



Northern Narratives  
2023

# NORTHERN NARRATIVES

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A Collection of Poetry, Fiction, and Nonfiction  
by Writers from North Dakota and the  
Red River Valley

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by Writers from North Dakota and the  
Red River Valley

Volume 7

Collected and produced by the following Fargo Public Library staff:  
Melisa Duncan, Andy Gustafson, Nicole Hofer, and Lori West.



2023



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To learn more about the Friends of the Fargo Public Library, please visit [friendsfpl.org](http://friendsfpl.org).





# NORTHERN FOCUS

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**Cover Photo:** “Yellowjacket on Grape Leaf” (2022) by Jeffrey Westgard. Taken in Dilworth, Minnesota, in the photographer’s backyard.

This photograph was chosen for the front cover of *Northern Narratives* as a part of the Fargo Public Library’s fourth annual Northern Focus photography project. Northern Focus was conceived by the library for up-and-coming or recreational photographers. We aim to provide a free space, for artist and viewer alike, where we can showcase artwork and share local perspectives.

Photographers sent in their favorite photographs taken anywhere within North Dakota or Minnesota. Entries were on display at the Main Library in downtown Fargo during the fall of 2023. Find the digital gallery online at <https://fargond.gov/city-government/departments/library/adults/northern-narratives-northern-focus>.



# INTRODUCTION

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Back in 2017, a couple of plucky librarians at the Fargo Public Library conceived of an idea: what if someday, somehow, the library could provide an opportunity for local writers? It's hard to get published, especially for people unfamiliar with the constantly shifting landscape of the industry. But if we made a space for the writers of our region in order to prop them up, give them that confidence and experience of seeing their work in print, wouldn't that enrich the community?

The library put out the call, and *Northern Narratives* was born.

That first year, with a lot of determination and a handful of staples, those librarians took in about thirty submissions and fashioned them into little zines that any library patron could pick up and take home for free. Only a few books were printed to preserve the writing in the library's collection. Still, this felt like the start of something great.

The next year, with a couple more librarians on board, we thought of ways we could take the project even further. We realized that it wasn't enough just to provide opportunity; we wanted to highlight the hard work and passion that was so evident in the creators of our region. We enlisted volunteer judges with various backgrounds in writing, reading, teaching, and publishing. We created a beautiful book that anybody could have the opportunity to take home. Then we held a big public reception where writers could read from their work and share their vision—and their joy—with each other, and us all.

*Northern Narratives* has only grown since then, as more and more writers in our region hear about us and take part. It made us here at the library dream even bigger. We asked ourselves, why stop at writers? Why not provide a similar space for up-and-coming photographers, too? Thus out of *Northern Narratives* grew its sister project, Northern Focus. Since

2020, we provide free gallery space at our Main Library, and volunteer expert judges choose the front cover of *Northern Narratives*—the results of which are in your hands right now.

We hope you enjoy reading this book and fall in love with the beautiful, funny, thrilling, lighthearted, thought-provoking, emotional, and diverse voices of our region, just as we did.

Welcome to the seventh volume of *Northern Narratives*!

# POETRY







# MISTY SHROUD

by Sarah Adams

---

A murky, gray veil shrouds the light.  
Noisy thoughts fade as quietude descends upon the land.  
Isolation emerges from a meditative state.  
Grainy shadows appear unfettered by the surrealism.

Mystical beings movin' in imaginary worlds  
Arthur? Merlin? Tuatha DeDanaan? Wee folk?  
Stillness welcomes a cocoon.  
Mystical, magical entities reveal an alternative universe.

Rime and hoarfrost emerge.  
Artistic mischief is afoot amid crystalline energy.  
Mist freezes beautiful, delicate designs.  
Metal and nature don new spiky, white clothes.

An imaginary playground appears on the canvas.  
The fairies play on metal and wood.  
Working in mysterious ways, it encompasses all that is still.  
A vision of dreams, a feminine touch.

Quietness filters the human noise.  
Colorful alliterations abound as a wordsmith ponders.  
Photographer's delight in capturing a life encased in mystery.  
An artist's palette awaits a paintbrush.

A masterpiece is created as crystals quietly fall.  
The tall white world is enigmatic.  
Car lights shine like a beast stalking its prey.  
Animal tracks offer a sign of life in the snowy frost.

The shroud becomes an obscured mirror: Who am I?  
Perhaps re-membling ourselves in a human construct.  
An existential crisis of abstract walls closing in  
Perhaps a prison of one's own creation.

Cleansing the past, it brings a revelation for the future.  
Amid the perceived isolation, beauty abounds.  
Creativity is unfiltered by its physical surroundings.  
Mysteries signal that we are only limited by our own imaginations.

# TRACE YOUR MOONLIGHT STEPS

by Sara Anderson

---

Trace your moonlight steps  
The magic ceases in daylight  
Take your gods off their pedestals  
The façade is in your heart and eyes

“I love you” comes in many languages  
Make sure you have the right translation  
Words are not promises  
Touch is not commitment  
Time is not matrimony  
To act is not to leap  
To speak is not to ensure

Trace your moonlight steps  
And put that magic inside your heart  
Walk alongside your gods, bring them down to their knees  
The truth is in your heart and eyes

# FIRST SNOWFALL

by Stacy Anderson

---

Frosted flakes float down with whimsy.

Branches sprinkled slowly with white and glistening wintery tinsel.

Melting instantly like tears on a tender heart in the chilly calm open lake  
waters

Peaceful and serene nature speaks to the heart.

“Winter’s here winter’s here come enjoy my splendor” it calls to all the  
naysayers.

Snowflake blankets sweetly layering upon the sleepy earth singing their  
cool silent lullaby.

Soft slow as syrup sliding down down down sticking to everything in  
their playful path.

A Snowflake Splendid symphony music to one’s senses.

Beauty abounds as the frosty season turns a new page.

Behold and lose yourself in the moment chilling sensations if only you  
welcome them in...sweet fanciful snowflakes take me away to my  
childhood memories playing with you!

# THIS WINTER NEVER-ENDING

by Joanne Bekkerus

---

This never-ending winter  
Continues, advancing on,  
Feet of snow looming later,  
Several inches on the lawn.

A slight thaw only to tease,  
Offering but some relief,  
Sinking soft into the ease,  
But it was all far too brief.

Now comes the deepest of freeze,  
Water hardens on the ground,  
Harsh winter back to reseize,  
With spirit it does rebound.

The snow is back, flakes falling,  
So substantial from the sky,  
Hear the acute wind's squalling,  
To the thaw it bids goodbye.

Inches of cold flakes add up,  
Rapidly they do amass,  
Wind howling, it does build up,  
Many feet upon the grass.

This cycle repeats over,  
Over, and over again,  
Hard to keep full composure,  
With this winter we are in.

Winter must soon surrender,  
Spring anew will be retrieved,  
Reborn again in splendor,  
Winter's duty then relieved.

# GRANDMAS

by Mary Bjerke

---

Life size trinkets,  
Powdered knick-knacks,  
Fragile, soft, and  
Faintly smelling  
Of age and some soft flowery mist.  
Lines of age  
Applied by time  
And painted on to stay  
Forever;  
Dots of rouge  
To add some life –  
Some shade  
To where the blood's stopped flowing.  
Careful steps,  
The knick-knack  
Moves.  
Wonder shines  
In eyes so bright.  
Halos dance  
Around her crown –  
A mist of dust,  
A shine from  
Rhinestones,  
Heavy, clinking  
Keeping time  
With heartbeat pounding.  
Loss of breath;  
And then it's done,  
The glass-like figure  
Has sat down  
And will not move



Till some soft  
Wind sings in her  
Ear  
And gently whispers,  
“Stay alive.”

# LATE AT NIGHT

by J.L. Burt

---

Late at night the moon is full  
Late at night the Church bells toll  
Late at night something creeps  
Late at night a spirit weeps  
Late at night the rain patters  
Late at night are ghostly chatters  
Late at night a lonely howl  
Late at night I hear it prowls

It creeps outside by bedroom door  
I feel the fear within me soar  
Its eyes like burning coal  
See into my very soul  
And its coat of ebony  
Shimmer round this entity  
Unsheathes its claws and licks its lips  
Stretches its haunches, rocks its hips  
My life flashes before my eyes  
Oh, what untimely a demise!  
It leaps onto my bed  
Curls up, and lays its head

# POETRY CAN BE

by J.L. Burt

---

Poetry can be a cure  
Medicine for the soul  
Poetry can be a path  
To take a pleasant stroll

Poetry can be a door  
Into another world  
Poetry can be a map  
A history unfurled

Poetry can be a light  
Shining in dark places  
Poetry can be a family  
Of familiar faces

Poetry can be a hand  
Helping you on through  
Poetry can be a thing  
Something wild and new

Poetry can be a home  
A cozy spot to rest  
Poetry can be a reminder  
For when you don't feel blessed

Poetry can be a shield  
Protecting you from harm  
Poetry can be a fire  
Flames toasty and warm

Poetry can be a story  
A fictional delight  
Poetry can be a bird  
Singing as it takes flight

Poetry can be a spoon  
Full of honey to soothe  
Poetry can be a testament  
When you need to hear the truth

Poetry can be a friend  
Someone to confide in  
Poetry can be a nook  
When you need something to hide in

# LOST MEMORY

by Loretta Cantieri

---

I remember you bent at the waist cutting spring flowers  
for your granddaughter's birthday bouquet,  
dozens of daffodils from your backyard,  
a torch lighting the room as your memory faded.

Our memories are as deep as the snow after a blizzard.  
We come to four corners without stop signs  
surrounded by shoveled mounds taller than our cars,  
we cannot see what is coming.

If our brains remove the mountains of snow  
blank spaces remain.  
Early into my pregnancy you visited for a week.  
Your company was disorienting because  
every day you asked the same questions.  
I kept answering because no reminder of our past  
conversations stuck.

I don't want to see you like this,  
"What is a fork for? Which end of the spoon to hold?"  
I restrain my remembrances, yet I still remember  
like branches in winter wind  
we all fall off.

When your second grandchild was born  
you introduce yourself to your son,  
and he calmly explains he is your son.  
You weep because you still know enough,  
You say, "I just introduced myself  
to my son, I didn't know my son."  
The whiteout in your brain floods our hearts.

# WINTER PROMENADE

by Loretta Cantieri

---

*Run wild turkey                      run*  
*it is minus one*  
*your arrow feet are cold*  
*your iridescent feathers bold*  
*bold      in the sun                      run turkey run.*

Each morning our walk is distinct  
    maybe three crows on the ground  
    maybe twenty dive-bomb an owl in a tree  
cold weather unleashes my husky's speed  
    her plumed tail unleashes joy above her hip

Dog bless the soul of my boots  
Dog bless the soul of my boots so I do not slip

insects are quiet now  
as frozen water booms

In minus zero weather the ice dries with a chalky grip  
in the single digits ice warps like a midlife face  
If above freezing, it becomes a slippery fish, worn out elastic, a mirror  
    when whipped by the high winds it refreezes into rippled gravy  
Refrozen ice, an opaque shield, mutes the moon's reflection.

I see it all in my synched balaclava  
I am a pinhole camera  
    In one small opening  
truncated mounds of snow appear,  
my neck, a craned tripod, I see two story hills of plowed street snow

I sight the moon's surface, desert's dunes, southwest buttes,  
my film captures  
many shades of white and bluish gray

It records the shadows of my dog and me on the snow  
as though we are warm Indonesian shadow puppets without intricate  
details.

my hooded head, a basketball,  
my long coat, a wedding gown  
My dog's ears and muzzle  
sometimes canine other times piscine  
sometimes a tall llama other times a crooked fox

Dog bless the soul of my boots  
Dog bless the soul of my boots so I do not slip

Strong north winds ride the sidewalk shaving the center as  
snow bows out to the edges in feathery piles  
wind exposes icy gray shapes ensconced in white,  
dolphins and orcas cresting waves  
as my dog and I splash away

# LOVE IN A YEAR

by Kenzie Grace

---

## January

New beginnings start  
I want to try one more time  
I have hope for us

## February

Six more weeks of cold  
The sun comes out, I feel warm  
Will you only be mine?

## March

Spring is here, finally  
Now we can grow together  
You make me feel warm

## April

My heart beats for you  
Young love is like Spring showers-  
Intense but calming

## May

I want to tell you  
My love for you grows daily  
I am in full bloom

## June

Is this happiness?  
How long will we stay like this?  
I love you forever



### July

The sun is blazing  
Passion for you: hot like fire  
Life with you - complete

### August

Did we burn too bright?  
No! We're perfect for each other  
At least, I thought so...

### September

I believe its weather  
It's changing. Or maybe it's us  
No, just a chill breeze

### October

Am I the cold one?  
What more can I do for you?  
I miss the Spring air

### November

Say you still love me  
Let me believe for one day  
It can't end like this

### December

Were you always cold  
Am I just noticing now?  
New beginnings end

# THE MILK BARN

by Rita Greff

---

The milk barn was the center of our mornings and late afternoons.  
The cows noisily nosed the mangers for their hay and ground feed.  
If you were old enough, you milked, sitting on bench-like stools or  
three-legged stools.

You had your own cows: Eleanore, Elsie, Alice...

Mom was the main milker; she could milk three cows to your one.

If you were too young to milk, you were still included in the barn  
chores.

Little siblings would hold the cow's tail in the summer when the flies  
swarmed,

Because a cow's tail hitting your head, "Wallop," caused a headache.

If there were no swishing tails you tamed the kitties.

All important in the Martin family.

The barn was a warm family place.

No one, except Mom, really wanted to be there.

She liked it because she had all her children in one place.

We learned to make it a tolerable or fun place to be.

"If it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well."

To pass the time while we squeezed that warm milk into the stainless  
steel pail,

All were encouraged to play word games. Sometimes giving clues to the  
answer:

"I am thinking of something round..."

Sometimes we'd fill a category, like names of states in America.

All important in the Martin family.

Cats helped to cozy up the drafty old barn.

White cats with gold or gray spots. Calico cats. Tabbies.

Mom didn't like all-black cats.

Most kitties sat near the big sliding barn door

Close to their old frying pan we filled with warm milk.  
They sat preening themselves and waiting.  
A few sat in the aisle near certain milkers  
Who were known to squeeze a shot or two of milk  
In the direction of a cat's mouth.  
All important in the Martin family.

Little sisters and brothers cuddled some of the cats  
Learning to take comfort from these little purring machines,  
Learning to be gentle with animals.  
Sometimes a mother cat would be missing for a couple of days.  
A reconnaissance team of siblings would search for her hidden nest of  
babies.  
It was tricky to find babies before their eyes opened.  
Finally, they would come to the barn with their mother,  
Only to be captured and petted, their little claws attaching to our shirts.  
Eventually becoming so friendly, as to be pests.  
All important in the Martin family.

# REMEMBER, OH, BROTHERS AND SISTERS

by Rita Greff

---

Oh, brothers and sisters, remember our shared past, our family stories.

Remember the North Dakota winters forcing us to huddle around the coal furnace which dominated one end of the living room in the little house. At the end of a long day Mom napping erect in a kitchen chair beside it, her mouth wide open. Father lying on the davenport one knee bent, reading a paperback western. All of us reading, playing tinker toys or paper dolls, or studying for tests while our little rat terrier, Cindy, ran from person to person making sure all were fine.

Remember how all days starting with Father's boisterous voice on the telephone shooting the breeze with George Hardmeyer, laying out their plans for the day. Mom bumping around the kitchen making coffee and having a cup or two before heading to the barn. Those of us old enough to milk, groaning into another day as we put our feet on the cold floor, getting ready to head for the barn.

Remember coming into the warm kitchen after chores to hear the snapping and cracking as the eggs sputter into the lard in Mom's black cast iron frying pan and come out sunny side up with crispy bottoms. Our breakfast is complete with thick slices of homemade bread slathered with jelly or butter, sometimes both.

Remember the crush into a pickup or a car for our ride to Timber Creek School. Shedding our coats, we leave them on big, black hooks outside the classroom. Mrs. Hoffman greets us with her husky voice and her piercing blue eyes. About twelve students in about four different grades get to work. Classes take their turns reciting with Mrs. Hoffman who refers to her questions on tiny little notecards. At morning recess we take almost as much time dressing up, as we have to play.

Remember how we loved lunch at Timber Creek. We brought our own bowls and soup spoons from home, and we took turns stirring Campbell's soup in a kettle on the hotplate. Bringing in our cold lunch from the cold cloak room, we passed out bowls of soup and spoons. Remember how Claude wouldn't eat with our spoons because the worn silver was bitter.

Remember the long recess at noon how we crossed the road with our sleds and slid down the hill avoiding rocks that might be barely hidden by the snow. Remember how we were always at the bottom of the hill when the bell rang so we didn't hear it!

Remember the library at Timber Creek School, a small collection of classic books for each level. Some of them became our favorites, and we all brought the same book home time after time. Mom said *Magical Melons* was almost always on our cabinet and had our grease spots and finger marks on it.

Remember after school we had chores: carry water, carry out ashes, carry in coal, carry ground feed, gather the eggs, feed the chickens and pigs, and milk cows. Everyone in the family was important in accomplishing the chores. After separating cream from milk we hurried to the house where we had wonderful suppers like boiled German sausage and fried potatoes and maybe a cookie on a good day.

Remember how we had to wash dishes in a round dishpan because we didn't have running water. The dish wipers quickly tired of waiting for the washer to scratch off the pots and pans. We made a rule that if the dishwasher took too long the wipers could quit!

Remember how before we went to bed we went to the toilet because we had no running water. Remember how we begged each other to go along. No one wanted to go with me. Father told Diane she had to go with me. She said, "NO!" He swatted her. Our little dog Cindy barked and barked and bit Father's arm.

Remember the wall-to-wall bunks in our tiny bedrooms. The peach crate dressers covered with an embroidered dresser scarf and surrounded with a colorfully bordered flour sack skirt. We snuggled in for a good sleep and the next day we did it all again.

# GREATER STORMS

by Darla Helgeson

---

The pitter patter sound of raindrops intensifies upon the cabin roof  
then changes to the staccato of hail.

A look outside reveals marvels of nature:  
the afternoon sky is dark as late evening,  
white capped waves break the lake's shore,  
trees bend to the mighty wind.  
I am too entranced to be fearful.

There is no reason to be afraid,  
I have braved greater storms.

Then, at last, silence returns.  
The sun shines,  
stillness prevails.  
I walk about.  
Birds are singing,  
chipmunks look for their next meal,  
a loon glides across the still waters.  
The storm has passed, and life goes on.

Life goes on.

I have braved great storms.  
No doubt I will brave many more.

And life will go on.

# IN SYNC

by Darla Helgeson

---

We glide across the still water  
In sync.  
Our canoe paddles barely making a splash.  
I'm in the front,  
he's in the back.  
Guiding.  
Encouraging.  
I can't see him,  
but he is there.  
Offering occasional commands to "switch", "keep going".  
And as I maneuver my paddle to the opposite side,  
it strikes me that he is always behind me,  
this man of mine.  
Guiding.  
Encouraging.  
Keeping us in sync.

# GUILT BY ANOTHER NAME

by Stashenko Hempeck

---

Across a vast empty

the dusky sentinel  
stands in stark aloneness

all others  
long gone

their disappearance  
possible

only  
through her own roots

thick-anchoring in the ground  
that tremendous girth

her doubled-up trunk  
*three draft-horses thick*

those early settlers would  
exclaim in awe

each and every time  
they strapped her in

with two-inch thick rope  
threaded through seven pulleys

stripping the good earth  
of her offspring



one by one until  
all that remained

was  
Her Magnificence.

# ONE TOO MANY

by Charles Hinton

---

I am going down! Ain't no way out of this one. *Gone* hit the *floe*. Don't know what set it in motion. Don't know what my big foot hit. Bar stool? Table leg?

Might could be that jealous fella stuck out a foot, meaning to bring this overdressed babbler down a few pegs.

Don't matter no how; 'cause I am going down. No time to balance. Besides, it will only make matters worse. No need to give a Minstrel Show on my way down; my arms and legs flailing, a prideful black man tap-dancing before the fall.

Not going at it alone though. Misery loves company so I am bringing the table and drinks down *mit* me.

On the *floe* now. Me, the drinks, and the table. Lots of gum under that thing. Go big or go home they say. I am living 80 proof that you can do both.

Where the hell is the bartender? Do they not serve drinks down here?

# BRAGGING RIGHTS ON OUR RANCH

by Dave Jameson

---

A stately cottonwood stood tall above  
a copse of shorter trees, all clad in leaves  
waxen and glittering as they paid court  
to the great giant centered in their midst.

These trees grew on the banks of a small creek  
down the easy slope southeast from our house  
on the lonely western Dakota ranch  
our dad had homesteaded long years before.

It was a poor life we lived there, mostly,  
what with drought one year, poor prices the next.  
Wealth denied, we claimed our pride where we could:  
bragging about our fattened pig that broke  
the butcher's scale; or Ole the cobbler  
calling *our* workboots the hardest to mend.

Our sentinel cottonwood, so lofty,  
so green in summer, so gold in autumn,  
was our crowning source of pride, proclaiming  
the wondrous land about it was our home.

Of course, we dared not voice such lofty thoughts,  
even to ourselves. When guests came to call  
we'd say, instead, "You see that tree below?  
I'll bet it's the tallest in this county."

That was my mother talking. Or, more like,  
my older brother, arms crossed on his chest.  
It made us feel elevated, somehow,

telling guests of the splendor of the tree.  
But, with no visitors, we rarely paid  
our precious, treasured cottonwood much heed.

When the father of my widowed mother  
grew ill, she moved back east to care for him,  
taking my three sisters and me along,  
with the ranch left under my brother's care.

For me, at eight, small-town life in eastern  
North Dakota, not far from here, was great.  
My sisters liked the small town, too, but missed  
the ranch—the cows, the goats, the horseback rides.

Back out on the ranch the following spring,  
ecstatic joy was crushed by cruelest shock:  
our cottonwood—our stately tree--was gone.  
Did lightning strike and rive our tree's stout trunk?  
Or blizzard gusts snap its bole to splinters?  
No! Humble beavers brought our great tree low.

Cries of disgust and hurt were heard from us  
for our first day or so back on the ranch.  
“Oh, those destructive beavers” and such-like  
angry rages were soon set aside, though,  
as the sad truth settled in: that these days  
back at the ranch told us of greater loss,  
far sadder pain, than the crash of a tree:  
no longer were we ranch kids—but town kids.

In August, just before we left for school,  
I walked to the place our great tree had stood  
and admired the beavers' intricate skill,  
weaving the dam that formed their pretty pond.

Stepping boldly east on the beaver dam,  
I crossed our creek, mind on the tales I'd tell.

# FOUR GREEK WORDS FOR LOVE

by Atiya Khan

---

στοργή

(*Storgí* - familial love)

I took what I could  
In the chromosomal raid  
Stole custom mutations  
And epigenetic memories

But no words of consternation  
Greeted me  
Instead they rejoiced  
In what I had taken

All my treasures laid bare  
For everyone to see -  
A particular tilt of the head  
A glimmer in the eyes

Sometimes, feeling unmoored  
I forget about the theft  
As the mirror to the soul is shunned  
And something of my own making takes its place

But one day I found a snakeskin at my door  
As the skin, rife with parental DNA, is shed  
A new one takes its place  
Still, this skin is no different than the discarded one

Reminding me of what I already know  
There is no need to escape  
The circular morphology of inheritance  
For it is not a cage

It is a foundation  
Built by my ancestors  
As I stand on their shoulders  
And rise above to see the world

φιλία

(*Filiá* - platonic love)

This bond between you and me  
Has roots longer than the banyan tree  
Though both are given sustenance  
Love has made our bedrock grow stronger

Though it is invisible  
That has no bearing on its strength  
But how could an unseen thread  
Be mightier than physical form?

Because it is built from  
Shared laughter  
Glances in which nothing is said  
And everything is understood

It is invigorated by  
Watching the river of time flow by  
As the Potomai  
wash and cleanse us

Each ablution mollifies  
the adversity of life  
As we are bathed in mutual recollections  
With water heated by our amity

As we join in friendship,  
The four chambers of our heart  
Together make eight  
Signaling an infinity of our own making

## Ἔρως

(*Éros* - romantic love)

By all that is holy  
I thought you were a vision  
For I was rendered mute  
Staring in awe at your pristine form

Pharaoh and the whole Egyptian world  
Collapsed for such a Joseph  
I would patiently wait years  
To get news of you second-hand

Yet, you were not an immovable statue  
But someone who lived and breathed  
So I pulled a thorn from the fence of your garden  
And it has not stopped working its way into my heart

It seems you did the same  
For time passes in beats of three as we waltz  
Below the cathedral vaults  
Spinning like a film reel

When the clouds pulled their curtain  
The light stayed  
where you sat  
So that day I came into new knowledge

Your body is a screen  
that both shields and partially reveals  
The light that is blazing inside your presence  
is, incontrovertibly, love

This love has five hundred wings  
And each wing stretches to its full breadth  
Not from the empyrean to the hypogean  
But from my heart to yours

αγάπη

(*Agápi* - unconditional love)

Green-fingered trees sway in the punishing wind  
Clouds move so quickly  
Making my mind spin  
In the boundless forest I have taken a fall

My eyes search the grayéd heavens  
Thin, waifish sculptures bend  
As Boreas forcefully exhales  
A chill runs through my bones

Chaffinches provide dependable woodland ambience  
Singing *chip-chip-chip, chooee-chooee-cheeo*  
Then a sudden change to *run run run run run*  
Rust-red bird with an ashen head sends a warning

The heavens cry  
Share their pain with my mere mortal self  
As tears descend on Gaia  
Silvanus whispers to me

*The spruce is your evergreen fortress  
Stay close to the trunk to stay dry  
As the roots remain thirsty  
Regiments of needles collect the water*

Now I understand, the essence of nature's love is unconditional  
Giving with reckless abandon  
Everything I need to survive and flourish for eons  
Just like the spruce reaching for the heavens



# GAME OF ANGELS

by Atiya Khan

---

There are angels at the picnic table in my backyard  
Nervous at first,  
I thought they were waiting for me  
But they are only playing poker in the snow

One of them reminds me of Antaeus  
Still bruised and drained from wrestling  
Another smokes a cigar between  
Muscular fingers and dirty nails

They have no breath to hold and release in relief  
No invisible vapor diffuses from dry lips  
This is no weekly game; they play daily  
With mortal stakes and endless decks

They are guardian angels; one of them mine  
Yet my shoulder is devoid of company  
He has abandoned his post  
Then again, I have never seen him there before

A piano player plays on  
Somewhere behind this veil separating life and death  
As the angels stare across the table  
Each waiting for the other to fold

# WARRIOR SELF

by Bibi Khan

---

My body is not my shield  
It endeavors to ruin me  
I oppose it as I would an enemy

I hold it close like a treasured friend  
I court it with fervor as a lover would  
It is a prayer I repeatedly recite

My fortune it cradles in its bosom  
We struggle to sustain each other  
Cautiously feeding off the other to survive

I embrace order, constancy, and diligence  
It always has my respect, as well my ear  
I harken to its feelings

It controls me - I am no longer its master  
It devours me from within  
While gnawing at me on the outside

I yearn for its acceptance  
But I cannot quench its thirst  
My death is its salvation

# WINTER WALK IN THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

by Bibi Khan

---

Under the gray of January's sky  
I learn to move quickly and quietly.  
Like the animals in the frozen north -  
Silently - and with head downcast  
Against the wind blowing fiercely.

Looking up every so often  
Confirming that I'm still on the winding,  
Uneven, snow-packed path.  
Heading in my chosen direction.

The infectious cold seeping under layers  
Against the harshness of winter  
Feels weirdly comforting.

The trees eerily looking down  
As I navigate between their gnarled trunks  
And beneath their bare, outstretched branches.

No bird cries out a welcome.  
Even the busy squirrels are burrowing.

The river is somewhere east.  
No water flows along its banks.  
Only pristine white snow,  
Speckled with deer and rabbit tracks.

I can walk, and respire, these trails  
At any time, day after day  
Never tiring of the desolateness.

The peaceful quiet lulls me  
Into a meditative state  
Calming all thoughts crowding my mind.

Here the world appears to stand still  
Leaving all its troubles far behind.

# PAGES

by Katie M. Leier

---

Pen to paper  
Ink to sheets  
Words dance across the lines  
Sparkling through the pen

From the heart flows each letter  
The scent of pages  
And stories  
A thousand to unfold

With every heartbeat  
Another word falls  
A part of the heart on the page

Words turn to sentences  
Sentences turn pages  
Pages turned by readers  
For years to come

Stories to treasure  
Stories to hold  
Words in our hearts  
To never grow old

# NIGHTLY RITUAL

by Anna Lynch

---

Tossing, turning  
Can't sleep.  
Familiar creak  
From an old floorboard.  
Door opens,  
Just a crack.  
A familiar face,  
Full of love.  
Rest comes.

Deep sleep,  
Drift awake.  
Dad's face at the door,  
Dreamy smile, "goodnight dad,"  
"night sweetie."  
Safe dreams return.

# THE FARGO PASSPORT OFFICE 1979

by Betty Moraghan

---

In the Fargo Passport Office  
Two men move  
From desk to desk,  
From file to chair.  
All day they read the forms that say  
“Destination—  
Purpose of your trip—  
Who should be notified?”  
And the world is named between their hands:  
Spain, India, France,  
Norway, China, Pakistan.  
They smile,  
Spotting the passport renewer,  
Accusing me of wealth, of child neglect;  
And volunteer their children for the trip.  
They like their work.  
And their smiles spill like champagne  
Across the forms.  
I am launched!  
By two men moving  
In the Fargo Passport Office.

UNLOCKING:  
THE MINNESOTA - INDIA CONNECTION 1980  
by Betty Moraghan

---

My husband is in Hyderabad,  
India,  
Thousands of dollars and air miles away,  
And phoning is  
A crowded circuitry  
Of Indian roulette.  
Letters limp. We cannot break the present together.  
Sometimes in my school's geography  
Classroom I pause  
To touch the globe  
With the raised-up ridges  
And the colors telling height;  
My eyes and hand,  
Intent on Hyderabad,  
Rubbing my soul  
Through my senses,  
Stabbing out the kinks of fear and pain  
With a finger.  
His habitat is measured, placed, and real  
On this bent globe  
My hand is bending near.  
The room is empty,  
But it is full.  
I am in Moorhead  
And in Hyderabad.



# LOSS

by Bette Nelson

---

Walking step  
by...measured...step  
down the grassy path

Maybe time will move more slowly.  
Even  
    more  
        slowly.

Halt.  
Pause.  
Delay.

Watch the waving of the wind.  
Catch distant sounds of rumbling cars.  
Smell the clean of spring and fresh dirt.

Can I suspend time?  
Can I make it wait for me  
to adjust to this new old me?

I can't keep up.  
Suddenly, uncomfortably, in hostile territory.  
And alone.

# SAVVY WORDS ON AN OLD WOUND

by Bette Nelson

---

Snag  
on a prickly memory

Slip  
in a comment edgewise

Seethe  
remembering the moment

Slit  
open that hypothetical vein

Slowly  
enter the dripping anger

Silence  
while it ruminates

Smolder  
as it permeates

Shudder  
with building resentment

Stop  
before the poison destroys

Still, mark my words,  
it is not the last of this.

# A HOUSE IS THERE

by Julie Henderson Ovitt

---

A house is there, I know its walls  
Though tumbled to the ground  
And buried in the prairie sod  
Relentless wind its shroud.

Its flowers knew the summer sun  
Its trees turned into fall  
Its garden in the winter slept  
In spring awakened all.

I hear the voices ling'ring here  
Each nuanced sound and scent  
Imprinted on a page I keep  
A fragranced document.

I know these walls that lie beneath  
In prairie grave unmarked  
Abandoned but for memories  
And therein, lies my heart.

# AN UNCONVENTIONAL LIFE

by Julie Henderson Ovitt

---

She lived an unconventional life but knew not how to change it,  
in this small town where winter's cold and snow's reproach,  
where summer's heat and the growing of wheat  
came every year but still were talked of without ceasing  
in the elevator's dusty air and the overheated store.

There were years, when she was young, when ladies came calling  
for coffee in teacups and the delicate talk of the day,  
when her children fit her into narrow stalls of the accepted and  
expected,  
and she brought cupcakes to school on their birthdays  
and sat motionless at basketball games that were talked of without  
ceasing.

But she stayed away when apron-clad ladies cooked  
together in the church basement, turkey suppers and funeral lunches,  
for she felt awkward and did not know what to do with her hands,  
and knew she was harshly judged for this, they did not understand,  
nor her silence when they talked of foolish things, of dresses and pies  
and pans.

For she knew of deeper truths, she'd seen into her soul,  
she'd studied greater masters, their music made her whole,  
she could not explain her thoughts to them, and so began a slow descent  
into the abyss of lonely hearts, for she'd been solitary from the womb,  
the odd one out, so some would say, a thorn among the blooms.

Now the years had passed, her children grown and gone,  
the store had closed its doors, the church bell fallen silent,  
trucks no longer rumbled to the empty elevator,

the old school echoed ghostly chatter in memories from the past,  
amid debris of fallen bricks and broken window glass.

Now she lived alone in the house too big, but didn't know how to leave  
it,  
she wandered quiet rooms at night, listening to her life,  
unbothered by their dusty corners the ladies might find appalling,  
still the teacups she brought down each week to wash,  
in case they should come calling.

