. You know he was learning to fly and landed his plane right in a lake? I mean, crashed, he crashed that thing. He was done flying after that."

"Wow."

"It actually may have saved his life. A lot of his air buddies didn't come back from the war. I think that was especially difficult to Dad. He felt like he'd let everyone down. Didn't make mistakes often, but that one stuck with him."

"Was this one of his buddies?" I asked, holding the cut out from the Fargo Forum's memorial section. Roger Hornbacher was listed as Missing in Action while fighting the enemy near Hadong, South Korea on July 27, 1953 and was presumed dead on February 24, 1954. He survived one war to be killed in the next, I thought sadly.

"Yeah, I met Roger once. He and Dad were best friends, went to school together and grew up in Leonard. Here's a picture of Roger, Dad, and Pat."

"Who is Pat?"

"Patrick Erickson? The three were best of friends. But he passed, oh, at least 20 years ago, I'd say. He died of a heart attack, I think. He and Glenda used to come each summer to do a weekend of trout fishing with us. Mom used to keep in touch with Glenda, but after she found out about all this," he trailed off motioning to the balance sheets and mapped images. "You saw the oil statements?"

I nodded.

"I don't know how it came out, but Patricia was irate that Dad could keep something like this from her. This was no small deal; he had kept it from her for nearly 40 years! She accused Dad of being soft and naïve. They hadn't even used a lawyer to draw up the paperwork back

Short Stories

then. ‘Why use a lawyer when I trust everybody?’ Dad used to say. I don’t think she talked to him for a solid week.”

I eyed the thin, white envelope. The purple attorney’s stamp now offensive and ugly to me. She’s going to stop the payments, I think to myself. What else would all this be about? She’s going to keep everything for our family. But, why? We had what we needed. Why go back on something...?

I knew the answer before the question had fully formed in my head. She wanted the agreement to be rectified; Patricia was not cold; she was following the original agreement that all three men had designed. Jim had been the longest survivor, and he should be the lottery winner. That was what was right in her mind. I wondered, then, why didn’t it feel that way in my heart?

“In the end it wasn’t really worth it. All the anger, the big blow-out they had.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t worth it?” I demanded.

“Well, Dad didn’t actually own the land. You see these percentages here? He owned the mineral rights, and when it was all said and done, each year the shares were only worth a few hundred bucks. And, that’s when they were drilling them. Most haven’t been active in years.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter under my breath. All of this for nothing, I think, looking at the stacks of papers and colorful satellite images of the land, blocks of peoples’ lives sectioned off, rigid and isolated.

“Yeah, but don’t bring it up to Patricia. She still hates to talk about it. Not worth getting her even more upset today,” Bob focused on me until I nodded my understanding. He walked away without knowing I’d kept from him the fact that she’d already shared all of that. She had shared everything except what the current lawyers were doing for her.

I wouldn’t ask her. But, I had to know. I ripped the letter open, preparing myself for what I thought was a betrayal to Grandpa’s name, his wishes. I skimmed the gist of the letter. What would I tell my dad when...?

But, the letter made mention of continued payments. Wait a minute. I returned to the beginning and read more carefully. It said payments were to continue to the Hornbacher and Erickson families. The

payments would continue? My breath released from me in a sudden gasp. I hadn't realized I'd been holding it in. And I am relieved. More than relieved, I feel as though a weight had been lifted from me. I had been preparing for a world where I didn't know my family, my own grandmother.

Grandma had just wanted everything to be the same? Stay the same?

I returned to the living area to see the remnants of the games and still a bustling crew cleaning up dishes and leftovers. Grandma sat with her sons around her, and they were passing some of the memorial cards around reading snip-its as they found them interesting. I looked at her patting my dad's hand as they talked. I should have known her and trusted her.

Sure, they had secrets, but she knew Jim better than anyone. She knew his story; she had helped him write it.

A FISH TALE: HOW IT WAS?

by Dean Hulse

I slide out of our Oldsmobile before it stops rolling and crunch across the graveled parking lot to the wayside store, what we call the Six-Mile Corner. I head straight for the freezer standing near the back, next to the door of the apartment where the owner lives. It has rained during the night, and Dad and I are using the work-halting soggianness to swap out farm chores for fishing and loafing. I open the frigid door and focus. A Push Up or a Drumstick? Or maybe an Eskimo Pie? The front door jangles. I look away and see that two other men have entered the store right behind Dad, who's come in to visit with Dave, the owner. I turn back to the frozen treats.

"Your sweet tooth is growing on you, isn't it?" The tired-looking stranger asks me this. He's walked to the back of the store. He's standing on the opposite side of the open freezer door, which frames him, a frozen-water image contorted by the clarity of the ice gripping the inside of the glass door. His shirt and pants are tan, like a uniform, like a school janitor's. He's wearing a wide leather belt on the *outside* of the belt loops. His large belt buckle has some kind of writing on it. The armpits of his shirt are damp with sweat. The smell is sour, even from a few feet away.

"You remind me of a round Bumby," he says. "*Very* round."

I understand. Some adults say one thing but mean something else. "My name's not Bumby. It's Dean. And Albert Madsen says I'm husky. Sometimes he calls me 'pleasingly plump.'"

"Who the hell is Albert Madsen?"

"Dad's best friend. We bale hay together, and Dad combines for him."

I let the freezer door spring shut. The stranger squats. I've never met anyone with a white beard before, except for Santa Claus, who is a fake. The old man combs his hair forward so that most of it sits on top of his

head like a flat hat. When I stop staring at his hair, I see he's glaring at me.

"What were you looking at?"

"Your hair."

"What about it?" The old man stands now and looks down at me.

"Dad says men should part their hair on the left. Why do you comb it that way?"

Without answering, he moves to an aisle with canned beans. I follow. He turns toward the shelf on his right, picks up can after can, studying each, and after replacing the last one, he grunts. "Not *one* can of garbanzos in this godforsaken place."

I move alongside the man and look up. "Where do you live?" I expect to hear a local name, something familiar.

"Ketchum."

"Where's that?"

"Idaho." He moves down the aisle.

"What's your name?"

"Huck Von Hemingstein," he says. He grabs a box of chocolate chip cookies.

"Why are you here?"

"I've been in Rochester, now I'm here, and then I'll be heading home."

"Then?"

"Soon." He looks over the cookies, then sets the package back.

"Where's Rochester?"

"One state over, in Minnesota. The city with the famous hospital."

"Why's it famous?"

"It has a reputation for healing people."

"What's wrong with you?"

Short Stories

He leans forward and whispers into my left ear. I'd heard curse words before, but these two mean nothing to me. *Black ass?*

"What's that?"

"It's better that you don't know."

"Are you healed?"

Instead of answering, the man fingers a pack of Oreos. I know better than to repeat what he's said while standing within earshot of Dad, but I want to visit more, so I say: "Dad and I went fishing this morning. He caught three northerns and I caught a bullhead and a perch."

"Where were you fishing?"

"On the river."

"The one we crossed a few miles back?"

"Yes."

"What's the name of that river?"

"The Mouse River."

The old man sighs. "Of course it is. How fitting." He throws the cookies down and turns to face me. "Have you ever been anywhere beyond this endless, flat prairie? To an ocean? Any ocean?"

"No."

"Then you haven't fished."

"We've got fish in the trunk of the car. I can show you."

"Have you got a marlin in that trunk?" His eyes narrow.

"What's a marlin?"

"It's a beautiful lavender bird."

"It's not a fish?"

"It is."

"Then why'd you call it a bird?"

"Because it can fly. It leaps from the water and soars." The way he speaks the words reminds me of singing.

“How big are marlins?”

“Some are as big as small sailboats—eight, twelve, fourteen feet long.”

“That’s how wide our cultivator is.”

“Which?”

“Fourteen feet ... How much does a marlin weigh?”

The old man straightens. “The big ones weigh half a ton or more. Maybe a ton.”

“You ever catch a marlin?”

“Many.”

“What do they look like?”

“They have dark purple heads and backs, perfect lavender pectoral fins, and wide lavender stripes on their sides. They have swords as big as baseball bats for snouts and a tail like a scythe.”

“We have a scythe,” I reply. “I cut grass with it sometimes.”

He grunts. “I’m sure you do.”

“What else about marlins?”

“They reflect sunlight brilliantly.” When he says this, his eyes are partly closed. “But most of all, they have dignity.”

“Dignity?”

“Yes. A particular way of dealing with the world. I admire marlins.”

“Why do you catch marlins, then? Doesn’t it make you sad?”

“A marlin’s behavior is magnificent, beyond reproach. I’ve fished them because I can’t kill the moon or the sun.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’ve done all I can.”

“Aren’t you going to fish anymore?”

“No, I am not.”

“Is it because you’re too old?”

Short Stories

He pauses, as if he's thinking of how to explain. He finally says, "I'm exhausted."

I don't understand his answer, so I ask, "What's it feel like to catch a marlin?"

"It tastes."

"Huh?"

The old man fetches a penny from his front pants pocket and tells me to suck on it. He explains, "Copper, the taste of physical exertion, of putting yourself up against it."

"It tastes like blood," I say, the penny sticking to my tongue.

"You don't appreciate the taste?"

"It reminds me of nosebleeds."

"Do you get a lot of nosebleeds?"

"When I fight with one of my cousins."

"You need to learn how to box."

"He'll still hit my nose."

"Does it hurt when he hits your nose?"

"Not for long ... It's the blood."

He pauses. "Does your mother wash your shirts?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't hurt much and you don't have to clean up after yourself. Then let it bleed. And kick ... his ... sorry ... ass."

The old man holds out his right hand and I spit the penny into my left hand and give it back. He slips it into the pocket he'd taken it from and then jiggles all his change. He goes quiet. His eyes move from side to side. He licks his lips. He looks as if he's going to say something else, but the other man, who's dressed for church on Easter Sunday, calls to him from the front of the store: "Ernie, we should be on our way. Williston is still several hours away."

I brighten. "Are you going to Williston?"

“Yes.”

“My uncle and aunt own a motel in Williston. Chet and Evelyn are their names. They bought it last year. You should stay there.”

“What’s its name?”

“The Grand View Motel.”

“The Grand View,” he repeats. “I’m sure it is.”

“Why are you going to Williston, anyway?” I ask.

“Hopefully, to see a friend,” he says. “Miss Teddy Jo Paulson.” Almost to himself, he adds, “And to take the road less traveled by to throw off the Feds.”

“I have a neighbor we call Teddy, but he’s a boy,” I offer, because I don’t know what he means by “the Feds.”

Again, the man who looks like a preacher calls out. “Ernesto, we need to be going.”

The old man begins moving away from me.

“Who’s Bumby?” I ask.

The old man turns back to me. “Never mind ... Do yourself a favor, kid, lose some weight.”

Then the old man turns away. He moves past the fireworks and leaves the store without buying anything. I walk to the front and look out through the screen door.

There’s a two-door Buick parked near one of the gas pumps. I recognize the car because it’s one like the banker in town owns, except a different color. A small woman is sitting in the back. She asks, “Ernest, did you use the restroom?”

The old man barks, “What do you think? I’ll piss my pants or soil myself? We can stop somewhere else. A ditch if need be. I’ve used worse.”

As he speaks, the old man climbs in to the car and slumps in the passenger-side seat, which is closest to the building. He stares at me until the vehicle swings in a semicircle toward Highway 5. I watch the

Short Stories

car head west until it appears to become a sailboat, floating on the sea of a highway mirage. Then it disappears from my sight.

During the afternoon, I imagine what the old man is doing. Are they eating at the main street restaurant in Stanley where we usually stop on our way to visit Chet and Evelyn? I wonder what he'll say when the odor of rotten eggs enters their car as they pass by the oilfields near Tioga. Will the old man know when Highway 2 bends south that he's only minutes from the Grand View Motel?

That night, my uncle Chet calls from Williston. A long-distance call on a weeknight usually means bad news, but Chet tells Dad that he's got guests staying in two rooms who claim to have met me. He says Dr. and Mrs. George Saviers are staying in one room, and a George Brown is staying in another.

To Dad, I say, "I think the old man's name is Huck or Ernest or something like that."

About a week later, I'm sitting in the living room with Dad. We're watching the evening news and waiting for Mom to get supper ready. The old man's picture comes on the TV, and Walter Cronkite says he's dead. His name *was* Ernest. Walter Cronkite says he was a great man. I'm thinking the old man is just like any other adult, except he told me a good fish story.

* * *

On the fiftieth anniversary of Ernest Hemingway's suicide, A.E. Hotchner wrote an essay appearing in the *New York Times* to mark the event. Hotchner was Hemingway's close friend, and one point of his piece was to offer a mea culpa of sorts. He had doubted Hemingway's paranoid claims about F.B.I. surveillance. But because of a Freedom of Information Act request, the F.B.I. was years later forced to release its Hemingway file. That's right. And the dossier reveals F.B.I. spying continued even while Hemingway was hospitalized for treatment of his depression.

Did I meet Hemingway on his way home from Rochester in 1961? Maybe. Maybe not. In Mary Welsh Hemingway's autobiography, *How It Was*, she claims their friend George Brown drove them from Rochester to Ketchum via South Dakota, not North Dakota.

Is she being truthful? There are several reasons to believe she isn't. For example, regarding Hemingway's suicide, she writes, "Not consciously lying, I told the press that the shooting had been accidental. It was months before I could face the reality."

Another reality Mary Hemingway may not have been able to face was her husband's infatuation with young women, including Teddy Jo Paulson, which might have been reason enough to propel him along the northern-most route home to Ketchum. Here's Mary's account of how a college coed from Williston, North Dakota, was able to celebrate the 60th birthday of one of the most famous writers of the 20th century:

In Pamplona our fellows had picked up a couple of pretty American girls who were sightseeing Europe in a little French car, and we added them, Teddy Jo Paulson from North Dakota and Mary Schoonmaker, to the guest list together with Beverly Bentley, who was making a movie in Spain, and Hugh and Suzy Millais, traveling Britishers and troubadours we had met somewhere, and Valerie Danby-Smith who now became Ernest's secretary-handmaiden and a temporary appendage to the outfit.

And then there's this, from Hemingway's own work, titled *The Dangerous Summer*. In the second installment of his account of the 1959 bullfighting season in Spain, which ran in the September 12, 1960, edition of *Life Magazine*, Hemingway offers this account of meeting Teddy Jo Paulson and her friend, Mary Schoonmaker, in Pamplona:

On the first night Antonio (Ordonez, a Spanish bullfighter) and I had noticed a very chic-looking small French car with a beautiful girl in it accompanied by what turned out to be a Frenchman when Antonio jumped up on the hood of the car to bring it to a stop. Pepe Dominguin was along and when the occupants of the car got out we informed the Frenchman that he could leave but the girl was our prisoner. We would also keep the car as we were short of transport. The Frenchman was very affable. It turned out the girl was American and he was only guiding her to her lodging where her friend was waiting. We said we would attend to all that and vive

Short Stories

la France et les pommes de terre frites (long live France and french fries). Negro (Bill Davis, an American living in Spain at the time), who knew every street in Pamplona, found the girl's friend, who was even more beautiful than the original prisoner, if that was possible, and we all moved off into the night on the dark flagged narrow streets of the old town where Antonio knew a place he wanted us to go to sing and dance.

And so, it's plausible Hemingway traveled along North Dakota Highway 5 just a few days before his death. If he did, he might have stopped at the gas station Dad and I were visiting. Teddy Jo Paulson probably was living in Chicago during the summer of 1961, so if Hemingway did travel through North Dakota, it was all for naught. No more singing and dancing with a young, beautiful female North Dakotan. At the time, Teddy Jo likely was attending the University of Chicago, earning a master's degree in mathematics (according to her brother, "Bud," who moved back to Williston after retiring). Pretty *and* smart, apparently, making Teddy Jo doubly attractive to a man like Hemingway.

While my Hemingway encounter may be only be imaginary, I'm certain about this: Marlins *are* magical fish, singularly symbolic of nature's splendor. Also, fish stories and other tall tales are sometimes what's needed to lift the spirit, like a loyal companion such as Hemingway's "Black Dog," or one of his many named and nameless six-toed cats living still in Key West, Florida.

THE HEART MENDER

by Grace Loughheed

The sun, which had just started to set, gently spread its fading rays among the craggy sidewalk of the small city. Surrounded by aged brick structures, a slouching silhouette followed the path before her. A young girl, dressed in a dull blue school uniform, slowly shuffled in the direction of her home. A soft sigh escapes her lips as she paused in step, looking up to the buildings towering overhead. She stared at the empty shells of businesses, lips pursed as she allowed her mind to wander. She blinked, suddenly dragged from her daydream by the sound of laughter. The girl glanced around, her braids bouncing as she turned her head. Two other girls, wearing the same uniform as the slouching figure, walked together in step, chatting loudly. The girl with the braids stepped from their path, and the two paid her no mind as they passed. The duo chattered, ignoring the braided girl nearby.

“Haven’t you heard the rumor about this street?” The girl with blonde hair asked the one with brown curls.

“I haven’t. Tell me!” Curls replied.

“People have been saying that there’s a secret shop on this street.”

“A secret shop?”

“Yes,” Blondie grinned, “they say exactly when all light vanishes from the street, a shop appears in the old dress alteration storefront.”

“Really? What kind of store?” Curls leaned closer, intrigued.

“They say a special kind of repair store, one where you can get broken hearts fixed up good as new!” Blondie giggled.

“Like a magical heart surgen?” Curls tilted her head.

“Not really, more like a seamstress that sews up all the tears and broken bits.”

“That sounds ridiculous,” Curls responded with crossed arms.

“But you never know if it could be real!” Blondie retaliated.

“I mean, you’re right, but it just sounds like plain fantasy.”

“You’re not wrong there. If it was real, you bet I’d be first in line! I bet the seamstress could make me forget all about my last breakup!”

The two girls laughed and yammered on, leaving the girl with braids behind. She watched the pair set off, turning her gaze from her path home to the empty storefront across the street. Quickening her pace, she moved across the empty asphalt. She halted in front of the store, her hazel eyes wide as she studied the ancient tomb of a dress shop. The wooden frames that surround the windows loosely hung from flaky wooden siding that was covered in chipped patches and sun-dried curls of old paint.

“Can they really fix hearts?” The girl said softly to nobody in particular.

With a doubtful sigh, the girl turned her gaze away from the sad little storefront. With heavy steps, the girl wandered to a nearby bench, taking a seat.

“I suppose the only thing I can do is test the theory.”

In silence, the girl waited, her eyes moving between her watch and the storefront until quite some time had passed. Fed up with the lack of results, the girl stood with a bitter expression.

“I guess it was only a rumor. No one can magically fix hearts. I should’ve known.”

Just as the girl turned to leave, the last bit of light faded from the rundown road. Within a blink of an eye, the rickety old dress shop shifted its appearance. The faded paint of its crumbly siding became good as new, donning a soft blush-tone color. The loose windowframes were replaced with gingerbread trim. A warm light shown from the windows, casting a soft glow upon its wooden sign. The girl turned with wide eyes, reading the sign aloud.

“The Heartmender Shop: Open From Dusk Until Dawn.”

Her feet seemed to move on their own, pulling her to the tiny shop. Nervously, the girl pushed open the door and shuffled inside. The soft jingle of a bell announced her presence. The girl’s freckled face filled with awe as she took in the new surroundings. Spools upon spools of

Short Stories

thread lined the walls, as well as a variety of fabrics, ribbons, and other elegant trimmings. The lobby of the shop was decorated in a very cozy manner, with plush furniture aligned in a welcoming arrangement. A gentle voice shook the girl from her awestruck stupor.

“Welcome! Welcome! I will be with you in a moment. Please, take a seat for now,” A song-like voice called from the rear of the shop.

Obedying the gentle command, the schoolgirl gingerly took a seat on the nearest sofa, sinking into it’s squishy surface as soon as she made contact with it.

“This feels like a dream,” the girl whispered as she felt the plush top of the couch, “I must be asleep...”

The familiar, sing-songy voice interrupted her quiet ramblings.

“Oh, it’s very real, my dear!”

Startled, the girl looked up. Before her stood a young woman. Dressed in a fluffy, lacey gown, apron, and patterned stockings, the woman gently reached for her hand, smiling.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she began, “I’m the Heartmender of Avalon Road. What might your name be, Miss?”

“P-Peony, ma’am,” the young girl stuttered.

“Peony! What an adorable name! How may I help you, Miss Peony?” The Heartmender beamed.

“I heard...that you can fix broken hearts, is that true?” Peony questioned.

“Why, yes, it is! May I see your heart?”

“You want to...see my heart?”

The Heartmender nodded, “Yes, my dear. It’s right next to you. May I see it?”

Peony glanced around, a rather awkward expression on her face. Beside her rested a small, glowing love-heart shape. It was a brilliant scarlet, quite a beautiful sight. However, it was covered in tons of nicks, tatters, and scratches. Peony looked in wonder at the sight of the heart before her.

“Oh my,” the Heartmender whispered, taking Peony’s heart in hand, “It seems as if you have been through a lot. Please, allow me to see what I can do.”

“O-Okay,” the schoolgirl stammered, watching as the seamstress took the heart to a work table nearby.

Nearly an hour and half later, the seamstress returned to Peony, the girl’s heart in hand.

“I managed to fix it up to the best of my ability, dearie. Tell me what you think,” the Heartmender said as she handed the scarlet object back to its owner.

Peony took her heart in her hands, studying it. The little tears and scrapes in the heart’s surface seems to have disappeared. At least, all but one. In the center of the heart, a big gash still resided, practically splitting the delicate organ in two.

“There’s still a big gash in the middle,” Peony commented, looking at the heart with a disappointed expression.

“I know, dear. It was the only one I could not fix,” the Heartmender replied.

“Could you at least try to patch it up?”

“I did. I’m sorry, dear. Sometimes, not even a heartmender can fix certain wounds. This looks to be one of those cases.”