# ANGELS AHEAD

by S.E. Page

---

*for Nancy Anne*

Whatever aquamarine heavens are given,  
what wings may be feathered and found—  
if only the whisper of a soul flowers  
beyond the bounds of a fragile body—  
I know you'll find your way!

No one dreamed brighter than you—  
sweet angels always in your eyes,  
rays of kindness in your heart,  
and cups of sugar in both hands  
for casting happiness like  
a million tiny stars.

In place of shadows,  
your aura twinkled  
with unabashed sparkles!  
Now, may you rise on  
a breath of sky, and pearl  
a lifetime of love  
into flight.

# LET ME LEOPARD

by S.E. Page

---

A few years shy of forty,  
I suddenly discover  
the glorious mystique  
of the leopardess:  
White chiffon dappled  
with fierce golden spots,  
pink leopardine rayon  
paired with fine black lace—  
now I want every  
hue and dot in dress!

Strange how two decades ago,  
I would've despised such  
wanton patterns as garish,  
a foolish fashion  
for bold ladies.  
But now—  
let me BE  
*that* wild woman!

Just another once-a-girl  
who still wants (still dares)  
to dance her heart out  
in a body trashed by time,  
scarred by life's big  
and little unfair things,  
yet ready and *not* waiting  
for anyone's permission  
to presume enjoyment  
of being alive.

I guess I had to grow into  
leopard with middle age—  
I didn't need that armor  
of cat-like confidence  
until today.  
Now I revel,  
how I

RAWR!



# MEN OF LEGENDS

by Victor Pellerano

---

They battle the waves  
And brave the rough seas  
They are the sea warriors  
That only Kings can dream

They ride their ships of glory,  
Where the Angels dare not go  
They are the crab fishermen  
Searching for Red Gold

They ride seahorses, they're the strongest of men  
The lines on their faces tell where they have been  
Some think they are crazy, while others stand tall  
They are the crab fishermen, the bravest of all

They dance with the humpbacks and soar with seagulls  
With the wind in their faces and salt in their nose  
They drop their boxes in the sea of foam  
As their fathers did many decades ago

You can read their stories and seafaring tales  
Of all their courage on ice covered sails  
And so they ride on top of a snow-cap breeze  
As they sail their vessels upon the Alaskan seas

They set their course to the Bering Strait Horn  
Hansen's Northwestern and the Valley Dawn  
Many others will follow in the hazy morn  
The Men of Legends go where only heroes are born

# THE STORY OF MY LIFE

by Victor Pellerano

---

I have seen rainbows, across the open sky

And walked among the beauty of the Minnesota pines  
I drank from a mountain stream up in the Catskills  
If I could live forever, I would love you still

I ran the rapids along the Delaware  
Had some good times with my friends, in my younger years  
I felt the cold Jersey shore upon my weary feet  
And tasted the sweetness of victory with the bitterness of defeat

I touched the blanket of darkness under foreign skies  
And felt the desperation of war, while missing your soft eyes  
I walked the temples of gold and felt the fear of the unknown  
If I could live forever, your love would always bring me home

Have you ever heard the rustle of leaves, it sounds like grace  
Or have you ever felt the softness of the rain upon your face  
Have you ever seen a fire, turn the night into day?  
Or try to help someone and they just turn away

I slept upon the grasslands, while watching the Northern Lights  
And I have seen the Glacier Mountains against Montana nights  
I felt the pain of loneliness on an angry sea  
If I could live forever, you would be all I would need

I rode the wings of an Eagle as we circled the sky  
And discovered America through a poor boy's eyes  
I felt the pages of history turn from the places along the way  
As I watched the stars reflect off the San Francisco Bay

I heard the drums of reason from a distant land  
And fought in a war I didn't understand  
I lost some friends and memories by walking the edge of a sword  
If I could live forever, I could not love you anymore

# THE VISIT

by Marcy Peterson

---

I go to his bed, he lies so still  
I whisper his name, and wonder if he will  
know that I'm here, and so I say ---  
"Good morning, Sweetheart, how are you today?"  
Across the covers, I reach for his hand  
I feel a squeeze, "Do you know who I am?"

"I know it must be my beautiful wife,  
The girl that I've for all of my life.  
I've been waiting for you, afraid you won't come.  
I'm so lonely here, I want to go home.  
Are we going to church? Can we pray?  
I want to be with you, can you stay?  
My eyes cannot see you, but now I find  
an image of you I have in my mind.  
I think you're so pretty, and you're my wife  
And for you I'd gladly give my life.

"I know that one and one makes two-  
One for me and one for you-  
But when we married, and I know it's true  
that one and one made ONE not two.  
I don't know why they tore us apart  
but when they did, it broke my heart.  
I want you with me all through the night  
put my arms around you, and hold you tight.  
I have to get out of this place very soon,  
I have things to do. Things to get done.  
I miss you so, I want to go home.

“I know I’m old, the choice is not mine  
one day God will come and say, ‘Ed, it’s time.’  
But I know that one day, we’ll be in Heaven together  
And we can hold hands forever and ever. Amen”

# A FAREWELL TO A FRIEND

by Anne Prischmann

---

Before you go, my friend  
Let me contemplate your countenance  
To memorize each characteristic and crease  
Created by an animated personality

Let me place you high in the night sky  
With the North Star to guide you  
So that on a crisp and starry night  
I can look heavenward and see you  
Nestled in the bosom of the Pleiades with your sisters

When the moon is bright  
Too bright to see your profile  
I shall have in my mind  
The image of your face.

# COLD MOON

by Karla Smart-Morstad

---

*December 21<sup>st</sup>*

Tonight Cold Moon is born, and winter.  
Tonight all usual alignment slips,  
    moon layering sun welcoming snow solstice.

I had not counted on self eclipsing self.  
Sorrow moon's slick, white surface  
    A tight eyelid over power.

I had not counted on knowing anything this way.  
But dark-shine delivers new, listening mothers,  
    preparing, perhaps to heal.

*I talk to snakes and whales.*

*I no longer pretend perfections.*

*I stare down memories,*

*tear my skin,*

*sit for hours without noticing*

*the muscles in my back braid.*

When I call her name, Thunder Moon parts clouds.

Emerging from cover, I nurse changes. Energy  
and space shift, black turning white, swirling deeper  
    like orcas rising and diving through Alaskan Straits.

Feeling fragile stone, I pick bones  
From a dry creek-bed, stretch across the Badlands,  
    walking every season with questions, hope.

*December 25<sup>th</sup>*

Tonight, Wind Canyon fills with moonlight and coyote song.  
Twelve voices echo round, mysterious misaligned cadence,  
three climbing barks, then falling.

Is the wounded buffalo I saw under Red Moon still alive?  
Will there be summer rain?  
Might my father hear these prayers?

*In the new year:*

I am still and more myself, nights beyond Cold Moon.



# WILD MOON

by Karla Smart-Morstad

---

Poets say “grow more fur” and “dream of licking stones  
and bark.” And so I shoulder housecats, breathe furred hips  
sniff their paws, their moist, tartared yawns.  
Sometimes we are just alike, sharing quilted sleep,  
relishing processed food.

My felines craft play and teach its rhythm and purpose.  
They take ample rest, and we are so much the same,  
until the moon fattens herself and they journey into wild,  
pawing walls, changing voices, dismissing drowsiness,  
pursuing a certain satisfying anxiety I do not know.

*What is it to be cat, or coyote, or timber wolf?  
To be eagle or wind? I want to know water  
thousands of feet deep.  
Let me be uprooted trees and burgeoning fern.  
I want to lap rainwater and leaves. Let me be rock crusted  
land, soft earth, ground knotted with roots.  
I will circle and trample prairie grass before sleep.  
Let me slit the sky. I want to be lightning, or frozen rain,  
or sunrise. Teach me to transform,  
to know November from inside wind, to know the unmoving  
wild silence of August air.  
I claim the odor of singed fur, the death motion of eagle  
and salmon, talon locked, rolling under  
while surging skyward.*

Then come nights when the moon peels her own bright  
knowledges. My clawless creatures, released, stretch and  
moan at dawn. They pat pouches of catnip and taste my toes,

while I, in dark coffee contentment, search newsprint  
for word of the world

We are kin again. I serve bites of cheese and praise  
my spirit-teachers, awaiting Wild Moon.

# SOLIDARITY IS NOT A FAVOR

by Karen Van Fossan

---

Solidarity is not a favor.

Not a present wrapped in a bow for someone else's carnival.

Not an altruistic venture into someone else's fear.

Not a charitable activity.

Or a merciful pursuit. Or a generous endeavor.

When we fight, struggle,

march, dance, write, sing, pray

for anyone's liberation, anyone's humanity,

anyone's aliveness on this round, blue planet –

we fight, struggle, march, dance,

write, sing, pray,

and pray and pray

as much

for our own.

# FICTION

---



# THE VIKING

by H. Ernest Coffman

---

Damn! Here I am again, stuck in the middle of a shield wall, about to die. Who would have thought my life would come full circle? Twenty years ago, I was a snout-nose boy of ten seasons. My father had stuck me in the middle of a shield wall to protect me.

It was a night just like this. Miserable! The gods were angry that night too. Odin and his son, Thor, had thrown everything they had at us that godforsaken night. Cold rain and hail as big as a man's fist hammered down upon us.

"Here, take this," my mother said, slipping a long dagger into my hand. It was heavy, and I was clumsy with it as I took it from her.

"Stab it into the boots and legs facing you inside the wall. Do you understand? Stab it into their feet and toes."

"Yes, mother," I replied. I was scared and didn't understand why these men were killing us and burning our farmstead.

"Shields up!" my father cried out. I could hear the clatter of willow boards touching as my family tried to make a feeble shield wall. The marauders gave a war cry, their shields crashing together, then slowly inched forward, surrounding us. I lost my bodily functions and urinated over myself. I felt the soft touch of my mother's hand on my head, trying to comfort me.

There were only fifteen of us left, not enough to make a solid wall. You need two to three or four ranks of warriors to have a solid defensive wall. The Russ attacked us that night, setting fire to our lodge and killing our people as they fled out the doors unarmed. I did not understand then what was happening. I did not understand why our neighbors were killing us, but I do now.

The Russ pushed forward, and the wall got smaller and smaller. I pushed on my father's and mother's back more for moral support; their shields held high. A lance penetrated the gap between the shields and

sliced through my cousin's throat, blood gushing down upon me. I dropped to the ground and started stabbing, pushing, and stabbing. I heard the shields grated together again, my father and mother standing next to each other, pushing against them, their legs sliding back from the onslaught of men trying to kill us. Dirt was kicked into my face as I tried to find a foot facing in. Spitting to clear my mouth, I saw a boot move toward me. Swinging down with all my might, I sank the dagger into the top of the boot into the foot. I heard a high pitch yell, then twisted the blade with all my might. The pressure on that side of the wall eased slightly as the warrior pulled his leg back, taking himself out of the chaos.

The melee of close combat is brutal. To hold a crumbling shield wall with arrows raining down on you is impossible. I pushed hard against my mother's back and, kept pushing, and stabbing. I saw her slide down my father's back, her hand holding her throat, blood pulsing through her fingers. I pushed the memory aside with effort.

As a child, I prayed to the gods that I would never see another shield wall as long as I lived. It was not to be.

---

Twenty years later, a dragon silently slid through the calm waters of a fjord. The long, narrow warship, powered by both oars and sail, was new to this part of the world. They were outsiders looking for wealth and revenge.

There was no moon, only the blackness of the night. The raider's leader looked up at the steep cliffs as if they were gods looking down upon them. Long ago, he would cower next to his father as they rowed through the fjord, heading towards their home. The only sound from the oars was the water dripping off the blades as the dragon made its way.

The warrior swung up over the railing of the longship, his long blond hair blowing in the cool wind. He landed in the surf, splashing up water over his calves. He was tall, strong, and knew how to thrust a lance, cut with a sword, and kill or decapitate a man with one swing of an ax.

Wading towards the shore, he walked across the sandy beach to the forest just beyond the tall sea grass. Putting a hand on a tree to brace himself, he bent down to pluck a clump of grass from the soil and smelled the mustiness of it, and it smelled good and clean. *Home, at last*, he thought.

Another distant reminder of his love of the earth and the place he had once called home.

The band of warriors walked for an hour after landing the boat far enough from the settlement to avoid being seen as they approached. Beyond the walls was a jumble of thatched roofs and a wooden scaffold around the stone bell tower of a church under construction. The warrior had to chuckle. What would his father and mother say, knowing a Christian church had been built in their old town?

It had been a while since he had been in any village or settlement. The buildings outside the new walls were all open shops. He imagined what it would be like with all the food stalls and wandering vendors everywhere. The streets would be noisy and crowded, the odor almost overpowering.

They had made it all the way to the gate without being seen. The leader gave a nod, and men climbed on top of the shoulders of their comrades, pushing them up over the wooden stockade. They made short order of the night guards, who were half asleep. One of the Vikings lifted a torch and swung it back and forth, signaling the other to come in.

Within minutes there were sounds of steel on steel, steel on wooden shields, steel on flesh, the sound of men-at-arms fighting in the town's center, and the shouts of archers slaughtering the enemy's flanks. The Russ put up a good fight when suddenly they formed a shield wall in front of their Christian Church.

Each man in a shield wall had to maintain his position and stand firm with the man on either side of him. All were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, their shields overlapping each other, each man benefiting from the protection of the shields of his neighbors and his own. If a single man panicked and ran, the whole wall would collapse, and there would be no escape from death.

Crossbowmen stood behind the men maintaining the wall, shields overlapping each other, locking them in place. Behind those men stood the pikemen with their poleaxes and halberds. When the order was given, everyone manning the wall would kneel then the crossbowmen would loose their bolts into the oncoming charge. Hundreds of men-at-arms would fall as bolts slammed into them, blocking the way for the men coming behind them.

The Russ had put up a good fight and then stopped. *Why* the warrior thought. He and his band of Vikings were far from winning the battle. He halted his men. The warrior's keen eye stared at the formation. Then he



saw the weakness. Granted, the first row was filled with veteran soldiers, but the second and third ranks were inexperienced fyrd and free peasants. The wall would collapse. The Viking leader smiled.

The morning was almost upon them. Jarl Erik Sten, a Viking, looked to see the sun almost rising over the fortified tower behind them. The sun would be in the enemy's eyes shortly. The gods were looking down upon them this day.

Then he heard them. Steps of a person who commanded respect. Someone of authority. He looked up seeing a figure clad in armor standing on the narthex, staring down at him.

"Leave now, arseling, or you will die. We have no use for thralls, slaves, here."

Erik tilted his head. The voice sounded like it came from behind the knight. Or was it just the echoing of the buildings? Whatever it was, Erik and his men began to laugh.

The knight didn't wait. Without warning, the warrior jumped down the stairs to where Jarl Sten stood, swinging his sword. The first thing Erik noticed was how small in stature the knight was. Erik bent backward, the tip of the blade barely missing him. Erik feinted to his right, pulled out his sword, and stepped into the knight's right to check his counter-swing. The action surprised everyone. Erik's bodyguards surrounded him, keeping him safe inside their circle.

"Stop!" Erik shouted, smiling. "He's mine."

The knight nodded and raised his sword above his head. The blade traced a glistering arc above his head. Walking slowly, he made his way toward the blond Viking.

The best way to win any battle is to surprise the enemy, to outnumber the enemy, and to attack the enemy with such speed and ferocity that he has no idea what is happening until a sword is at his throat or a spear-blade is deep in his guts. That's what happened to Erik. The little knight darted straight at him before anyone knew what had happened.

Erik jumped aside, slashed, and missed. He spat out some blood, the metallic taste filling his mouth. The little knight had struck him with his gauntlet, taunting him. The warrior stood in a battle stance, waiting, sword held with both hands, always facing Erik, allowing him to make the next move.

The strike surprised Erik, as well as everyone else. His men not liking what they saw but not saying anything. He wiped the blood from his

mouth with the back of one hand, constantly watching the imp in front of him.

“Okay, Gnome. Fight me if you wish. But remember, I am old for a reason!” Erik jumped—not to the side but forward towards the warrior, dealing a swinging cut that made the air howl. He missed.

The warrior moved in a flash, swinging his sword and checking Erik’s feint.

The knight stood erect, staring at Erik. “If I defeat you, you must leave. Everyone.”

Angry shouts came from Erik’s men. *Never!*

The taste for raids and looting, the chance of riches, and the smell of blood in the air were too much for them. The Vikings started forward. Erik put up his hand and stopped them.

He and his men were stunned. The voice was of a woman. “And if I defeat you?” Erik said.

The warrior said nothing at first. “If I am killed, spare the town. They are a peaceful people.”

“And if you are wounded?” Erik asked.

Again, the warrior said nothing.

A shout, “Kill them, kill them all,” came from inside their shield wall. It was all it took to release the wrath of the Vikings. The two walls came together, the sound of the clash echoing throughout the village like a clap of thunder. Shields slammed into shields, axes, spears, and swords clanged, glancing off each other, and then the cries and screams of the dying. Arne stood next to Erik, protecting his lord in the melee.

Erik lost track of the nymph as the two sides came together. The battle raged on. Swords hacked flesh and steel, and men died. It was an unseen blow coming from his right side that threw him sideways, a stone catapulted from a boy’s sling hurled at his head. Stunned, his sight suddenly blackened, his head spun, while his skull filled with sounds, darkness, and pain. The next thing he knew, he was behind his men leaning against a building, his hand on his head.

“Answer me, pagan, are you ready to see Valhalla?” came the soft voice of the warrior.

Erik shook his head. “Let’s get this over with, nymph,” and charged the woman warrior. The sun was now high in the sky. Flashes of sunlight reflected off the swords as they danced above their heads.

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He raised his head, torn from sleep. The sun was already high and forced blinding golden rays through the window shutters, penetrating the insides with rays of light.

“So, you’re awake. How are you feeling?” Arne asked, looking down at his lord and friend. “You know you should be dead.”

“Nothing is certain in battle. Not even your own death,” Erik Sten said. “Besides, that’s what I have you for. To keep me alive. I’m sore all over, my lip is swollen, my head throbs, and my ribs are bruised. So other than that, I’m good.”

A woman healer was led into the room, a captive from the village they had just raided sat on the edge of the bed and skillfully unwound the linen bandages wrapped thickly around his neck. Erik grimaced in pain.

“Easy, woman. Do you know who you’re treating?” Arne verbally lashed out.

Erik raised his hand to stop him. “She’s doing her job, and she’s doing fine.”

The healer, one of the captured thralls, felt the wound, washed it, and began to curse.

“Fool!”

“What?” Arne said as he moved towards the thrall, his hand on his sword.

Again, Erik put up his hand and stopped him.

“It’s terrible! To let yourself be slashed like this by an ordinary soldier. He just missed your bloodline!”

Arne looked closely at Erik’s neck. “My God, Erik, what’s happening to you? How did the Russ get so close to you?”

“It was a her,” Erik murmured.

Arne stared at him for the longest time. Even the thrall sat back and looked at him in disbelief. She mumbled something.

“What?” Erik said, looking at the healer.

“You fought a Shield Maiden, my Lord. I’m surprised you’re still alive. That says something about you. It isn’t every day that a maiden allows a brigand to live.”

“Woman, you’re testing me,” Arne said, putting his hand back on his sword.

Turning back to Erik, he said, “You fought a Shield Maiden? Did you try to mount her?”

Erik didn’t answer and smiled faintly at the thrall, who blushed red.

“Don’t you dare grin like an idiot. She almost killed you,” Arne said, concerned about his lord.

Standing, the healer gathered her medical supplies and bandages. “I’ll be back tonight to change the bandages,” she said, bowing to Erik first, then to Arne as she pushed through the door and left.

Arne shook his head. “You laugh now, but it’s not funny. You are losing your reflexes. You’re slowing down.”

Erik saw the concern on Arne’s face, then shuffled on his bed, trying to get comfortable. “You’re exaggerating.”

“I’m not exaggerating,” Arne said as he picked up a jar, opened the lid, and smelled what was inside. He stuck two fingers into the jar pulled them out, and spread a greenish salve smelling sharply of eucalyptus over Erik’s shoulders. “You shouldn’t have allowed yourself to get wounded, but you did, and very seriously at that. Seriously, even if you were just a man.”

Erik tilted his head back and laughed. “I am just a man. Nothing more.”

“It will be months before your neck is fully mobile again. I warn you, don’t test your strength by fighting an agile opponent during that time,” Arne cautioned. “You have men following you, and you must lead them.”

Erik looked at Arne and put his hand on his arm. “Thank you for the warning.”

Arne looked back at Erik. “I’ve known you since you were knee-high to me. I swear, sometimes when you fight, I see a vortex of power surrounding you.”

Erik still held onto the old man. “I’m not surrounded by any vortex or gate.”

“You’re sick.”

“No. I’m injured.”

The two laughed together. “There’s something not quite right with you. That, I can sense. As I’ve said before, I swore an oath to protect you. You’re my lord, but you’re still a bloody fool. When I met you, you came up to my waist. And now I feel that you’re spinning around in some damned whirlpool, tangled up in a slowly tightening noose.

“Now get some sleep. You’ve done enough for one day. We’ll deal with that Shield Maiden later,” Arne said as he blew out a few candles. “Tomorrow is a new day. We’ll see what it may bring.”

Erik leaned back into his pillows. He had been a warrior once and had the scars to prove it. His dark eyes betrayed no fear, only challenge. He was big, but it was all muscle, the kind of muscle a man develops from years of battles and sword skills.

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The next day, dawn brought a mist that lingered about the meadows, drifted across the wooden stockade, and was lost in the morning smoke from hearths. Merchants and peasants walked the streets as if nothing had happened. Priests offered blessings and the last rites to those wounded or had died.

Erik had long been awake as the dawn nudged the mist away. He pulled on his mail coat and buckled his sword belt. Then he sat and waited. His neck screamed in protest as he sat in the Hersir chair, the warlord or chieftain of the village. He didn’t want anyone to know how bad his injury was, so he hid it by pulling his tunic high.

The first of the prisoners brought in was a priest. He hated this part. Every prisoner, nobleman, merchant, and mercenary begged for mercy and claimed to be poor.

“Infidel! Blasphemer!” the priest yelled as the guards held him back.

Erik turned and faced the ranting priest. “My name, priest, is Jarl Erik Sten, and you’ll do well to remember it.”

The priest blinked. He seemed to be suffering a momentary confusion, still caught up in the ecstasy of his pain-driven prayer. His voice had ranged higher in pitch as he screamed more profanities at the Vikings. “Thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword...” One of the guards whacked him on the side of his head, and he stumbled to his knees. “*And there was given unto him a great sword,*” he murmured.

“Strip the church of everything of value. Once that has been done, rip up the floors. If you still can’t find anything, dig up the graves.”

The guards nodded and dragged the priest out of the room, blubbing.

Erik felt himself wobbling again, the whole world tilting.

“You all right, my Lord?” Arne asked.

Erik tried to smile and nodded.

Arne stuck his head out of the room. Coming back in, he said. “You ready to see the rest of the prisoners, my Lord?”

“Do we ransom all the nobles or the town?”

Arne thought for a moment. “Both. You know the nobles will lie about their wealth. Ransoming the town will bring the merchants and the peasants together. But before we bring in the nobles, I have something for you.”

Erik raised an eyebrow. “After the wall battle last night and that damn priest this morning, I’m not in the mood for surprises.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will like this one,” Arne said as he motioned for the guards to come in.

The guards brought in a person who looked like a knight wearing a hood over his head. Erik immediately recognized the armor the knight wore. He stood ready to stop anyone from harming her.

“Jarl Sten, I present to you the Shield Maiden, Tyra,” Arne said as he pulled the hood off her head.

The Shield Maiden took a step forward as if she was about to attack, inhaling the rich scent of sandalwood, myrrh, and frankincense stolen from the church. Her hair mussed about her face; she was a vision, to Erik. They stared at each other, neither saying a word. Maybe it was the way the sunlight danced across her bruised face, making her look mysterious and inviting simultaneously. Her features were nobly chiseled, her nose narrow and straight, her jaw strong and rounded, and her lips finely arched. Her hair was thick, blond, and braided back so she could wear a helmet. She held herself as a noblewoman would. And for an insane moment, Erik wanted to take her. Jarl Erik Sten was in love.

“Cut her restraints. Bring a chair for her. Something to drink.” Men moved quickly, not only because their leader requested it but by the tone of his voice.

“Truce, while we talk?” Eric asked, motioning to the chair.

Tyra stood next to the chair.

He grimaced as he sat down. His hand started to go towards his neck, but he forced it down, but not before she saw his lips press together and twist. He saw her staring at him.

“War is dangerous,” he said.

“It is madness,” she retorted. “It is nothing more than man’s greed and lust for wealth. What do you lust for, my lord?”

Erik could not answer. He would remember this moment on his wedding day.

# MILE MARKER 342

by Aurora Dimitre

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Dawn leaned against her car, the phone pressed to her ear. “Yeah, I called them, but the tow truck’s like, four hours out,” she said. “All I’m saying is would you *please* at least bring me some Burger King or something.”

Stevie’s voice from the other end of the phone: “Fine,” she said. “Fine. I’ll be twenty minutes.”

“Thank you,” Dawn said. “Bye.” She hung up and tapped her phone against her leg, glancing around. It was early enough in the fall to still be hot. Mid-seventies, but with the wind. She’d maybe been taking a risk when she decided to try and take her car farther than fifteen miles out of town, because it had broken down after ten minutes on the highway, but she was glad she’d taken a back highway instead of interstate. They were doing a ton of construction on interstate, and having to try and pull over out of traffic’s way in her old SUV sounded like a nightmare. Here, sure, she’d run the risk of not having cell phone service, and of course the closest city’s wrecker was busy, because people were stupid and kept wrecking their damn cars. The girl on the other side of the phone at the tow place seemed apologetic, and she’d said that she’d call as soon as there was one available. Then she’d given the ‘four hour’ estimate and Dawn had nearly chucked her phone into the middle of the highway.

She then totally could have gone into the highway and nabbed it because, again, back highway. She hadn’t seen a single car since she’d broken down, which she was kind of glad for—she didn’t want some random farmer looking under her hood.

She got back into the driver’s seat and flipped through her camera roll. She didn’t have enough service to use data, so she couldn’t even check Instagram or listen to music or anything, because she was too cheap to pay for any of her streaming services. She thought back to when she’d made fun of Stevie for having a tape player. She could go for some tapes right about now. But she could flip through her screen-shotted Instagram memes. She could re-judge selfies. She could clean out the embarrassingly large folder of pictures she had of her favorite musician.



She did this for roughly half an hour (hey—sometimes a girl’s got a lot in her camera roll) before she realized that she hadn’t seen Stevie’s Prius yet. And Stevie, while she could be a complainer, was generally pretty fucking reliable. Since college, Dawn had been able to rely on her as a middle-of-the-night DD, someone who would run and grab lunch at the drop of a hat—pretty much, Stevie was the best friend that existed. And Dawn was about to pick up the phone and call her—because maybe the line was just long at Burger King, or something—when it rang.

“Where are you?” Stevie asked. “What mile marker did you say?”

“Um, 342,” Dawn said. “Right as the no passing zone starts.”

“Coulda swore I passed 342 already,” Stevie muttered. Then she raised her voice. “I’ll swing back around. I got you chicken fries.”

“Thank you, you’re the best,” Dawn said. She hung up, and she did double-check the mile marker, just in case. Probably Stevie had passed 324, or something, because Dawn was right by 342. Pretty much parallel to it. She sat for a couple of minutes, planning on giving Stevie a full half hour before calling her again because, if she was at 324, she was pretty far away, but Stevie called back in about thirty seconds. “What?”

“I’m parked in front of 342, there’s nobody else here,” she said. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Dawn said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Stevie said. “Hold on, I’ll send you a picture.”

She hung up, and a couple of seconds later, Dawn’s phone buzzed. It was Stevie, her hair blown into her face, taking a selfie in front of mile marker 342. Stevie had also sent a message that said nothing but: “?????”

Dawn hopped back out of her SUV and took her own picture. Same angle. Same area. Sent it along with her own: “?????”

Stevie called her again. “If you’re fucking with me—”

“I swear I’m not, Stevie,” Dawn said. “I’m at 342. I’ve been sitting here *forever*.”

“Well, shit,” Stevie said. Dawn could hear her boots crunching the quickly drying grass. And then she heard thunder.

“Is it storming?” Dawn asked.

“Looks like it will soon,” Stevie said. “Are—you’re not storming?”

“I’m not storming,” Dawn said. She looked up. The sky was clear blue. Sunny. It wasn’t even windy anymore, not at all. Almost dead quiet with no wind. “It’s beautiful.” But beautiful was the wrong word, because it was *weird*. Maybe she was making this shit up, since she had no clue what was going on with this whole mile marker thing, but the sun seemed too big. Too red. When she looked back at her car it seemed *wrong*, somehow.

"Well, where the hell are you, then? Are you on some other road? Are we on different highways?"

"Highway 46?"

"Shit," Stevie said. "You're—still in North Dakota, right?"

"Stevie, I made it ten miles out of town and my car died," Dawn said. "I'm still in North Dakota."

"*Shit*," Stevie said again. She blew out a long breath, exasperated enough to come across as such over the phone. "Wait, I think I'm getting your tow truck."

"What?" Dawn said.

"There's a tow truck pulling up," Stevie said. "Hold up."

Dawn could hear the conversation, just muffled enough so that she had to strain:

"Dawn Friedman?"

"Um, no," Stevie said. "There's been a—a little bit of a—is there any other mile marker 342?"

"On this road, in this state?"

"Yes."

"Ma'am, are you—trying to—"

"I just, Dawn, she's at 342, and I'm at 342, and she says she's on this road, and it's I guess kind of proven that she really thinks she is, because you came here, to this road, and I'm guessing she gave her location, but she's not here. I have her on the phone right now."

"Can I talk to her?"

The sound of the phone passing hands: "Hello?" A man's voice, but not a very old one.

"Hi," Dawn said.

There was no response, so she tried again:

"Hello?"

"Hello?" the man said back. "Is anyone there?"

"Hello?" Dawn said. There was silence, and then the sound of the phone exchanged again. "Stevie, can you hear me?"

"Dawn, are you there?"

"Stevie!"

"She was talking just a second ago," Dawn heard Stevie say. Then there was nothing—when Dawn looked at her phone, all she saw was that she'd had a missed call from the tow place. They'd probably tried to call her while she was talking to Stevie. In the next couple of seconds, her phone buzzed: Stevie. She answered: "Hello?"

"Dawn, are you—the phone got answered, but I can't hear anything," Stevie said. Phone passed.

“I’m *fucking here*,” Dawn said, her voice raising.

“Ma’am?” the man’s voice again.

“I’m here.”

“You’re right,” the man said. Phone passed. Hang-up.

Her phone blinked out then—she’d used up more battery power than she’d thought, looking at pictures. Her car wasn’t new enough for a charging port and, anyway, it was broken. She could start walking. That was probably her only option at this point—start walking and hope that she broke out of whatever weird situation she was in.

She looked up at the sun. It was big and red and hot.

# A RIDE WITH A FRIEND

by Lyn Dockter-Pinnick

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Bill carefully placed his new Samsonite suitcase on the snow-covered sidewalk in front of the bus driver, who was standing beside the large bus. With far less care than Bill had displayed, the driver quickly heaved the suitcase into the luggage compartment before grabbing the other suitcases as quickly as they were placed on the sidewalk. Bill paused for a moment in the cold, blowing snow, admiring his navy blue beauty amongst the older, more battered bags. It was the first and last time he would use it.

Climbing on the large shuttle bus, Bill chose a seat near the front, where he could keep an eye on the weather and the roads. The bus would take Bill Malik, and what appeared to be at least a couple of dozen other people, from Fargo to the Minneapolis-Saint Paul airport, where they would all try to catch other connecting or outbound flights.

The other passengers quickly filed on the bus and the driver, a middle-aged man who gave off a reassuring air of confidence, made his announcements. He explained about the Wi-Fi and the bathroom and said he knew everyone was eager to get on the road. With little fanfare, he then stepped down into the area of the driver's seat and slowly inched the bus away from the curb and headed towards the interstate. The view ahead was a blizzard of falling and drifting snow.

Expressions of relief mixed with apprehension were clearly visible on passengers' faces as they pulled out of the terminal. All began to settle in and each of them sought distraction. A set of parents far in the back could be heard murmuring to two children, whose high voices could be heard throughout the bus. Some passengers pulled out tablets, while others opened books and still others pulled pillows and blankets out of their backpacks; intentions clear.

Bill was the exception; he was unable to settle down; unable to relax. The same agitation that had kept him pacing inside the terminal was clear in the nervous way he repeatedly looked out the window and then back at his phone. Using a variety of apps on his phone, he was checking road conditions and the weather. He also checked his airline app to see if the redeye flight he was supposed to be on later that night had been cancelled.

Bill's dark brown eyes moved from the front of the bus, out his window and then back to his phone. He could see that traffic was moving slowly around them. The further they got away from the Fargo-Moorhead area, the fewer cars were present on the highway, which seemed an ominous sign. Bill could see that even the semi drivers had slowed to a crawl.