Peony’s face turned to an expression of pleading, “you have so much fabric. Can you fill the gap with some fabric?”

“I’m afraid I won’t do that, dear. Again, I’m very sorry I couldn’t have been more helpful,” the Heartmender gently spoke.

Peony sadly lowered her head, staring down at the luminous heart in her hands. She gently moved her finger over its ridges and the large tear, sighing softly. As she studied it, cruel thoughts ran through her mind.

No one can accept a heart like this.

It’s too broken to be loved.

It needs to be hidden away.

Short Stories

Slowly, Peony lifted her head to face the Heartmender. Her eyes glimmered with the faintest hope.

“If you can’t fix the gash, can you hide it for me?”

“Pardon?” The Heartmender tilted her head.

“I’ve looked around your shop. You have so many pretty ribbons and lovely laces. Can you cover my heart with those?” Peony pleaded.

“Miss Peony, I really don’t think that is a good idea. You see...”

“Why won’t you fix my heart? I know you can’t sew it back together, but you can cover up the bad parts! Please, Heartmender, please do this for me!” Peony stood, holding her heart out to the seamstress.

The Heartmender’s gaze avoided Peony’s own. She pursed her lips and furrowed her brow, as if searching for the words to respond with. Finally, she gave in with a sigh.

“I will do what you want, but I advise against it. It is your heart however, and I will do as you request,” she sadly responded.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” Peony beamed as she handed the Heartmender her heart once more, “Please, do your best!”

With gloominess in her step, the Heartmender returned to her work desk to beautify the exterior of Peony’s heart. Peony stood, following the Heartmender to watch. With soft white lace and silky, floral ribbons, the Heartmender carefully decorated the exterior of the young girl’s broken heart. With each bow stitched into its surface, the ugly tatter in the center of the organ became less and less visible, until finally, the original heart was nowhere to be seen. Peony’s eyes widened with delight. She snatched up the frilly heart, holding it gently in her grasp.

“It’s perfect!” She cheered, “thank you so much!”

“It’s just as you asked,” the Heartmender quietly responded.

Peony dashed over to where she was once sitting, scooping up her school bag.

“It’s just what I hoped! Thank you!” She smiled.

And without another word, Peony dashed from the Heartmender's shop, leaving the seamstress alone until, like her shop, she vanished at dawn.

* * *

Weeks passed since Peony's visit to the Heartmender's shop. She had grown much more friendly and talkative, thanks to her heart's new look. However, such false personas can only last so long.

Peony had began her usual walk home from school, a smile on her face as she made her way down the street of crumbling structures. Her eyes brightened as she noticed two familiar girls walking ahead of her. She was about to skip to them, but paused midstep as she overheard their words.

"Peony's been acting really weird lately," Blondie began.

"Yeah, she's suddenly acting so friendly, but it feels so fake and impersonal," Curls replied.

"I know she's always been real shy, but I'd prefer shy Peony to this new fake one any day."

"I just can't be friends with someone like that. I just can't read them."

The two girls moved on at a quick pace, grumbling gossip to one another. Peony stood behind in their dust, her shoulders drooping, her eyes watery.

"That's how they see me?" Peony whispered to the empty air around her.

"Even with a pretty heart, I'm still unlikable?"

Hot tears began to stream down the young girl's cheeks. She clenched her teeth, turning to the familiar run-down dress shop across the street. Within an instant, Peony was across the road, slamming a shaking fist into the chipped wood of the old door.

"Open up! Please! Let me in! I don't want this heart anymore, can you make me a new one? Please? Please, let me in..." Peony slowly sunk to her knees, her eyes sore with emotion.

Short Stories

As her shaking knees touched pavement, the last drop of light, faded from the street. Peony slowly lifted her head as the soft light of the shop gently covered her face. The gingerbread trim door slowly opened, the familiar tune of the bell chiming as it did. The Heartmender stood in the doorway before Peony, her hands folded gently before her. The round face of the streamstress was filled with sympathy as she reached down, helping the sobbing girl to her feet.

“Poor dear,” she said gently, “here, come and sit with me.”

With slow steps, the Heartmender carefully guided Peony over to the waiting room sofas. Gently, the Heartmender sat Peony down, taking the spot next to her. Peony bawled into her hands, tears spilling over and landing on the heart that had suddenly appeared in her lap.

“They didn’t like my old heart! They didn’t like this version either! I need a new heart! Please, make me one!” Peony choked out between loud sobs.

“Oh, Peony,” the Heartmender whispered whilst rubbing the young girl’s back, “your heart is beautiful, if only you could see its beauty too.”

“How is it beautiful? How!?” Peony shouted as she began to violently pull the lace and ribbon off of the ruby-colored heart. “It’s ugly! Nobody wants to see a heart like this. It’s damaged and ruined. It’s better off thrown away.”

The Heartmender grabbed Peony’s hands, “Peony! That’s enough.”

Peony looked up at the Heartmender. The young girl sniffled, her face sticky with bitter tears. The Heartmender’s expression softened. Gently, she took the heart from Peony’s lap, carefully removing the rest of the lace and ribbon with kind fingers.

“Peony,” the Heartmender began, “Your heart is lovely gift. We each only get one in our lifetime. You seem to think an unflawed heart is the ideal heart, but I am here to tell you that is incorrect.”

“What do you mean?” Peony sniffled.

“Hearts give you personality, hearts hold your memories. Though we should never wish emotional turmoil on anyone, negative

experiences, as well as the positive, give us our humanity. We feel sympathy and compassion for those who have been through bad things, but we show understanding to those who have been through tragedies similar to us. The world can be unforgiving, but humanity and human hearts make life a beautiful thing. We are healers of our own kind. We are far from perfect, but we are certainly not to be rejected for our flaws,” the Heartmender stated as she gently brushed her fingers against Peony’s heart to dry it off.

“But people won’t like my true heart. People have their own troubles and don’t need to take on mine,” Peony whimpered.

“It is true that not everyone will like your heart or will be willing to take on the burden it carries. However,” the Heartmender paused, smiling sweetly, “there are many out there who are willing to love your heart. There are many out there who are waiting for you to love theirs. A true, loving relationship is made when two are willing to be there to carry each other’s hearts when they are light as well as when they are heavy. The best relationships are made of this.

Peony hung her head, sniffing loudly as her hair tumbled over her face. The Heartmender reached over, brushed Peony’s hair aside and lightly lifted her chin, wiping away Peony’s warm tears with a gentle thumb.

“Peony, your heart is lovely and holds so much worth. There are many willing to love it for the way it is, without the lace or ribbons. They’re waiting for you. You just need to see worth of your own heart and find them,” the Heartmender smiled softly.

A sudden flash of dim light appeared in the Heartmender’s hands, disappearing just as quickly as it arrived. The pair looked down to see that the two halves of Peony’s shining heart had started to sew themselves back together. The eyes of the Heartmender brightened.

“I see,” she began, “I was able to heal all but the source of the problem.”

“The source?” Peony asked with a tilted head and a soft snuffle.

The Heartmender nodded, gently enclosing Peony’s hands around the healing heart, “Others can fix plenty, but sometimes, we must

Short Stories

mend our own hearts. I can see you have finally started to fix your own as well.”

Peony looked down at the beating object in her hands. The radiant organ felt much lighter, resting weightlessly in Peony’s loose grasp. A small smile tugged at the young girl’s lips as the warm glow of her heart reflected off her freckled face.

The Heartmender stood, smoothing her apron, “I believe I’ve done all I can do to help. However,” she smiled, “I always welcome visitors.”

Peony smiled, standing as well. She quickly pulled the Heartmender into an embrace, sniffing with a bittersweet smile.

“Thank you,” Peony said.

“It was all you, Peony. You learned and grew on your own.”

The hug lasted mere moments longer before the clock began to chime.

“My, it’s quite late. You better be heading home, dear,” The Heartmender said, walking Peony to the door.

“You’re right. Thank you again,” Peony smiled.

“I’m happy for you, dear. Take good care of yourself. If you ever need me or simply want to sit down for a cup of tea and a chat, you know where I am.”

The Heartmender held the door for Peony as she exited. The young girl waved as she walked away, her step lighter than it has ever been. The Heartmender closed the door went back to work, content and alone, until, just like her shop, she vanished at the crack of dawn.

BABY TEETH

by Travis Michael

As Cassie and Paul Hammond passed by the elderly janitor pushing the mop bucket, they noticed two drops of blood had been missed on the school office's tile floor. They entered the stuffy little office at the back and Principal Morris Urlacher invited them to sit. Before taking a chair, Cassie observed that the desktop between them was meticulously positioned. There were six pencils all sharpened and of equal length and lined up parallel to each other, a notepad and a box of tissues squared to the corners, and a pen holder positioned in exact geometric right angles to the desk's edge. Even the mug of coffee had been placed perfectly in the center of a square coaster and set at optimal arm's length for Urlacher to reach.

"You're looking thinner than usual, Morris," Paul said and purposely banged his shoe against the desk to scatter several of the lined-up pencils. After matching eyes with the principal, he sat down next to his wife. "Can you actually see thru those things?"

Urlacher's glasses sat slightly askew on his crooked nose, and the absurdly thick lenses made his eyeballs appear to float like bloated fish behind aquarium glass. The cowlicks in his hair just above each ear, gave him a windblown, unsettled appearance which seemed to conflict with the particular nature of the man. "Mmm, blind as a bat, you know." He realigned the out-of-place pencils. "Well, anyway, Ms. Mounds thought I should...you know. Considering this isn't the first...well, she's concerned, and...and really, so am I." He clasped his hands together and sat forward over his desk. "After last month's incident, well, thankfully they were able to reattach the Loggins boy's finger, but..."

Paul came to the front of his chair. "Whoa, wait a second, Loggins? That little shit who tried to cut Tabby's hair." He bumped the edge of the desk again and one of Urlacher's pencils again rolled out of place.

"Paul," Cassie said.

Urlacher slid the stray pencil back in line and looked visibly perturbed. He began rubbing at the underside of his nose repeatedly as though the irritation had instigated a pesky itch. “We’ve spoken with Mrs. Loggins about the incident and your offer to cover the medical expenses helps tremendously. But if she were to file a lawsuit against the school...”

“She’s not going to do that,” Cassie said.

“He had a scissors and tried to cut my little girl’s hair,” Paul said. “What if something had happened? What if he’d poked her in the eye?” Paul leaned back. “This where you tell us some shit about Tabby needing therapy? Is that what this is?”

The Principal wriggled his itchy nose, causing his glasses to slide down the bridge. “The aggression isn’t normal behavior, Mr. Hammond. I believe after the Loggins boy and the trouble Tabitha had with Marcy Jannis – didn’t your family physician recommend some child counseling?” He reached for a tissue from the box on his desk, but Paul swiped it away.

“Oh, here we go, Cass – I told you. Didn’t I tell you? Come on, she barely left a mark on that Jannis kid. If you ask me, the little brat deserved it for making fun of her, the way she did, calling her names. Did you know that?”

“Paul,” Cassie said again.

“She threw a rock at her on the playground. Did you know that Morris – that she was throwing rocks? Maybe instead of counseling, we should invest in self-defense classes for our daughter.”

“Paul.”

He tossed the box of tissues back on the desk. “I don’t know, do they have self-defense against rock-throwing? You ever think maybe the problem is your teachers not doing enough to discipline these other kids?”

Urlacher straightened the tissue box, and plucked one out, then dabbed at nostrils large enough to inhale dimes. “Tabitha bit her teacher, Mr. Hammond?” he said. “Hard enough to draw blood.”

“Oh, come on. She still has some of her baby teeth.”

Short Stories

“Paul, please. Sit down.”

Paul looked down at his wife. Her eyes were calm and pleasant, her posture relaxed. She could have been out for a nice dinner with wine and soft music, or conversely, she could have been preparing to lead a platoon into battle with enemy fire crackling all around, and likely her demeanor would have been unflinching. It was one of the things he loved about her, she could be cloaked if she deemed it so.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Urlacher?” Cassie said.

Urlacher’s Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat and got hung up over the top of his shirt collar, and he looked to have just woken from a deep nap. “Well, I mean, yes,” he said with audible surprise in his voice.

Cassie didn’t speak and didn’t move. She did not blink. Her breathing was even and steady.

“I mean, we – well, we just can’t have this kind of behavior.”

Cassie still said nothing and did not gesture in any way that would have suggested having heard the Principal despite the tiny space of the office.

“It’s just not what we’re trying to teach here.”

“By *this kind of behavior*, ” Cassie finally said, “your referring to rock throwing and children trying to cut other children’s hair?”

“Mrs. Hammond, you’re aware, Tabitha has been growing increasingly more...aggressive in the classroom.”

“Our daughter is aggressive? She’s seven.”

“Mmm.”

“Sorry, mmm? Tell me what *mmm* means. It seems like a very passive way to communicate and I, like my daughter, can be at times considered aggressive. I don’t understand, mmm.”

Paul watched the conflict in his wife begin to build like a storm clouds on the horizon and couldn’t help but feel a small tingle of spousal admiration towards her. A part of her thrived on confrontation, a trait which had earned her partnership at the firm of *Dobbs, Neugebauer, and Hammond*, attorneys at law, and admittedly, a portion of Paul’s love for her over the years since they’d been married. That

embrace for battle was contrary to most people's comforts and had always intrigued him. He found it unique and beautiful in the way that nature's dangers could be deadly and stunning at the same time. Like that destructive, looming storm, so too was his wife should she have the intention.

Within days of their initial courtship, over fried cheese curds, bar pretzels, and craft beer, while watching the Vikings lose dramatically on a last second field goal to the rival Bears, Cassie had quickly remedied Paul's naïve misconceptions of the judicial system. His assumption of a career in law being 'practiced' were corrected by the not yet graduated from Northwestern University law school, Ms. Cassandra Mesdrea, as not practiced but rather an exercise in assignment – assigning blame, assigning guilt, assigning responsibility. It was her job to guide the decision-making process down an acceptable route where the outcome was favorable to her clients, she'd said. For only soon-to-be-unemployed attorneys allowed opinionated judgement. Cassie had a way of assignment with finality that didn't leave one feeling defeated, but rather that you had come to a mutual decision, that of course, Cassie had casually administered to her liking. Paul watched his wife start positioning Urlacher toward the inevitable steamrolling the man would experience if he weren't on his knees begging for leniency in satisfactory time.

"Aggressive is a strong word, Mr. Urlacher," Cassie said. "Boys on a football field are aggressive. Traffic at 7:45 Monday morning is aggressive. At five hundred dollars an hour, some might say my hourly rates are aggressive."

"Your comparing your daughter's behavior to athletics and road rage? I...I don't see the correlation."

"No, that's your mistake, comparing the two. In this instance, you're misspeaking. Aggression is an offensive behavior. My daughters done nothing but defend herself. Aggressively, perhaps, but in defense."

Urlacher dabbed more at his nose with the tissue. "There is a pattern of escalation here that is unsettling. Surely you see that. I mean, don't you?"

Short Stories

Again, Cassie did not respond and sat patiently and unaffected. Underneath, however, Paul could sense the coming storm building and growing stronger.

Urlacher wriggled his nose more. "It's...it's just not right."

"No, it is not," Cassie said.

The Principal rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "She bit a fellow student's finger off. And...and left sizeable teeth marks on Miss Mounds's leg. I mean, if little Marcy Jannis hadn't been wearing a sweater, oh gosh who knows what would have happened. And we haven't even gotten to what she's done to the Chandler boy this morning." He paused and folded up the used tissue nicely with perfectly creased edges, and then placed it into the trashcan next to his desk. "My point is that this is a private school and children are expected to behave to our Christian principals. Children here are *accepted* for enrollment, *not* tolerated. We do not like to turn our backs on troubled children, of course, but if nothing is being done to correct their poor behavior, then...well, the public school is always more than accommodating."

"Poor behavior?"

"Mmm."

"Like the Loggins boy and his scissors."

"Well, yes, but..."

"Why was Marcy Jannis hurt?"

"I don't..."

"Miss Mounds, I assume she's refrained from documenting the incident with Tabby?"

"Well, yes..."

"I wonder why that is? We won't be chased off by an angry mob with pitch-forks, Mr. Urlacher."

The Principal's mouth fell open. "Mrs. Hammond?"

"It's possible that if an investigation were opened into the school's disciplinary procedures, that some of the administration's actions in student matters might be deemed unsatisfactory. Wouldn't you say?"

Urlacher's mouth dropped open further and hung there for a moment. His fingers wriggled nervously while he blinked and examined the strategic placement of items around his desktop. "Are you...threatening me, Mrs. Hammond?"

"Are you threatening to expel my daughter because she's been bullied by students in your school?"

"This is..."

"Ridiculous," Paul said. He got up from his chair and walked a half circle back to the closed door of the office. While his wife was calm as ever, he could feel his temper urging him toward the Paul of his youth who liked to settle things physically. The Paul Hammond who had been heading down a dark path of anger and poor decisions, had it not been for a beautiful dark-haired law student. He peered thru the slats of the closed window blinds out into the waiting area where Tabby sat in a yellow plastic chair looking tiny and isolated. She wore a navy-blue jumper and navy-blue sweater, polka dot leggings and bright orange tennis shoes. Like usual, her hair was in frizzy chunks around her face, having mostly fallen out of the pigtails that Cassie had fashioned that morning. Too small to properly fill the chair, Tabby's feet dangled six inches from the floor and the back of the chair rose well above her narrow shoulders. My little girl, Paul thought. Won't take any crap from anyone. "So, why are we here, Morris?"

The intercom on Urlacher's desk buzzed. "*Mr. Urlacher, call for you on line two.*"

The buzz startled him. His fingers danced across the desktop like spider legs. "Can you take a message please, Diane? It's really not..."

"*Sir, it's Mrs. Chandler.*"

"Oh." He startled again and made a drawn-out, scratchy, *huck* sound from the back of his throat. "Oh...oh, right." He quickly pushed out of his chair and strode across the office. "Excuse me. I'll be..." and closed the office door.

* * *

"Should I be worried?" Paul said.

Short Stories

Cassie casually plucked away a piece of short, dark hair from her lap. "I'm not."

"Really?"

"Yes, Paul, really."

"Cass, I knew things would be different..." He tried to smile but felt it was too forced. "I didn't anticipate this."

"Of course, it's different. We are different. But what would you like to do Paul, home school her?"

"Of course not. Obviously, she needs the social interaction, but this can't keep happening. Whether it's this limp-wrist Urlacher, or..." Paul reached over the desk and flicked the lined-up pencils, scattering them randomly, "Sooner or later, someone is going to start asking questions that we don't want to answer. It feels like we're walking a tight rope here is all I'm saying. What if she really loses control one of these times? She obviously doesn't know how to control it and damnit, I won't lose my little girl."

"That won't happen, Paul."

"She could hurt someone, Cass."

Without getting up from her chair, Cassie reached out and touched Paul's arm. "You're a good father. We just need to watch her closer. She'll learn."

"What if we keep her home, say she's sick or something. We know when its most likely to happen and I could save up my vacation. You know just for that day or two when it's the worst."

"And you don't think someone will put together that she misses school once a month?"

* * *

The office door opened, and Urlacher tip-toed back in as though the floor might be boobie-trapped or covered in deadly tarantulas. He looked irritated and skittish, and his navy and gold striped tie was turned askew as though he had been yanked around with it. He settled into his chair with an audible sigh and placed a purple file folder in front of him so that it was aligned directly perpendicular with the edge

of the desk. He gathered his scattered pencils back together and realigned them in proper order.

“Mrs. Chandler is considering pressing charges,” he said. “Oh gosh, the woman is furious.” He opened the purple file folder. “Twelve stitches. Furious.”

Paul noticed a photograph inside the file folder, the image of a child’s ear lobe and the curve of a child’s jaw line. Below the jaw, a patch of skin had been ripped from the flesh beneath and lay like a folded piece of bloody, white bread. Blood was pooled beneath the raw, fleshy wound. Paul picked up the photo. “Twelve stitches huh? Not bad.”

Urlacher had grabbed another tissue and was cleaning his glasses. Without the thick lenses to magnify his eyeballs, he looked sour, squinting hard to make out any smudges on the lenses. He paused. “Not bad? Attacked like an animal,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Paul said.

Urlacher quickly slipped his glasses back on over his large nose and blinked as if adjusting to the images brought back into focus. “Well...Ashton Chandler is lucky that your daughter didn’t hit a major artery. An inch to the left, oh gosh, we might not have been able to stop the bleeding. Surely you see...” He sat forward, noticing that Cassie had taken a notepad from her purse and was writing in it. “Um, what are you doing?”

“Documenting,” Cassie said. “A school administrator just referred to my daughter as an animal. You can understand my concern. But please, continue.” She reached out and touched her husband’s arm. “Paul, it’s okay.” She pulled him back toward his chair, but he wouldn’t sit.

Urlacher stood and walked across the room to the door. “Biting another student’s throat is not an appropriate response to anything.” He opened the door of his office and leaned out. “Tabitha, come join us, please.”

Tabby slowly slid from her chair and walked into the office with her head down, eyes hidden behind her thick veil of bangs. Again, Paul considered how tiny and vulnerable she looked. His paternal instincts

Short Stories

to protect his child were urging him to scoop her up and go charging out of the office with her in his arms. He wanted to hold her tight to his chest and whisper in her ear that everything would be okay. She was his little girl. Protecting her was what he was supposed to do after all. He reached out, took Tabby's hand and pulled her to him. He hoisted her up on his lap and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

Urlacher sat back down behind his desk, twitched his nose, and said, "Tabitha, you know why your parents are here, don't you?"

Tabby nodded.

"Your behavior recently has been unacceptable. Do you..."