Bill had been jolted out of a restless sleep in his small apartment near the college campus where he worked in Moorhead, Minnesota, at 3:30 am. He had quickly dressed in the clothes he had laid out the night before and brushed his teeth before picking up his bag, and hurried outside. He was waiting when his pre-arranged taxi came at 3:50 am. He had no sooner arrived at the airport and was looking up at the flight announcements when he received the text message from Delta that his 5 am flight was cancelled. At the same time, the board blinked the same negative message for the other morning flights listed. All the posted flights had been cancelled. His heart in his throat and a sick feeling in his stomach, he had rushed to the ticket counter only to get even more depressing information from the harried gate agent. All flights were cancelled for all airlines, for the entire day. As he had waited in line, he had heard other passengers talking about a daily shuttle bus that would be leaving for the Minneapolis airport at 9 am. After leaving the ticket counter, he had searched online on his phone for the company, found it, and secured a ticket. While he had waited, he had kept getting cokes from the vending machine. Four 20 ounce bottles had wired him with more caffeine than he usually consumed all day. By the time the shuttle arrived shortly after 9:30, he had already paced nearly 10,000 steps.

His pacing had been hard to miss. Not only was he darker skinned than most of the other waiting passengers, but he was also wearing a large, multi-colored stocking hat and a bright yellow parka. The bright colors in combination with his large smile and tall stature garnered attention. In addition, every time he lapped the terminal and passed the other waiting shuttle passengers, he had smiled broadly and gave a big, vigorous thumbs up. Most had returned the gesture or waved back, although none of them had spoken to Bill.

Now, Bill slid from the passenger side over to the window, grateful that the bus wasn't so crowded that someone had to sit with him. He appreciated being able to stretch out his long legs. Visibility was nearly zero outside. So much snow and only whiteness to be seen out the window. In the back, one of the children heard earlier was obviously distraught and the mother was trying in vain to distract her. We all feel a bit like crying, Bill thought to himself.

Bill scrolled through his phone again. The weather app showed blizzard conditions would continue all the way to the Minneapolis airport.

Unconsciously tapping his foot, he looked across the aisle and out the other window to his right. His feet were clad in overshoes over his tennis shoes; something he found wonderfully practical because that meant he had to only pack his good dress shoes. It also hushed the sound of his tapping, making a muffled, thumping sound. As his eyes slid across towards the other window, he noticed the woman to his right. Seated across from him was a woman with purple hair. He had noticed her in the terminal waiting area and she had been one of those to return his wave and smile. She looked at least 60, maybe 70, and he had been taken aback by her purple hair, which he was used to seeing on much younger women; like his students at the university. It had given him something to think about as he paced, other than the weather. What was the story with that hair, he had wondered.

Now, he said, “Bad storm,” he said. “We’re lucky the shuttle is running. I try not to drive in weather like this. I’ve only lived in the area for about a year. I came to this country for graduate school and decided to stay,” he said, wondering why he felt he needed to say all that to her.

The woman had a notepad in her lap, and Bill could see that she had been writing. Now, she capped her pen and turned towards him, nodding in agreement about the storm.

The woman saw that he was staring at her hair and her eyes widened with amusement. With blue eyes that sparkled with curiosity, the woman closed her notebook and looked directly at him. Bill noticed that she was also wearing a purple scarf over her overcoat and had purple mittens lying on the seat beside her. She must like purple, he thought.

With a voice that sounded much younger than he expected, she responded, “You know what they say about the weather! We all talk about it and talk about it but none of us are able to do anything about it. Seems like all we do is talk about the weather. In fact, these days it’s getting so the weather seems the one thing we *can* talk about to each other. And, even that can be dicey!” She laughed as she finished, either pleased with her words or something else, as Bill wasn’t quite sure what dicey meant.

Bill nodded emphatically in response. “Yes, I’ve noticed that; and some of us also have a professional reason to talk about the weather. I’m a climatologist at Moorhead State University. I’m on my way to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt.”

He paused, and then looked back out the window at the storm. “If I do not make my flight tonight, I will miss the first days of the conference.

When I spoke to the dean, she said that if I miss the first two days, since it is only a four day conference, that I should cancel my trip and return.”

With a rush of words that released his pent up emotions, he went on, “But, it is so very important! This is a conference attended by the heads of state for 90 countries and there will be over 30,000 participants. I was fortunate to be selected as an observer; I must attend this conference!” Bill’s voice rose as he spoke. Other passengers paused their conversations to stare at him. He lowered his voice as he repeated, “Attending this conference is important.”

The woman stared at him sympathetically as he delivered this speech. She had noticed his nervous scrolling through his phone as he sat across from her.

Bill grew uncomfortable under her gaze. But her eyes were kind as she said, “That sounds very impressive. Being a climatologist *is* very important work. I care about our planet, too. I want there to be a beautiful planet for my grandchildren. After all, there is no Planet B, is there?” she asked.

As she spoke, Bill’s gaze had strayed again to look out the window. The storm had not abated and there was very little traffic. Only occasionally could he catch a glimpse of trees or a house. He guessed visibility was less than an 1/8 of a mile.

As she said the words Planet B, he felt a jolt of irritation. The use of slogans or simplistic language when talking about his chosen field was a pet peeve of his. “Planet B? That sounds like something off a t-shirt. This is serious.” He jabbed his finger at the highway. “These kind of dangerous winter storms are getting increasingly common. That’s exactly why it is so important that I get to this conference. I *must* get to this conference.”

Even as he spoke, Bill realized that his anger at her was misdirected. He could feel the heat rise up his neck, although less noticeable than it would have been in his companion due to his dark skin.

As Bill spoke, the woman’s face did not change. He steeled himself. What was he thinking being so rude to her? What would her reaction be to someone like him speaking to her in this manner? He waited, settling his face into an impassive expression, prepared for her anger or rebuke. Instead, she stayed quiet and her eyes did not lose their kindness.

In a steady voice and with amusement now vivid in her blue eyes, she said, “Actually, you are right. It *is* off a t-shirt. In fact, it’s from the one I wore last summer when I was protesting against the Line 3 pipeline in Park Rapids.”

He looked at her, his mouth slightly agape at her words. She laughed at his expression; her laughter unabashed and infectious. Despite his embarrassment, he laughed with her.

Her face became serious as she continued, "I've been worried about climate change since I read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* after it came out in 1962. I was in junior high and my science teacher recommended it to me. It changed my life. We are the last generation that can try to reverse the damage that's already been done; we are the culprits as well as the potential saviors." She sighed, "I appreciate your passion, but I am equally concerned about climate change."

He was filled with relief that she hadn't been offended by his anger. Plus, he was impressed. She read *Silent Spring* as a junior high school student; the year it was published?

She went on. "But, as important it is, if I've learned anything in my life, it's that everyone has a story. There's a couple sitting behind us who are on their way to a funeral, scheduled for tomorrow. A family is flying their child to see a medical specialist. If they miss the appointment that they've waited six months for, another chance might not happen for another six months. And that young couple in the front row? They just got married and this is their honeymoon trip. They've been saving to go on this cruise for three years. If they don't make their flight tonight, the cruise will leave tomorrow and they're not sure they'll get their money back since they didn't buy the trip insurance policy."

She paused and looked at him again. "So, we all have somewhere we need to be. Will we get there?" She shrugged. "That remains to be seen. In the meantime, I'm Sarah Jensen-Goldberg," she said, reaching her hand out across the aisle to him, undoing her seat belt to do so.

Stammering, Bill said, "I didn't know. About the others." Then, composing himself, and shaking her hand in return, he said, in a formal tone. "My name is Bill Malik. Dr. William Malik. Please accept my apologies for my rudeness."

As they shook hands, she said, "Apology accepted. Your work *is* important and it is always our own story that consumes our attention. Seeing things from another's eyes is hard. Even for someone as old as me," she said. Her voice now sounded tired and her tone had a finality that indicated their conversation was over. Looking down at her notebook, she picked up her pen again and stared down at it.

*Ach, shame.* Bill was muttering a common South African expression to himself as he turned back to the window. His eyes were now riveted on the ditch. Between the two highways, a black pickup was lying on its side, its lights on and caution lights blinking.

His embarrassment now forgotten, he quickly turned back to Sarah. "I just saw an accident. A pickup just went in the ditch. I'm going to try to call 911."



Before he could make the call, everything moved and slipped. People were jolted awake and cried out as the bus slipped sharply to the right. Someone screamed.

The bus was sliding in a circle and skidding. Everything seemed to be in slow motion as Bill gripped the seat in front of him, checking to be sure his seat belt was still fastened. The driver's seat was below everyone's line of sight, except for those in the front row who could look down at the driver. It crossed Bill's mind that it looked like the bus was moving of its own accord, whirling in a circle that seemed to be gaining speed. As the bus skidded, Bill was relieved to see that there were no vehicles immediately in front of or behind them. The thought also shot through his mind that maybe there were vehicles there, and they couldn't see them due to the poor visibility.

Most of the passengers on the bus, like Bill, were in their seat belts. However, in the back, the family that the woman had talked to who were making their way to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester were not so lucky. A small boy, seated next to his father who was sleeping, had managed to wiggle out of his seat belt just before the skidding began. The boy was four years old and he was traveling with his mother, father and twin sister. It was his sister who was ill. She had cancer and because they were twins, the doctors wanted to do tests on him, too, to make sure they could spot any cancer in him early, as well as do genetic testing to see if he had the same markers for the disease. His mother had let him bring his favorite stuffed animal, now on the seat behind him, as well as his favorite truck. He had been playing with his truck and dropped it, just before the bus started sliding. He was on the floor by his father's feet, trying to retrieve it from the aisle, when the bus starting sliding.

The boy had just gotten to his truck when the sharpest jolt of the skid happened. As the bus jolted, the boy was hurled down the center aisle of the bus, tumbling over himself and dropping the truck.

Bill's head jerked around in time to see the boy coming towards the front of the bus. Acting on instinct, as the boy came close to him, he reached out a long arm, and grabbed the boy up. The boy was surprisingly heavy. With a grunt, and straining to stay in his own seat belt, Bill pulled the boy into the aisle seat, and quickly snapped the seat belt around him. The boy's face was terrified and tears were welling in his eyes. There were bumps appearing where he had banged his head coming down the aisle.

As they slid again in a circle, Bill positioned an arm across the boy and braced his other hand on the seat in front of him. "Hold on," he muttered to the boy.

As Bill held on to the boy and gripped his seat, the bus plunged off the road into the heavy, accumulated snow, coming to a horrifyingly abrupt stop. As the bus crashed into the snow and stopped, it began to topple to the right. Passengers were screaming, and some were crying as their bodies were jolted against their seat belts. The frightened voices, and the sounds of bodies crashing into seats made a cacophony of sound in the bus.

Bill was thrown forward against the seat in front of him, but he managed to throw his right arm back against the boy, his wrist banging hard against the seat belt. His head was slammed against the side window and then he was thrown forward. As the bus came to a hard stop in the ditch, Bill had squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Now, he opened his eyes and looked ahead. They were at a hard angle to the right but the bus had not fallen completely over on its side.

Bill suddenly realized all of his weight was against the small boy beside him, who was dangling halfway out in the aisle, held in place thanks to the seat belt. He pulled the boy back towards him and shoved his own body back toward the window, the bus jerking a bit as he did so. As he and other passengers struggled to right themselves, the driver's voice came over the intercom system. The driver sounded frightened, but resolute as he spoke.

"Please, stay in your seats. I'm sure help will arrive shortly, but stay in your seats. If everyone starts to move around, we are going to tip the bus all the way and that could cause windows to break and more injuries. I'm going to have to turn off the engine and we won't have heat when that happens. I also won't have power for the intercom. Please, try to stay calm. Stay in your seats."

With that, he stopped talking, and everyone collectively held their breath for a moment, listening. Immediately, the sound of the engine ceased and the bus became eerily quiet.

Suddenly, a woman's voice rang out loudly from the rear of the bus. "Billy, where are you? Billy, are you all right?" Her voice was high pitched and filled with fear.

Bill looked down at the boy, who was now awake beside him and who was trying to stand up in his seat, in response to the woman's voice.

"You're Billy, aren't you?" he asked the boy. The boy nodded. "Billy, you're not going to believe this but that's my name, too. My name is Bill."

Billy ignored him and still struggled to stand up, squirming and twisting against the seat belt. Bill reached out his arm to restrain him. "I am very sorry, Billy, but you will need to sit still. I will attempt to let your mother know that you are safe here, with me."

Turning his head slightly, he cupped his fingers around his mouth, and called as loudly as he could, over the voices now starting to murmur across the bus. "Billy is fine. He is here, near the front, with me."

The woman's voice, decidedly relieved, could be heard from the back again. "Thank you! Billy, be a good boy! We'll get you as we get off the bus." Bill grinned to himself that, despite everything, the mother didn't want her son to cause any trouble for anyone.

Hearing his mom's voice, the boy relaxed somewhat and stopped pulling to get out of his seatbelt. Bill glanced away from the boy and across the aisle at Sarah. He gasped. She had fallen out of her seat and was laying on the window. She apparently hadn't gotten back into her seat belt before they crashed and she had hit her head, hard enough to cause a deep gash, which was now bleeding profusely. She was completely still and looked pale and white-faced.

He started to try to move across the aisle to help her when he remembered what the driver said and what he had told Billy. They all had to stay still, but she obviously needed help. What could he do?

Raising his voice slightly, he called out to the woman, "Sarah! Are you all right?"

In the seat in front of her, in response to Bill's words, an elderly man groaned and sat up in his seat. Wincing, he reached up to his head, and now turned around slightly to look down at Sarah.

"I'm not sure she's breathing," he said somberly. Bill flinched at the thought of this woman having died right across from him. He refused to accept it.

"No, I think I saw her breathe. Can you reach your arm over and prod her?"

The man looked tired and was in obvious pain. "I don't think I can. Plus, I just don't know if it's worth it if she's dead."

Horried, Bill looked at Sarah. Young Billy was also looking at her and was staring in fascination at her hair. "She's got purple hair," he said now, in an amazed tone. "My sister likes purple. It's her favorite color."

Bill tried again. "Sir, please, see if you can wake her. We need to try to help her," said Bill.

The old man turned slightly and leaned an arm cautiously over the side of seat towards her. Weakly, he tapped her shoulder.

Billy decided to try, too, "Lady! Hey, lady! Wake up! I like your hair!"

The woman didn't move. Billy called again, this time, even louder. "Hey, lady, wake up. My sister would like your purple hair, too!"

The woman remained still. As Billy continued to call out to the woman, Bill wondered if he should tell him to be quiet. He knew nothing about being a parent.

Suddenly, Sarah groaned and stirred. With eyes still closed, she mumbled in a low tone, "Thank you, I like it, too, Billy."

Billy looked at Bill, delighted. "She said thank you to me," he said, proudly.

Bill looked at the woman, "Sarah, I wish I could come over and help you but the driver wants us to stay still. Can you try to move? I am worried about you on the floor—can you try to get up on the seat?"

Without moving or opening her eyes, she said, "No, I don't think I can. Besides whatever happened when I banged my head, I think my leg might be broken. It really hurts."

Over the next few minutes, they talked Sarah. Bill encouraged the small boy to talk to her since it was his voice that had pulled the woman from unconsciousness. Billy talked to the woman about his sister, who was also four. He explained that his sister was really sick and didn't play much with him, which made him mad until his mom and dad explained that she was sick. Now, he mostly played alone, since they lived on a farm, but that was ok, because he helped his mom and dad. Proudly he said, "They say I'm a big help."

As Billy talked, Bill remembered what the woman had said about how everyone on the bus had a story and somewhere they needed to be. He felt shame at how angry he had been that he might miss his flight. Now, he just wanted for himself and everyone else to get off this bus and to safety.

Long minutes passed. The bus was dark, although Bill knew it was probably late afternoon. The lack of visibility due to the storm and the loss of any inside lighting made it seem like night. The bus got colder, rapidly.

Several times, the bus creaked and moved. Sarah gasped, as the movement of the bus caused her shift against her injured leg. She cried out and Bill's heart twisted in sympathy. He hated not being able to help her. He called to her, "Hang in there, Sarah. Help must be on its way."

In his heart, he was scared. What if what he said wasn't true? He knew that emergency vehicles were likely struggling to get to them due to the road conditions and the poor visibility.

Several people screamed as the bus swayed again. With a loud creak, it settled back to the same angle, causing more than a few swear words to be heard.

Billy started to cry and said, "I'm scared."

Bill put his arms around him, and said, "It's ok. It's ok."

Suddenly, flashing lights lit up the interior. People quickly realized what it was and started to cheer. Bill called out to Sarah, "Help is here, Sarah; hang on!"

A man in a snowmobile suit appeared outside the bus with a bull horn. "Attention, everyone. We have a wrecker who is going to try to pull the bus up out of the ditch. We can't get you out right now because the door is buried and we're not sure we could get anyone out of the windows if we broke them. Please try to brace yourself as it's the best we can do to get you help as quickly as we can."

A large search light suddenly flooded the bus with light. The man with the bull horn spoke again. "Hang on and brace yourselves."

Bill looked over at Sarah, who was laying on the floor and the window. "Sarah, you've got to get off the window. Can you move yourself more on the floor?"

Sarah moaned and said, "I'll try." As Bill and Billy watched, she started to move her body away from the window, wincing in pain at every movement. Bill could see her turn even whiter with pain when she moved her leg. The gash on her head had stopped bleeding but there was blood everywhere. Her scarf and coat were covered in blood.

Everyone else's eyes were fixed on the windows. They could see the wrecker on the highway. Several other men in snowmobile suits could be seen climbing down into the ditch to attach a chain to the front of the bus.

"Billy, when the bus starts to move, we're going to be thrown against this window. Sarah might start to roll across the floor and I want to be able to help her. As soon as the bus stops, I'm going to let you out of your seat belt and we're going to trade places because I'm going to help, Sarah. Is that ok?"

Billy nodded solemnly. "Help Sarah, just like my mommy and daddy help my sister."

Bill swallowed hard against his emotions. He thought of all this little boy had seen in his life, already.

With a loud, clanging sound, the chain grew taut and the bus started to jerk ahead. Everyone stopped talking, and fear was so palpable, Bill thought he could feel it in the air. Would the bus topple over the other way? Would more people get hurt? A woman started to say a prayer out loud and several passengers joined her.

Bill's eyes were on Sarah on the floor and as the bus jerked hard forward, he saw her thrown into the aisle. His heart sank. The bus jerked

again, hard, then swayed to the left. Suddenly, the bus was upright. A woman started to cry. Another man said, loudly, "Good god almighty!"

Other men appeared, bearing snow shovels and made their way to the door. Prying it open, they opened the door and shouted, "How is everyone in there? Is anyone badly hurt or can we pull you up all the way up to the highway before we unload you into ambulances?"

Several people began to shout. The man said, "Hush, I can't hear you all at once. Is anyone badly hurt?"

Bill's voice rang out over the rest, "The woman next to me is badly hurt, but I think it would be best to get up on the road."

Sarah opened her eyes from where she lay and said, "Yes."

"Ok," the man called back. "Hold on and we're going to get you up on the highway."

Bill looked down at Billy. "We're going to trade places now, Billy, and I'm going to help Sarah. Remember what we talked about?" Billy nodded and Bill quickly unhooked his seat belt, and did the same with Billy, lifting him up and over into the window seat. Quickly, he belted Billy and then, squatting on the floor awkwardly between his seat and the aisle, he bent to hold on to Sarah as the bus began to move again.

With loud creaks and wobbles, the bus was pulled up on the road. Bill couldn't see anything that was happening as he was bent over Sarah but people were talking about the police cars and ambulances that they could see out the windows.

Finally, they were on the highway and they abruptly stopped. Some passengers cheered. The door was once again pried open and a police officer appeared. "We want to take the most seriously injured first," he said, looking down the aisle where Sarah lay on the floor.

Bill stood up from kneeling behind Sarah. "Here, this woman here needs your help."

Motioning the EMT crew inside, the police officer stepped aside and two men carefully made their way down the aisle towards Sarah and Bill.

"It's ok, ma'am," they said to Sarah. "We're going to get you out of here and to the hospital as quickly as we can."

Sarah opened her eyes to look up at Bill. "Looks like you're not going to make that conference but thanks for worrying about *me*."

Bill's face flushed hot again, this time with pleasure at her words. He wasn't quite sure what to say but settled on, "It's ok, Sarah. There'll be another conference."

It felt like hours to get everyone off the bus. Bill waited with Billy until his parents came up to their row. No one appeared to be hurt, although Billy's sister looked very frail and was shivering in her dad's arms. Bill

ignored the shocked look in their eyes as they took in the color of his skin. He waved off their thanks but happily returned Billy's hug before they left the bus.

Everyone was taken to a hospital in St. Cloud.

Bill later learned that the bus driver and Sarah were two of the most badly hurt, along with the old man who was seated in front of Sarah in the second row. Everyone was treated at the hospital and most were also kept overnight for observation. A few, like Billy and his family, insisted on leaving as soon as the storm had abated and the bus company supplied another bus to get them to the Twin Cities.

Bill cancelled his trip. He learned his suitcase, along with many others, was smashed when the bus crashed on that side. He was treated for cuts and bruises and when released from the Emergency Room, he asked the nurse where Sarah was being treated. He learned that she was in surgery, and although no other information could be provided, since he was not family, the nurse told Bill where to wait. The nurse also said he might be able to see her when she woke up, if Sarah agreed.

Bill located the surgical waiting room, where, exhausted, he fell on the couch and immediately fell asleep.

Abruptly, he woke up. Someone was tapping on his shoulder. It was a different nurse. "Sarah is awake now and is asking that you come and see her," she told Bill.

Light was flooding the hospital waiting room. It must be morning and sunny outside, Bill thought in a daze, as he grabbed his yellow overcoat that he had used as a pillow, and walked stiffly down the corridor.

Walking with the nurse to Sarah's room, Bill was suddenly apprehensive. What was he doing? He hardly knew this woman.

Sarah looked small in the bed, with her leg and arm in a cast, and all sorts of wires and tubes coming out of her body. Her eyes were open, though, and she looked at him with eagerness when he appeared in the doorway.

Shifting on one leg to another, Bill remained standing there, hesitation written on his face. Tentatively, he asked, "How are you?"

With her good arm, she waved toward the chair beside her. Bill walked into the small hospital room, which seemed bursting with equipment, and sat down.

She explained that she had a broken leg, a broken wrist and bruised ribs. "But," she said, in a voice that was filled with warmth, "I'm still here and that's thanks to you and that little boy. As I was laying there on the bus, I was in such pain. I didn't want to wake up or move, but I finally heard Billy talking about my purple hair and that got through to me; that

woke me up.” She laughed a bit, then shuddered as the effort clearly caused her pain.

“No, shouldn’t laugh,” she said, “But it’s funny that my hair got his attention and his voice got mine.” She looked directly into Bill’s brown eyes, filled now with kindness and compassion, his anxiety gone.

“Bill, you helped save my life. That means, according to some cultures, that we’re bound for life. I hope you will come visit me when I’m back home. You will be as welcome in my home as my own children and grandchildren.”

Bill nodded slowly. “Yes, ma’am, I’d like that. I don’t have a lot of family, and none in the Fargo-Moorhead area, so, yes, I’d like that.”

Although some might have found them an unlikely pair—a retired 69 year-old high school science teacher with purple hair, and 28-year-old climatologist from Botswana—they became good friends. Bill visited her when she returned home to her Moorhead apartment and he helped her plant her garden in the spring. They also built a tradition of taking a trip together around the anniversary of the bus accident. Due to their shared interests, the trip was generally to a conference on climate change.

Bill used his old suitcase and never replaced the Samsonite. They took the shuttle every time.



# HARRY AND GAIL

by T.J. Fier

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The witch knew their arrival was inevitable.

After hiding and thriving in the woods for centuries, the modern world reached the witch's front door in the guise of two somber men holding legal documents claiming the fatal words: EMINENT DOMAIN. As she did with most strangers, the witch hissed and frightened them away with her best butcher knife. At first, this appeared to work until the somber men returned with a sheriff, a gaggle of deputies, and a damp-eyed wisp of a woman they called a "Social Worker."

A myriad of strange words and legal documents came with the motley crew. According to the heavily scented Social Worker, the local government intended to reroute the river outside her cottage, and she was in the way.

Of course, the witch put up a fight. How dare they try to remove her from her home? She had lived there since before most of them were born. She was just a little old lady. Couldn't they leave her in peace? And please, stop touching her stuff, especially the knives. The people crowding her home gaped as if they had never seen a wood-burning stove, shelves of candy-making utensils, or hand-woven rugs made with children's hair. Fortunately, they didn't look too closely at the rugs.

"Dude, it's like being in a fairy tale," one deputy said to the other, not knowing the witch could hear them clear as day. Her eyesight was awful, but the loss had sharpened her hearing and sense of smell.

"More like a horror story," the other deputy snuffled. "Did you see the piles of bones out back?"

How rude. What was so strange about a pile of animal bones? She knew better than to keep any human bones lying around, not that she had eaten any in decades.

The sober men handed her a check—at least she knew what a check was—for a rather large sum of money.

Said the witch, "What will I do with this?"

"Why, start your new life," replied the saccharine-sweet Social Worker. "Do you have a bank account?"

After the witch admitted she didn't, another barrage of strange words and questions hurled her way: Medicaid, health insurance, life insurance, assisted living, subsidized housing, next-of-kin. The phrases overwhelmed her, so she pulled another act from her old playbook: "When in doubt, start crying."

Everything moved much too fast after the fateful day with the Social Worker. More men came with a giant truck. She fought back furious tears as they put her life into boxes, carrying pieces of her away one by one. Of course, they moved her too, stuffing her and all her things into a space with several conjoining rooms. The Social Worker called it an "apartment."

Her new home was nearly the same size as her previous cottage, only cleaner, brighter, and with too many windows. The neighbors—ugh, so many damned people—who lived above and beside her, made noise at all hours. After years of precious solitude, the unending clatter often woke her in the middle of the night.

The witch had no choice but to adapt to her new surroundings. She learned how to use her modern stove, refrigerator, and a baffling piece of technology: the microwave. She required supplies to use all her new devices correctly, so she went to an unexpectedly magical place: the Supermarket. While taking in the "deli" section, she understood how much the world had changed.

How could one place have so many vegetables and so many fruits? And many from exotic locations, such as Peru, Vietnam, or California. And the meat, Goddess below, the myriad of flesh all available for purchase. The simple, seasonal village markets of the Old World paled in comparison. Despite her awe, the witch could not ignore the howling presence of her favored flesh: children.

She stalked several children through the vast, gleaming store. Gone were the quiet shadows clinging to their mother's skirts, sitting somberly in the background. These fat, stinking beasts were loud, fierce, and took up more space than the adults. Much to her horror, every one of them wanted nothing to do with her.

When she tried several times to catch a sniff, the cunning little beasts ran away screaming. Their parents shot her looks of open hostility—another new development. Did no one give deference to their elders anymore? Not a single youth offered to push her cart or give directions to certain ingredients until she asked.

Her extraordinary yet horrible experience at the Supermarket made her realize there was only one thing she required to transition into her new life. One thing that would soothe her quivering heart: roast child.

From her careful observation and the help of a new device called a “television,” she learned how children no longer disappeared or died as they had in the long past. Now there were these things called “cameras” recording everyone while in public spaces. Parents had fewer children and kept a careful eye on their progeny. Toddlers were strapped down in carts or strapped to their father’s chests. The older children knew better than to wander off and glared at the witch with suspicious little eyes.

The witch was ready to give in and accept her childless fate until one fateful day when a little boy clutching a stained teddy bear passed her apartment window. Unlike the portly, polished beasts at the supermarket, this boy was thin and dirty. After her recent experiences, the witch knew better than to approach the child.

Instead, she watched.

The little boy plopped onto a half-dead thatch of grass on the lawn between apartment buildings. He spoke to the teddy bear, likely sharing childish secrets with a creature who wouldn’t tell tales to the surrounding adults. The witch stood closer to her kitchen window to hear and smell him better.

The boy whispered nonsense and reeked of urine. Her fingers quivered, aching to grab him up, but she dared not. Some camera or over-protective mother must have an eye on the boy. Why did she torture herself? The witch was about to leave her window when she noticed a coat hanger of a woman stumble out from an adjacent apartment building. Even though the witch couldn’t see the woman in detail, she could smell the corruption rolling off her gangly body. She must be another one of those unfortunate, sick creatures the witch had heard about before on the television—an addict.

“Harry, wha’did I tell ya ‘bout leaving the apartment w’out saying somethin’?” The woman scolded the boy. Her words were slurred and too loud. The boy ignored her even when she gave him a half-hearted swat.

Soon a rail-thin girl joined the fray. She ignored her mother, walking straight to Harry and whispering something the witch couldn’t catch. The boy turned his dirty face to the girl, hugging her legs.

“It’s okay, Mom.” The girl’s voice was too world-weary for a child only a year or two older than her malodorous brother. “He wanted some sunlight.”

“Wa’ get back inside where I can see ya,” the woman garbled and stumbled back to their apartment.

The two children lingered, and the girl sighed a long, tired sigh. She skated her fingers across Harry’s greasy head. “We should give you a bath. You smell.”

"I'm hungry, Gail," the boy whimpered, leaning into his sister.

"I know. I'll see if I can do something about it after Mom falls asleep."

The witch hadn't prayed to her dark goddess in years, yet the Crone had bestowed a wonderful gift upon her. Was this her chance to break her fifty-year childless drought? The boy may be thin, but she could easily fatten him up. During her long history of spinning sugar into culinary delights, the children, especially the hungry ones, couldn't resist her confections.

And thus, the witch spent several gleeful days replenishing her candy stock. The Supermarket had everything she needed and then some. Making boiled sweets with her dreadful stove took a bit of experimentation and many wasted pounds of sugar. However, her unholy skills and dark magic adapted to the new technology. It wasn't long before every bare surface in her apartment was covered in jewel-toned sugar masterpieces.

Now, to set the bait.

She began by opening her window when the boy came near, hoping he would catch the sweet perfume of her confectionary delights. As predicted, Harry followed the enticing smells pouring from her kitchen window, walking past her apartment several times in one afternoon.

When the boy's back was turned, the witch cleverly placed jars full of glistening lollipops and butterscotch coins in her kitchen window. The next time he tottered by, he stopped dead in his tracks, eyes rounding at the sight. The witch could sense the raw need quivering through his little body. Still, she waited, pleased to hear the boy's belly rumble.

He would be back.

While waiting for Harry to appear each day, the witch took notes about the mother's movements and shrewd-eyed Gail. The mother had no sense of time or schedule. She sometimes disappeared for days before returning thinner and more bleary-eyed than before. When their mother went missing, Gail managed to get her and her brother off to school each morning, meeting a giant yellow beast of a vehicle called a "school bus."

Their food seemed to run out after their mother's disappearance on the second or third day. The boy often walked listlessly between the buildings, clutching his teddy bear. Sometimes Gail joined him, then returned to their home late afternoon to "watch cartoons" for an hour or so. A perfect window of time to set out a tray of sweets with a pretty little label declaring: "For Harry."

The next afternoon, the witch made her next move. The boy couldn't believe his luck when he stumbled across the glittering sweets. Harry's eyes shone with delight as he mouthed the letters to his name. He didn't

hesitate, stuffing his mouth with the toffees, mints, and boiled sweets. Behind her windows, she fought back gleeful giggles. The witch had set the hook now to lure him in.

The second time the witch put out a sweets tray, she opened her door to say hello to the sticky boy. Harry's eyes widened momentarily, and the witch worried he would run away.

"Do you like the sweets I made you?" The witch filled her voice with as much sugar as the candy she had created.

The boy nodded, lips parted, revealing the multi-colored candies stuffed between his gooey, red lips. His dull eyes and even duller expression reminded the witch of dozens of boys she had fattened and devoured before. If she knew anything about ensnaring children, the dumber, the better.

"Harry!"

His sister appeared swift as her name, flying across the apartment complex, fists clenched. She glanced at her brother, then the half-empty tray of candy, and finally the witch, her gaze furious.

"Harry, what did Mommy tell us about taking candy from strangers?"

Harry shrugged, chewing his melting sweets while picking up another fistful.

"They could be filled with poison!" Gail shrieked, shaking her finger at the witch. "Are you trying to poison my brother?"

"I would never do such a terrible thing." The witch feigned perfect contempt. "I noticed how hungry your brother looked and simply gave him a treat."

"Why?" Gail placed tight fists on her narrow hips.

"No child should go hungry." The witch attempted a smile. Gail flinched. "Would you like some candy too?"

Gail narrowed her eyes. "I'm diabetic."

"Oh." The witch didn't know what the word meant. Yet another to add to her list. Thank Goddess, the Social Worker brought a dictionary one day when the witch refused to try a contraption called an "iPad."

"Let's go, Harry."

"Kay." Harry scooped up a sticky handful of toffees before leaving.

The witch slumped. Harry was the perfect target. Perhaps she could have lured him inside for cookies if she had ten more minutes with him. Cookies always sealed the deal. She was about to shut the door when she noticed Harry give her a quick wave before his sister shoved him back into their apartment.

The witch giggled. Hope sprung anew.

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Harry didn't disappoint. Once the boy had a plate of her gingerbread cookies, he couldn't stay away. He scurried to the witch's door at every opportunity. The witch realized if she gave the boy a small plate of treats, he could polish it off in minutes, and his sister wouldn't notice his absence. As one of her favorite new television shows with police officers and degenerates would say, the boy "needed his fix."