"Wait a minute," Cassie said and touched Tabby on the shoulder. "Hon,' what happened? Why did you...hurt that boy?" Tabby's chin stayed tucked to her chest. The tangle of hair over her forehead shielded her eyes so that only her little button nose and tiny mouth could be seen. Cassie rubbed her shoulder. "It's okay, honey, you can tell us. We're here to find out what happened."

Tabby pulled her chin inside the collar of her sweater. She peeked at the Principal thru the tangle of bangs and then quickly looked away. Paul squeezed her and rocked her gently. "It's okay. It's okay." She shifted in towards her father, burying her face. Then whispered something muffled by the sweater.

"What, honey?" Cassie said.

"Tabitha," Urlacher said, "I want..."

"They...said bad things to me."

"Bad things," Paul said, "what bad things? What did they say?"

Cassie glided her hand over Tabby's knee and looked into her husband's eyes as she spoke. Paul saw a beautiful, subdued ferocity behind those eyes.

"What things, honey?" Cassie said.

"Your daughter claims that several of the boys were making fun of her at recess."

Cassie's eyes turned Urlacher's way and he fluttered beneath his skin, a visible ripple of unease sending a shiver thru him.

Tabby sniffled, ran the back of her sleeve under her nose, and sniffled again. "A dog."

"What about a dog?" Cassie said. She saw the short, dark hairs on the arms of Tabby's sweater, and the bit of dander across her shoulders.

"Ashton said I smell like a dog...he, he said I...I pee like Goldie, he said." Tabby sniffled again and her chest trembled. She squeezed her elbows in tight to her ribs. "I told him I pee on the toilet, but he laughed."

"Goldie?" Paul said.

Urlacher rubbed his temples. "The Chandlers own a Golden Retriever I believe."

Paul clenched his jaw as tears welled up in Tabby's eyes.

"Miss Mounds said I shed. And...and Mr. Mayer won't let me run with the other girls because I'm too fast. He said I'm a freak. Mommy what's a freak?"

"A freak," Paul barked. "Jesus, Urlacher."

"Please, don't take the Lord's name in vain, Mr. Hammond," Urlacher said. "Tabitha, that's not true..."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm sure you misheard Mr. Mayer. You know, the gym can be loud during class."

"I heard him tell Miss Mounds during our Social Studies test." Tears began to stream down her face. "Josh and Riley and Jackson bark at me."

"Tabitha..."

She began to cry harder. She curled into a ball in her father's arms.

"We've already spoken to Ashton and several of the others who were there. There's conflicting reports."

"Of that I have no doubt," Cassie said. "Little boys always tell the truth of course." A wry, cynical smile had creased the corner of her lip. She placed her hand against Tabby's face and brushed the hair away, up and over her ear and wiped away the tear streaks.

Short Stories

Urlacher's glasses had slipped down the bridge of his nose again and he pushed them back up. "This isn't about..."

"The truth?" Cassie said.

"I was going to say, the other children. This is about Tabitha."

"You don't approve of a child defending herself?"

"Mrs. Hammond, we don't approve of violence."

Paul saw the word violence ripple thru his wife like a wave of electricity. He had no doubt that combined with their daughter's cries, the words had stoked some warm embers deep down inside of her and like poking the mother bear, it was potentially dangerous fire to taunt.

"Tabitha, you have to be responsible for..."

Cassie shot out of her chair and came across the desk. "*Give her a minute!*" She barked with an audible growl at the back of her throat.

Urlacher fell back into his chair and nearly toppled over backward.

Cassie's fingernails were dug into the desktop and she had come across the desk hard and fast enough to spill the jar of pens and knock over the cup of coffee.

"P-please, Mrs. Hammond."

Cassie was close enough that her exhales disturbed the thin wisp of hair on Urlacher's scalp. Slowly, she slid back, scraping her nails across the desktop as she went, until her heels dropped back into her shoes.

Coffee ran over the side of the desk and dripped onto the floor. A pencil teetered on the edge, then fell and clattered on the floor. Paul watched his wife composer herself, gently brushing a hand across the front of her blazer and resituating her necklace. She retook her seat, crossed her long legs again, and folder her hands in her lap. Paul smiled at the look on Urlacher's face. Only a brief glance into the storm and the man was already about to piss himself.

A loud crash of chairs came from outside the office. There were voices shouting, more banging, and then several strikes on the office door. Urlacher cowered low in his chair as the door flew open and a stout, beefy woman rushed in. She had the face of a pumpkin, round and swollen, with black hair sprung in wiry coils. Her limbs were heavy

with fleshy mitts at the end. The hips of a much larger animal appeared to be stuffed into her pants, despite the high heeled shoes on her big feet.

Urlacher threw up his hands. “Oh, Mrs. Chandler...oh.”

The brutish woman barreled into the office dragging Ashton behind her. “There’s the little monster,” she stomped and jabbed her finger at Tabby. “There she is.”

Urlacher scuttled to the center of the office, waving his arms to cut off the angry woman. “Mrs. Chandler, please...”

“That child is a horrible beast. Look what she’s done.” She cupped Ashton’s face in her hand and turned it to show the large bandage covering the left side of his neck. “Look at my baby. Look what she did to him. When will you people see? She’s a *monster*?” She surged forward, flailed her arms, and Urlacher was flung into the bookcase along the office wall where he struck one of the wooden shelves and split his chin open. His glasses flew from his face, hit the floor and spun away.

Cassie jumped between Paul and the angry woman. “I’ll give you one warning, Mrs. Chandler. If you call my daughter a monster one more time, they’ll be carrying you out.”

Chandler’s nostrils flared wildly like a racehorse. She wheezed and her large red lips trembled as her robust chest heaved beneath her blouse in quick, sporadic breaths.

Ashton clung to his mother’s pantleg and made sure to keep positioned in the safety behind her. He wore a faded navy stocking cap over messy black hair like his mothers, and from beneath it, his chocolate colored eyes watched with a look of confused fright.

Paul held his daughter tight and felt the low vibrations rattle around in Tabitha’s chest. They started like a purring cat, soft and deep, and then began to grow until he could hear the low moan rising in her throat. He looked to his wife, but she was facing off against Chandler like a gunfighter ready to draw.

Sweat trickled down Chandler’s face as she shook with frenetic energy. She was manic, high on a cocktail of fear and rage, spiked with anger, ready to howl and hiss.

Short Stories

Urlacher pawed around the floor for his glasses, paused to look up with squinted eyes trying to make out what was happening in the room. “I can’t...can’t see.” Blood dripped from his split chin and onto the floor beneath him. “Mrs. Chandler,” he crawled in quick circles and figure-eights. “Mrs. Chandler, please...”

Chandler’s eyes were wild and darting around the room, shifting from Cassie to Tabby. She was frantic, spiraling on adrenaline, her breath coming like a sputtering locomotive.

Urlacher was down on all fours, sweeping his hands blindly back and forth in front of him moving left and right in an odd hands and knees dance to find his glasses. He kept repeating Chandler’s name, with a panicked tremble in his voice that grew with each repetition.

“Think carefully about what you say next, Mrs. Chandler,” Cassie said. “It *is* a full moon.” Her shoulders were tense, and her fingers were curled at her sides. There was a minor shift forward at her hips, one foot slightly back of the other. It was that storm that Paul had seen in his wife’s eyes, beautiful and dangerous, and stoked by a mothers’ love for her daughter. It was just beneath the surface now, ready to break free.

Chandler filler her lungs with a gluttonous suck of air.

Paul saw a flash of light reflect off metal and looked up to see a gun in Chandler’s hand. The small silver revolver looked miniature in the woman’s fat palm and quivered terribly with her fingers spread oddly in an inexperienced grip. She kept the gun away from her body with little control over its aim. Her index finger fumbled over the trigger.

“Monsters. You’re monsters,” she mumbled.

Tabby’s head pulled away from her father’s chest and the low sob coming from within her rolled out in a droning moan. Little Tabby growled. Her eyes had morphed from their beautiful big brown to pools black as tar. As the growl revved up in her throat, elongated canine teeth protruded from behind her lips.

“*Ahhh!*” Chandler screamed. She saw the child’s eyes and fangs. The gun flailed around in her hand, pointing from Cassie to Tabby. “*Monster. Ahhhh! Monster!*” She leaned forward and pointed the gun,

shying away from the blast as she aimed and squeezed the trigger. *"You're all monsters. Look what you did to my baby!"*

Paul turned his back to shield his daughter and take the bullet that would likely kill him. There was a sharp snap and a loud bang that in the confines of the tiny office became an eruption of rhythmic, metallic echoes and beneath it all was a muted, wet, fleshy smack. Paul expected the piercing pain of the bullet to punch his lungs. He expected a sharp snap against his ribs, or a punch into the muscles around his spine. But there was none. There was no bullet. No pain. Instead, there was only the piercing howl in his ears and the dull ringing leftover from the gun's bark.

"Whooo..."

The scream was terrible. It was a shrill wail, long and drawn out like a train horn or the shriek of a fire alarm that ricocheted around between the office walls. It wavered in painful, earsplitting frequency.

"Whooo..."

Paul let out the breath he had been holding and loosened the nearly crushing hold on Tabby. He turned to see a bloodied Mrs. Chandler was huddled in the corner of the room. The compound fracture of her broken arm produced a jagged shard of white bone from the middle of her forearm and blood dripped down the front of her pants. She clutched at the raw meat and screamed.

"Whooo..."

"Uhhh..." Urlacher whimpered on the floor. Blood covered his left pant leg and was beginning to pool under his thigh. "Whut," he mumbled. "Uhhh, whu..."

Cassie was perched in the center of the room and the silver revolver was on the floor beneath her. Blood dripped from the tips of her fingernails. Her shoulders rose and fell with short, quick breaths.

Three deep lines were cut across the left side of Chandler's neck and blood poured down her collar, slowly growing a crimson bib over her breasts. Little Ashton was curled up in a ball against the office door.

Short Stories

Paul remembered his wife's warning before Chandler had pulled the gun. "*They'll have to carry you out.*" He spoke his wife's name, but Mrs. Chandler's wail swallowed his words.

"Whooo..."

"Shut up," Cassie growled.

Chandler's mouth snapped shut.

Urlacher whimpered. He was propped against the bookcase with both hands clutched to his left thigh. Blood was rolling from the bullet wound in bubbling spurts that leaked between his fingers and soaked his khaki pants.

Cassie calmly walked over to Ashton and swiped the stocking cap from his head. She went to Urlacher, knelt beside him, and pressed the balled-up stocking cap to the top of his leg. "Keep pressure on it."

Urlacher nodded. He was pale and still without his glasses, squinted into Cassie's face to focus. "What?"

"You've been shot."

His eyes went wide. "Oh, oh God."

"Cass are you..." Paul said.

She looked over her shoulder at him and her eyes were black ink like Tabby's had been. Behind her lips were elongated fangs on both top and bottom but her face was calm and her breathing steady. "I'm fine. Go tell the secretary to call 911."

Paul hesitated. The cold, lifeless eyes of his wife sent chills thru him. He looked at Urlacher, pale and bleeding. He looked at Ashton who had crawled over to his mother and was now whimpering and trembling with waves of panic and shock. There was so much blood. A pool of blood beneath Urlacher. Blood soaked the front of Chandler's blouse and pants. How were they going to explain this? *Call 911*. He couldn't call the cops. My God, his family...his mind raced trying to grab at some definitive way to handle the situation. How would they explain this?

"Paul..." Cass was looking up at him again and her eyes were back to their normal slate grey color. "Paul, it's okay."

Cassie picked up Urlacher's glasses from where they had slid under the desk and pressed them into his hand. He slipped them on and gazed around the office like he had forgotten where he was. "Oh, oh, thank God. Oh...oh God, Mrs. Chandler, Jesus, she shot me."

Paul saw that Cassie was smiling now. Actually smiling. She stood up and walked over to him, touched him on the face and kissed Tabby on the top of the head.

"Trust me, dear," she said. "Everything's just fine."

* * *

After watching the two ambulances pull away and the three squad cars follow them out of the school lot, Paul lifted Tabby's sleeping body into her booster seat and fastened the seatbelt around her. Cassie was in the passenger seat and buckled by the time he got in. Her cell phone was in her hand, which meant she'd already made the call to the office and soon the full weight of *Dobbs, Neugebauer, and Hammond* would be leaning on the unstable mother who brought a gun into the school and shot the principal.

Paul started the SUV and tightened his grip around the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. It didn't stifle the tremble he felt inside, but at least he felt more in control.

Cassie put her hand on his thigh. There was dried blood under her nails, but otherwise no sign of the damage she had inflicted. And there was a glow about her that he found oddly surprising. The calm after the storm, he suspected.

"It's too late to back out now," she said.

"She's my little girl," he said. "I don't want to back out. It's just..."

Cassie watched him. The woman who had been ferocious and deadly, now revealed nothing but gentle tenderness in her eyes.

"I love you, and I love her," Paul said.

"I know you do."

"Most fathers deal with idiot boyfriends and too much time on the phone, and getting her driver's license, and...and underage drinking

Short Stories

and driving and getting minors at parties...I can understand those things. I can relate to those things. This though...aw shit.”

Cassie took his hand in hers and leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t worry dear, I’m sure you’ll still get to deal with idiot boyfriends and parties. My father did.” She smiled and sat back into her seat with her eyes closed. “But look at it this way...you’ll never have to worry about a boy trying to take advantage of her in the backseat of a car. She’ll be more than capable of protecting herself.”

Paul smiled. She did have a point.

He put the truck in gear and glanced in the rearview mirror at his daughter, asleep in the back. “God help the little bastard who tries to take advantage of my little girl.”

MEDORA BIGHORN

by Randal Ness

In southwestern North Dakota the Little Missouri River, flowing northeast into the Missouri, aeons past carved a maze of rugged, red sandstone canyons and wilderness. Stark, menacing but resplendent, the Bad Lands in the 1890's provided refuge for game, land for cattle and sanctuary for men of the historic West.

Walter slid his new Winchester Model 1894 from its scabbard, admiring the polished steel and close-grained walnut. His old hand lightly touched the engraving on the right side of the receiver. The year was 1895. Walter had waited anxiously for this new, smokeless .30 WCF caliber in Winchester's recently issued, small- frame carbine.

Walter picked up an empty casing and examined its size and dimensions. He was mindful to save his brass, but not fully understanding this new powder, had not attempted to load any cartridges. Walter remembered the gunsmith warning him about smokeless powder, how it was different than black powder and to be careful with it if he ever got his hands on any.

Walter, sitting in his cabin late at night, picked up a .44-40 brass case and filled it level. One after another he loaded cartridges for his revolver, a Colt Double-Action Army, Model 1878, with an action worn smooth by years of use and care. Walter lived alone now. His small cabin and land along the Little Missouri River was no longer a working ranch. Walter was sixty-eight years old and did not labor much anymore. Walter remained, however, because he loved this wilderness. He had always loved these Bad Lands, even during the long winters.

And slowly, he was learning to live alone.

North of his ranch and along the river's east bank, the small town of Medora provided a center of commerce and community for the area's inhabitants. Established in 1883 by the Marquis de Mores and named after his wife, Medora, the hamlet had once enjoyed a bustling, economic life. The failure of the Marquis' business ventures, hard

winters and the end of open range proceeded to change all that. The town, deep in the pith of the Bad Lands, was retired.

Bright, morning sunshine illuminated the clay buttes and angular cliffs in the still, clean air. Traveling north along the east bank of the Little Missouri, Walter rode his paint, Nebraska, trailed by his packhorse, a bay named Knot, up a little used cut that led to the village of Medora. As planned, Walter stopped in town and told his friends Pete Anderson and Willy Bishop where he was going, crossed the river and proceeded up the west bank.

In 1879 a company of the Sixth Infantry, under the command of Captain Stephen Baker of the U.S. Army, erected a military post on this same west bank. Located less than a mile northwest of Medora, the post was maintained to protect men working for the Northern Pacific Railroad. Walter had known Captain Baker well and remembered the soldiers of the Bad Lands Cantonment, as the garrison later became known. Walter spurred his horses to a trot as he passed the site, desirous to push deep into the wilderness to hunt, following the sluggish, late summer water of the river, his only sure guide into, and out of, the area that he had in mind.

Late in the day Walter made camp. He sat back in his small lean-to watching the fire and smoking his pipe. Deer were plentiful, but Walter was thinking of sheep.

Two days into his journey, Walter stood looking down at the mud of the bank. He had reached the point where he wanted to leave the river and follow a canyon north. Walter bent down and touched the outline of a cougar's footprint with his finger. The mud had dried somewhat in the sun, but it was still soft and relatively fresh. Walter pulled a compass from his jacket. Walter could see the Little Missouri turn in a long, slow bend to the east. To the northeast, the wide, flat river valley broke suddenly beneath dramatic, steep cliffs. The sheer face of this formation mesmerized Walter and appeared to come alive against the hazy blue sky. The canyon would lead him to the back side of these cliffs - and Walter knew well that he would have to take his time.

The initial trail through the canyon was difficult due to the fallen rocks and heavy, low-lying brush. The game trail cleared, however, as it climbed, leading Walter and his horses up the east side of the canyon.

Short Stories

Soon Walter could see the back of the formation. He stopped to rest as he sat astride Nebraska, using his field glasses to scan the elevations.

Two ewes and a kid came into view. Walter nudged Nebraska and the gelding up the trail and out of sight.

Nebraska suddenly stiffened.

"What's wrong with you? Afraid of a cat?"

Knot whinnied. Nebraska balked and reared back in a concerted attempt to turn down the trail. Walter kicked her hard and forced her forward, pulling along the frightened bay.

The horses broke into a canter up the rough trail, despite Walter's attempts to slow them down. Walter shouted, reining in Nebraska as he gained control. The three of them topped a small rise and abruptly stopped, surprised, standing face to face with a bewildered, young bighorn ram. A suspended cloud of dust engulfed them. Pieces of clay and rock quietly clattered down, dropping off the far reaches of the pathway.

The quizzical ram stared at them, appearing somewhat amused. The animal then turned and bounded off. Nebraska snorted and shook her head.

Walter smiled. "Too small."

* * *

The heights of the formation rose, reaching into the eastern sky. Walter was on foot, stalking a large ram that he had spotted early that morning. He knew where the bighorn might be. Walter moved carefully. The ram suddenly came into view seventy yards distant, peering in his direction. Walter leaned against an outcropping for support and brought his Winchester up. His thumb cocked the hammer back; he aimed for the shoulder to break it and fired.

The ram wheeled as if hit by a maul. Walter racked the lever, ejecting an empty case and chambering a fresh cartridge. Walter held still, the ram did not get up. He worked his way closer to the bighorn, climbing down to where it had fallen. The beautiful animal lie on its side, his eyes wide and staring into the sky. The ram's only movement was his heavy breathing, causing a froth of bright, red blood from his

nose and mouth. Walter sat down to wait. His bullet had pierced the animal's lungs - a clean, effective shot. The ram's breathing soon became quiet.

The bighorn slowly closed his eyes.

This ram was truly a magnificent trophy and Walter knew it. He had never before seen one this huge. Walter held his carbine high and danced in a small circle, grinning. After a short while he set to work field-dressing the animal, quartering and preparing the meat and head for the pack out.

Walter later relaxed in the light of his fire, savoring the loin roasting over the coals. Tomorrow he planned to cut back to Medora and his ranch, see his friends and share this fresh meat. Walter pondered long, however, drinking in this moment, the smell of horses and leather, the cool night, his comfortable camp, the carbine and meal. Like those quiet mornings at home that he always wanted to last, he could almost see the time run by.

Walter broke camp early. The smell of sage filled the air.

To the west, dark clouds gathered low between two buttes, crabbing eastward through the Bad Lands. Walter and his horses approached the divide where the game trail dropped into the canyon. Nebraska hesitated.

"Quiet, girl," said Walter as he reached down and softly patted the horse's neck.

"We rode through here before, remember?" Walter talked gently to the animal, easing her forward.

They maneuvered slowly down the steepest part of the path, making their way around a weathered, sandstone ledge.

Suddenly Nebraska began to shake. Surprised, Walter grabbed the pommel of his saddle. The horse locked her legs. A horrible stench hit them, pushing Walter back in the saddle.

"My dear God..." Walter's eyes widened.

Below the trio lay the rotting, open carcass of a young ram. Nebraska shrieked as an enraged, white grizzly burst from the bush behind the kill, making a horrific sound as it charged Walter and his horses.

Short Stories

Nebraska lunged uphill, leaving the trail in an attempt to escape. Walter reached for his carbine as his mount threw him and the '94 backwards into the rocky sage.

The bay was caught between Walter and the grizzly. The bear grabbed Knot by the neck with his jaws as he slashed the horse's head and flank with his powerful claws. Knot went down and the grizzly came up over the top of him.

Walter pulled his revolver and fired into the bear's face as the grizzly raked his left shoulder. The bear, astonished, sat up and Walter fired again.

The bear stood up to its full height and tripped over Knot, falling backwards down the steep incline below the trail.

Walter searched frantically for his rifle, trying to avoid the hooves from the bay's wild kicking. Walter spotted the Winchester near Knot's head. He got up and ran for the firearm as a kick from the bay struck his right thigh, spinning him over onto his back. He rolled over, reaching for the carbine. He could hear the bear. Walter got up on his knees and racked the lever.

Across the trail from Walter stood the heaving bear, staring at the old man with his one good eye. Walter froze. A deep, dark growl emanated from the grizzly's throat.

Walter mounted the Winchester and fired as the grizzly crossed the trail, hitting the animal near the ear. The injured bruin screamed, swinging wildly at the air. Walter fired again. The bear flew back from the impact, rolling part way down the incline.

Walter crawled across the trail. Taking careful aim, he shot the bear for the last time. Walter slowly sat back against his right side, exhausted. The shirt over his left shoulder was torn and bloody. Walter's right thigh was beginning to hurt. Near him on the trail lie the dying bay. For a long time Walter could not move.