A nice padding of flesh began to thicken the child. The witch concocted richer and richer delights full of butter, sugar, and fat. Harry preferred chocolate-covered caramels and a recent discovery for the witch—cupcakes. She knew better than to fill him with too many confections, so she balanced out his moments of gluttony with the occasional cheese sandwich or hunk of sausage.

His sister caught him several times, filling his belly at the witch's doorstep. At first, she admonished Harry for accepting food from a stranger, promising, "Mom'll be home soon," with less and less conviction as their mother's health worsened. Each time, Gail glared at the witch with cold, hard eyes, but hunger got the best of her in the end too. After the witch sent Harry home with extra cheese sandwiches, the girl no longer railed against her brother's daily visits.

One morning, the witch spied the children's mother stumble out of their apartment and into a waiting vehicle. According to the witch's notes, each time their mother left with the smoking man in the loud, rumbling car, she was often gone for days.

The time had come.

The witch made a fresh batch of cookies with a special ingredient: valerian root. And not just any valerian root, but a unique hybrid she had developed over centuries of careful cultivation. After one or two cookies laced with her special herb, all children fell into a pleasant doze. A sleep so pleasant, they never noticed when her butcher knife found their throats.

After the children's mother was absent a second day, the witch pushed forward with her final preparations. She gathered her spices and salts, measuring the precise amounts for each part of the boy's body. She cleared her freezer and fridge to make way for its soon-to-be contents and pulled out her old, oiled tarpaulins, each hiding years of bloodstains beneath their careful folds. She filled the bathtub with ice to keep Harry's various pieces cold while others cooked. And finally, once everything was set, she sharpened her knives while dreaming of roasted boy.

Once everything was ready, she set out smaller snacks for Harry—enough to quench his sweet tooth, not enough to keep him from her door. Eventually, Harry would be hungry enough he wouldn't hesitate to darken her door and step within when she offered him cookies, milk, and sandwiches.

As predicted, Harry appeared at her door just as the boning knife was sharp enough to split the witch's chin hairs. He first peered through her kitchen window before tentatively rapping at her door. The witch pulled out a fresh batch of her valerian-laced ginger snaps from the oven and waited for him to knock again.

"Granny?" Harry's wavering soprano bleated. When the boy had asked the witch for a name, Granny was all that came to mind. She never gave her true name to mortals.

"Coming, dear boy." The witch plated the cookies and hurried to the door.

She was horrified to see not just Harry but also his fierce-eyed sister. The witch had enough room and supplies to butcher Harry, not Gail. The two were in a horrible state—red-eyed, runny-nosed, and desperately needing a proper bath.

"Momma's been gone for three whole days," Harry lamented.

"She promised to be home soon." Gail shushed him. "We're wondering if you had something to eat. At least until Mom comes home. She forgot to leave money this time."

"I made cookies just for you." The witch maintained calm even as her plans fell apart. Sure, Harry would gobble down enough cookies to knock him into oblivion, but the girl? Gail knew better due to her health condition. The witch mentally scanned her arsenal but came up short. Could she sneak some valerian into a cheese sandwich for Gail?

"Cookies?" Harry bounced on his toes. "What kind?"

"Gingersnaps." The witch held out the still-warm baked goods.

Harry immediately stuffed two into his mouth. At that rate, he would be out in minutes.

The witch stepped back from her door. "Why don't you come in and have a glass of milk with your treat?"

Harry walked right in.

Gail hesitated. "We'll need to get back soon. Mom'll lose it if we're not home when she gets back."

"You look hungry too, Gail." The witch watched with mild horror as Harry crammed two more cookies down his throat. "Can I make you a sandwich?"



"Yeah, sure, fine." Gail's shoulders sagged, and she followed her brother inside.

"Slow down, Harry." The witch swallowed a shout when the boy swallowed the fifth cookie. "Let's get you some milk. You'll get a tummy ache if you eat too many cookies."

"Is the milk in here?" Harry yanked open the refrigerator door.

The witch scurried over to her fridge. "Wait, child, please let me—"

"Oh, whoa, what's this?" Harry pulled out one of several stainless-steel meat hooks she had dumped into the crisper.

"That's just for—"

"Can I use your toilet?" Gail started down the hallway toward the bathroom with its ice-filled tub before the witch could stop her.

"Oh, please, no, wait, I have to—"

"I feel weird." Harry belched, rubbing his stomach. "I think I ate too fast."

"Why don't you go sit over—"

Without another word, Harry dropped to his knees and fell unconscious before his head smacked the linoleum floor.

"Hey, why is your bathtub filled with ice?" Gail returned the second after her brother passed out. She shrieked upon seeing her brother's unconscious form, kneeling beside him, shaking his shoulders. "Harry? Harry? Are you okay?"

None of this was going according to plan. The witch had no choice but to improvise. Gail was too distracted to notice the witch pull her dough-crusted rolling pin from the sink. When the girl lifted her face, crying for an ambulance, the witch promptly bashed Gail in the forehead.

Silence, clear and pure as a bell, rang throughout the witch's tiny apartment. At her feet, both Harry and Gail lay unconscious. A rising lump and a bright trickle of blood ran down the little girl's forehead. The witch hadn't felt so alive in decades. This is what she knew: the capturing and carving of children. The sight of Gail's blood stirred an ancient power within—waking the hidden monster.

Despite her years, the ancient woman easily dragged Gail into her bedroom. She checked the child's heart and breath, disappointed to find the girl alive, though barely. The witch would deal with her later. First, she must attend to Harry before either child woke and further ruined her plans.

Harry lay drooling where the witch last left him. She checked his pulse, pleased to find his heart beating slowly, but surely. The witch scurried to her tarpaulins and tossed them open, revealing the delightful bloodstains from many children before. The witch was so hurried that she nearly



forgot to close her blinds. The last thing she needed was a nosy neighbor peering through the window when she sliced the boy's throat.

Speaking of blood, the witch tugged out a bucket beneath her sink. She then moved the tarpaulins to her wide plank of a kitchen table. She stuck blocks beneath two table legs to elevate one side. If she positioned the boy correctly, the bucket would catch most of his blood for future "Harry sausages."

"Oh, blood sausage," the witch hummed as she checked her butchering setup. "Crone below, I cannot wait!"

With much cursing and grunting, the witch shoved the unconscious boy onto her kitchen table and laid her knives at the boy's feet. Her knobby fingers trembled in anticipation. She picked a long, sharp needle of a knife—the perfect narrow blade to sever an artery.

"So long, I've waited so long." The witch ran her long nails along the child's throat. She wished she had time to savor the moment. But, there was much work to do and little time to do it. While Harry bled out, she would check on Gail and see—

A sharp blow struck the back of the witch's head. She tumbled forward, the knife flying from her fingers. Before the witch knew what was happening, she was struck again against the side of her skull. Darkness momentarily washed over her vision.

"I knew you were evil." Gail stepped into the witch's bleary view with a bloody rolling pin in hand.

"Wait, this was just a terrible—"

"No one messes with my brother." Gail, eyes blazing, sent another skull-crunching blow to the witch's forehead. *Crack.*

The world and the witch tipped sideways. A film of red, then black, then Gail's blotchy, furious face filled the witch's eyes. Tears streamed down the girl's cheeks, mixing with the blood covering the left side of her face. When did the witch fall onto the floor?

"You're, like, a real witch, aren't you?" Gail breathed hard, surveying the table, the knives, and the bucket. She pressed her ear to her brother's chest and released a small cry of relief.

Darkness collected around the edges of the witch's view, spreading further and further. Was this how it ended? After centuries would she be undone by a horrible little girl?

"Please," the witch gasped. Her gaze scoured the room, searching for salvation. A boning knife lay inches away from her left hand. "I'm just an old woman."

Gail turned to her brother. The witch took advantage of the girl's distraction. She grabbed the knife and leaped to her feet despite the dark spots pulsing across her eyes.

"I guess I'll have to eat both of you," the witch crowed, aiming her knife at the girl's heart.

Gail attempted to dodge the blade, but the knife found purchase in her shoulder. The little girl screamed and scurried beneath the kitchen table. The witch wavered on her feet, blood rushing to her banged-up brain. She must push through the discomfort and gut that girl before the neighbors—

"Leave my sister alone!"

A new agony screamed in the witch's side. She looked down to find a paring knife between her ribs. On the table, Harry sat up, fighting the effects of the herbs that should have kept him unconscious for hours.

"You little brat. How is this possible?" the witch wailed. Each breath was like the knife was stabbed into her side repeatedly.

"Let's get outta here." Gail hurried out from beneath the table, helping her brother down. The boy sagged on his feet, clutching his sister as they staggered for the front door.

"No, stop, this is all a terrible mistake," the witch wheezed.

"You're in big trouble, Granny," Harry slurred as he and his sister flung open her apartment door and raced into the evening.

The witch let out a bitter laugh. Was this moment inevitable? Like those who took away her home, had it only been a matter of time? Her compulsive need for children's flesh was her final undoing. Soon sirens and lights pulsed behind her closed shades.

The witch pulled out the knife, blood gushing down her side.

She still had a choice; this time, they would not take her alive.

This time, she would leave on her own terms.

# WHITE HONKY BITCH

by Charles Hinton

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## 1

His name was Leroy Jackson not Leroy Brown, and he was the meanest man in the whole damn town. At least on my block. Everything about Leroy was mean. His dark skin was mean. His nappy Afro and his nappy beard were mean. His beady eyes that glared from behind his round spectacles, his raspy voice, his fast walk and his fast talk, were all mean. Even his huge barking dog was mean.

Save for being the meanest black man on One Hundred Seventeenth Street back in 1975, Leroy Jackson was no better or worse than any of us poverty-stricken ghetto Negroes. He lived in a rundown apartment like the rest of us. He had mice and roaches like the rest of us. The front and back of his apartment building was littered with trash like the rest of us. He had to maneuver around players, pimps, pushers, hoodlums, and hustlers like the rest of us. But there was something that Leroy Jackson had that a lot of jive ass Negroes didn't have back in 1975: a white woman.

Connie Underwood was beautiful from head to toe. She looked like the kind of woman who'd spent most of her life climbing out of limousines. Her hair was brown and shiny. Her bright eyes were green, her cheeks dimpled. She had the body of a movie star; curvy and sensual. And there was no doubt in my mind that it was Connie's beauty that mean Leroy Jackson wanted to destroy so that no other man would ever want or have her.

The day Connie Underwood became Leroy Jackson's "White Honky Bitch" (as far as I know or can tell) was on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1975. It was the day after my tenth birthday, and I remember that day as clear as glass. Connie, whose only job was to look after Leroy, take care of Leroy, and satisfy Leroy, had the audacity to sit out on the front stoop dressed in a tube top and bellbottom jeans. She was thumbing through a Reader's Digest on this sunny June day. I was examining her from our upstairs window when Leroy's screeching Cadillac skid across the dirt lawn. Leroy leaped from his Cadillac and grabbed Connie by her hair. Her hair was in a ponytail

fastened with a silver bow. See how well I remember? Leroy dragged Connie inside the apartment building. I heard Connie scream, “Stop it, Leroy! You’re hurting me! What did I do?” as Leroy manhandled her through the downstairs hallway. There was a thud followed by the rattling of keys—Leroy was the janitor at Rose Creek Hospital and was wearing his blue janitor’s uniform with his name stitched on the left side just above his muscular chest. I heard Leroy’s apartment door bang open then slam shut followed by the words “White Honky Bitch!” And then I heard the first sounds of Connie’s random beatings. On this day, she had received five slaps across her face. Her crime, according to Leroy, was showing off his goodies to passing Negroes, filling their heads with unspeakable desires.

Back in 1975, in my neighborhood at least, people minded their own business as if it were a matter of life or death, because it *was* a matter of life or death. No one saw the group of men down on their knees shooting dice. No one noticed the shady black man stealing hubcaps. No one witnessed the drug addict getting pistol-whipped by a dealer for his nonpayment for pharmaceutical services. And of course, no one saw when Leroy Jackson had to put his White Honky Bitch in check. Perhaps if I were a little older, I could have done something that day. But most likely, had I intervened, I would not be around to tell this tale. So, all I could do—and it pains me to this day—was stand by and do nothing.

Weeks after her beating, Connie wore dark sunglasses even though we could still see black, brown, and blue bruises beneath the rims of her dark shades. Before her attack, when we’d occasionally cross paths in the hallway, she’d greet me with “Hello young Robert, how are you today?” or “How is young Robert doing today? I hope you’re doing as fantastic as you look.” Once, in the hallway, while heading in the same direction, Connie poked out an elbow and said, “Would you like to escort a lady out of this place, young Robert?” We locked our elbows and walked out of the building, Connie smiling, me grinning from ear to ear, in love. I will never forget that moment. Connie was always good to me, and boy was I head over heels for her. But when the beatings came, she became less interested when we’d pass each other in the hallway. She wasn’t mean, but rather distant. She’d timidly smile in my direction and hurry on, looking defeated, empty and broken. She was never the same after that first beating. And it was clear that Leroy had taught his White Honky Bitch a lesson because Connie never sat out on the stoop again.

My mother was a waitress at a downtown hotel. When she was home, she was either sleeping or dressing to go out.

My father took it on the heel and toe not long after I was born. He apparently never wanted kids and felt that he had been trapped by my mother in some desperate attempt to try to keep him. So, when dad (if I could be so bold to call James Raymond Washington dad) left, my mother viewed me as a living, breathing, little person who only needed to be fed, clothed, and sent off to school during the school year. Although she never told me, I knew deep down inside that my mother, Beverly Johnson, resented me because I was a constant reminder of the love that she had tried to keep but lost.

There was hardly any affection, joy, or pain between my mother and me. We were estranged; merely coexisting as mother and child. I was just some disregarded ploy that didn't work out. Birthdays and holidays for us were as empty as our relationship.

The small hole that was pierced through our living room floor had to have come from one of my mother's high heels. Although the hole was smaller than a penny you could see a lot of what was going on downstairs inside of Leroy and Connie's apartment, if you dared to press an eye against it.

The first time I looked through the small hole in the floor I saw Leroy's vicious black dog, Panther, lying near the front door awaiting his master's return, waiting to please him at any cost. Word on the streets was that Panther had once nearly bitten off a man's hand. This was only because the poor soul had used his hand to cover his privates, which was what the dog was seeking. It was what Leroy had trained him to do.

When I returned to the hole later that day, I saw nothing. Leroy and Connie's apartment was dark and silent. The next day when I awoke, I heard Leroy going through his morning routine. I heard him let the dog out. Yell to Connie about his breakfast. And then start his bath water. A moment later I heard footfalls and knew that they could only belong to one person. Connie. I raced to my...my...—who am I kidding?—peephole. I wanted to see Connie. I had to see Connie. I was ten years old, and I was in love with her. I loved her the first day I saw her. Although I could never bring myself to harm her, I understood why Leroy was so desperate to keep her. She was one of a kind. She was one of the great ones.

I made it to my peephole just in time to see Connie pass by. Though it was brief, what I saw filled me with excitement and shame all at once.

Connie was wearing a white bra and cotton panties. From my vantage point, which was close to a birds-eye view, everything seemed to move in slow motion. Her shapely, milky breast peering over the sides of her bra. Her curvy hips swaying from her white cotton panties that seemed to glow in the golden morning sunlight that shone through her living room window. Her golden-brown hair flowed sensuously. And then she was gone, leaving that image of her burned inside my head forever. I yanked my eye from the hole and hurried away feeling ashamed and full of remorse. Even at the age of ten I knew what I had done was wrong simply because it had *felt* wrong. Though I could not articulate it in words, I knew that I had somehow violated Connie. I was no better than a peeping Tom. Worst; I was no better than Leroy. At least Leroy afforded Connie the courtesy of knowing his true intentions.

I was done. I was never going to look through that hole again. I thought about telling Connie how I had made a big mistake and how sorry I was and that I would never do it again. But when I thought of Leroy Jackson, the meanest man on our block, if not the whole city, I believed it best to just keep my horrible secret between me, myself and I, so that my mother, who I doubt would have missed me, didn't have to bury her only child. For the sake of living, I held on to my secret.

### 3

July gave way to August. The month of August, for the most part, was uneventful. Outside of Leroy screaming here and there at Connie about God knows what, August had been a good month for Connie. Not once did Leroy call her a White Honky Bitch. That was good. Very good. But as they say, all good things must come to an end. And so came the second beating.

There was a party going on downstairs. I could hear music and laughter and people shuffling about as I lay across my bed watching a grey mouse inch towards a mouse trap. The trap had been planted by our landlord, Spencer Duffy, an old and frugal white man who was constantly unavailable save for on rent day. It was my mother's relentless complaining about unwanted rodents that finally got Spencer off his greedy, flat ass to setup mouse traps that he had the nerve to try to pass on the expense. Beverly Johnson wasn't having it.

The mouse was squeezed tightly against the basin, heading straight for the trap, and just as it was about to take the bait someone from downstairs screamed "That's my jam!", scaring the black beady-eyed rodent away. So, I laid there thinking of Connie. What was she doing? What was she

wearing? Was she having fun down there? Was Leroy being good to her? Does she know that I love her? I fell asleep with Connie on my mind.

There was a loud snap as I bolted from my sleep, knowing exactly what the snap was and what had happened. The mouse had met its fate. I looked over and saw that the mouse trap had flipped upside down. I bolted from my bed and saw that the mouse had not only gotten away, but it had also managed to steal the old and dried cheese before making its escape.

I had just reset the trap when I heard soft music playing downstairs. The party was over for the people, but it was just getting started for Leroy and Connie. I heard soft laughter and shuffling feet. They were dancing. Slow dancing. I was happy for Connie. And then there came a crash. “Oh no!”, fell from my mouth before I could stop it. And before I knew it, I was racing for the peephole.

I arrived just in time to see Connie, who was dressed in a red silk bathrobe that dropped just above her knees, step back from Leroy who was staring down at the bottle of champagne that had shattered across the floor. Leroy was also dressed in a red bathrobe, but his robe stopped at his feet. It didn’t take long for me to understand that the bottle had slipped from Connie’s hand while the two were enthralled in their slow drag. The damage was done, and all Connie and I could do was wait to see what mean Leroy Jackson was going to do.

Leroy walked out of view while Connie stood like a deer in headlights—not knowing what to do and what the heck was about to happen. Leroy returned with a towel. He bent and swiped up the glass and liquid with a few careful swoops. He was silent and did not show any emotions. He left the room then returned empty handed. Connie stood there, silent, her eyes staring down at the floor. At that moment I realized something that Connie had perhaps known all along: there were no second chances with mean Leroy Jackson. You messed up, you messed up. Period. And then you paid the price. Leroy had two speeds when things went wrong: mean and meaner. I suddenly realized that if Connie had accidentally dropped the bottle of champagne during the party, she would have still paid the price as soon as the guests departed. It wasn’t that Leroy would avoid beating her in mixed company because he cared what people might think of him. He had already shown who he was, and people believed him. He would not have struck Connie in mixed company because he knew that there was a chance, though small, that some lollipop sucker would try to play hero and then he’d end up having to deal with more of a mess than necessary (actually, it would have been Connie dealing with the mess; cleaning up her blood and the would-be hero’s).



Had Connie dropped the bottle in front of guests, Leroy would have smiled it off and waited patiently until the coast was clear. Then and only then, would he have gone in for the strike.

Leroy stood towering over Connie, who looked like a child in comparison to his huge bulk, wearing a halfcocked smile. I could see that Connie was trembling. What happened next happened so fast that I hardly had time to process it. Leroy took a step back, shouted “White Honky Bitch!” and then kicked Connie in her stomach. Hard.

Connie slumped over just in time to receive a backhand across the right side of her face that sent her flying against the wall where she smashed her head and fell to the floor, unconscious. In the distance, out of view, I heard Panther growl then whine repeatedly.

Connie laid twitching; her red bathrobe hiked up to her thighs. Leroy stared down at her. “Get your white honky ass up!” Leroy shouted. As if on cue, urine poured out from beneath Connie’s bathrobe in protest, turning it dark and wet. “I am not cleaning this mess up!” Leroy scoffed, and then turned to Panther who had made the mistake of drawing in too close. “I’ll teach you to growl at me, mutt!” Leroy shouted, kicking Panther in his side. The dog yelped then sped off with his thick black tail tucked between his hind legs. Leroy, satisfied with his brand of justice, strutted away. I heard a door open then slam shut.

Connie began moving her arms and legs, and a moment later she came to. She raised her head and looked around, disoriented. She touched the right side of her face, paused, placed a hand on her crotch and then understood what had happened. With grave effort, she lifted herself from the floor and staggered away, leaving a puddle behind. I heard a door open followed by water filling what could only have been the bathtub. Panther, not knowing what to do, did all he could do; he walked over to the front door, curled against it, and whined.

My heart was an unbearable lump in my chest. Had my mother been home, I would have run to her, planted my face near her bosom, and cried, hoping that she’d just hold me, squeeze me without any questions. Hoping that she would not push me away, reminding me that her only job was to feed me, clothe me, and send me to school. Nothing more. Nothing less. But my mother was not home, so I ran to my room, slid under my covers, and bawled my eyes out, wishing that there was something I could have done, but knowing that I was just as powerless as Connie. All I could do was cry myself to sleep.

I woke up hours later to the soft sound of sobbing. I knew it was Connie, and I knew that there was nothing I could do to ease her pain and anguish. I yanked my pillow from beneath my head, pulled it into my arms



and squeezed it with all my might. Tears leaked from my eyes as I imagined holding Connie Underwood as tightly as I could. I held her as we both cried to sleep.

I awoke again seconds before the trap sounded. I don't know how I knew that the mouse that had tempted fate earlier that night was going to meet its demise right before it happened. I just felt it. I knew it was just a matter of time before the mouse would run out of luck the same way I knew it would just be a matter of time before Connie's luck (if there's ever any luck when it comes to a beating) would run out. One day Leroy would go to the well too many times, like the mouse had gone to the well too many times, and on that day, Connie would suffer a beating, fall, and never get up. The thought of knowing that one day the woman who I loved would be as dead as the mouse in the corner of my room weighted heavily on my heart, and all I could do was sob. Softly.

#### 4

I was sitting on the couch watching the Flintstones when I heard that Leroy and Connie were moving. The bad news came while I was kind of listening to my mother jawing it up on the phone. As usual, she was talking to her friend Julia. Their conversations always started the same. First, they would greet each other as if they hadn't spoken in months even though they would reach out to each other every two or three days. Not long after their good-natured formalities, they'd converse about their daily Soaps. They would talk about these people who lived inside their black and white 20-inch televisions as if they were real. I remember one time my mother was so infuriated at one of her TV people that she yanked off a shoe and threw it at the television, breaking the dial that was used to change the channels. I don't know what satisfaction my mother got out of the deal, but I don't think it was worth us having to use pliers to turn the channel from NBC to ABC to CBS for at least three years.

No matter what the conversations were about, my mother and Julia would always wrap things up with a discussion about the latest neighborhood gossip. This was when my mother, unknowingly, would have my complete and undivided attention.

Apparently, Dee Dee Baker, a woman who lived just a few apartments up the street and who seemed to be concerned with what people had or didn't have inside their homes, failed to inventory her own home. It was said that Dee Dee had left her apartment with a small, pregnant stowaway inside her purse that decided to give birth in the break room of Dee Dee's place of employment: Jackson Harvest Foods. Dee Dee's stowaway was

a roach that hatched countless baby roaches that crawled from Dee Dee's purse in clusters, scattering aimlessly. Dee Dee was headed to the break room when she got word that the plant was closing because someone had brought in a pregnant roach that had hatched its eggs. Dee Dee laughed with glee. She couldn't wait to find out who this nasty, disgusting slob was.

I found out that James Moses had got his throat slit by his girlfriend, Tina Hurst, because James refused to walk away from a poker game. Tina had repeatedly asked James, who had already lost half his paycheck, to leave the game. When James shouted at Tina to "sit her funky ass down or go home," Tina pulled her straight razor from her bra, walked right up behind him, and went to work on his throat. It took three men to pull her off James. Luckily for James, the razor was dull, otherwise what turned out to be a minor cut from ear to ear, would have been a gaping wound that without a doubt would have landed James Moses a trip to Brimstone Cemetery. The owner, trying his hand at barroom doctoring, smothered the cut with a towel until the bleeding stopped. Shortly thereafter, James and Tina left holding hands. James with half of his paycheck in his pocket, and Tina with one less murder wrap.

Last was Leroy, the man downstairs who beats his white woman. It turned out that Leroy had applied for the head custodian job at Mount Temple Hospital in the suburbs. They wanted Leroy to start as soon as possible. My mother told Julia that she was glad to see Leroy go and hoped he burn in Hell for the way he treats that poor young white girl downstairs. She told her that Leroy would be gone in two weeks. My heart sank. Connie was leaving and I would never see her again.

The days that followed were painful as I watched from the window, Connie helping Leroy load his car with small household items, before dropping them off at their new place of residence, billions of miles away in the suburbs. And I knew it wouldn't be long before a truck rolled up and moved Connie away. Forever.

## 5

The truck did come. But what had happened the night before was more terrifying. In fact, it was this horrible incident that gave me desperate courage the day after to run to Connie, press my face against her stomach and squeeze her tight.

There are two versions of what had happened the night before the truck had come; Leroy's, and the truth. Leroy had taken Connie to a bar up the street called Mandingo to celebrate his new job, new apartment,

and new neighborhood. When the two left the bar on foot, they were followed by two black males. Leroy grabbed Connie's hand and the two rushed inside their apartment, where Leroy locked the door and grabbed his shotgun. Moments later, a heavy foot landed against his front door. Leroy aimed the gun high above the would-be robbers' heads and fired, sending them fleeing into the night. This is what Leroy had told the police and the neighborhood. This was, like I said, Leroy's version.

Now here's the truth:

The part about Leroy and Connie going to Mandingo had to be true otherwise his tall tale would not have added up, would not have jived, and the cops and the people would have been suspicious. The two of them walking home was true. I know this because I heard them.

My mother had gone out, high heels and all, and I was lying on the couch watching *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* for the hundredth time, when I heard their chatter and footfalls approaching from outside. I didn't go to the window for fear that I may be seen watching by Leroy. The two of them were arguing below the streetlights, their words slurring. Leroy was once again accusing Connie of flirting and teasing men while Connie was wholeheartedly objecting. Suddenly, there was silence. That was when my heart began to beat as if the Devil itself was drumming on it. Because I knew what Connie had to have known—Leroy always fell silent before the storm.

There came a loud slap followed by the words, "Get yo ass in the house, bitch!" I heard Connie run inside the apartment followed by Leroy. I sprinted to the hole in the floor, hoping, praying, that I would not bear witness to murder.

I saw the lights flick on. Panther racing to his master, head low, tail wagging. Leroy, who was pulling Connie by a fistful of hair, yelled at the dog, sending the scruffy animal scattering with its tail tucked between its hind legs once again. Leroy slammed the door and slammed Connie against it. She was wearing a rose red dress. Her shoes were gone. It was evident that Leroy had yanked her out of her shoes and left them on the sidewalk or out in the hallway.

"Here I am busting my ass try'n to give you a better home, a better life, and my payback is for you to bat your eyes at strange men!" Leroy had pinned her against the door, trapping her between his muscular arms that lumped from his slick dress shirt.

"I didn't do anything, Leroy!" Connie cried out.

"Like hell you didn't. Right under my nose."

"I just ordered our drinks and came right back. I kept my eyes on the floor just like you told me to." Leroy stepped back, eying her. Connie

hung her head low, seeming afraid to look her capturer in the eye.

"Now what's this about you wanting to go back home to Wyoming, huh?"

"You said that the next time we moved it would be near my family back home."

"Why in the hell would I want to be surrounded by a bunch of honkies? And why would you want to go back to a place you ran away from when you were fifteen?"

"That was ten years ago, Leroy. A lot has changed, and I have changed." Connie lifted her head, her eyes staring into Leroy's. "My mother wants to send for me. She wants me to come home." Leroy looked confused. He stared at Connie as if what she had said was in a foreign language.

"What? Your mother?" Leroy said, his eyes narrowing. "When and how have you been talking to your mother, bitch?" Leroy took a step forward, his head cocked to one side, his dark and thick lips squeezed tight. To my surprise and astonishment, Connie took a step forward while staring Leroy square in his eyes.

"We have been talking for a long time, Leroy. We write letters."

"You write letters, huh? Well, ain't that a bitch!"

"Yes! We write each other letters. I tell her everything. I told her all about you. I told her that you were lower than whale shit!"

That was when Leroy slapped her, turning the left side of her face red. Connie raised a hand to her cheek, stared at Leroy, and then slapped him so hard that his glasses shot from his face, hit the wall and fell to the floor. Miraculously undamaged.

"I'll show you!" Leroy stormed off. Until this day, I don't know why Connie didn't just run out the door. Maybe it was liquid courage that caused her to stay. Or maybe she was just tired and wanted the whole mess to end once and for all. All I know is that she stood there waiting for a madman to return. The same way I crouched there waiting for a madman to return.

And so, he did return, with his shotgun. "I'll teach you, you White Honky Bitch!" Leroy pointed the gun at Connie's face, while she stood there, totally calm, totally at peace. While I, on the other hand, was paralyzed with fear. I couldn't shout out or move. I was going to witness the murder of the woman I loved, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it.

"I will send your meddling mother your deepest regards."

I'll never know that if it had not been for Panther, Leroy would not have pulled the trigger. All I know is that the gun went off when Panther

chomped down on one of Leroy's pants legs, pulling and shaking his head ferociously. Fortunately for all of us, the deadly blast shot high over Connie's head, showering down splintered wood fragments and tuffs of plaster. The blast was deafening.

"Heel, Panther, heel!" Leroy shouted. Panther obeyed. He sat on his hindquarters and lowered his head, panting. Leroy stared disbelievingly at the large hole just above Connie's head. He looked like a man who had just awakened from some horrible nightmare, trying to figure out what was real and what was not. He shifted his gaze to Connie and shook his head. Seemingly perplexed, he turned and walked away with the instrument of destruction hanging in one hand.

Connie peered at the hole, and then reached down and patted Panther on his head as he thumped his tail from side to side.

"Good boy," she whispered, then walked away, going back to her man. Panther curled up next to the door and whined, crying the only way a dog knows how.

Sometimes people in my neighborhood dared to call the cops, and when they arrived hours later, Leroy told them his version of what had happened. But he and Connie knew the truth. And I knew the truth. And Panther of course. In the end, none of us contradicted Leroy's tall tale. I believe if Panther could have spoken, he would have elected to plead the fifth.

Afterwards, the night was as silent as a tomb. Despite the quiet, I was lucky if I'd gotten an hour's worth of sleep.

The next day, I heard the truck rumbling outside before coming to a stop, its air brakes hissing like a giant snake. I ran to the window watching and waiting for my opportunity to run downstairs to Connie.

Two huge boxes were the last to go. I watched one of the burly movers roll down the truck's metal door, and then climb into the driver's seat next to his partner. The truck roared to life as it began following Leroy's Cadillac to its destination. A Cadillac with a dog riding shotgun, panting a smile, enjoying a fabulous dog day afternoon, happy to be in the good grace of his master.

I wasted no time. I bolted out the door and down the stairs, leaving my mother snoring on the couch. Apparently, she didn't sleep much the night before either.

Connie's door was open. She was closing it when she saw me coming down the stairs, my eyes swelling with tears. "What's wrong, young Robert?" Connie asked. There was concern on her face. "Are you alright? Come here." I ran into her stretched out arms, planting my face on her stomach. She smelled of sweet perfume and coconut oil. I squeezed her

as tight as I could and let all my anguish, frustration, guilt, sorrow, and heartbreak fall, as she held me and allowed me to let it all wash out from my eyes and roll down my cheeks.

When I was done, she held me at arm's length and said, "Robert, my sweet little boy, I don't know what you are going through and you don't have to tell me, but I want you to know that you are loved. You are loved by your family and friends, and you are loved by me. I love you, young Robert. As you grow, no matter what happens in your life, you just remember that Connie loves you. Do you hear me?"

Oh yes, I heard her. I heard her loud and clear. Connie Underwood loved me and there was no doubt that I was the happiest kid on the planet. In our galaxy, even. My plan to tell her that I loved her, and I didn't want her to go somehow got stuck in my throat, so all I could do was nod in agreement. "Very well then," she continued, "you are a bright light, and you are here to shine. Don't let anyone dim your light. Be nice. Be kind. Be gentle, young Robert, and life will take you far." She kissed me on my forehead, ruffled my hair and left me to figure things out. It was the last time I ever saw her.

## 6

And so life went on. And before I knew it, I was married, divorced, remarried, had three children, and was teaching math at a college university. I managed to be nice. Kind. And gentle. Through it all.

My mother turned out to be a fabulous grandmother, despite her failure at being a fabulous mother. But I am okay with that. She kept a roof over my head and clothes on my back. That must be worth something. She's been given a second chance (my kids being the second chance) and is making good on it. Mother lives close by, in fact. I am happy to say we all made it to the suburbs, which was not a billion miles away after all.

My so-called father, James Raymond, died in 1990. Or maybe 1995. My mother was one of the few people who attended his funeral. I did not go. My anger would not allow me to feel for a father who was nothing but a stranger. I just hope that there's a special place in Hell for runaway dads. I suppose I should give my mother a few more points for sticking around.

Even though I never saw Connie again, I'd like to believe that my recurring dreams of her are as real as my childhood love for her. In my dream, she lives in a beautiful white house that has a big porch with a swing. She is sitting on the swing, watching the sun slide behind beautiful mountains that stand in the distance. A man, a *gentle* man, sits beside her

and puts an arm around her as she lay her head on his chest. They are a beautiful, loving couple at peace with the world. Happy. At home. Connie is free. Far away from One Hundred and Seventeenth Street, and far, far away from Leroy Jackson, a cruel man, a bad man, a mean man. In this dream, Connie's life is all she could have imagined and all she could ever have hoped for. But most importantly, she is anything but a White Honky Bitch.

Stay blessed, my dear. Stay blessed.

Love Young Robert,

The little boy who fell in love a long, long time ago, in a neighborhood far, far away...

# THE CORONATION OF HJALMAR

by Mark Holman

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For as far as one could drive in a half hour, the Coronation of Hjalmar Hjalmarson was mythical. It even had a brief moment of viral fame on social media, tagged as “Norwegian Bachelor Farmer Tinkles On A Phone” and “Twenty-First Century Luddite Raises Awareness Of Important Social Issues By Draining His Bladder.” When not engaged in discharging on the floor and going viral on social media, Hjalmar Hjalmarson lived a simple life on his farm as the last in a line of agrarian ascetics who, like their predecessors, the hermetic poets and seekers of history, were fading into the irrelevance of everything timeless in the age of digital homogenization. The ancient solitary poet Han Shan withdrew to the mountains and the Desert Father St. Anthony to the desert; for bachelor farmers on the flat prairie, their farm was their refuge from the world.

In local legend around the tiny hamlet of New Norway, North Dakota, it was called the Coronation of Hjalmar after a local art teacher had plugged the event’s details into oddly sentient artificial intelligence software that used public domain images on the internet to produce art. The software modified a version of the famed 1807 Jacques-Louis David painting titled *The Coronation of Napoleon*, where he crowned himself emperor before the Pope and a gallery of spectators. Instead of Napoleon surrounded by a vast crowd, the AI populated the scene with the likenesses of the witnesses to Hjalmar’s crowning. The AI added faces, a phone, and a golden ring like a crown splashing up from the latest model of a new Earphone 7000™ phone on the floor. The Pope standing by as Napoleon crowned himself in the original, had been digitally erased to avoid any intimation of offense of juxtaposing the holy with urine. Ironically the empty digital space was filled by the image of the digital device, the source of religious devotion of the present age of faith in techno present and future that had displaced faith in all else. The new emperor and religion were digital, ruling more than Napoleon could have dreamed.



The Earphone 7000™, the most recent iteration of electronics in the endless cycle of planned obsolescence filling landfills, polluting developing nations, and emptying bank accounts worldwide lying on the floor of the artwork, was the must-have of an infinite list of must-haves in a world dominated by technology. When he saw the artwork, Hjalmar laughed heartily, especially enjoying the use of the public domain, the vast unenclosed commons of art and knowledge increasingly under threat in an age when things not legalistically controlled by large entities for extracting profit were becoming as rare as hen's teeth.

Norwegian Bachelor Farmers like Hjalmar were a dying breed. They were anachronisms made up of increasingly irrelevant parts in an age when each constituent piece was an antiquated descriptor of a bygone era; Norwegian Americans had blended with other ethnic groups, while "bachelor" was an outmoded term in an age of fluid gender and relationships, and farmers, most of all, had become a dying breed in a time when they were as rare as hen's teeth.

While Hjalmar was quietly affable, his temper flared when he felt under assault. Incensed with rumored attempts to trademark the term "Norwegian Bachelor Farmer" and what he felt was a jocular condescension toward his brothers, the solitary philosophers who took no partner but the soil, by a local variety show personality, Hjalmar tried to stir up a rebellious spirit in his fellow isolated agrarians. Unfortunately, most were unreachable, sequestered in their isolated hermitages, or had no interest in engaging with the world they primarily sought to avoid.

Hjalmar, seemingly alone in his angst, drove his 1941 Studebaker truck to Fargo. Climbing on stage at the Tallgrass Prairie Memorial Theater during a live broadcast of the Flatlanders, he called show host Odd Thingsdal a stereotyping appropriating capitalist. Hjalmar was incensed at what he saw as his humorous condescension at the expense of Norwegian Bachelor Farmers and the rumored attempts to appropriate the very essence of his being. While the audience thought it was all a new and exciting twist to the show, he accused Thingsdal of creating and perpetuating a negative stereotype that led people to believe he and other agrarian anchorites were a bunch of ignorant boobs. He grabbed a large sack decorated with bold black lettering "Wheat Raised by Norwegian Bachelor Farmers" from the show's backdrop and spilled it all over the stage, hoping to score a symbolic victory. The victory turned pyrrhic when packing peanuts showered the scene, and somebody hit the laugh track. Flustered, for several moments, Hjalmar waxed on stage in a diatribe infused with elegance, poignancy, and the dry humor of prairie sages before being dragged off after ironically being hit over the head with a

concrete loaf of bread with the subtitle on the package “Made With Wheat Raised By Norwegian Bachelor Farmers”. Hjalmar had heard wrong, and there was no effort to trademark the term “Norwegian Bachelor Farmer” to rob him of his very identity—at least not yet.

Hjalmar was a contradictory Luddite because he felt that machines made up until the 1950s still had a soul, but their companies never did. Hjalmar decried the plague of “excess technology” that he believed was taking power out of regular people’s hands as the number of complex devices controlling life grew beyond comprehension. In a small act of rebellion for a small man from a small farm and a small town, after the county had put in a camera that would identify license plates and automatically mail out tickets along the highway outside of New Norway, Hjalmar had acted. One night, like a contemporary Don Quixote, in the pitch rural dark, only pierced by a few distant yard lights, Hjalmar had hooked on to the invasive piece of technology with his tiny 1946 Ford grain truck, yanking the thing out pole and all, tossing it in the truck bed then driving it to his farm, burying in a rock pile in the middle of his field. Witnesses, straining to see in the oddly dark natural darkness of a lightly populated place, described a vehicle “smaller than an SUV” that could fit inside the bed of a standard pickup. The investigation centered on a band of wayward teenagers known to be stealing road signs and never suspected the solitary older man on his little farm with a tiny grain truck. The denizens of supersized Americanism with no faith in the old or the small remained clueless to Hjalmar’s subterfuge.

Second to his outbursts of philosophical rage against the machine, Hjalmar was most well known for being in charge of the annual exhibition of agricultural performance art called the New Norway Threshing Show. Hjalmar was a caricature of a storybook farmer with his worn, grease-stained overalls, straw hat, and old Studebaker pickup truck that he drove to town once a week to gather at the local repair shop and around the one round table at the nearby restaurant Chez Lefse Casa with the informal group of retired mechanics and farmers for whom preparing for the New Norway Threshing Show was a year-long endeavor. The group, known in the humor-infused naming conventions of small communities as the Knights of the Welded Pliers, met weekly at the Casa to discuss the perpetual preparations for the one-weekend event.

The threshing show, which Hjalmar and the other philosophers of old iron presided over, had been going on since just after World War Two, the rigid dividing line between the old and new ways of so many things. The show’s irony was that the practice of threshing grain as a type of performance art with ancient machines had been going on for longer than

the amount of time threshing machines in the region had served as necessary tools for actual threshing. Hjalmar always thought the nostalgia surrounding threshing was as much about the lost purpose of shared community effort toward harvest dating to the earliest times of humans and agriculture as it was about the ponderous machines from the golden age of heavy iron invention. With the advent of self-propelled harvesting machines and agriculture given over increasingly larger tractors and devices, a few people could do what had been done by shared work of many hands for thousands of years. In his typical cynical and acerbically humorous tone, he said that before the advent of all the “excess technology,” as he called it, there had never been a need to have sentimental displays and recreations, and there was nothing to be sentimental about because it was just hard, sweaty, dirty, hardscrabble life.

The annual homage to the highly choreographed ballet of cutting, binding, stacking, threshing, and storing, requiring many hands and as much teamwork as a football game, had been going on since the beginnings of agriculture thousands of years before, only recently coming to an end in what Hjalmar called “The Age Of Abomination” had turned everything over to machines. Hjalmar felt that the whole process would only be complete when humans were removed from the equation and had nothing to do but watch robot machines do everything, losing the reason for their existence. On the day of the Coronation, he felt that day had arrived. The Singularity, when machines finally surpass humans and take control, which he believed was happening on the prairie, had to be stopped. Like General Ludd and, ironically, Captain Swing before him, Lieutenant Hjalmar was off to battle a new tumultuous turning of the page of modernity.

Like his predecessors two centuries before, he wasn’t so much fighting against the technology as the systems of control and exclusion they brought into being. The famed Luddites of history were not so much against technology as against its role in marginalizing people from their ability to direct their affairs and make their own life. In the twenty-first century, average humans could not understand or have the agency to do what they will with their machines while simultaneously being compelled to accept costly updates and invasive incursions into privacy. The Luddites had once railed against the use of technology by the robber barons of their day who were taking independence out of their hands. Still, those machines were understandable to the average human. Devices of the present were hard to rebel against because it was hard to rise against something you couldn’t even comprehend or understand.

On the fateful day of the Coronation, Hjalmar sped into town astride his bright red steed, an early 1950s Farmers Union Co-op tractor, at an unsafe speed of twenty-five miles per hour toward the local Tecno Tractor™ implement. The tractor was the same one his grandfather had driven home from the St. Paul factory enduring the jeers of locals for buying a “commie tractor” because of the Farmers Union’s cooperative ethos and bright red paint. He thought it would be the perfect machine to drive and have it out with the techno-industrial complex and its increasing encroachment into everything. Pulling up on his tractor as if it was a bright red sports car, he intended to express his disapproval and try to stop his nephew Alejandro Hjalmarson who was about to sign the papers and therefore sell his soul in a Faustian bargain to purchase one of the new Tecno Tractor 2100 Series™ self-driving tractors and all its associated technology agreements.

As he rushed through the door, he yelled across the room to his nephew as emojis flew through the air: “When will you stop being the (kitten, rainbow, unicorn) of all these corporations?” The emojis expressed strong emotion in a fun way and seemed to appear in the air as he spoke. He began to expound biblically like a preacher on the pulpit quoting scripture from the literary bible of human expulsion from the farm: *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Everyone stared in awe at the curmudgeon.

The farm implement showroom looked like an agricultural version of an Earphone store with sleek, shiny, space age surfaces everywhere. Moving across the room with a speed that belied his advanced years, he snatched the novel length technology agreement whose title was Total Information Awareness™ with Smart Farm Technology™ on the new Tecno Tractor 2100™ out of his nephew’s hands and threw it to the ground in front of a collection of the Knights, a couple of the parts counter guys and a few salesmen in their sleek Tecno Tractor™ polo shirts. The Knights, Sigbert Noonesdottir and Stinky Schweinfahrt, who sat on stools by the parts counter where they whiled away a few retired hours before going to their weekly meeting at the round table, held their breath, fearing Hjalmar’s forked tongue.

Calling it an “atrociousity against humanity, nature and the sanctity of tractors”, he unzipped his overalls while the two Knights and the others turned away from what they knew would come next. As Hjalmar began to release a stream, they pretended not to notice the splashes hitting the bottom of their jeans as they bounced off the polished floor tile. The emojis began to fly once again as Hjalmar directed his vitriol at sales manager Mike, saying; “You Mr. (cotton candy, rainbows, ice cream cone)

eating grin are nothing more than the return of the bad old days of the company store where people have no choice but to buy from the only store in town because they need a product. In addition, people and everything around them are the product. You can't just buy a tractor from a guy like you and be finished." He began to quote and satirize the text from the urine-stained cover on the floor: "Get constant on-the-go, real-time data when you subscribe to Watching You Every Minute™ and Pay Us To Use Your Data For Free™ integrated with Better Not Mess With Our Intellectual Property DRM™. With your ongoing Pay Us Forever™ subscription, you can access real-time stats on our patented Super Gene Seeds™ with built-in Don't Worry Be Happy, Climate Change Smimat Shange Flex Gene Technology™ as you apply our patented Kill Everything But Our Seeds™. Watch the corn grass grow through sensors via our patented Bio-Digital DNA integration™ that provides seamless connection so the living and the digital worlds never need to be apart. As a bonus, you can sync everything with your new Earphone 7000™ and sit in your pickup while your tractor does the work." Hjalmar exclaimed: "What has the world come to when a farmer can't even fix or drive his tractor, own his seeds, or be in the field alone without being connected, owned, and watched by several of the nodes of the techno-industrial complex?"

Gazes averted at Hjalmar's violation of all social convention and sanitation; he was next able to grab the phone from his nephew's hands where Alejandro had been about to do an electronic signature on the agreement. He continued: "I have nightmares where Steve Jobs is shoving one of these up my nose sideways to put it inside my head, but I keep sneezing it out, telling him to stick it up his own Bauhaus. Then one night, he finally installed it inside my head but had to pull it out every hour to make me pay for upgrades, repeatedly sticking it back in. My nose wouldn't stop running for a week." Tossing the phone onto the soaked papers on the floor, he directed the still flowing prodigious stream onto the electronic device that, for the better part of a thousand dollars, was largely impervious. He pointed to the thing on the floor and continued, "These bloody devices are the crux of the problem. Can't you wankers see that they are destroying our society and your minds while owning and selling you back to you?" Stinky gave Sigbert a quizzical look. "He watches a lot of the BBC on the internet and talks in British sometimes," said Sigbert. "He likes to say alu-mini-um instead of the American way alumin-um, very unpatriotic, I think."

Hjalmar continued: "It won't be long before people will be signing agreements ensuring that a person cannot tamper with their own body or

change their mind without the approval of some company of polo shirt-wearing human robots like this fool,” he said, pointing to Mike. “Bloody Orwellian hell! This tractor is just one step away from not needing a farmer anymore.” His screed continued: “Those Silicon Valley techno fascists will read your mind while sitting in that Las Vegas lounge of a tractor cab, analyzing your biometric functions like you are in a mobile ICU. As a bonus, they will profit off selling your data and by selling advertising back to you on the Big Screen 2100™ right there in the cab.” He went on as he shook the last drops onto the floor, “Those hermetically sealed tractor cabs are a metaphor for our whole damned civilization, sealed off from the outside world in cars, homes, and the endless joy- and anger-filled rabbit holes of the internet that separate us from any form of shared reality. How can you care for the Earth when you can’t taste the dirt, smell, and feel the green or the brown of the natural world and experience the sun beating down and the wind on your face? Our world sees the Earth as a substrate to make more and more things to fill our hermetically sealed cabs. When these tractors, the techno fools, and all they represent are done with us, the only farming will be inside hermetically sealed pods indoors, like being inside the cab of a Tecno Tractor™, because the world will be gone. Tecno Tractor™ wins, and we lose, but will you even know it from inside your bubbles? Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magical (rainbows, puppies, kittens) to paraphrase Arthur C. Clarke’s Third Law.” Again, the emojis hung in the air like provocations challenging the very flow of history.

As he zipped up his greasy overalls, his words and actions left everyone slack-jawed, finally comfortable with staring at the crazy elder. “Go ahead, nephew, sell your soul to these blockheads and pay them while they gather data from you for free so you can buy it back, and they know when you need to change your mind even before you do.” Zipping up his pants, he stormed out of the building, got into his tractor, and raced away in a cloud of dust, again at the unsafe speed of twenty-five miles per hour.

After a long silence, Alejandro was the first to speak. “My phone looks like it is still ok. Does anyone have some wipes? I just got an upgrade. Urine is sterile, after all. Sorry about my crazy uncle, guys.” Mike handed him a tablet with the documents pulled up. He quickly signed the required twenty-five times on the 80,000 words of the legalistic novel using his finger to enter an electronic signature, giving himself over to subservience to the machine. When completed, the man was now owned by the machine rather than the other way around.



Alejandro continued addressing the speechless group, “I told him that to run my operation, I have no choice but to sign these documents to sell my soul or not. I can’t run my farm with old machines and ancient technology, just like we can’t live without one of these,” as he picked up the dripping phone with a disinfecting wipe. “I told him the days of farming like he does are over. Hermetic bachelors farming with little tractors or a team of horses is quaint and looks fantastic at a tractor show, but it doesn’t produce enough to make ends meet or feed the world. He gets mad if I mention that little tractors like the ones he loves brought on the Dust Bowl. The irony is that those words he quotes from Steinbeck are about the same tractors that he loves so much. When I gave him a print of Alexandre Hogue’s *Drouth Survivors* showing a fence line buried in silt, looking a lot like the fence on the property line of the west quarter and the old tractor in the painting looking a lot like his tractor that broke down on the island with the giant cottonwood that has been there since the wet years started, he didn’t talk to me for a month.”

Hjalmar’s nephew had a different farming philosophy than his cranky, contradictory anti-tech uncle. Filled with the cheerful, grinning optimism of those fully assured in the wholesomeness of the technological future where everything was rosy and bright like some 1950s sitcom, Alejandro saw Hjalmar as a man gripped by the insanity of those who spend too much time alone on their farm talking to chickens and tractors. Alejandro loved and believed in the forward march of technology, progress, and a world filled with new substances and products that continued to improve life. With its techno-fixes and endless elixirs to elicit responses and manipulate the earth, Hjalmar thought it was a system that seemed to be coming apart in the bizarre, disembodied present. Still, he was just a crazy, contradictory hermit who lived on an insignificant little farm, so what did he know?

Time moved on, and it became one of those moments that get filed away in the history of a place and recounted for generations until there are no more generations in that place. A place, similar to a person, dies its final death when its name, spoken for the last time, flows into the ether. Like so many small towns, history itself would eventually evaporate from the land, the stories just memories sometimes heard on the wind in cornfields where people had once lived.

# INTIMATIONS OF THE DIVINE

by Nancy J. Jones

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It was not till after Michael Jensen was reincarnated as his stepdaughter's pony that it became clear he was obsessed not so much with sex as with religion. Quite simply, he desired to know God and viewed intimate relations as the vehicle through which he might best experience the divine.

The day he and Karin had stood at the altar and exchanged vows, the words of the Apostle Paul had glittered in the air like sapphires: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." But for eight years, this mystery had eluded him. Indeed, his sex life had become a disaster.

Although he gave every appearance of being a devout man, privately he doubted that he believed sufficiently in God for God to believe in him. Thus it was that, in the grip of a crisis of faith and on the verge of marital implosion, he collapsed in the First Presbyterian Church during the funeral of former Mayor Harold Lintelman. It was a solemn ceremony of pomp and hypocrisy sprinkled with genuine grief. Michael himself had laid the mayor out in regal repose. There remained no hint of the Alzheimer's that had consumed him—the vague, querulous mouth, the darting eyes. Now Michael rose with the tide of mourners, opened his hymnal, and sang the first bars of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." He had a voice that could seduce angels, a mellifluous tenor that soared toward the sanctuary's vaulted ceiling on ribbons of stained-glass light.

But celestial voice notwithstanding, he could not talk to his wife. He dreaded the evening that lay ahead. As he sang, he began to perspire. The church was too crowded. His chest felt tight.

Michael's body lurched forward in a ludicrous and mortifying manner. As he fell, the last face he saw was that of the mayor with his frozen, beatific smile, unconcerned that one of his fellow congregants, just three weeks shy of forty, was ill prepared to meet his Maker.

But the meeting did not occur. Instead, Michael revived to find himself inside his own blue and silver horse trailer, careening down the



highway, a plastic net filled with fragrant alfalfa swinging before his nose. The throbbing pain that chanted, “Sinner! Sinner!” as it lashed against his ribs had disappeared. He felt a fly land on his belly and kicked at it with his hind leg. That was when he realized his plight. He peered around at his body, as far as the rope attached to his halter would permit, and realized that he was no longer a man of imposing height and superb physique but a dapple-gray gelding.

Michael lost his balance as truck and trailer swung into a curve. He scrambled to regain his footing on the grooved, rubber mat and braced himself against the padded breastplate. Sweat soaked his flanks. In his anxiety, he raised his tail and expelled a stream of manure that ran down his legs. A sticky, yellow warmth spread from his hocks to his fetlocks. He was appalled.

As the trailer hurtled down the highway, he turned from the humiliation of his immediate circumstances to the more enduring consequences of his new condition. He struggled to reconcile his transformation with his preconceptions of the afterlife—not to mention the change in relations with his wife and stepdaughter. He had always scoffed at the notion of the soul returning to inhabit a new body, particularly that of a mere animal. It went against the essence of the Resurrection—of the transfigured Christ raised up from the dead. It went against the promise of eternal life. Perhaps, he reasoned, this was purgatory, that a man who had not only doubted God but also sinned against him should return to earth as a lowly pony to atone for his misdeeds before ascending to heaven. For Michael Jensen—son in Jensen and Son Mortuary, minister to the deceased, consoler of the bereaved—had recently had an affair. It was brief, a single night’s indiscretion. Furthermore, it was unconsummated. But there it was. He had not told Karin.

Just then, the rig swung off the highway, crawled down a long gravel drive, and came to a crunching halt. Michael leaned against the breastplate to balance himself and whinnied. His voice rang high and desperate in the thin, prairie air. He raised his tail and released a second stream of manure.

Two doors slammed in unison, and two sets of footsteps—one light and measured, the other erratic, skipping—approached the back of the trailer. Karin and his stepdaughter Melissa lowered the ramp. In an instant, Karin had entered through the side door, unsnapped his lead rope, and backed him down the ramp. He stood alert, nostrils flared, taking in his surroundings in the fading light. There was the house with its peeling yellow paint. (Yet another of his failings—he had promised to paint it the

summer before.) There was the barn, its wide door flung open to welcome in the last rays of sunshine.

He was home. How much time had passed since the heart attack? A week, a month? Pale green leaves sprouted from the trees bordering the yard and new, tender grass spread across the lawn. It was still early spring.

Karin patted his neck. "There now," she said. "It's all right." She was slimmer, perhaps five to seven pounds, but she appeared to have weathered his death superbly. Her voice was even, her skin glowed like melted caramels. Probably she was happier without him. He had been a dismal husband.

She handed the lead line to Melissa. "Let him walk around a bit, Missy," she said, hands on hips, surveying him. "Squirt's a good name for him. Look at the mess he's made of his legs." She laughed. "We'll have to hose him down."

Michael turned his head away from the women and gazed at the house. He had always been unnerved by Karin's laughter. It was slippery, buttery. He was always sure that he had somehow missed the joke, or worse still, that the joke was on him.

The setting sun glinted off the upstairs windows. The house looked the same. On the outside. He would never know what Karin had done inside, if any remnants of himself remained.

"Come on, boy," Missy said, tugging at the lead. She led him over to the side of the drive and sat down on the grass. "I hope you like it here, Squirty." She fed him a handful of young grass. "Mom said we could keep my old pony in addition to her mare, so you won't be lonely. His name's Timmy, and he's been the man of the place since my dad died last month. I don't talk about that around my mom."

The last, matter of fact, but her voice grew softer, almost a whisper. And her eyes were misty. His breath had constricted when she said, "my dad." He had always been unsure of how she felt about him, if she had felt cheated because Per had died. She was so young, only twelve. She was slight for her age, and her fine, brown hair hovered above her bony shoulders like a wary moth.

It struck him, too, with sadness, that his stepdaughter now carried on those slim shoulders the same burden he had lugged along throughout his marriage. Missy would not talk about Michael with Karin, as he had not talked about Per with his wife. Poor Karin. She was only thirty-six and already twice a widow. Her daughter twice made fatherless.

Karin had moved her studio out to the barn after the fight. Everything except the kiln, which remained in the basement. The studio was upstairs, adjacent to the hayloft, in the apartment they'd built for the stable hand

they'd never hired. Karin and Missy had always cleaned the stalls themselves. There were only two horses after all, Missy's pony and Karin's mare. They had decided against boarders after building the six stalls. Besides, they liked the work, they said. Michael believed that Karin felt more at home in the barn, with her daughter, with the animals, than with him. Often, she and Melissa went back out after dinner to check the horses' water buckets one last time, feed the cats, he really didn't know what else. He had envied them the effortlessness of their relationship, the easy conversation, the comfortable silences.

"I wish you were happy in your skin, Michael," Karin had said once. Her voice was both playful and sad and she brushed the back of his neck with her fingers.

Well, he had a new skin now. Though he didn't see how he'd be any happier in it.

In the wash rack the women moved around him, quiet, efficient. They talked softly as they hosed the sweat and salt from his coat, the green stains from his legs, massaged his shoulders and loins. Was it sinful to enjoy their ministrations? Would his satisfied grunts and snorts keep him from entering heaven?

"There, now, that's a good pony," Karin said as she patted him on the rump and tossed three slabs of clean-smelling hay into his stall. A green plastic bucket in the corner held sweet feed. Michael scoured the tub with little circular motions of his tongue, licking up the morsels of molasses-coated oats, the coarse, red grains of mineral salt.

While he ate, he allowed himself to gaze at Karin, turning his head so he could see her better with his monocular vision. She was beautiful, her shirtsleeves rolled up above the elbows, hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was mesmerized, found that he wanted her. His penis extended from its sheath and bounced against his belly. Alarmed, he spun around so Karin wouldn't notice and, in his haste, knocked over his stepdaughter, who had been standing by his side, brushing his coat.

"Mom," she cried.

Karin leaned against the open stall door and smiled. "It's all right, Missy. He's frightened, that's all. Remember, everything is new and strange. He'll settle in. Move slowly, so you don't startle him."

Michael was not frightened but terrified. His embarrassing erection, his close call with Missy, brought home not just the limitations but the dangers of his altered state. To make matters worse, he remembered how Karin and Missy used to groan when it was time to clean Timmy's sheath. Every six months, mother and daughter took a bucket of warm water and gently washed away the grit and gunk that had accumulated around

Timmy's penis. Michael had been appalled when they'd first told him about the procedure, but the veterinarian had explained it was essential for good hygiene.

"Dad, it was so gross," Missy said, wrinkling her nose, relishing her father's distress. "You should have seen the size of the beans in his urethra. Yuck." She held up her thumb and index finger to indicate the size of a shriveled pea.

"Poor pony," said Karin, her eyes distant and unfocused, as if she were reliving the experience. "You could hear him squeaking every stride around the arena this week. No wonder he kicked at me when I went up in there." She sipped her water, ruffled Missy's hair. "Isn't it fun owning a gelding?" she teased.

Michael felt his face flood with heat. He brought his napkin to his mouth, wiped the beads of perspiration from his upper lip, frowned at Karin.

"Why can't you let the vet do it?" he asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," Karin had said, breaking a roll with her lovely fingers, the same fingers that had...Michael couldn't complete the thought. "Why should we pay the vet when I can do it myself? It's not a big deal. It's no more disgusting than—"

"I don't want to hear." Michael had cut her off. And that had been that. In the future, they spared him the details of horse care.

What *were* beans, anyway? Michael imagined them as secretions that hardened around specks of grit, like pearls in an oyster. He saw his beans on a necklace around Karin's neck. Certainly, he could no longer give her pearls. Michael began to pace the length of his stall.

"Let's let him settle down." Karin put her arm around Missy, and they walked out into the night's expanse of sky and stars.

After they left, Michael watched as lights winked on in the house. At least Karin did not seem to have a boyfriend yet. There had been no mention of a third for dinner, no sound of strange tires on the gravel. But what did it matter? Now that he was a pony, what hope did he have of ever properly making love to his wife? And how could he begrudge her, who had suffered so much, such companionship? From now on his relations with her would be perfunctory. She would clean his sheath twice a year, out of necessity, for his health. She would overlook the repugnance of the chore. Afterwards, she and Missy would laugh.

Michael lowered himself onto the fragrant pine shavings, tucked his legs beneath his belly, and sighed. The mystery of which Paul had spoken—of two become one—was beyond his reach forever. Before he slept, he prayed for God's redeeming grace.

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Over the course of the next month, as he lay in the bedding Karin and Missy spread for him or grazed in the pasture, Timmy dozing at his side, the mare nearby, Michael reflected on the tortured course of his marriage.

It had begun on their honeymoon. It was May in Paris, and the first day the Sacre Coeur shown above them, arrayed as for a coronation in all its splendid whiteness, from the summit of Montmartre. That evening, the lamp on the nightstand cast its own pale and virginal glow as Michael waited for his wife beneath the cool, cotton sheet. They had not yet made love. He had been insistent on that point. Now, he was troubled. Karin was a widow. Her first husband Per had died in a car accident. Was Karin not joined to him throughout eternity, as Christ to the church?

The church had sanctioned his marriage. Michael himself had counseled many widows upon their loss, urged them to remain open to life, to love. Karin deserved a husband, Melissa, who was just a baby, a father. But still, as he listened to the sounds of Karin brushing her teeth, he felt an irrational gloom.

Their lovemaking that night had been unreserved. When Karin slipped into bed, he was aroused at once by the sight of her rose-dark nipples. Yet afterwards, as Michael watched Karin's chest rise and fall beneath the damp sheets, he felt the presence of a third person in their bed.

And so it was every time they came together. In the blur of sensation, of skin on skin, the mingled sweat and secretions of their bodies, he forgot himself, gave himself over to the rhythms and language of love. But always, in the inevitable falling away, of one again become two, he felt cheated, betrayed. He imagined Per living not only in Karin's memory, but in her flesh. He saw the imprint of Per's long, slim fingers on the white skin of Karin's thigh—Michael had embalmed Per, been mesmerized by the pale, smooth fingers, the absence of the calluses and ridges of the farmers and carpenters he so often buried.

Michael berated himself for his inability to accept the presence of love, of commitment, in Karin's first marriage, without negating the possibilities for the same in his own. Often he prayed, prone and desolate beneath the sheets as Karin slept. But he could not shake off the idea that he had been, would always be, deprived of the ultimate intimation of the divine, perhaps the only glimpse into the nature of God allowed to man and woman on this earth.

Over time, Michael became jealous not only of Per, but of others in Karin's life. For Karin was never his alone. Always, she belonged to someone else. And always, she was smiling, laughing. He resented the time Karin spent with Missy in the barn, her evenings with her friends, her summer weekends at her former in-laws. He could not endure the hours she passed, oblivious, in the studio she'd set up in the sunroom. He could not bear to watch her at her wheel, her cheek streaked with brown where she had brushed her hair out of her face, her slender fingers shaping the flaccid clay, which arched gracefully, sinuously, under her hands.

Finally, Karin declared she could not work in his presence. "I feel shadowed," she said. "I'm sorry. I can't help it. I want to be with you, but I can't focus." In summer, she moved out to the sun porch, to the other side of the French doors but he couldn't help himself. He often lay down whatever he was reading and came to watch her at her wheel on the other side of the glass.

"Why don't you spend time with *me*?" he'd said once. "Only God can breathe life into clay," he said. It was something his father had told him long ago when Michael was first learning to embalm the dead, marveling at their waxy skin.

After that, Karin began to slip downstairs in the middle of the night to work while he slept. Her pieces became more and more luminous, as if it were her soul itself that she poured into each bowl and vase.

"Maybe we should see someone, get some help," she said one night, addressing the bedcovers and stroking his forearm with that touch of hers, light as meringue. But he had refused. He had sulked and turned away from her.

In the kitchen the next day, Karin had set three ripe tomatoes from the garden on the counter. The swollen, red globes seemed to mock him. Without touching them, he knew they were still warm from the sun, their smooth, powdery skins radiating an almost sexual heat. Her pleasure was everywhere, in everything but him. He flung the tomatoes against the smooth, white cabinets, where they splattered and dripped like the blood of paradise.

He strode to the porch, intent on confronting her, with what he didn't know. She was bent over a pot. On the rose-painted table next to her stood several pieces she'd recently glazed. He grabbed a bowl of iridescent lavender and turquoise and hurled it against the wall.

Karin flinched and spoiled the vase on her wheel. "My God, Michael," she said. "What's wrong?" She waited, her hands poised above the clay, her eyes frightened but tender. "What is it?" she asked again.

He wanted to go to her, apologize—for he was not a violent man—put his head in her lap, feel her fingers in his hair. But his feet would not move. “I’m going out,” he said.

He walked the streets for a long time in a restless and anxious mood, but finally he had to return home.

Karin did not come to bed that night. The next day she moved her studio to the barn.

“Is there anything I can do?” Michael had asked as she lugged her wheel through the kitchen door.

“No,” Karin said, her biceps taut as she lifted the wheel over the threshold. “It’s all right.” The door slammed behind her and she hoisted the wheel down the steps.

A week later, in the certain knowledge that his marriage had failed, or rather that he had failed his marriage, he’d had the affair. It was in Seattle, at a funeral director’s convention, and it, too, was a fiasco. Annette, the woman with whom he’d almost had intercourse, had stroked and stimulated his penis for more than half an hour, to no avail. She was pale and flat-chested, her red hair bound in a tight chignon at the base of her neck. They met at a session on the special needs of the bereaved when the departed has had more than one family. She led him to her room and lay back on the bed the moment he had closed the door. She held out her arms, legs spread in invitation. He had been unsure what to do.

When he hesitated, she sat up and unbuckled his belt, removed his pants and socks and boxers. But despite her considerable charms and skill, Michael was unable to respond to her overtures, unable to initiate any of his own. In the end, he had fled, his recalcitrant penis flopping madly inside his trousers, his under shorts discarded and forgotten at her bedside.