The early afternoon sun warmed Walter's neck and back. He had fallen asleep, or passed out. He was not sure which. He did know, however, that he had a serious problem. No one would find him up here, except maybe Walking Dog, but by the time he did it would be

too late. He had to get back to the river, and the closer to Medora the better.

Nebraska had run off, up the trail. Knot and the bear were down. Walter was stiff and sore but able to sit up. He could see Nebraska several hundred yards away, her reins entangled in the brush. She was standing still, her head turned, looking in Walter's direction. Getting her past all this blood and the dead horse was going to be a trick. Walter could not remember being so thirsty, but first he loaded his Winchester. Walter then pulled a canteen from Knot's pannier and drank until he could not hold anymore.

Looking around for his revolver, Walter found it near the dead horse. The hard rubber grip plates and heft of the barrel felt good in his hand. He carefully examined the Colt's action and replaced the two, spent cartridges. Sliding the handgun into its holster, Walter took his jacket and walked up the trail. When he reached the horse, he draped the canvas jacket over the paint's head and tied the arms of the duster around her neck. Nebraska's withers trembled as he stroked her neck and talked quietly, repeating the mare's name in her ear.

A hawk, far above in the warm, rising air, stared down at the man and his horse. She then looked away to continue her search, these odd creatures a momentary diversion. Walter was on his own. The vast emptiness of the Bad Lands seemed to swell upwards and expand. Walter swallowed hard, this being what he loved about the wilderness, and it frightened him.

Walter and Nebraska slowly approached the steepest part of the path, making their way around the dead gelding and the sandstone ledge. Walter was still talking to Nebraska when he looked back. The bear's eye was open, staring at him. Walter's stomach fell. His knees went weak. He held the mare tightly and continued to back down the path. As he did, the bear's head moved, his eye following Walter. The old man caught his breath. As they dropped further down the trail, the bear's head jerked up, his glaring eye wide open.

Walter continued down the game trail until the grizzly was out of sight. He quickly removed the duster from Nebraska's head and pulled his Winchester from the scabbard. Walter gripped the reins and saddlehorn with his left hand and held the carbine in his right hand as

Short Stories

he backed down the trail, tight against Nebraska's flank. He could not afford to be thrown or kicked again. The bear would have to come down the path, or from above.

Sweat rolled down Walter's face, burning his eyes. He had difficulty keeping pace with Nebraska but held on, ready at any moment to drop the reins and fire the Winchester.

As they approached the lower reach of the canyon, Walter turned and led Nebraska through the tangle of rocks and brush. The pair broke out on to the wide bank of the river. Walter led Nebraska into the open, near the running water. There Walter stood, breathing hard and assessing the mouth of the canyon, looking for movement.

"We can outrun him now, horse, by God."

The pain in his shoulder and thigh intensified. Walter had some water left in his canteen and he drank it all.

Far above in the sky the hawk returned. She held still in the air then dropped, soaring down, disappearing between the silent buttes.

Walter pulled himself into the saddle and secured the Winchester. He gave Nebraska her head and began to follow the meandering river south. It hurt to turn and watch the distant canyon. Walter looked again at the water to make sure they were traveling upstream.

The bleeding from his shoulder seemed to have slowed, but his left arm, like his thigh, was stiff and hard to move. Walter held the reins and saddle horn with his right hand, turning on occasion to look back.

Near dusk, Walter and Nebraska stopped to rest on a wide, sandy bar near a bend in the river. Walter loosened Nebraska's cinch and hobbled her, made a small fire and wrapped up in his slicker. Walter felt cool drops of rain lightly brush his face as he slipped into a restless, painful sleep.

* * *

The bright, noonday sun burned down on Walter. He had fallen from his horse. The light clay seemed to Walter's mind soft against his back. His shoulder, in contrast, felt heavy and wet, anchoring his body. Walter could hear distant shouts and the increasing sound of horses. He

could see battle flags against the sky, soldiers running in the dust and the heat.

Walter opened his eyes, suddenly conscious of the searing pain in this shoulder. Nebraska stood near him on the wide mud-flat, having stopped when Walter let go of her reins.

Walter now realized that the only thing he could do to save himself was to get up and get on his horse. He also knew that it would be easier not to do this.

* * *

From the center of town, Willy Bishop could see Pete running from the back of his house, his wife close behind. Willy was amazed that Pete, a large and ponderous man, could move so fast. Willy then saw Walter's horse, with Walter hunched low over the saddle. Willy found himself running too, along with several others who had heard Pete shout. Willy felt weak when he saw Walter.

"My God, Willy, just look at him." Pete held onto Walter as he tried to catch his breath. "Help me cut him down."

Walter had tied himself to the saddle. His hat was gone. His face and lips were blistered from the sun. Walter tried to answer their questions but could not get the words out.

* * *

In late May and early June the Bad Lands come alive, fresh and clean and new. The earth, sand and sediment move with the sudden bursts of rainfall and thunder. Layers of ashy clay, silt and lignite shift slowly in the direction of the Little Missouri, held only by the red-baked scoria and sandstone - both destined to lose with time. Walter sat on a flat table of rock as Walking Dog searched the area where the bear had been shot.

"No sign here, Walt."

Walking dog could see, however, the large sheep skull and boss, along with the remains of Walter's gelding, Knot. Pieces of rotting leather and gear littered the area. Walking Dog sat down beside Walter.

"You need a wife."

Short Stories

"I had a wife."

"She did not like me much. I think because I did not become Catholic. You should become Catholic, then when you die you can be with her."

"I think I will anyway."

"Maybe."

Walking Dog stood up.

"Tell me next time you hunt, Norwegian."

Walter looked out across the Bad Lands. He got up and followed Walking Dog to the horses. A light, recent rainfall had nourished the land. Wildflowers blossomed in stunning profusion, dressing the perimeters of earth and grass. Walter sat astride Nebraska with Walking Dog in the lead. They maneuvered slowly down the steepest part of the path, making their way around a weathered, sandstone ledge. The sun was bright. The air was clean. The smell of sage surrounded Walter, and filled the sky.

ALL WE TRAPPED RAG DOLLS

by Caden Nestler

The puppet waited. Alone. But his Master held his strings in His loving hands, and the bench was warm and comfortable in the spring sunrise. He gazed at the beautiful pink and white trees and the rows of flowers just beginning to blossom. John smiled to himself, content. He was happy. He watched the others as they passed by. Arm in arm, hand in hand. Skipping, running, dancing through Tarry Park. They were also happy.

One day he would be like them. One day his Master would pull his strings and make it so. His Master would give him a wife. His Master would give him everything. One day. But today was not that day. It simply wasn't the right time, but it would come. That perfect day. How glorious it would be.

For now, though, there was nothing he could do except sit and wait.

The Puppeteer dropped John's eyelid strings and carried him into a beautiful dream. John skipped through a field of bright white and yellow daisies and red chrysanthemums, arm in arm with a beautiful golden-hair. She had sunny blue eyes and rose lips. They moved like they had the same Master, one string moving them both in perfect synchronicity. Their bounds grew and grew with each skip until they were almost flying. Their Master pulled them higher, higher, higher. They flew. Weightless. Almost touching the sky. Closer, closer. Higher. Together.

John's eyes were jerked open by his Master's gentle tug. He felt disappointment rising in his mind, but his Master quickly took care of it. John glanced at his watch. It was almost time for work. But he could wait a few more minutes. Just a few more.

More and more happy people walked by on their morning strolls through the park, but John didn't pay them any mind. He was too busy remembering his dream. How good it felt to love and to be loved. He wished and wished he could feel it for real. But of course, it was vain

to wish. His Master would give it to him in due time. He had to believe that.

He checked his watch again. It was time for work. He sighed and gathered his things, and his Master pulled him from the bench.

John always walked down Lover's Way on his way to work. He didn't know why, but he assumed it was his Master showing him his future. It was the most secluded part of Tarry Park, a narrow, paved path shaded by two rows of trees holding hands overhead where young romantics could play at their love. John was the only one who walked alone, but he didn't mind. He would have a wife soon enough. For now, he would hold his head high and enjoy the scent of the blooming flowers and the beauty of the King's castle looming in the distance on its hill overlooking the park.

He was almost at the end of the path where the trees stopped embracing and he would turn left for the tavern when he saw it. Someone else was walking alone. A girl. Walking towards him. She was beautiful. And now that he saw her closer, he swore it was the girl from his dream. Bright blue eyes. Rosy lips. Golden hair. His knees started to shake, but his Master cradled him up. He smiled at her.

She smiled back.

He froze.

For a few seconds he forgot his Master. It was just him and her in the entire world. No one held his strings.

She turned and continued on her way. The Ventriloquist regained control after a few moments and held John in His loving embrace. Then He walked him to work with a spring in his step.

* * *

"Thank You, Lord Master," John prayed as He dropped him in his chair, "for letting me sit and rest my aching bones. And for giving me visions of my bright and happy future during another long day of serving food and waiting tables while Your strings moved my humble hands. Forgive me, oh Master, for any doubt I may have possessed. I trust in You and You alone. You will give me all I need, in due time. In due time, You will give me all I need."

Short Stories

The Puppeteer let him rest for a while longer before picking him up and making him a ham and cheese sandwich. John hardly tasted his food as he ate it. His mind, like it had been all summer, was fixed on the girl he saw in Lover's Way. They met for a reason, he knew. His Master had set it up.

Now he only had to wait for the right time to do something about it.

He would stroll down the shaded path some night with no one else around. He would idly gaze at the summer stars through gaps in the trees. Then he would see her, brilliant blue eyes shining in the moonlight. She would run to him, arms open wide, and they would embrace in such a strong, loving embrace that he would instantly know that their Masters had meant for them to be soulmates since the very day they were made. Then they would skip down the road, hand in hand, singing happily as they pointed at flowers and gazed into each other's eyes. John would ask her to marry him right then and there. She would say yes, of course, before kissing him with passion only a Master could muster. And they would live happily ever after. Together.

John woke from his dream. As he was cleaning his dinner plate, he realized he was still smiling. The dream would come true. It was so close he could feel it, taste it. His Master tugged his heart strings rapidly. He was happy.

Determined, he went to his bedroom and pulled out his papers from his nightstand drawer. He spread the sheets on his bed and across the floor of his three-pace-by-three-pace room. His apartment was much too small for his ambition, but that was the least of his concerns right now.

John was going to impress her. All these half-written pages of scribbled lines were the products of years of hard work. He had always wanted to be an author. He wanted to write books and sell them to thousands. He would live in a stone manor beside a river, and everyone would know his name. But there was simply never enough time.

He looked around his room thoughtfully. There was a novel here somewhere. He would write it up and give it to the golden-haired girl, and she would love it, and she would love him even more.

He picked up a page and dipped his quill in ink. Just then, the bell tower struck ten. He sighed. *It's too late*, he thought with a sad yawn. *And I'm too tired to write anyways. I'll do this tomorrow*. Then he picked up his papers, put them away, and went to sleep dreaming of love.

* * *

Today was going to be a special day.