High above the clouds on the flight home, far above his own turbulent emotions, he considered that perhaps fate had spared him. He had taken it as a sign, had pledged to see a therapist, as Karin wanted. But the very next week, he had died.

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Despite his initial alarm, Michael found the life of a pony comforting. The sheath-cleaning seemed far off. Perhaps Karin and Missy would forget. Or perhaps they’d call the vet. He was still despondent that he’d never be able to reconcile with his wife. But at the same time, he felt a palpable relief that he was no longer gripped by the angst and doubt that had tortured him when he was a man. He no longer had to face the



possibility that he might not be able to conquer them, that in the end they might consume him.

Now, every morning either his wife or stepdaughter pushed open the barn door just after six a.m. and called out, "Good morning, Squirt! Time for breakfast." His life settled into a new routine, a scoop of sweet feed, three slabs of alfalfa, and a clean bucket of water twice a day, turnout after breakfast, a daily riding session with Missy when she got home from school, and a short trailer ride to Missy's instructor for lessons Saturday mornings.

He enjoyed sailing over fences with his stepdaughter. He tucked his front legs beneath him and thrust his head and neck forward, feeling the wind in his mane, Missy's hands steady alongside his crest. Sometimes Karin brought along her mare, and after Missy's lesson, they rode out across the prairie. He inhaled the sharp, clean scent of the rich, black earth, thrilled to the cool wind that blew the mosquitoes away, cut the heat of the sun.

He had never known what to say to Karin and Missy. He, who knew without fail what to say to the woman who had lost her mother, the man who had lost his son. Death was manageable, the rituals it required solemn and dignified. He flourished a handkerchief, offered an arm, patted a hand. But the rituals of home and hearth eluded him.

Now that he was a pony, however, the days tumbled by, neither trickling nor gushing but flowing smoothly, imperceptibly, one into the other. Michael was lulled by their rhythm, by the sound of Missy's and Karin's voices washing over him. He was no longer incapable of the responses expected of him.

In the beginning, he was alert, anxious, waiting for the moment in which his stepdaughter would say, "Do you miss Daddy?"

And Karin would respond, "Sweetheart, I loved your father, but he had problems. I'm sad he didn't get help before he died. One day when you're older, I'll explain."

But they never talked about him. At least in his presence. Their conversations were unmemorable. What was important was the way they worked together, as if their love flowed from one to the other, to him, without need of language.

Michael was overcome with gratitude. He saw that God had sent him back as a pony so that he could experience the blessing of forgiveness. Michael sighed.

Karin noticed and laughed. "You like your life?" she asked. "You should. You've got it pretty good, Squirt, old man."

Her laughter washed over him, cleansed him of his sins.



Then one afternoon, Missy put him on the crossties to pull his mane. She worked from poll to shoulder, taking the smallest sections of hair so the process wouldn't hurt. After she finished, she took the clippers and trimmed away the long hairs along his legs and around his hooves, and his bridle path.

"He looks super, Missy," Karin said. She carried a bucket of water down the aisle. "We might as well clean his sheath now, too. Why don't you run and get the gel?"

Michael clamped his tail to his buttocks. If he let her touch him—worse still in the presence of his stepdaughter—it would make a mockery of their marriage, ruin everything that he had gained. He began pawing the floor, his hoof scraping across the rough concrete. Karin patted his rump and set down the bucket. Michael drew his penis up far inside his sheath. His belly muscles tightened along with his resolve. He would kick out if need be, not to strike but to discourage her.

"There," Karin said absently, stroking his neck, "it's all right. This won't take long. Then you can eat." She scratched her leg with the boot of her other foot.

Maybe if he behaved badly enough, Karin would give up and call the vet. He shivered. He had broken out in a sweat.

Missy returned with the gel. Karin put a hand on his back, bent down, and dipped the soap in the warm water. She brought it toward his belly. Michael shifted sideways on the crossties. She moved closer and tried a second time.

"It's all right, boy," she said, her hand holding the gel edging toward his groin. Michael sidestepped away from her again. After three more tries, Karin waited till he had backed himself up against the wall. Then she picked up the bucket, set it down beside him, and tried a sixth time. This time, he swatted at his sheath with his right hind leg, avoiding Karin's hand.

"Lift one of his front legs, Missy," Karin said.

Missy raised his right leg as if she were going to clean his hoof, but when Karin reached for his penis, Michael crow-hopped so that Missy had to let go.

"We'll have to twitch him," Karin said. She went over to the tack box and returned with a short, wooden handle, a loop of chain attached at one end.

Michael had forgotten about the twitch. He had had to twitch Timmy when Timmy had pneumonia so Karin could give him his penicillin shots. Timmy reared as soon as he saw a needle, but the twitch distracted and

immobilized him. Timmy apparently had never minded having his sheath cleaned. Of course not, his relationship with his wife was not at stake.

Now Karin took the twitch, pulled Michael's upper lip forward and looped the chain over it, twisting it until his skin was pinched between the links. He had had no idea how powerless he would be once she twisted the chain. His lip tingled and pulsed, he stood riveted to the ground. He experienced not so much pain but rather paralysis, like the immobility of the woodcocks he and his father used to trap in the beam of their flashlights on spring evenings when he was a boy. The little birds sat rigid and alert, beeping automatically until they were released from the light to soar high into the night sky.

Caught in that memory, he stood still, Missy at his head, as Karin moved the bucket of water closer to his side, bent down, and dunked her hand back in the water, poured more gel into her palm. She reached inside his sheath, loosening the gunk that accumulated in the folds of skin. She repeated the motion over and over, dip and cleanse, dip and cleanse. Her fingers reached further up inside, exploring the cracks and crevices, routing out the grit. As she worked, he could feel her breath on his belly, quickening now from exertion. His penis began to stiffen and wriggle.

"That's a good boy," she said. "See, it's not so bad." Then to her daughter, "Missy, loosen the twitch. I think he'll stand now."

Missy untwisted the chain and stroked his nose, whispered to him. His penis hung, wet and bobbing, beneath his belly, as Karin worked. A warm, hazy feeling radiated from his groin, up the line of his belly to his heart.

He had been wrong about everything all along. He had been wrong to resent Per, Karin's friends, her pots. And he had been wrong to believe it was the sexual act itself that gave one a glimpse into the nature of God. It was, instead, the vulnerability one risked. He had never allowed himself to be so vulnerable, so exposed. Karin was breathing harder now, and he was sure she felt it, too.

Then it was over.

"OK, Missy," she said. "That's it. You can give him a carrot and put him away. Thank God that's finished. Poor thing, look at all that gook I removed. Ugh. I can't wait to scrub my nails." She surveyed her hands, wiped them on a towel.

Missy offered him a piece of carrot, but Michael spat it out. "Mom, you hurt his feelings," she said.

"There, now, old pony." Karin patted him on the rump. "Don't worry. We love you or we wouldn't go to so much trouble. Missy, give him his hay; he'll get over it."

And she was gone, carrying the bucket of filthy water outside.

Michael followed his stepdaughter back to his stall. After the women left, he munched on his hay, morose and doubtful again. He had been so certain that Karin had felt it, too.

Perhaps she had. Perhaps it didn't matter whether Karin knew that the sheath she had cleaned was her husband's. Perhaps it didn't matter that Michael never had the chance to apologize for his appalling behavior, for the affair.

After all, who can predict under what circumstances the divine will reveal itself?

He nosed his hay, tore at it with his teeth. It was rough and sweet.

# THE HOUSE OF IMPOSSIBLE BEAUTIES

by Atiya Khan

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Your world is poetry in motion, like an ancient hand painted the frames and spilled it out of heaven for everyone to see. But you do not speak the words that could drip from your lips. You do not draw the worlds that occupy your mind. You do not converse through verse or music. You do not express yourself through words or rhythm. You do not articulate through language or structure. No one can see the world through your eyes, except for your smile.

Blinding, radiant, brilliant. You show the world how you view it through this one simple gesture. This world, though, is not yours. You are from another time, perhaps. Whether it is from before this time or after is irrelevant, for here you are, now. Maybe you are from another planet, a comet, an asteroid. Or, quite possibly, you have journeyed from another dimension, beyond our current comprehension. But imagination serves little good when it runs away and fails to take in the present moment. And in this case, it is necessary to just see you, in this moment.

What can you teach this world? Or are you here to learn from us? Most likely, the student and teacher will morph into one, with each side taking turns. Soon, the teacher will become the one who is taught and the one who is taught will become the teacher. These two forms will seamlessly interchange in a fluid manner as information passes through each party's consciousness. This shared knowledge will bridge the gap between two beings, each unknown to the other. But it has been forgotten that you do not speak.

Your sardonically lopsided mouth curves in the gesture of a smile, but as it opens, it only seems to gasp for air. You are like a fish underwater, making futile motions with your mouth. The eyes of a fish dart quickly to and fro, but yours are torpid and calculating. It appears that you could read anyone if they crossed your path, but that opportunity has not yet presented itself. The curious inhabitants who occupy this planet have not revealed themselves. But the words have left lips too soon! Who is that peculiar creature?

A small girl tumbles into the vale in which you happen to reside. Your residence, however, does not last long. No shriek emanates from your mouth, but your legs take you, with great speed, to a place of refuge - anywhere away from that foul being. After you are able to gather your thoughts and still your racing heart you begin to wonder, was the entity really so fearsome? The brief meeting consisted only of a quick glance and the instillation of fear in your heart. But absence makes the heart grow fonder because the heart forgets how hurt it was, and it is the same with you and your fear. Your racing heart forgotten, you slowly venture back to the place where first contact occurred.

*Hello* the bright eyed girl remarks nonchalantly. What a strange looking creature indeed! How can she see with only two eyes? And the body seems disproportionately large in comparison to her legs. How can she move? You look down to admire your long legs. And those disgusting tentacles coming out from her non-standing legs! How repulsive! What a vile creature this must be, if all her outer ugliness is any indicator of her inner condition.

*Are you an alien? I thought they were green, but you've got lovely eyes.* You always thought your 4th eye from the left was rather unsightly, but she liked all your eyes. She made you feel ashamed. Who were you to judge her? Perhaps this creature was not so revolting in appearance as you had first thought. She did have a nice bed of straw grass coming out of her head and she was dressed in exotically colored fabrics.

And words, oh beautiful words, spill from her lips like a swollen river overflowing with water, quenching your thirst. You want to hear more, you want to see more—more of the things she could forge with her words. She could create magical lands, move mountains, beat giants. The words are things of beauty, each a magic powder or potion that can be melded with other words to craft a powerful spell. In her expert hands, she manipulates the words deftly so you are taken prisoner and cannot move. Around your limbs words wind themselves like spider silk. You cannot move, you are so enthralled. The words begin to pierce your skin, flow through your bloodstream, and inspire your thoughts. Your mouth opens and...

*It's all right. They'll come out when you're ready. It happens to my brother too. He's almost two. But he mostly screams when his mouth opens. I'm only in the first grade. Only in the first grade.* You are not sure what the first grade is, but it surely must be a great honor to be in if this master of words was in it. A deep desire to be in the first grade was now instilled in you. Perhaps if you heard words more often, they would fill your being and you would be

unable to do anything except utter the words occupying every crevice of your mind.

Now you have a mission. You must find the secret of the words. Everyone else seems to have already found them. Some have unassumingly picked up the secret of words, like a grain of sand embedded in a shoe. Others have consciously acquired the secret, like a coin collector carefully searching for and accumulating precious metals. Maybe now that you were here, in this strange place, you would find a method previously unbeknownst to you that would allow the words to penetrate your consciousness. The first grade seemed to be the key to your quest of obtaining words.

Through vague gestures you conveyed your wishes to the young girl. She managed to dissuade you from letting your presence be known. *There is too much danger*, she explained. *People don't like what they don't know*. She hands you a present to numb the sting of her words. As soon as you touch it, you are besotted by the object. It is long, slender, and sleek. Its quiet presence exudes power and strength. In your hand, it fills a void that had remained unknown for so long. The pen embraces all that is beautiful in its six inches of ink-filled glamour. It was brilliant, from end to tip—a beacon of intellect. You throw the pen's shiny silver cap to the side, as if you could not stand the containment of the ink any longer.

What a beautiful day it would finally be. The words that had held you captive for so long would let you be free just as the oppressed overthrows the oppressor, reclaiming their lawful rights. You would now hold the very thing that could create what had tortured you for so long. What a beautiful way to finally be set free.

A piece of crumpled lined paper is handed to you. Though this singular piece of paper appears unremarkable to most, it excites you. This is the vessel upon which the pen will float. The cool touch of the pen chills you as it dances upon the blank ledger. It seems as though the words that are written illuminate themselves. As the light of the heavens rains down upon the paper, the glow that emanates from it appears to be blinding.

The words for you are sunbeams. The more you take them in, the more they are burned into your being. Yet, you cannot speak them, so you write with a fervor unmatched by any creature, human or otherwise. The words to you are beings, and small drops of ink fall like dew, giving shape to your words that could allow thousands, perhaps millions of others, for a second, to possess the same thoughts in their mind as you do now. But a strange thing happens. Just as the morning dew slowly evaporates when

sunbeams strike hot upon the earth, so do the drops of ink on the page dissipate.

The ancient caverns of your eyes begin to well as you start to understand why you will never be able to share the fruits of your mind with the world. The words are crumbs that fall from the feast of the mind. But you have consumed yourself so utterly with the feast, so assiduously studying the meaning of the words, absorbing them into your very being, that you have none left to speak.

You do not speak the words that could drip from your lips. You do not draw the worlds that occupy your mind. You do not converse through verse or music. You do not express yourself through words or rhythm. You do not articulate through language or structure, for they were all designed to fill the void of understanding between people. But your presence on this earth leaves no emptiness to be filled. No words are needed to strengthen the bridge from your world to ours, because you are already here.

# A SERIES OF CHAOS

by Katie M. Leier

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I slammed the door. “Whoever smeared peanut butter on my map of Ukraine better start praying because your life is over!”

I dropped my backpack, keys, and coat in a heap in the umbrella holder by the door and kicked both my shoes into the living room. I could hardly see straight; my mind was too full of images of my ruined European history project—a project I had spent the better part of last week perfecting—slobbered with sticky tan spread. Completely ruined. My professor had nothing good to say, and my grade would be even worse.

Whoever was responsible would have my wrath upon them.

“Jeff! Taylor, Nick, anyone!” I stormed through the apartment, searching high and low in the two bedrooms, bathroom, and back to the kitchen and living area. I even checked the side deck, even though it was the middle of February and two feet deep in snow.

“Drat!” My threats had been exploited in an empty apartment. My shoulders sagged as I opened the refrigerator.

I withdrew my leftover Panda Express just as my phone began to belt out the Canadian national anthem.

“I wish Jeff would NOT steal my phone!” I moaned. Setting my meal aside, I checked the caller ID. *Speak of the devil.*

“Hey, Jeffy, nice ringtone you decided to give me this time. An improvement on the last one—something by the Beach Boys, I think it was?”

“Maybe if you would change that password you’ve had since sixth grade, and maybe if you would leave your phone on silent like a normal person in this century, then maybe I would leave it alone!”

My best friend was probably the craziest man to ever live in the grand state of Michigan, but you had to love him.

“What’s up?” I shoveled rice into my mouth with a butter knife because we hadn’t done dishes in a week.

“Well, it appears we have a problem.”

“Which is?”

“Nick sort of broke the keys to the van.”



“Excuse me?”

“Well, you see there was this pop can crusher, and we were sort of a little too excited, and we were crushing anything just to watch it die, and then Nick had the bright idea to test the durability of stainless steel...”

“Never mind.” I could imagine what had ensued. “I’ll bring the spare. Where are you?” I set my food back in the fridge, disappointed to be skipping dinner.

“At Taylor’s brother’s place.”

Taylor was the oldest of our little group—a junior in college. His brother, Grady, was a few years older. He and about a dozen other fellas rented a teeny little rambler in the most run-down area of town, where we often found ourselves hanging around, as if our two-bedroom apartment for four wasn’t crazy and crowded enough.

“OK, I’ll be there in a while,” I responded.

“Thank you, sir,” Jeff said dramatically.

“Yeah, yeah, just call me the auto-club,” I waved it off. “See ya.”

No sooner had I hung up than the Canadian anthem blared once more. This time it wasn’t Jeff, however. I swiped at the green button and put my phone to my ear.

“What’s up, Chloe?”

“You busy?”

“Depends.”

Chloe was a senior in high school. If you’ve been paying attention, the rest of us are college age, but that meant nothing to us where Chloe Hall was concerned. The five of us had been thick as thieves since before we could tie our shoes, Chloe included. I guess she had always been our little sister, and nothing had changed since us four guys graduated high school and rented an apartment together.

“You think you can come pick me up?”

“Depends,” I repeated. “I’m out to save the terrible threesome who broke the car keys.”

“They broke the...never mind. I don’t want to know.” Chloe sighed and I could see her bright green eyes rolling around her pretty head. “Look, I’m at the mall. My date went south, and I’m not exactly wanting to hitch a ride in the middle of downtown Detroit by my lonesome.”

“Your date dumped you?” I was fumbling in the coat rack for the spare keys and stabbed myself on a safety pin that stuck out of Jeff’s Carhart to hold the hood in place. “Ouch!”

“No, well, I dumped him,” Chloe explained. “Look, it’s a long story. I’m in the food court.”

“OK, I’ll come by for you before I go get them.”

"Thank you, Dexter!" she exclaimed in relief. "Really, thank you!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, just sit tight." I hung up. I withdrew the keys from Nick's letterman's sweater pocket. "I should charge mileage," I grumbled.

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It wasn't until I was all the way to the parking lot and staring at the empty parking spot that I realized that since Taylor, Nick, and Jeff had taken the van, I had no mode of transportation myself.

Absolutely exasperated, my broke college self called an Uber.

Chloe was waiting patiently outside the food court entrance at the mall. Her AirPods were fixed firmly in both ears, and she was bobbing along to her own world.

I had the Uber driver stop right in front of her. Her eyes went wide, and she started to hurry away.

I swung open the door and called out the first cheesy pick-up line I could think of.

"Heya, gorgeous, I hope you know CPR, because you take my breath away!"

Chloe whirled back around, her face brightening with recognition. "No, but I know karate, and I can rip your lungs out!"

Laughing, I let her slide in the back seat and followed behind.

"Nice wheels, Dexter. What happened—did the van finally earn its eternal reward?"

I gave the driver the address before responding. "No, they have the van, which is where we're headed." I held up the spare keys.

She threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, yes! The broken car keys! How dumb could someone get?"

"I don't think we even want to know."

"Excuse me." The Uber driver stared at us in the rearview mirror. "Did you say your friends broke your car keys?"

"Yes."

He looked back at the road. "Because that makes sense."

"Hey, them's my friends you're talking about!" I protested. It was one thing for Chloe and I to bash them. It was completely different for a total stranger to start in.

"My apologies," the man replied, but it was impossible to tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"Some people," I mumbled. Out loud, I addressed Chloe. "I don't suppose you want to tell me what that guy did on your date that made you dump him?"

Chloe withdrew her ChapStick from her purse. “No, I don’t want to.”  
“Fine.” I would just find out his name later, then myself and the other fellas would hunt him down and hurt him. No one messes with Chloe.

“What part of town did you say this house was in?” Our driver was cutting in again.

“Turn left at the next street,” Chloe advised. “It’s clear across town.”

“Practically in the Ukraine.” I rolled my eyes, recalling my ruined project.

“Don’t be snippy, Dexter.” Chloe glared. “It’s bad enough that I have to tag along on this side trek!”

“I didn’t have to come and pick you up, you know!”

“No, you didn’t—I could have called Uber on my own.”

“Well, I don’t think—”

“Um, sorry, I hate to cut in again.”

I turned in exasperation to the man in the front seat, suddenly aware that the car was sliding to a stop alongside the road.

“Um, it appears we’re out of gas.”

I felt my eyes go wide. “Get out of here.” Cars only lost gas in the movies.

“No, I’m serious.” He tapped the gauge where the tiny orange needle was now fixed on the E at the bottom of the dial.

Chloe sat back in the seat with a huff. “Great. Lovely. I really should have called my own Uber!”

“Well, I’ll call you a spare, no charge.” The man withdrew his phone from his pocket. “Um, on second thought.”

“Don’t tell me.” Chloe folded her arms. “Your phone is dead, right?”

“No, I don’t have service. Forgot to pay the bill.” He scratched his head. “My ex-wife got remarried last month, and I haven’t been real good about keeping my life together since the divorce.”

I sighed. This day had begun badly, and was quickly declining, and while I did possess some empathy, now was not the time to turn into a therapist for my Uber driver.

“You know what, don’t bother; I’ll call you a tow truck and we’ll get by just fine.”

“Thank you, sir!” The man didn’t even have the manners to apologize for the inconvenience.

Chloe and I slid out of the back seat, and after the man was taken care of, we started down the sidewalk.

I hadn’t taken more than four steps when a large body collided with my back.

“OOF!” I stumbled but didn’t fall. Chloe grabbed my arm and a large, orange blob went sailing by.

“What the—”

“THIEF!”

We turned around. “THIEF! STOP!”

“What’s wrong?” Chloe called to the middle-aged man who was running straight for us.

“That man robbed me! Stop him!”

I was still trying to gain my bearings when Chloe released my arm and took off like a shot. While she may play volleyball and be head cheerleader, she had also recently completed her second half-marathon and could out-run anyone I knew.

But she’s no football player, and even if she did catch the man, he would snap her like a toothpick.

“Catch him!” The little middle-aged man was wailing, practically in tears. I couldn’t help but wonder why in the world he was standing here like a crybaby and letting some blonde teenager chase criminals down the sidewalk in the snow.

I was that close to telling him what I really thought, but a sudden thought flashed through my mind. *I* was responsible for Chloe right now and if she got hurt, *I* would be to blame.

So I turned to run after my princess, determined to be her knight in shining armor, but then I remembered it was snowing, and it was February. The reminder came in the form of a poorly placed patch of ice.

“OOMPH!”

The world was black and blotchy. I couldn’t move. The next thing I knew, Chloe’s bright green eyes were staring into my face.

“Dexter? Dexter? Are you OK?”

I blinked.

Without another word, she pulled me up and began to brush the snow from my coat and pants.

“Didja slay the dragon?”

“Come again?”

“I mean—the crook. What happened?”

Chloe handed over my hat. I hadn’t realized it had slipped off.

“Yeah, I got him. Or the cops did. The police station is right around the corner, you know. Ran him right into the lobby.”

I smiled. “Well, I’m glad he didn’t hurt you.”

“That makes two of us.”

We started walking again. “By the way, what did he steal?”

The corners of her mouth turned up a bit. “Two quarts of tequila.”

I could hardly believe it. “We almost died from a couple of drunks who were jerking around a bottle of booze?”

Chloe slugged my bicep. “Serves you right for calling an Uber!”

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“I cannot believe how we got into this mess!”

I would have replied, but I was too busy huffing and puffing and shivering as I trotted alongside Chloe. If I had known how speedy this girl was when she was angry, I would have called another ride and let her sulk on the drive. But what I didn’t know was how long a two-and-a-half-mile walk was in the snow with an angry teenage girl.

“Oh, stop it, Chlo’. Saying that over and over won’t fix anything.”

“But it makes me feel better.”

“You could have called your own ride, you know!”

Chloe tugged her hat down lower. “But not every ride would turn out as crazy as this.”

I sighed. We were only about six blocks from the house. What was typically a ten-minute drive had turned into a whole afternoon, and I still hadn’t gotten lunch.

A firetruck honked in the distance. I hoped our Uber driver hadn’t gone up in flames to add to his incredibly unique afternoon.

Chloe kicked a fluff of snow. The wind blew it back into my face. I sputtered, the cold shock quickly melting into my eyes and mouth.

Frustrated, I swiped the moisture away. “On a scale of one to ten, how mad are you at me right now?”

“I’m hovering somewhere in the low forties.”

Another siren wailed, growing closer. I paused. “Do you smell that?”

“Yes, I do. That creep spilled tequila all over my shoes!”

“No, not that.”

Two firetrucks shot by, followed by a police car. In my heart of hearts, I knew what had happened, but I was too dumb to let myself believe it.

Chloe must have sensed it, too, because we both took off running at the same time. Sure enough, just six blocks ahead, a small cluster of people were gathered in the snowy driveway. Firemen were swarming the house, a plume of smoke curling from the roof. I could see flames over the top of the peak.

“Good gravy, what the heck happened?”

“Dexter! Chloe!”

"Jeff!" We hurried to join our friend in the neighbor's driveway, watching as Grady's house went up in smoke. Taylor and Nick came to join us.

"I burnt the house down." Jeff sipped his Diet Coke.

"Well, don't act all devastated about it!" Taylor rolled his eyes. "Grady and his friends are about to rip out your intestines and use them for silly putty!"

"What did you do now?" I groaned. If being an airhead was worth money, Jeff would be a threat to Donald Trump. A so-called accident such as this was usually easily avoided if you were anyone beside my best friend.

"Well..." Jeff swirled his beverage like it was fine wine, and not bottled pop. "Let's just say that hairspray and birthday candles are not meant to mix."

As if on cue, an audible POP exploded from the back porch of the burning building.

"Sometimes I swear that you are so...so..." I shook my head. "Words can't even describe you!"

"I'm too intricate, you mean." He winked impishly.

"I don't think you know what that means!" Chloe socked his arm. "Or how to count." I often wonder why she puts up with us.

"He's crazy," Nick scowled. Nick and Jeff have been friends just as long as the rest of us have, and they've only ever had one fight, and it has lasted for their entire friendship.

"Oh, and putting the keys in the can crusher doesn't earn that label?" Taylor smirked.

"Well, it was better than whoever spread peanut butter all over my history project!" The anger returned when I recalled my ruined masterpiece.

"Oh, let's forget it and go home!" Chloe was rubbing her mittened hands together, clearly unimpressed.

"I'll second that. The van's parked on the street." Taylor grinned. "Keys, Dexter?"

"Yes!" I reached into my pocket and found absolutely nothing. My heart dropped down to the core of the earth.

I frantically began to dig around in the rest of my pockets, the inside of my hat, and even my boots.

"No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!"

"Don't tell me..."

"Dexter!"

"Chlo', did I give 'em to you?"

"Now why would you do that?"

We all stared at one another as we stood in the snow, a burning house in the background, firemen and angry college boys surrounding us.

“Well.” Jeff drained the last of his Coke. “I guess we’re calling Uber!”

# THE SQUATTER'S DAUGHTER

by Kyleigh McCloud

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Near Fort Ransom, Dakota Territory, 1883

Aksel panted. The prairie grass engulfing his six-foot stature swished against his shoulders as he rested. Crickets chirped their evening lullaby. His gaze traveled to the sky. Despite nighttime having fallen, the moon and stars' brilliance beckoned him onward. He'd be home after another three miles.

Aksel adjusted his grip on his rifle and continued southwest. As he navigated the lush prairie, each step became heavier than the last. He sighed. In the distance, the grass was swaying. He pressed the butt of the rifle against his shoulder.

When the rustling grew closer, he aimed toward the noise. His heart thrummed against his ears as he waited.

A doe and twin fawns emerged and halted, their dark brown eyes staring at him. Aksel lowered his rifle. He stepped forward, and the deer sprinted, their white tails visible in the moonlight.

Aksel reached the edge of his homestead and parted the tall grass leading to the yard. His heart swelled as he studied his log house and barn. With the money he had earned at the Brinks farm, he hoped to improve his homestead next spring. A yawn escaped him. After two days of walking from Horace, he would settle for improving his sleep in his goose-feathered bed.

He eased open the door and tiptoed inside the small cabin. A sliver of moonlight spilled through the window curtains. Aksel's brow furrowed at the new decoration that had appeared in his absence. He leaned the rifle beside the door and hung his bedroll, then slumped on a chair at the dining table. Tomorrow, he would politely thank Miss Andersen for the curtains and compensate her for the cost. Aksel clenched his jaw as he removed his boots. The precious money in his pocket would be better



spent on improvements than frilly curtains. A soft sigh passed through his lips.

Miss Andersen needed to stop pressing him for a proposal. He wondered what advice his mother would have given for Miss Andersen's persistence.

He pushed Miss Andersen from his mind and draped his jacket on the back of the chair. Mor always preached, 'do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.'

As Aksel shuffled across the cabin, he stripped off his clothes and dropped them on the floor, then crawled into bed.

A high-pitched scream startled him. Someone flailed against him until he fell off the bed, landing on the floor with a thud. The intruder trampled over him as they fled. By the time Aksel rose from the floor, a gun cocked.

"Who are you?" a young woman demanded. She jabbed the barrel toward him, her shaky hands unsteady with the rifle's aim.

His eyes widened. *A woman!* Aksel snatched up his pants and jammed a foot through one leg, then the other. *And a squatter at that!* He forced himself to swallow but couldn't find his voice.

The intruder shouted, "Answer me!"

Aksel slowly extended his arms to the side, gaping at her. "The owner of this claim."

"It's ours now." She scoffed.

"Ours?"

"My far and I."

"I've been here three years. If you and your father want a homestead, there are a few empty parcels nearby," Aksel said. "And if your far needs help building a house, I'd gladly be willing to lend a hand."

The woman shook her head, long strands of hair fluttering against her body with each shake. The golden hues of her hair glinted beneath the moonlight.

Aksel glanced around his cabin, searching for the woman's father. She appeared to be alone. His gaze stopped on hers, and he studied her face. She must be in her late teens or early twenties, far younger than his twenty-eight. "Please put down the rifle before someone gets shot. I know you're alone."

"My far's sleeping in the barn."

“That’s not true. He’s either gone out for supplies, or he’s passed on from this world.” Aksel lowered his hands. The woman glared at him. He leaned over and grabbed his shirt off the floor.

“Stop. Stop moving.”

*She wouldn’t shoot him.*

Aksel was buttoning up his shirt when a shot was fired, the bullet sailing past him. He squinted at where the bullet had struck his wall. *She shot at him!* Aksel stormed toward her as she fumbled with the rifle for a re-load.

When he neared, she shrieked and swung the gun at him. “Leave me alone.”

Aksel flinched at the strike against his ribs, pain radiating across his side. The woman sure could hit. She went to swing again, but he raised his arm to fend off the second strike. The gun halted in mid-air.

“Are—did I—”

“I’m fine,” Aksel snapped. He grasped the barrel and yanked the rifle away from her. “Put the gun down before one of us gets hurt.”

Aksel laid the gun on the table and stifled a groan when a sharp pain assaulted his ribs. The chair screeched across the floor as he pulled it out from under the table. He clenched his jaw at the fresh onslaught of pain upon sitting. His fingers curled around the rifle’s barrel. He wanted to be ready in case she tried to kill him again.

The intruder joined him at the table. She fidgeted as her gaze went from him to the gun to the floor, and after several minutes, she apologized for accidentally squeezing the trigger.

Aksel stared at her. She fidgeted again, and a tight-lipped smile crept across his face at her uneasiness. He continued to stare when she looked away. “What’s your name?”

“Katja Nilsen.”

“Well, Miss Nilsen, I’m Aksel Johansen. How long have you and your far been squatting on my claim?”

“Two weeks.”

*Two weeks?* They must have arrived here within hours of his departure to Horace. Despite leaving his claim unattended off and on the past three years to work, people were respectable by not stealing his homestead. Aksel took a shallow breath. He and the Nilsens were no different, for he was squatting on the military reservation. With more settlers moving into

the rich Sheyenne River Valley, he should have expected not everyone to be respectable.

His eyelids growing heavy, Aksel stood. He picked up the rifle and winced as his side ached with pain. Miss Nilsen must have cracked a few ribs, or at least bruised them.

"You're hurt." Miss Nilsen's chair clattered backward as she hurried around the table and stopped in front of him. Before Aksel could protest, she prodded along his bare ribs, feeling the tenderness. Heat suffused his body, and he sucked in a sharp breath. Her prodding slowed. She glanced up at him as if noticing their closeness for the first time. "Oh...um..."

Aksel's lips twitched as she snatched back her fingers.

"I think they're cracked," Miss Nilsen stuttered.

"I'll be fine." Aksel bent down, clamping his tongue between his teeth at the renewed pain. He lifted his boots and headed toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"The barn. Should I expect a surprise there too?" Aksel teased. He gave a soft grunt as he fumbled with the door handle. His boots slipped and fell to the floor with a thud.

Miss Nilsen got them and handed them back to him. "Why don't you put them on?"

"I'm too tired. All I want is a place to sleep." The door banged open, and Aksel stepped outside on the porch. As he shuffled toward the barn, the grass stubble prickled his bare feet and the nighttime fall air made him shiver. In his haste to get away from Miss Nilsen, he had forgotten to grab his jacket and bedroll. Mor was right about tomorrow having its own worries.

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Katja stared at the door Mr. Johansen had disappeared through and blinked. Perhaps she'd dreamt of him. She dragged a chair over and placed it in front of the door, to alert her if he came back inside. Tomorrow would prove Mr. Johansen never existed. She rubbed her bleary eyes and headed to bed.

As Katja settled beneath the blankets, she examined the wall. The moonlight illuminated a bullet hole in the wall above her. She squirmed. *Stop it. It's just a shadow*, she admonished. Her fingers trembled against the

quilt, and she flattened them to stop the shaking. She forced her eyes closed, yet she tossed and turned.