John sat alone on his bench that autumn morning like usual, admiring the red and yellow trees, but now there were thousands of people crowded in Tarry Park. Good King Jack IV had called off all work for the day so everyone could come and listen to him speak.

John was waiting for Thom and his wife, Marguerite. Besides his Master, they were his only friends in the world. Between working at the restaurant all day, trying to write a novel, and waiting for love to find him, there was no time for friends.

While he was waiting, John dreamed, of course. He imagined he was one of the gentries in the crowd with green silks flowing down his back, ruby-studded rings adorning his fingers, and a beautiful woman hanging on his arm. His woman. The woman without a name. He loved her, and she loved him. They listened to the king's speech and whispered hilarious nothings in each other's ear. They clung to one another to stifle their bursts of laughter and support their trembling legs. They were so happy.

The Puppeteer woke John from His vision of the ever-so-near future. Thom and Marguerite approached the bench, and John's strings were tightened to stand.

"Thom! It's so good to see you!" John said with a smile.

"Yes. It's been awhile." They hugged.

John turned to Thom's wife. Her curly red hair and sea-green eyes almost made him forget about his future wife. "Ah, Marguerite, nice to see you again!"

When John hugged her, he couldn't help but feel that old jealousy. Thom had it all. The wealth, the manor, the life, the

Short Stories

wife. Everything. *But I'll have everything he has soon enough*, John reminded himself. *Soon enough*.

"You ready to hear some good old-fashioned royal lies?" asked Thom in a cheery voice.

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"Only false promises and happy deception come out of our good king's mouth."

The royal fanfare blasted through John's confusion. The crowd of thousands instantly grew quiet and turned towards the magnificent castle with its red bricks that matched the fall foliage.

The Fourth King Jack, clad in his jeweled purple robe that shrunk his waist and his massive gold crown that made him two heads taller, appeared on his pulpit and basked in his praise. John cheered right along with the loudest in the crowd.

"Yes, yes, thank you," the king boomed, quieting the masses with a wave of his arms. "I called this meeting today to inform you of how happy we are as a nation. Our Masters have blessed us all. We are good. We are in a good place. I know some of you may not feel it. I know some of you are poor and sick and worried about this so-called war. Well, I assure you, we have everything completely and totally under control. Those of you who are poor and anxious, have patience. Have patience, and our Masters and I will set everything right. You will be rich and happy like the rest of us in no time at all."

John nodded with enthusiasm. Thom and Marguerite shook their heads and sighed.

The king went on for hours and hours. John didn't really hear what he said, but he believed every last word.

"All right," said Thom after the King had finished. "All these lies have made me hungry. Let's go to the Tarry."

They pushed through the throngs of people toward Tarry Tavern. It was the last place John wanted to go. He already spent every waking moment there waiting tables. He couldn't possibly stand to spend one more second in there, especially on his day off, but he followed his friends anyway.

Then it happened.

In less time than it takes for the Master to drop and raise an eyelid, the girl, John's golden girl, tripped and fell into his arms. He had no idea how his Master pulled his strings fast enough to catch her. But He did.

John helped her to her feet and smiled.

She smiled back. "Thank you. I could have been hurt. Sorry."

John smiled and said nothing. She turned and continued on her way. John stood there, wishing his Ventriloquist would have asked for her name.

Thom had to pull him to keep going. "You know that girl?"

"Yeah, I've met her a few times," said John.

"She's our neighbor."

"What's her name?" John asked.

"Daisy," said Thom.

Daisy, he thought with a smile. *Daisy*.

As they sat down at the tavern, John's mind was on Daisy, Daisy, Daisy, but he decided not to talk about it. The dream was so close now that he was afraid speaking of it would shatter its reality.

"Thom," John ventured as they waited for their food, "why don't you like the king?"

"He does nothing except lie to us to keep us happy and content so he can keep ruling us. But he isn't the one who really rules us. He's just a puppet, a figurehead. I don't think he's ever had a single original thought in--"

"We're all puppets," John interrupted. "Each of us has his Master who gives him life."

Thom shook his head. "When will you wake up, John?"

"When will *you* wake up, Thom?" countered John. "Can't you see?" He moved his arm up and down to demonstrate. "This is my Master moving me. You can't see the strings, and you can't touch them, but you can *feel* them. I know they're there. I know He's up there."

Short Stories

“Why do you believe that, John?” asked Marguerite. “*How* can you believe that? You’re your own person. You can choose, and you can act. Nobody chooses for you.”

“My Master does,” John said, voice raising. “And yours does too, even if you can’t see Her. He gives me comfort, and He gives me everything I need. How can I *not* believe in Him?”

“All right, all right,” said Thom. “Let’s change the subject, shall we? How’s your writing coming along?”

John shrugged. “Ah, you know. There’s never enough time. But someday I’ll finish the novel. Someday. Then I won’t have to work *here* anymore. I can’t wait.”

“You’re right,” Thom said. “You *can*’t wait. Go and do it. Go home and write your book right now.”

“But-but the time,” John stuttered. The Ventriloquist was losing control. “Th-there’s no time. If it was the right time, my Master would help me-”

Thom pounded the table. “Enough of your Master. He’s not real. Get over it and live your own life.”

These were words John had heard time and time again. But now they scared him. They scared him beyond belief. He needed his Master. *But why didn’t He help me today? He could have helped me talk to her. He should have done something. It was the perfect time, but He didn’t do anything. It was the perfect time.* He needed somebody. Somebody to comfort him, to love him, to choose for him. He began to tremble in his chair.

“I-I-I’m not feeling well,” he said, holding his stomach. “Excuse me.”

John stumbled from his chair and made for the door as fast as he could. He couldn’t breathe. It was as if the Master had tied his strings around his neck before letting go completely. He had never felt more terrified. Or more alone.

But suddenly there she was. The blue-eyed girl. Daisy. His Daisy.

She was sitting at the bar, drinking alone. He wanted more than anything to go and talk to her. To introduce himself. To tell her his feelings.

“Hey, Daisy. Remember me?”

“Oh, of course. You saved me from hitting my head and ruining my dress. I can’t thank you enough. You’re so kind and sweet and brave and strong.”

“Oh, I just did what anyone would do. My name’s John. May I sit?”

“Absolutely. I’ve been waiting for you all night.”

“Waiter! Another round. On me.”

“Wow! You’re so generous.”

“Daisy, I love you.”

“I love you too, John.”

But he couldn’t do that. Not tonight. Not right now. He shook even more at the mere idea of it. So he ran out the door into the crisp autumn air and tried hard, so very hard, not to look back.

* * *

It was a long winter’s day.

John shivered every time a patron opened the Tarry’s door and welcomed the chill wind to enter and gnaw his bones.

He served and served all day. Nothing but the mere puppet of the considerate, charitable customers who so kindly told him what they needed him to do five minutes after they needed him to do it. He had no rest and no master to help him. Running to and fro, back and forth, balancing six plates in two hands, taking complaints and putting in new orders just to get more complaints, hauling pitchers of water, beer, and wine around the tavern, saving the needy from dire thirst, cleaning up spilt wine because it was obviously his fault that the customer knocked his glass off the table by waving his hands to summon the poor waiter. He hated this life.

But he dreamed. He was marrying Daisy. It was a beautiful spring day. The trees were pink and white, the flowers bloomed in full color

Short Stories

and life. Everyone was happy. Everyone smiled. Daisy's father walked her down the aisle and gave her to him. He lifted her veil and looked in her sunny blue eyes. She was so beautiful, perfectly beautiful. He no longer felt the hole in his heart his master had left. They said their vows, then they kissed. They kissed long and hard. They kissed for hours. He didn't need to breathe, didn't need his master. He only needed her.

The clock tower's bells tolled five, shattering his dream. *Finally. I thought the day would never end.* He went back to the kitchen to grab his things. When he came back out, he froze.

Daisy. She was the first thing he saw, the only thing he saw. She was alone. He turned and sat at the bar instead of going home.

He was going to do it tonight. He was really going to do it. He was going to talk to her and ask her on a date. He was going to be happy.

John ordered a mug of beer and caught a glimpse of her across the room. By the Masters, she was beautiful. *No*, he shook his head, *there are no masters. I can do this alone.*

How good it would feel to do it himself. He didn't need a master to do anything for him, no. He would do it. All by himself. He wasn't a puppet anymore.

He gulped down his mug and called for another. *I can do this, I can do this*, he told himself. *Five more minutes. Just five more.*

His fingers began to shake, and his knee bounced uncontrollably. He downed the last drop from his second mug.

I can do it. I will do it. Yes, I'll do it. Right now. He ordered another of the Tarry's specialty. The frosted glass melted in John's tight, desperate grip. *After this beer. Right after this one. This is the last one, the last one. I only need a little more courage.* He took a sip. *Tonight's the night. It's tonight or never again. It's my only chance. I can do this.* He raised the glass for another sip, but his hands were unsteady, and he spilled on his shirt. *I need to get myself under control. I need another.*

He drank the rest of the glass and yelled, "Waiter! Another!"

“You know you can call me Ben, right?” said the waiter as he brought him another drink. “We work together, John.”

John shrugged and grabbed the beer from his hands. *All right. This is the last one. I’ll do it after I finish this glass. I will.*

Twenty minutes later, he finished his drink and stood up. His knees buckled, but he caught himself against the bar.

He took a deep breath. *I can do this.*

John took another breath and started walking towards his Daisy. She was still alone, drinking the same beer he’d been drinking. She looked sad. *I can make her happy.* He tried to catch her eye, tried to get some reaction that would calm his nerves, but she never glanced up from her drink. He was almost there. Ten feet from her. The bar racket and the crowds disappeared. It was only him and her. He was so close.

He turned around.

John sped back to his place at the bar. He needed another drink. He needed more time. He sipped the night’s fifth glass. *This is the last one. Really. The last one. Then I’ll do it.*

“Then I’ll do it,” he said aloud.

He finished the glass and stood, determined to keep his balance and stay true to his word. He pushed through the throngs of drunkards to her table.

She looked up and smiled. His heart fluttered.

But she wasn’t smiling at him.

Some handsome man had beat him to it. Two drinks were in his hands. He gave one to Daisy as he slid into the booth beside her. He put his arms around her, and she moved closer to him, smiling. They were so happy.

John stood there, frozen. Staring. His heart dropped to his stomach. His stomach churned and ached. His head pounded. Tears welled.

He raced out the door and emptied the night’s alcohol on the pure white snow. Then he lay beside the stain and cried face-first into the ice.

Short Stories

The night was cold, deadly cold, cold enough to freeze tears. John didn't mind. The wind shelled him with pellets of ice. He took no notice. People came out of the Tarry and stared at him. He didn't care. He felt nothing.

Two hours passed before he finally ripped the frozen tears from his cheeks and stood up. He didn't shake, despite the cold. He started walking without knowing it, as if he was a puppet controlled by a distant Master. He was carried to the park bench where he spent every morning looking at the happiness of others.

He sat down. And waited. For something, for someone that would never come. He stared and stared at the black winter's night until he fell asleep. And he did not dream.