Unable to fall asleep, Katja sighed and opened her eyes. A strange man was sleeping outside in *her* barn.

Her gaze returned to the bullet hole in the wall from where she squeezed the trigger without thinking. She could have killed him! Katja's stomach churned. Far had warned life on the frontier would be difficult and not to trust anyone.

Katja flipped the covers aside and got out of bed. She paced around the cabin. Warm milk tempted her, but she wrinkled her nose at the effort. She went to the bedside table and lit a lantern, adjusting the wick until the light flickered against Mor's Bible. A lump swelled in her throat. She caressed the worn cover.

*Mor's Bible—the only thing I have left of her.* Katja carried the lantern and Bible to the dining table. When she peered inside the cover, she kissed her palm and placed it over Mor's handwriting. She whispered, "You should be here."

Tears bubbled in the corner of her eyes and threatened to spill. Mor should have been buried in the earth instead of the ocean. Katja swiped at her tear-soaked eyes. She skimmed through the pages and stopped on a random one. A single line made her stiffen.

*Thou shall not steal.*

Katja searched around the cabin, then read the line again. She slammed the Bible shut. A hand on the cover, she struggled to speak in an even tone. "Mor? Is that you?"

Distant howls disturbed the quiet. Katja shuffled to the window and pushed aside the curtain, gazing at the vivid moon. A flash streaked across the sky. She murmured a wish, like Mor used to do when a star fell. Goosebumps pebbled across her arms, and she rubbed them. After she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, Katja leaned to blow out the lantern, but the Bible caught her eye.

"I should go to bed," she muttered. Katja extinguished the lantern and slumped onto the edge of the bed. She fidgeted with her fingers.

*Thou shall not steal,* Mor's faint voice whispered.

Katja hunched over, silent tears trickling down her face. An ache filled her. Why had Far persuaded them America would be better than Norway? Half of their family was lost to typhus on the ship and her older brother disappeared after they docked, along with their money. Far had lied.

The bed creaked as Katja rose. She padded to the dining table and relit the lantern, then grasped the Bible. Reading God's word had comforted Mor up to her dying hours. Maybe God's word would comfort her.

Katja opened to the first book of Corinthians. She glided over several chapters and paused at chapter thirteen, pressing a finger below verse thirteen. Her mouth dried. She had lost her faith, hope, and love on their journey to Dakota Territory.

Katja read until she fell asleep.

Someone shook her shoulder, and Katja gave a muffled groan. When she didn't rise, the person shook harder. "Miss Nilsen, wake up."

Katja gasped and jerked upright. She glanced up at the face of Mr. Johansen, her cheeks growing warm. Blue-gray eyes darted back and forth as she stared at them. Mr. Johansen appeared far younger than she had first assumed. Her cheeks grew hotter.

"You shouldn't fall asleep with the lantern burning," he chastised.

Katja pulled her shawl tighter around herself. She must have been sleeping hard not to hear the intruder alarm she had created. "Why are you back?"

"I told you. This is my homestead." Mr. Johansen's boots thumped against the floor, and he lifted the empty wood bin beside the stove. Katja averted her gaze to the Bible on the table. As he headed outside, he said, "Besides, I'm hungry."

When the door shut, Katja sprinted to her trunk and snatched up her dress. Mr. Johansen needed to leave. Dress in hand, she tiptoed to the window and spied him setting a log onto the chopping block. He winced and clutched at his side.

*That man! He's got cracked ribs, and he thinks he's splitting wood?* Katja marched outside and halted in front of him, putting her hands on her hips. Her dress toppled into the mud. "Mr. Johansen! You shouldn't be chopping wood with those cracked ribs."

Mr. Johansen gaped at her.

Katja narrowed her eyes and picked up the ax he had leaned against the chopping block. Mr. Johansen cleared his throat, and she glared at him.

"Your nightgown..." He looked away.

Katja set down the ax and re-covered herself, her toes curling deeper into the mud. She wanted to sink into the mud and hide. As she turned to

leave, she kicked the blade. Katja yelped as she stumbled, nearly falling. Mr. Johansen caught her.

The warmth of his arms radiated through her nightgown. They remained in that position for several moments, staring into each other's eyes. Mr. Johansen's breaths came in spurts. His lips pressed together in a thin line. Katja's heart raced.

*He's going to kiss me.*

"Can you walk?" he asked, his voice a pitch higher than usual. His face paled, and perspiration beaded on his forehead.

Katja gingerly stepped on her injured foot and winced. "I-I-I think so."

"Lean on me, and I'll help you into the cabin." Mr. Johansen stifled a groan when she wrapped an arm behind his back. With his help, Katja hobbled inside. She collapsed onto the chair, and Mr. Johansen dragged over another. "Put your foot up."

Katja raised her foot onto the chair and blood dripped onto the floor.

Mr. Johansen whirled around and rummaged through a cabinet. A minute later, he pressed a cloth to her foot. He clasped her hand, placing it over the bandage. "I need to get wood. Will you be okay alone for a few seconds?"

Katja nodded. His footsteps faded, and within seconds, he returned with wood. The fire chamber door squeaked as he opened it. Mr. Johansen rattled the grates, and soon he had the stove heating to boil the water.

"Do your ribs hurt bad?"

"I've been hurt worse." He shrugged. "I'm more concerned about that cut on your foot. If it gets infected, you'll lose that foot...or worse."

"Thank you for your help."

The blood soaked through the cloth and pooled against Katja's hand. When the kettle rattled against the stovetop, Mr. Johansen poured the water into a basin. The steam wafted as he carried the basin to the table and set it on the floor beside her injured foot. He squatted down beside the chair. "Take off the cloth."

Katja removed the bandage slowly, blood still oozing. Mr. Johansen examined the wound. He dipped a clean cloth into the water and dabbed at her cut. She sharply sucked air through her teeth and willed herself not to squirm under his ministrations. Despite his rough and callused hands,

he treated her with gentleness. Mr. Johansen paused, his voice low. "I hope infection doesn't set in."

The door opened, and Far emerged, his eyes widening. "Get your hands off my daughter!"

Mr. Johansen stiffened. He dropped the washcloth in the basin, water splashing onto the floor. Using the chair seat to help him, he rose and faced her father. "Mr. Nilsen, your daughter's foot needs to be thoroughly cleaned before she ends up with an infection."

"Far, you're home early," Katja stammered.

"What did you do to her?" Far approached, studying her injury. His gaze landed on her nightgown and traveled to her exposed legs. "You and my daughter were alone?"

"I stumbled and kicked the ax," Katja said. She fidgeted. Her plan to get Mr. Johansen to leave had failed. Far came home earlier than he had said, and now he would plan to marry her off to this stranger in this foreign land. Katja took another look at Mr. Johansen. Her stomach fluttered.

Far's hands balled into fists. He edged closer to Mr. Johansen until the two men were nose to nose. "Mister ... uh?"

"Aksel Johansen, the owner of this claim. After you tend to your daughter's foot, I'd like you two to leave."

"You must marry my daughter." Far straightened, as if trying to gain extra height over Mr. Johansen.

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"I...what?" Aksel gaped at Mr. Nilsen. The man and his daughter had stolen his home, and now he was accusing him of impropriety. Aksel gave a harsh laugh. His fingers twitched, aching to curl into fists and pummel Mr. Nilsen. He didn't want to marry Miss Andersen, and he certainly did not want to marry Miss Nilsen, who had almost shot him. Marriage was not for him.

"Far—"

Mr. Nilsen interrupted his daughter's futile plea and glared at her. "I come home and find you alone with my daughter in a nightgown. You must marry her."

"Far, no," Miss Nilsen cried out.

Aksel folded his arms over his chest and stared at Mr. Nilsen through narrowed eyes. The man was more interested in arguing than in his daughter's wound. Aksel knelt down, fished out the washcloth in the basin, and wrung it. If he were forced to marry Miss Nilsen, he'd prefer her with both feet. She hissed when he dabbed at her cut.

"Stop it. What are you doing?" Mr. Nilsen said.

"Cleaning your daughter's cut." Aksel swished the bloodied cloth in the basin, the water turning a deeper red. He continued tending to Miss Nilsen's foot. "Dump this out and get me fresh water, please. The water in the kettle should still be hot."

Mr. Nilsen took the basin. When he walked away, his daughter whispered, "We don't have to marry."

Aksel stared at the bloodied foot until it became a blur. A young, unwed woman like her, he should have known better, but he had thought her far might have been dead. If he refused to marry her, Mr. Nilsen would besmirch his good name. Miss Nilsen seemed like she could handle being the wife of a frontiersman, but not his.

"Mr. Johansen?" Her voice broke through his stupor, and Aksel gazed into her soft brown eyes. As he studied them, he noticed specks of blue. He swallowed hard. His parents had an arranged marriage, and they remained unhappy with each other until Far abandoned them. He couldn't marry the young woman.

Mr. Nilsen returned with the basin. "You marry today."

"You carelessly left a young woman alone in the frontier where men outnumber women." Aksel stood. "And you steal my claim then have the audacity to expect me to marry your daughter. No, Mr. Nilsen, I won't marry your daughter."

As Aksel headed toward the door, Mr. Nilsen retorted, "You're no better than me."

"Far, it's okay. I don't love him."

With his back facing the Nilsens, Aksel released a quiet breath and spoke in an icy tone. "When I return from hunting, I expect you and your daughter to be gone."

Aksel slammed the door behind himself. He would not be pressured into a loveless marriage like his parents. His stomach rumbled. Tending to the young Miss Nilsen had left him hungry and without breakfast. No matter, the area was rich in wildlife.



After walking for a time along the Sheyenne River with no luck in finding game, Aksel studied the sun's position and estimated it to be past noon. Mr. Nilsen and his daughter should be gone by now.

In the yard was a wagon and team of oxen. Aksel clenched his jaw. The wagon and team belonged to Reverend Lundebly. Mr. Nilsen must have summoned him. If he had, it meant he and his daughter were still here. Aksel tightened his grip on the rifle and stepped onto the porch, where muffled voices carried from inside the cabin. He opened the door and gave it a shove, letting it slam against the wall. Mr. Nilsen and Reverend Lundebly stopped their conversation and glanced at him.

The reverend smiled and rose, offering Aksel a hand. "Congratulations."

Aksel stared at Miss Nilsen, who lowered her gaze to the floor, then turned to glare at her father. He should have known the man would have fetched the reverend. After taking several breaths to regain his composure, Aksel struggled to speak without losing his temper. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, Reverend Lundebly. There won't be a wedding today."

"Mr. Nilsen witnessed you and his daughter being improper." When Aksel didn't take his hand, Reverend Lundebly dropped it at his side. "And he would like you to be honorable."

*Honorable?* Aksel clutched his rifle. His far had done the honorable thing, and their family suffered for it. He observed the young Miss Nilsen fidgeting. She didn't want to marry him any more than he, her. But both of their reputations would be ruined if he declined.

If he married her, he could be rid of Mr. Nilsen, then annul the marriage later. Aksel leaned the rifle in its usual place beside the door. With his back to the others, he replied, "If I agree, will Mr. Nilsen promise to leave?"

He turned back around to see Reverend Lundebly glancing at Mr. Nilsen, who nodded. "Ja."

"Fine. I'll marry your daughter."

The reverend stepped forward and patted Aksel's shoulder. "Wonderful. Stand by your bride, and we'll begin the ceremony."

As Aksel took his bride's hand, tears trickled down her cheeks. Her father whispered in her ear, and she gave a small, closed smile. If he were to marry her, Aksel supposed they should wed with a view. They stood on the porch, overlooking the distant Sheyenne River with its lush blanket

of tree foliage, a myriad of green, yellow, orange, and red. Miss Nilsen's hands trembled in his. He met her soft brown eyes, gazing into his.

Reverend Lundeby's words faded as Aksel studied his bride. She was prettier than he had remembered, and his heartbeat quickened. "And do you, Aksel Johansen, take Katja Nilsen to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Aksel blinked.

Reverend Lundeby repeated the question. When Aksel still did not answer, he raised his voice. "Aksel?"

"I do," Aksel rasped.

The ceremony continued in a daze, then the reverend asked about the rings. Aksel gaped at him. Mr. Nilsen rummaged through his pocket and revealed a ring on his palm. He offered it to Aksel. "You can use this ring."

A sob burst from Miss Nilsen, and she shook her head. "Far, I can't take Mor's ring. That belongs to you."

"Your mor would want her only daughter to have her wedding ring." After Aksel accepted it, Mr. Nilsen wiped his daughter's tears and cupped her face. He kissed her cheek. "I hope it brings you many years of happiness as it did for your mor and me."

Mr. Nilsen and his wife had a happy marriage. A spark ignited within Aksel. He struggled to slide the wedding band on his bride's shaky fingers. Perhaps he could find happiness with Miss Nilsen.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Aksel stiffened. He had forgotten he would need to kiss her. His mouth dried as the new Mrs. Johansen stared back at him. He forcefully swallowed and leaned in, lips brushing against hers. When their lips parted, their gazes lingered.

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*Mrs. Johansen*, Katja recited. Two months had passed since the wedding, and she still had to practice using the foreign word. She sighed. If someone were to ask her, she might as well still be Miss Nilsen. Katja used an arm to swipe at the hairs tickling her forehead and plunged her hand back into the washtub. She lathered her husband's shirt and scrubbed it across the washboard.

Katja snorted. *I'm more of a housekeeper than a wife*. When her back ached, she stood and stretched. She studied the distant Sheyenne River, more

visible now that the trees had dropped their leaves. A breeze blew by, and she shivered. Today might be the last day she could hang their laundry outside. Her men were racing against the first winter snowfall as they prepared Far's homestead.

The breeze became steady, and Katja hurried to finish. By the time she hung the last of the laundry, the chilly wind had gathered speed. She glanced up at the dark clouds on the horizon. A storm was brewing, and she prayed for her husband's safe return.

Light fading fast, Katja lit the lantern on the dining table and stood by the window. Snowflakes twirled and fluttered outside. Her stomach churned. Mr. Johansen should have been back by now. The few snowflakes transformed into many, as if someone were pouring salt onto them. She paced the cabin. Winter had arrived.

The windows rattled, the wind screaming to let it inside. Katja squinted through the window to check on the laundry. Between the wet streaks on the glass and the snowy whirlwind, the laundry had vanished. She fidgeted.

Mr. Johansen had regaled her and Far with stories of blizzards on the prairie, and how dangerous they could be. Katja tugged her shawl closer. She knew it could be dangerous to venture outside in the storm, but the laundry outside was all they owned. If she had known the storm would hit that fast, she would have hung the laundry inside. She had to. She needed to get their laundry.

The wind pried the door away from Katja and banged it against the cabin as she stood outside on the porch. She gasped at how much the temperature had dropped. Snow pelted her, stinging her exposed skin. Katja fumbled for the door. Her hands became numb as she struggled to close the door.

Katja cautiously continued to the edge of the porch. The wind snatched her breath away, and she gasped. She sought for the stairs with an outstretched foot. When she didn't find the step, she moved forward and went too far, catching her heel on the edge of the porch. As she fell, she screamed. Her body jolted against the ground as whiteness blinded her, then darkness.

Cold seeped through her body, and Katja shook. Her entire body ached, but her head hurt worse than it ever had. She opened her eyes, blinking through the whiteness, unsure of where she was. *Outside. She was outside.*

Katja crawled, searching for the porch, patting faster the longer she couldn't find it. Her head ached. She slowed and collapsed back on the ground. Mr. Johansen would get what he wanted. Sleep called her name. Soon, she would see Mor again.

*Faith, hope, and love.* Mor's voice carried through the wind.

"I-I-I tried," Katja sobbed. She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes. Mr. Johansen's face appeared in her mind. His blue-gray eyes studied her, and his lips twitched. Faith, hope, and love had not been enough to make him fall in love with her. "Mor, I tried. He doesn't love me."

*Isn't it love that he persuaded Far to take the empty parcel abutting his?*

A distant voice shouted. Katja's eyes fluttered open, and she tilted her ear toward the sound. When only the wind whistled, her heart sank. She had imagined Mr. Johansen shouting. The voice shouted again.

*Faith, hope, and love,* Mor reminded her.

"Katja, if you can hear me, answer me."

"Mr.—" Katja grunted and turned onto her side. She tipped her head upward, squinting for her husband's familiar form through the snow. The snowflakes prickled against her face. She opened her mouth to shout 'Mr. Johansen' and faltered. He came for her. Mr. Johansen wouldn't have come for her, but Aksel would. She shouted her husband's name.

"Keep calling my name."

*Faith, hope, and love,* Katja chanted. She gathered her strength and then yelled over and over, "I'm here."

"Katja?" Aksel asked beside her.

"Aksel!" Katja reached out and brushed against his shoe. She grunted and tried to grasp his pants leg but couldn't get her numb fingers to bend. Aksel scooped her up and pressed her against his warm chest. Through her chattering teeth, Katja said, "You came looking for me."

"You're freezing." Aksel navigated them through the blinding snow. His boots thumped on the porch. After several steps, he stopped and jostled her as he groped for the door. The door opened, and heat blasted them. Aksel carried her inside and laid her in front of the stove. He disappeared, then returned with blankets. As he covered her, Katja thanked him.

Aksel poured water into a cup and added liquor. "You need to drink this. All of it, because that frostbite you've got is going to hurt."

Katja nodded. With her husband's help, she forced down the concoction. The beverage warmed her insides. She whimpered.

Thousands of hot pokers rippled across her skin until the stove's heat threatened to devour her. Violent shivers wracked her body. Hot and cold waged a battle within her, each rising to the surface until Katja feared she may never feel like herself again. A chair scraped across the floor, and she startled. She glanced up and discovered Aksel putting the chair beside her. "Why are you doing this?"

"I made a vow."

Aksel lifted her onto the chair, along with her blankets. He gently tugged off her shoes and stockings, then submerged her feet into a basin of water. Katja screamed. When Aksel placed her hands in a second basin, she screamed again. He cared for her until she fell into oblivion.

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The blizzard may have stopped, but Katja's screams continued to haunt him. Aksel hunched forward in his chair and watched her sleep. She was no longer Miss Nilsen. His lips twitched as he wondered when she had become Katja, his wife.

He shook his head. *You know when.*

His gaze traveled to the window curtains, then to her sewing basket. The cabin emulated her presence. He had failed to recognize how much he had enjoyed coming home to her until yesterday.

The night stretched on, and Aksel still stayed awake. His bleary eyes pleaded for him to rest, but he couldn't, not until he was sure she would be okay. After pouring a cup of coffee, Aksel returned to his watch post and continued to study her in the lantern's light. Katja muttered something over and over. He leaned in closer, straining to make out the words.

"Faith, hope, and love," she mumbled.

*Faith, hope, and love*, Aksel recited. The words seemed familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd heard them. As he sat back, the lantern's light gave a glimpse of a book cover. He picked up the book and discovered a Bible. *This must be her Mor's.*

Aksel opened the cover and studied the handwriting inside, then skimmed through the pages. When he reached the first book of Corinthians, he stopped. His lips pursed as he read through the chapters.

"What are you reading?" Katja rasped.

“Corinthians.” He marked his place with a finger and met her gaze. “How are you feeling?” Katja scooted up in bed and winced. Aksel set down the Bible and grabbed a cup of water laced with whiskey off of the table. He slumped onto the bed and tipped the cup to her lips. Water splashed onto her face. “I’m sorry.”

The cup clinked on the bedside table. Aksel started to wipe away the water he had spilled on her, but she stopped him. Katja’s soft brown eyes flicked back and forth. He looked down at her hands. A lump formed in his throat.

“You never answered me earlier. Why are you doing this?”

Aksel stared, the quilt and her hands becoming a blur. He forced out the lie he kept telling himself for weeks. “I made a vow to you.”

“No.”

“No?” Aksel snapped his head toward her and gaped. He flinched when Katja’s hand found his, and she stifled a wince. They stayed in that position for several minutes. A sigh escaped her, and she glanced at the Bible.

“Will you read Corinthians to me, please?”

Aksel nodded. He slid his hand free from beneath Katja’s and lifted the Bible. “Love is patient. Love is—”

“Start at verse eleven.”

Aksel scanned through the verse she had requested and read to the end of the chapter. Finished, he closed the Bible. *That’s why faith, hope, and love seemed familiar. She was reciting Corinthians.* Perhaps, like the verse mentioned, he needed to put his childish fears behind him and focus on faith, hope, and love.

“I—” both spoke in unison, then halted.

“You first,” he said.

“I thought you might have come for me in that blizzard because you loved me. But you only did it out of duty to our wedding vows.” Tears streamed down Katja’s face, and her voice cracked. “So I give you permission to dissolve our marriage.”

Aksel stared until she became a blur, and before he thought about what he was doing, his lips were on hers. Katja gave a muffled squeal and pushed him away. “What are you doing?”

“I lied.”

Soft brown eyes darted back and forth, like she was waiting for a further explanation.

“My parents had an arranged marriage. Far abandoned us when I was five because they were so unhappy. After that day, I made a promise to myself that I’d never marry.” Aksel gently laid a hand over the top of hers, careful to avoid her tender fingers. He examined her fingertips. She was lucky. She wouldn’t lose her fingers or toes. *If I hadn’t come home...* Aksel pushed the alternative out of his head. When he gazed at Katja, she still said nothing. “I lied about why I came searching for you.”

Tears shimmered in his wife’s eyes. Through the window, daybreak triumphed through the nighttime clouds. A new day had come. Aksel admired the colors on the horizon, blending into the others until they merged. The sunrise signified a new day. Today would be the beginning of their journey in marriage. He caressed her face. *He needed to tell her.*

Her lips quivered. “What are you saying?”

“Katja, I’m falling in love with you,” Aksel whispered. Like the hardships of living on the prairie with its unpredictability, their marriage could survive with faith, hope, and love. He had struggled to see love as the greatest gift until he nearly lost her. She helped him cast aside his childhood fears and become a man.

Her dewy eyes glistened as Katja confessed she felt the same. Aksel cupped her face, their gazes dancing with one another. He kissed her, and she kissed him back, their lips melding together.

# THE WIND

by Dan McKay

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The wind howled like an enraged animal. It roared through cracks in the wall, under the eaves, and around the edges of the barn door. Lars slid the parka's hood off his head. His blond hair lifted as breezes crisscrossed through the air. The cows stared with empty eyes, chewing their cud. Chickens clucked in their built-in coop in the corner with chicken-wire fencing stretched to the exposed ceiling joists. He filled their feeder and slid it back into the pen, the spring-loaded door slapping shut with a bang.

Barn cats slunk in the shadows. They'd normally scatter at the sight of him, but tonight there was nowhere for them to go. He leaned down and made a playful grab for one. It hissed and backed away.

"Oh, kitty, what's so scary about me?" His voice echoed inside before stray bits of wind carried it away. A windborne snowflake careened into his face as he poured cat food from a pail into a pan.

He climbed the crude built-in ladder to the haymow. The barn shook under the gusts. How many shingles would be missing when the storm finally ended? He pocketed his mittens and hoisted the pitchfork he'd used since he was twelve. His hands felt naked and vulnerable. Outside, the wind would destroy them in a matter of seconds. The last parts of a round bale would be enough for tonight. He'd start on a new bale tomorrow, cutting it open with a hay knife similar to the one in the county museum.

Cattle ate more in the cold. More food meant more water, except in bitter cold. Knowledge from his father, passed down from *his* father. Farming lived in their blood, alongside hard work, self-sufficiency, and sacrifice. He started the pump and filled the trough to half of what they normally drank. Larger farms had heated stock tanks, but in addition to the cost of the tank, he'd need to run a bigger electrical circuit to the barn. The original wires were only intended for lights, a luxury when they'd been buried seventy years ago.

After high school, Lars had gone to college, coming home to work on the farm in the summer. He had studied hard and graduated with honors, only to come back to the farm. His diploma sat in a box in the closet.



His brother, Sven, had gone to trade school and worked as a master electrician. He had been back to the farm only once, easing his BMW down the rutted gravel road. The sporty car looked alien parked next to Lars' battered and rusted Ford pickup. Sven's wife, Tiffany, had never seen a cow up close and left the barn holding her nose.

The cattle milled at the manger as the hay landed. They tossed their heads as they jockeyed for position. He resisted the urge to mediate their disputes. His father had enforced order, poking at them with the pitchfork handle. "See them, Lars? They will knock everything down and then what will I have?"

A cow slammed into the wall, which shook the barn, taking focus away from the storm for a few moments. Would he miss this? The simple answer was no, but not the entire answer. He'd grown up here. His father had been born in the house. Lars had been born in a hospital sixty miles away, just like his children, who were lying snug in their little beds.

The house would be missing shingles, as well. Leaky as a sieve, it took a frightening amount of propane to keep it warm. The wooden floors had trails worn in them where his mother and grandmother had made countless trips in and out of the kitchen. The simple woodwork worn smooth wherever hands had grasped it. It was a living museum. His wife, Clarissa, bore it with good nature, making a home that wasn't really hers or even his.

His parents came to visit every summer. He couldn't imagine them living in a fancy retirement compound in Arizona instead of on the farm where his father had lived all his life. His father insisted on helping, but drew the line at manure on his shoes. "Damn things cost too much. Should have kept my work boots, but there's not much call for them down there."

What would they think of his decision? Whenever he felt selfish, he thought of his children. An hour and a half on the bus every day. Twenty-five miles from town. A tiny town that hadn't changed in forty years, other than to shrink as its residents died off. Clarissa stuck out like the outsider she was. Everyone knew his family's history. *You're Ingvald's boy*. He'd given up explaining Ingvald was his grandfather.

The cattle had stopped fighting in favor of eating. He climbed down and eyed the water remaining in the trough. It would be ice by morning, and he'd have to chop it out, adding the chunks of ice to the growing pile outside. He returned to the chicken's pen for the eggs. Left overnight, they'd freeze solid and the chickens would not use their nesting boxes. He found six eggs and put three in each coat pocket. Clarissa would fry them

for breakfast, along with ham and toast. The aroma would wake the children who'd be happy to have a storm day instead of school.

A rope lay coiled near the door, the end threaded through the handle of a grain shovel. On his way from the house, he'd tied the other end to the wrought-iron railing on the front steps. More wisdom passed from father to son. Names of people he'd only heard in hushed voices came to mind. People found frozen a mere twenty paces from their front door, lost in a blizzard.

He wrapped the rope twice around his waist and tied a knot. With his hood drawn nearly closed, he slid the door open and tried not to breathe the frigid air. The wind sensed his softness and battered him. He staggered like a boxer stunned by a ferocious opponent. Gusts tore at his coat and screamed in his ears. *Quitter!*

He pulled himself forward, onward. If he didn't look back, he'd make it.

# THE ISLAND

by Meir Rayne

---

I've been on this island as long as I can remember. It's barely habitable on most days, but it could be worse.

I get to relax on the beach and listen to the waves come and go like the ocean is breathing. Sometimes it's gentle, sometimes it's harsh.

I get visitors from time to time. Little creatures that come seeking company. Maybe they're lonely?

The forest at the center of the island looms holding darkness deep within its shadows. I try to never go near, an aura of anger and pain radiates from it.

I'd rather spend time at the beach, letting the water slide over my toes, and the wind caress through my hair like a gentle hand.

I like how quiet it is here.

It makes me happy.

"Quit day dreaming and pay attention!"

Well, at least when I didn't have visitors.

The visitors came and went, never staying long, but always having something to say.

The "teachers" talked a lot, but didn't say anything that really mattered or that I didn't already know.

They liked to yell about paying attention more, and something about looking them in the eye. It was fine though. The teachers would usually leave after that, or yell something about being responsible.

My most frequent visitor was Mom. She wasn't too bad. Mom usually came with food, or was exhausted after a busy day. Mom sometimes yelled at me, but not as often as the teachers, she asked what she could do to get me to do the homework the teachers gave me. Mom always looked so sad when she got a note or call from the teachers. So I at least tried to do the bare minimum. The Art, English, Language, and History teachers gave some fun projects when they visited.

The music teacher doesn't like me because I'm always out of tune.

The gym teacher doesn't like that I stopped trying because I don't get included in games.

The math teacher thinks I'm stupid.

The science teacher was okay, but didn't like answering questions when I asked "Why?"

After getting yelled at for asking too many questions, I stopped asking or answering them.

Most of the other visitors also liked to yell. They'd arrive sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, but they always had rude things to say:

"Why is your hair so scraggly? Have you ever heard of a comb?"

"Ew, why do you wear the same stuff all the time?"

"Watch where you're walking idiot!"

Or the most common one:

"Tck, what are you doing here?"

The worst visitors though were the ones who liked to take things too far.

They would say mean things and take my things then throw them in the dirt.

They liked to make up rumors, and blame me for the bad things that happened because of them. They once tried to pretend to be my friends, because they wanted me cry when they told me that they really didn't care at all. Some would pretend to be my friend just to find more things to make fun of me for.

I stopped talking to the visitors after that. Instead I just drew in the sand and pretended they weren't there when they came to visit. After a while, I started tuning them out too.

When people visited the island I decided to nod along with what they had to say.

No one seemed concerned about it. Teachers just began to call me the "quiet kid." That I was "well behaved," but "not very observant." That I was "naïve," but "gifted."

They didn't realize I was just trying to get them to leave me alone, that I was actually just a boiling pot that was getting closer and closer to boiling over.

Mom just went along with it all. She was proud of the "gifted" kid I acted like, but behind closed doors hated how needy and annoying I was when I told her that something was wrong with me.

It got worse as I got older.

When the world was too bright, when I was too sick to move, when I couldn't breathe in the heat. She just brushed it off, I was just a "hypochondriac." She'd make me go to "school" when I wasn't in any shape to move.

One early summer the world was quiet when a girl appeared on the island. She sat quietly near me.

She didn't say anything for a long time.

But when she did, she asked, "Do you like Pokémon?" She told me she had watched me draw them in class.

I didn't trust her at first, but as she kept talking and kept coming back, things got easier. We would talk about Pokémon together. Which ones we liked the best. Which games were our favorites. We shared books with each other. Created artwork, made up stories. We played games together too. One day she said that she thought hanging out with me was what having a sister was like. She said she wished I was her sister for real, but we could say that we were.

I didn't know what a sister was but then I had one, even if it wasn't real. It was nice.

She would protect me from the visitors who were bullies. Told them not to call me names. She even got away with throwing something at one of the bullies when the teachers weren't looking. The rumors slowly stopped. It was nice. She helped me make more friends who would visit me on the island. I was less scared of people.

I wasn't used to hugs, so she helped me get used to them. Even on the days that I was upset or grumpy. She said that hugs were a miracle cure and that they fixed any bad day.

But even hugs weren't enough for the day that my grandfather died. I wasn't fine after that. He was the visitor I cherished the most. He didn't care that I was weird. We'd watch fun shows together, and he'd cook me unhealthy food that made my mom mad. He'd look after me when I felt all alone, and my sister wasn't there with me. He was proud of even my smallest accomplishments.

The only time I could think about him after was when I skirted the edge of the forest at the center of the island. I often wondered if I could find him if I went inside. The one time that I tried I blacked out and came too sobbing into my sister's arms. Apparently I almost did something very bad because I went in there.

But something good came out of that bad. I wasn't alone, I noticed the world around me more, and saw how big it could be if I took the time to explore it.

One day, I left the island. When I did, I found that while some of the visitors I had were bullies, many of the people in the world could be wonderful. I even found one person that I fell in love with.

Now that I'm all grown up, I go back to the island sometimes. For some peace and quiet. The world is a busy place which makes it harder to go back there sometimes. But I try when I can.

For the longest time I didn't know why the island existed. But I know why now.

I was 30 years old when I found out I'm Autistic.

The island is my way to cope with a world that wasn't made for me. It was my escape, my way to protect myself from the world. The forest was my bad memories; the beach my gateway to others.

But now, I can see the vast world. All of its ugly and beauty alike.

The world still hurts. But now I know why. Now I understand that things could have been different, if only people saw me struggling all alone on the island. The way that my sister did.

# A CAT'S TALE

by Marian Zieske

---

Morris was a beautiful yellow and white long-haired cat that came to our home in a roundabout way. We had lost our cat in an accident and had taken in a stray, only to have him disappear after a few weeks. While trying to locate the second cat we came upon yet another. This lovely cat could not be a stray. He was affectionate, well-mannered and perfectly groomed. He must belong to someone. Our family wanted very much to have him but all agreed that we must try to find his owner. I told my daughters that if no one responded to newspaper and radio announcements within a week, we could keep him as our own.

The girls had already named him Morris like the television ad cat, overruling my suggestion that he would be a perfect Oliver. He settled in as if he had lived with us forever, adorning our home with his beauty and regal air. Although he had claws he did not scratch furniture or carpet and did not jump onto countertops or tables. He slept most of the day under the folded TV trays by the dining room sliding glass door, fitting perfectly into the small sunny space. Never would he go into the living room to sit on the couch or chairs...EXCEPT...while we were gone. When we came in unexpectedly the black recliner would be swaying gently, with tufts of soft white hair visible on the seat.

Where had Morris learned his impeccable manners, we wondered, with just that spark of deviousness thrown in? We were intrigued by thoughts of his former life.

When our middle daughter Julie got a new camera, Morris, of course, became her forever subject. She loved his "Cheshire Cat" look, legs tucked under his body, serenely surveying the world from a bare tree branch...with even a bit of a grin, perhaps? She took pictures and more pictures, eagerly getting them developed, savoring that first glimpse of her masterpieces. "Are they all of the cat?" Dad wondered, Julie's sheepish nod confirming that they were.

I wish her camera could have captured his comical actions as he sat in front of the television set watching Wimbledon, his head, not just his eyes, following the course of each whizzing ball. Or seeing his head touch the

floor as he watched rain running down the glass door. With a shake of his head he'd start over, following another streak down the glass. The world was definitely his oyster.

Like many cats Morris loved the outdoors at night. When we went to bed he went out, returning in the morning to sleep inside most of the day. When he wanted in, he did not meow and scratch at the door like an ordinary cat. He jumped up on the front screen and looked in through the small diamond-shaped window in the door, hanging there until someone noticed and let him in.

Often during a family meal we would hear a small noise, look up and see Morris's face framed in the window. Meowing softly, unable to be heard through the heavy door, he looked like a cat on a muted television screen. "Guess who's coming to dinner?" I would say as I opened the door to welcome him in. I was a huge film fan always, and liked using movie/television titles or lines that fit the situation.

Morris's crowning glory was his magnificent tail. It fluffed to several inches in diameter and was held aloft as he walked. That tail caused some chagrin for my husband who, dressed for work in neat polyester pants, would receive a swipe one way, then the other way, on one or both trouser legs.

"That blamed cat," he could be heard muttering, as I used wadded-up masking tape to get the offending hair off the dark-colored polyester.

Morris did have a bit of a perverse streak. He seemed to like best those who didn't like him. While he accepted all the attention from the younger girls and me, he sought out attention from our oldest daughter who had allergies, and from her boyfriend who was actually afraid of cats! If boyfriend put his coat down somewhere he'd have to gingerly displace Morris in order to retrieve it. And my husband, recipient of all the tail swipes, was not a cat lover.

One warm Saturday, my youngest daughter Joan and her friend Amy were cuddling Morris in the yard, Amy with a lollipop sucker in her mouth. As she leaned over Morris the sucker fell from her mouth and into his tail. The girls tried to get it out but Morris wouldn't have it. They called to me to come and help. As I came out of the house Morris got away from them and slunk away. He seemed a shadow of his former stately self as he ran off, tail between his legs, seeking refuge under the car.

"I know how we can get him to come out! We can shake the cat treats box. He always comes running then," suggested Joan. "We need to help him. He feels really sad and embarrassed."



But Morris was not tempted by cat treats. “Maybe he’s eating the sucker now, so doesn’t want anything else,” Joan said hopefully. “I thought I heard some crunching noises.”

“He just wants to be left alone while he’s dealing with his tail problem. Let’s leave him be; he’ll be fine,” I assured the girls. They reluctantly walked away, returning in a few minutes to look under the car.

“He’s not there. He’s run off. I knew we should have gotten the sucker out of his tail,” Joan whimpered sadly.

“He’ll come back,” said Dad. “He knows he’s got it good here.”

Joan was near tears thinking about Morris, her broken-in-spirit cat with his impaired tail. By bedtime I told her that we probably shouldn’t expect him to come home that night. “He always stays out all night, doesn’t he? He’ll be here in the morning.”

But Morris wasn’t there in the morning. A sad family went to church. Driving home afterwards squeals of delight suddenly filled the car. “There he is hanging on the door! He’s looking for us to let him in.”

Everyone watched as Joan lifted Morris from the screen and carried him into the house. The beautiful upright tail swayed slightly as he walked into the kitchen to be fed.

# NONFICTION

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# A KALEIDOSCOPE OF MEMORIES

by Rita Greff

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A kaleidoscope of memories of my childhood forms the framework for the person I have become. Recalling each incident makes me smile as I do honor to each person who helped me grow.

## A Potential Heirloom

After my dad returned from the Pacific arena at the end of the Second World War, our family took on a new status. Mom and I moved with Father to a farm near Dodge, North Dakota. We had been living with my maternal grandparents where my mother helped with farm work and I charmed my grandparents.

My dad returned to farming and directing our lives with all the enthusiasm one could expect after seeing war in action. Somehow, he didn't seem to find my antics as precocious as my grandparents had. He demanded better behavior from me.

Mom had hung two circular plaster of Paris wall ornaments in the kitchen. The shiny 3-D fruits attracted my attention. Daily I would push a chair over to the wall where they were hanging and stand face to face with the fruits. Touching each one, I would name them aloud, "Apple, grapes, orange..."

One evening after supper as my father listened to one of his radio shows, he observed me carrying out my little ritual.

"The next thing you know, you will knock them down and break them. So cut it out!"

So, I just did my little ritual when he was not around. It wasn't long before his prediction came true. I begged Mom not to tell him, but he noticed the missing plaque on his own.

My father was trying to exercise the parental authority that to him, obviously had been lacking while he was at war, so he scolded me with his loud voice and I was sentenced to sitting in a corner of the kitchen. I cried big, salty tears because he did not appreciate my cuteness and smartness.

Thereafter, we had just one circular fruit ornament until another child (or maybe even the same child) pushed her luck too far!

### **Childhood Play**

When I was four, my mother seemed to be taking so many naps, but I did not know that she was pregnant with twins. It **did** seem that more often I needed to find my own entertainment.

One day I decided to bake mud pies. I gathered spoons and cake pans from the kitchen. Conveniently, I found a couple dozen eggs in a bucket in the entry. The yolks were so colorful that you could see streaks of gold in the pies. That gave me an idea: I could pick some wild sunflowers and decorate the tops with petals.

I set the pies out in the sun to bake. Very impressive, I thought, although my father did not. He ordered me to the familiar corner in the kitchen for breaking all those eggs.

### **Upstairs Play**

When I was five, we moved to a farm south of White Butte, South Dakota. The little house had an unfinished upstairs which could be accessed by a steep ladder. There was no railing around the stairway, so it was quite dangerous for my siblings who were toddlers. I had to be sure to close the door behind me so no one would follow. This was a place I liked to go for privacy on a sunny day. There was no electricity at that time, so the little window in the cupola provided the only light.

One day Dean joined me as I riffled through the wooden separator boxes trying to find clothes for us to pretend in. There were not many men's and boys' clothes, so I convinced Dean to wear a jersey dress. It was white with big purple flowers! Dean pulled on the slithery dress, and we pretended to be fashionable. Soon Dean got hungry for a snack, so he wore the dress downstairs to the kitchen. Standing on one of the sturdy white kitchen chairs, he was slathering a big slice of Mom's homemade bread with chokecherry jelly. The door opened and in walked Uncle Hank. Dean promptly dropped his jelly bread upside down on the kitchen floor. Uncle Hank had a big laugh about how Dean was dressed.

My little wooden cupboard was perfect upstairs, safe from the clumsy hands of little brothers and sisters. In it I stacked the pastel pink, blue, yellow and green Hazel Atlas party tea set which brought out my possessiveness. Safe from my little siblings, I hosted a few tea parties for

my imaginary friends up in that little cupola using Father's footlocker as the table.

One day I begged Mom to help me bring the little cupboard downstairs so I could play outside where the light was much better. She was always so busy with little brothers and sisters and so many household chores, but she took time to help me "move." It was fun coaxing my brother and sister to have a tea party with me. We were just starting to sip our pretend tea, when a big gust of wind blew my little cupboard off the abandoned stove I had set it on. As I surveyed the damage, I cried tears of anger and injustice. It was one of my first lessons that life is not fair, and it is up to us to find the silver lining.

### **My First Memory of Chores**

The double decker kitchen range consumed chunks of wood and coal to heat that area of the house and to do its job of providing heat for cooking and baking. The firebox was equipped with a little grate at the bottom so that we could shake the ashes into a box under it. The ashes and "clinkers" that didn't burn were shaken down into this box and scraped into an ashcan to be taken out to the ash pile at least once a day. Whoever carried out the ashcan had to be careful not to dump it when the cinders were still hot, because a strong wind could fan the ashes into a prairie fire.

One of my earliest memories of chores illustrates how much my mother enjoyed her children. After a long winter cooped up in the little house, Mom took the little red wagon out of the porch and loaded up the twins, Dean and Diane, who were about 1-1/2 and Judy who was about six months old. Mom pulled and I pushed the wagon over the bumpy ruts and stones to the nearby pasture where there was once a barn. Weathered scraps of wood were strewn about the green grass just waiting for us to claim them for the kitchen range.

While the twins toddled around the pasture looking at everything, Judy watched from her blanket on the ground. Mom and I retrieved the scraps of wood and stacked them against some old machinery parked in the area. I begged Mom to tell us some stories. She complied with *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, her standard fare.

We had not even completed our task before one of the "kids" got hungry, got hurt, or got tired, and we had to switch gears and load up to go back to the house. We squeezed a little of the wood into the wagon around the children. Then Mom led us back to the house, telling us to

look at the new little flowers, listen to the birds, and watch the hens scratching in the gravel.

Not only was this activity one of our chores, it was a part of our education. Every one of us siblings has learned the importance of storytelling, how each of us is important to the workings of the whole family, and to appreciate the wonders of the outdoors, because of the example of our mother.

### **Driving My Imagination**

As a child of six, I found a rusty convertible car body on our farm to be a place that stimulated imaginary adventures. In reality, the only thing left of the seats was a set of rusty springs, but the big steering wheel still turned. I could look out around the countryside and feel the breeze against my face.

Like a sentinel, the ancient chassis was perched atop a sloping hill which ended in a steep, jagged cliff. At the bottom of the cliff was a little creek looking like a dotted line from my vantage point. The sporadic little creek did not run freely, but was divided into a few small water holes.

Covering the hill top was a scrubby carpet of over-grazed prairie grass, but as I gazed off in the distance, I imagined the white stacks of clouds were mountains, and I was driving through sharply winding roads to reach their peaks.

Sometimes I drove through cities with tall skyscrapers dwarfing my very existence. There was always a parking spot where I would stop to go inside shops. In those fancy shops, I tried on swishy, elegant dresses and teetered on spikey heels. I danced in ballrooms and hugged handsome men.

Sometimes I would drive through tall forest trees. And my, how I loved to drive fast. I could weave around those trees without touching a branch. I went on a few safaris with my rusty chassis. I am not sure I shot any animals, but I chased them while honking my horn wildly.

I don't know when I stopped going to this quiet place on our farm, but I must have grown into the reality that my dream car was worthless. And yet, was it worth nothing at all, when I'd spent so much time there in thought? I believe this spot was of great value to me. For after all, didn't it build up my imagination in preparation for this vast world in which I really would meet many interesting people and learn many fascinating things?

## A Lesson Learned

The wind was extreme that crisp and cold spring day in 1950, blowing up bits of sand that would sting the face. It reminded us that winter was not far behind us, and might even tag us again. No one would venture out on this raw day unless she had outdoor work to do, or she was a seven-year-old girl trying to get away from little siblings and chores. Or, her mother had admonished her to get some fresh air and quit asking her endless questions.

The father was feeding the cattle somewhere in the corrals and barn. He was bundled up with a blue denim jacket and tan denim suspender coveralls as he pitched hay to cattle who didn't mind the wind, because they wore their own wind-breaking leather skin.

The old man in the brownstone milk shed was tinkering around on the tool bench. It was nearly dark inside because there was no electricity, so the door was propped open. With his thick body clad in a long, bulky denim jacket, cuffed blue jeans, and a blue and white striped engineer's cap, Louie looked like a retired railroad engineer. Upon close inspection, you might suspect that he had an intellectual disability and maybe he was a bit clumsy. This family had invited him to spend some time with them after the farmer he had worked for had laid him off until spring. He helped out with the chores to pay for his room and board.

The eight-year-old girl was bundled up in her gray winter coat, a plaid wool scarf covering her head. She reasoned that facing the wind was better than facing her little siblings and the endless amount of household chores her mom suggested she do. She bent her head down and pushed into the roaring wind in the direction of the milk house.

Nearing the milk house, an even stronger gust of wind burst upon her nearly knocking her backward. There was a loud clatter of a post falling to the ground, and a door slamming hard. The girl perked up as those loud sounds were followed by a vociferous string of cusswords the likes of which she hadn't even heard before!

Louie stormed out of the little brownstone shed, and re-propped the post against the humble wooden door to keep it open. He continued his rant as he struggled against the wind.

Chuckling with amusement, the girl saw a way to entertain herself. After he went back inside, she kicked over the post which thwacked to the ground. The door slammed as she high-tailed it around the corner. Louie met all expectations with his performance. So, the chain reaction persisted until the young rascal was caught in the act by the father.



The father's loud voice rang over the sound of the wind. "I thought you were better than that. You think you are so smart. You just showed that you are **not** better than anyone. Just a bully who teases someone that they think they are superior to."

The girl escaped a spanking that day, but the lesson she learned is still with her today: All people deserve respect.

## The Locker

"The locker" had an air of mystique about it which connoted secrets and past lives kept hidden from curious children. It was a place we were not to investigate without permission, but that unwritten edict was not strictly enforced. Its placement in the attic rather encouraged an inquisitive adventurer to visit the locker on her own to discover new treasures and to caress favorite old treasures.

Father brought this foot locker back with him when he returned from the Pacific arena at the conclusion of World War II. The first artifacts to find a home in the locker were some of Father's souvenirs of the war. Father's discharge papers held a prominent position on the removable top shelf. There was a brass bullet shell and the bayonet which had been attached to his rifle. Brandishing this weapon (without a gun) in the little cupola in the unfinished upstairs, I first practiced drilling it into the air. Then I examined it closely for bloodstains. Of course, there were none. My father never shared whether he had actually had to use that bayonet, and we knew better than to ask.

In the bottom of the locker, there were decorative satin pillowcases that Father had brought home from the Philippines after the war. The silky fringe around them was bright gold and they were emblazoned with the words "For My Sweetheart" and "For My Wife."

Tucked into the bottom of the locker was a small gray kimono with bright pink sleeves which Father had bought in Japan for his only child at the time: me. A black silk dress with hand-painted gray and silver panels could sometimes be found in the locker. Father brought that dress home for Mom, and she wore it as a maternity dress. I remember one of the unique parts of this dress was that it had some obscure short tassels to represent each child of the person who wore the dress.

In a metal soap dish buried with the clothes were some old coins. Ones that Father brought from Japan were strange because some were shaped like washers and none of the faces were Caucasian. There were several white pennies, as we called them. The pennies minted in 1943 were unique because no copper was used. I always called them "my pennies"

because that was the year I was born. Another intriguing coin was a metal silver dollar.

As the years passed, and we moved often, important papers were stashed in the locker for their safety. Our birth certificates, baptismal certificates, parents' marriage license, and report cards provided interesting reading. Even the signatures on the certificates were interesting because of the decorative styles of handwriting and different inks.

When I was about eight years old, my maternal grandparents and my youngest aunt came from Gladstone to our little house in South Dakota to visit. Aunt Charlene was about 16 years old. The two of us, wanting to get away from so many adults and little kids crammed into the little house, wandered upstairs. For a while we tried on the old clothes in the two wooden separator boxes, but when that got old, we looked around the crowded array of boxes and books, and spied the shiny black locker sitting in the sunlight near the little cupola's window.

Being the snoopy explorers that we were, we lifted the brass latch, took out the green and white sturdy cardboard shelf, and fingered all the contents in the bottom of the trunk. The tactile sensations of silk, satin, my father's wool army cap, and the smooth bayonet brought out some impromptu performances. When we had exhausted the contents in the locker and replaced the top shelf, we began to peruse the important documents it held.

Aunt Charlene came upon a birth certificate of Robert Martin. She commented that he was my brother who was the oldest in our family. "No," I insisted. "I am the oldest in the family!"

Although Charlene made a persuasive argument, I did not really believe her story. Surely, Mom had told me everything, and had kept no secrets from me! I waited for Grandpa and Grandma Rohr and Charlene to go home, and a moment when I could be alone with Mom to ask her. Mom seemed a bit flustered that Aunt Charlene had spilled the beans. Yes, I had an older brother, who died at birth. Mom saw no reason to talk about it, further confirming my suspicions that the trunk held secrets of past lives.

## **The Drill**

The Pulis Place is what we called the little farm my family rented near the North Grand River along the North Dakota/South Dakota border. There was a root cellar near the house with which my mother felt some issues and she refused to use it. Because it had a window on one side with

a shelf under it, my father used it as a toolshed. My mother's fear of the root cellar kept me from exploring there until one day...

About six wooden stairs led to the door of the root cellar, and one day I worked up my courage to go see what was behind the door. I pushed the door open, and found there was not much light in that little root cellar. The sunlight from the window seemed to shine on an interesting tool on the shelf. It was a strange-looking hand-drill with a red handle almost like an egg beater that moved the bit up and down. I had watched my father operate other hand drills. This looked more complicated.

"I think I could handle this drill." So I took it out to the wooden steps and tried it out. The steps seemed quite hard, and as I struggled to make a hole, the drill bit broke off. Oh, no. This would not be good. Now I would be leaving evidence that I had used the drill. Since I could no longer use a drill with no bit, I put it back on the shelf, and left the root cellar. Maybe my dad wouldn't notice.

But leave it to Father. The very next day, he noticed the broken bit and asked me what happened. I admitted that I had tried it out. He said he had borrowed Uncle Bill's drill, and I should leave it alone. Truly, a better plan would have been to show me how to use it!

Sometime that week, I decided to explore the toolshed again. Ah, there was the sunlight shining on that drill again, and it had a new bit in it. Hmmm. Surely I had learned last time how not to break a bit. So again I took the drill back to the same steps and endeavored to drill a hole. Oh, no. Another broken bit. Oh. Father is not going to like this. Once again I put the drill back on the shelf and left closing the door behind me.

All afternoon, I worried about Father finding the drill when he came in from the field. I decided I'd better tell Mom about it. She was feeding the toddlers before bedtime. I said, "You know Bill's drill?"

She responded, "You mean the one you broke the bit?"

"Yes," I said. "I broke a new bit."

"Oh, my gosh," my mom exclaimed. "What were you doing down there again?"

"I had nothing to do," I said. "I am sorry. Don't tell Father. I don't feel very well. I think I will eat with the kids tonight and go to bed early."

The room was dark, but I was still awake when my father came in for his supper. He asked Mom, "Where is Rita?"

She kinda laughed and said, "Well, she said she has a stomachache and needed to go to bed early. But I think she is just worried because she broke another bit today."

It certainly sounded like my parents were sharing a good laugh over my troubles. No one came to pull me out of bed for a spanking. Who knows what parents are going to do?

## **The Heater**

One day fifteen minutes before recess started, Mrs. Ellingson told Terry and me that we could go outside to play because our work was finished. We were so excited, but the rest of the class was a little jealous of our good fortune.

Smugly, Terry and I sought refuge from the prairie wind in the horse barn. I had brought along paper and a pencil, so I decided to write a little poem about our classmates. About the only words that I remember now are the ones that later got me in trouble. "Bill thinks he is so smart. He is only a fart." We giggled as we tried out those rhyming words. Soon the rest of the class joined us in the barn, and they wanted to know what was so funny. Grabbing my paper, they read my poem aloud. Of course, Bill was not appreciative of my rhyming skills.

Someone showed Mrs. Ellingson my poem. Although she probably agreed with me about Uncle Bill, in a private conversation with me, she returned my poem and suggested I show it to my parents that evening.

On the way home riding our horses, Uncle Bill threatened to tell my father about my shenanigans. I began to feel a knot in the center of my stomach. How was I going to get myself out of this scrape?

At the Pulis Place the wood and coal-burning heater sat like a self-satisfied Buddha statue at the east end of the living room under the chimney. In the summer and other warm days, it sat unused, resting for its main purpose: keeping us warm in the winter and cool days.

When I got home from school that day, I headed straight for the heater which we had not yet used that fall. I opened the cast iron door to the firebox and threw in my crumpled poem. Mom heard me close the door to the heater, and she wanted to know what I had put in there. At first I thought I would lie, but Mom had a way of making my conscience kick in. So I began to cry and blubber about what had happened. I said I was truly sorry that I was such an embarrassing brat, and I probably did add that Bill WAS a fart! I asked Mom to please not tell Father. But one thing I knew: if he found out from her while I was not around, he would laugh at my naughtiness. However, if I was around, he would have to show his authority. I thought I would make sure to be in bed when my parents had that conversation!

The heater in the living room at the Pulis Place had caused me dismay several other times. Once when Father had gone to town he returned with a huge cardboard box full of groceries. After the groceries were unpacked, the twins and I went into the living room where we had a nice warm fire going in the heater. I brought the big box in with us, and we played close to the heater because it was colder the farther away we got from it. I began to entertain the twins by being a jack-in-the-box. I would crouch down in the box and sing, "All around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel. The monkey stopped to have some fun. Pop! goes the weasel!" And I would pop up in the box. We were giggling and having great fun, which was always a sign of trouble. On my last pop-up, the box tipped over and my arm landed on the hot cast iron stove causing big blisters all up and down one arm. I am not sure how my parents administered their first aide skills, but I do remember being scolded for "not being careful around the stove when I should know better."

On winter mornings before all the little kids were out of bed, my parents would shake down the ashes from the firebox into the ash box. Then they would lay a new fire in the firebox. They put twigs and crumbled paper on the bottom of the firebox and piled some lignite coal chunks around them. The damper was opened on the pipe which let air come in from outside through the chimney and the pipes that connected it to the heater. This new fire didn't just start immediately. At that point, my parents would call to me to get up and watch the heater. My parents needed to go out to the barn to milk cows. I was supposed to let the fire get "a good start" before I closed the damper or the fire would go out. I was NOT to let the fire get such a good roaring-start that the flames would go through the pipes and burn the roof and set the house on fire. This made me very nervous. I never felt like an expert at tending the heater. On the other hand, I never burned down the house either!

Each of the little sharecropper houses where we lived, had a heater to keep part of the house warm. It was a place where the family gathered in warmth of spirit and body. Mom would bring a kitchen chair and set it near the heater after the supper dishes were done. She would sit upright, and fall asleep right there beside the heater. Some of us would read books we had brought home from school or we would do homework at the kitchen table. Some of us cut out paper dolls or used the catalog to draw new clothes for the paper dolls. Father would lie on the couch with his knees pulled up reading a novel he may have gotten at an auction sale. The boys would find a warm spot on the floor where they played with their toy tractors and trucks and little rubber farm animals. Uncle Hank would lie on his bunk reading a paperback.

On those evenings staying warm by the fire, the fire in the firebox contained, I felt safe and cozy with my family. It was the cold mornings when I was in charge of the fire that I felt its unpredictability and wondered if I was big enough for the job of keeping the fire in the firebox.

### **Republican Convention Celebration**

On July 11, 1952, just before I was nine years old, the students from Burdick School piled into one car and headed for Lemmon. In lieu of a school picnic, we had chosen to see the movie *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

On the way home, I was the first of the students to be dropped off, and my parents were still up listening to the Republican National Convention on the radio. Dwight Eisenhower and Robert Taft were the strongest contenders in the race for a Republican presidential candidate. Father was hoping that Ike would lead our country as President.

As Mr. Ellingson stopped the car, my dad came out of the house in his stocking feet and invited everyone inside to listen to the outcome of the ballots.

We classmates clamored into the cool, dark night with the stars twinkling above us. It was so dark that night that the earthly spaces seemed to swallow us.

First we went to the back half of a car body which had been cut away and set on the ground. The boys were surprised when I told them what slept there. Our family had a little black and white nanny goat which had the run of our yard. She climbed on everything, and pushed over my two-year-old brother every time she saw him, but at night she settled down in the car body.

Nanny heard our noisy approach, and as we surrounded the front of the car body, she jumped out the rear window and ran. We were greatly amused by her agility. Of course, we chased her around the yard, but she always escaped our pursuit. It was difficult to see that little black body in the dark. When she went back to the car body, we started the chase all over again. Finally, we recognized that Nanny was panting loudly, so we decided to play Starlight Moonlight.

Soon the Ellingsons called out that it was time to go. As the car wheels punctuated the sudden quiet and I watched the red taillights recede onto the dark country road. My heart was beating from the good run I'd had and from the warmth of being with good friends.

## The White Butte Rodeo

One August Sunday Father announced that we were going to a rodeo. Whoa! We were going to leave the farm for an afternoon?! We ate an early lunch and then dressed up. I got to wear my brand new red shirt and jeans. Mom packed jelly bread sandwiches and water.

Finally, we all piled into our ancient car to make the twenty mile trip to White Butte. I can't remember how we all fit in the car, but I am sure Father was driving, Mom in the passenger seat with Ted standing on the front seat between them. Dean was probably standing on the floorboards in the back looking out the window, Fritz kneeling on the seat looking out the same window, me sitting next to the other door, and Diane and Judy sitting on the seat looking at a book. None of us wanted to touch each other because it was a very hot day, but we were in good spirits because we were going somewhere.

I felt just a tinge of disappointment when we pulled onto the dusty little path that led to the rodeo arena. It looked so dry and desolate. Father put some cash in the hand of the ticket collector, and then we joined other families who were parking around a wire fence that surrounded the long, dirt patch which was the arena. Immediately, Father abandoned us, heading to the wooden corrals where the rodeo livestock was penned. He was going to man the gates or help prepare the livestock and riders wherever he was needed. Mom spread a blanket on the stiff, scratchy, dry grass in front of the fence. There were no bleachers, so we could either sit on the blanket or stand. Mom spent most of the rodeo sitting on the passenger side of the car with all the doors open.

The rodeo began with a little parade of prancing horses and proud riders circling the arena. The lead rider carried a pole boasting the Stars and Stripes. Some of the riders were wearing shiny fringed shirts of flashy colors. The parade paused at the center of the arena while the loudspeaker blared a scratchy version of *The Star-Spangled Banner*. We all stood still, and while the horses mostly stood still, a few of them pranced around nervously ready to proceed.

We were welcomed to the rodeo by a tinny voice from the wooden corrals. We could hear the belling of the first yearling as he transported his rider out of the chute while the speaker gave us a play by play account. The rider flew off the black-white-face steer and then had to get up and run before he got stepped on or bunted by the steer. Every time a rider's time would be up, if he was still on his mount, honking car horns chorused in appreciation. In between each rider, we lost interest because we were sweltering in the 100° heat with no shade.



Each of us siblings took a turn going for a drink of water from the water jug. Dean and Fritz looked for grasshoppers they could use as cows. They would amputate the wings of each grasshopper they caught, so the grasshoppers could crawl around but not fly. The boys built a corral for them out of anything they could find: rocks, sticks, and clumps of dirt.

Holding hands, Judy and Diane took a little walk in front of a few of the cars parked around us, hoping to see other children.

There was lots of laughing and whistling during the wild cow-milking contest where several teams had to squeeze milk into a tin cup from their scraggly, wild cows and then hurry to the judge to register their supply. The winners were the first teams to get back to the judge.

Another contest featured a calf let out of a chute, as a horse and rider came out of the corral parallel to the calf. The rider twirled his lariat round and round while chasing the calf. Then he let it sail out over the calf's head, wrapping the lariat around the saddle horn to hold the calf in place. Jumping off the horse he ran to the steer and threw it on its side. Quickly he wrapped the tie-down rope around the calf's legs near the hooves. This event was timed and the cowboy who finished the fastest was the winner. The contest would kick up a cloud of dust wherever a horse ran. The dust would drift over us, and soon our faces were freckled with dirt.

There was a barrel racing contest in which girls on fast horses cut an eight-shape around two barrels, one on each end of the arena. Then they raced back into the corral. The horses leaned on their sides almost parallel to the ground as they made their turns. More clouds of dust reached us, and then the smell of sweaty livestock drifted over to us.

The air remained pungent with the smell of dust and ripening crops. The shadeless sunlight was stifling. My beet-red face and arms began to feel feverish, but I was enjoying this excitement, so I did not want to go sit in the car.

The last event was the most entertaining of all. Wild mules were turned loose in the arena. Teams of men were directed to capture them, put a saddle and bridle on them, and then ride them to a certain spot in the arena. The mules were very stubborn, and the men had to work hard to even catch them. Probably because of my own struggles with Maude, I found it hilarious to watch four grown men unable to control one mule.

Finally, the rodeo was over, and a tired, hungry, dusty and sunburned crew crawled into the car for the long ride home. Dean crawled up in the back window and fell asleep before we got home. Fritz, Judy, and Diane fell asleep on the seat. I stayed awake but I was miserable. My allergies had



kicked in. I couldn't breathe, and I was sunburned and dirty. My beautiful red shirt was full of dirt. Would it ever get clean again?

# I HATE THE CLOUD

by Aurora Dimitre

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It started with books.

Physical books vs. eBooks has been a long-fought battle in online spaces since eBooks became a thing, really. And eBooks are convenient—you carry a Kindle, or even your *phone*, around, and there's your entire library. You can read what you want, when you want, and it does not weigh several hundred (thousand) pounds. However, it is different. It's different to read a book on your phone than it is to have the book there. First of all, pages are softer on the eyes, and there is a difference in information processing when it's coming from a page and not a screen. I, personally, have always associated reading on my phone with fanfiction, so unless I'm looking to get off, if I'm going to read, it's going to be a physical book.

I own over 2000 unread physical books. I realize that this is a problem, and so does the foundation of my second-floor apartment. I read an article (online) about someone whose floor started sagging under the weight of all of the books they owned, but my main takeaway was not that I should get rid of books, but that they had 5000, so I had a ways to go. I am currently working on cutting down the TBR. I've bought way less books in the last eleven months. I have a bet going with my fiancé. It's the only book buying ban that's ever worked.

Books are a physical media that people do generally accept. If someone loves to read, they probably have a lot of books, or at least a few, hanging around their house. Sure, they might have a Kindle, or they might read on their phone—my father swaps between paperbacks and his phone, decrying the other for a while before deciding that the other one is what he wants—but it is not weird. Let's move to film.

My television is a 1994 RCA ColorTrak Plus. It has a screen smaller than the screen on the desktop I use to write this. Attached to my television is a combination DVD/VHS player. Unfortunately, I have lost

the remote, so if I want to watch TV shows that I own on DVD, I have to use my desktop. My desktop was a gift from my family when I graduated college—my brother built it and my parents paid for it. My only request was that it had a CD/DVD drive. I do pay for Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Crunchyroll. This feels a little hypocritical for someone who does proclaim a love for physical media. The Amazon Prime, sure; that's not *just for the TV*. That's for like, shipping and stuff. But I have found that, if I want to be sure I'm going to finish a TV show, I have to get it on DVD or I have to binge-watch it in one sitting. So I have a growing collection of TV shows on DVD. Some of them I found at like, Goodwill. Some of them I bought off the internet. I also have a large collection of DVDs and VHS tapes. The reasoning behind the VHS tapes is that some movies, particularly if they're foreign, if they came out before the turn of the century, I'd rather try and avoid DVD codes. Also, some movies, like *House of a Thousand Corpses*, feel like they should be on VHS.

Music. I pay for Spotify. I am listening to "I'm Not Okay (I Promise)" by My Chemical Romance on Spotify *right now*. I also have a glut of cassettes, records, and CDs. The CD collection has been building since I was in middle school. I graduated from high school in 2015, so seventh grade for me would have been around 2009. Reasonable. The first CD I ever bought was The All-American Rejects' *When the World Comes Down*. Records are almost a status symbol. They're cool. I have a decent collection. For the cassettes, I had a period in my life, which I am just now accepting that I have left, where I was basically an eighties/nineties metalhead and I really just pretended it wasn't the twenty-first century.

The question does become why. I can give excuses all day long about paper being better for reading and the sound of cassettes and what have you, but it all comes down to ownership and not trusting the Cloud. When I have a book, and it is a bunch of paper bound together with glue, I own that book. Unless you come in my house and take it from me or I decide to get rid of it, I will continue to own that book. There will be no purge, on purpose or not, getting rid of that book. Same with music and movies. Songs will drop on and off of Spotify. Normally this doesn't happen with songs I'm listening to (the only exception is "Bruises and Bitemarks" by Good With Grenades), but it does happen. If I'm watching something on DVD, a TV show or whatever, I can take my damn time and not worry

about Netflix taking it off. Physical media is reliably there unless it is physically destroyed.

We all remember hearing about production companies deleting just swaths of old content, right? The only people who have that content now are people who had it on fucking VHS. Maybe it's a historical thing, maybe it's just me being a hoarder, maybe it's me fundamentally not trusting the Cloud (because I *don't*), but when things are physical, they are real. The internet is not real. The internet is a bunch of lines of code that permit us to do a lot of beautiful things. I love the internet. I grew up on Tumblr and warrior cat roleplaying Wetpaint sites like the rest of us. But I'm not keeping my music and movies and books on there. I'm not *renting* my movies. I fucking own them, and in a society that seems to be less and less concerned with ownership, I'm okay with being an outlier.

# NICE TO MEET YOU

by Elise Divine

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“That’s not where the lettuce goes. You overfilled the dressings and they slopped into the ice. This looks disgusting. Clean up your mess.”

Looking up from my greasy pizza and limp salad, I saw a great lump of dough wrapped in the standard uniform of a chain restaurant manager—cheap white shirt, striped polyester tie, shapeless black trousers. He leaned so heavily on the metal cart they called a salad bar that I thought it would collapse.

The young woman at the receiving end of this beratement wore a red uniform shirt still creased from its plastic packaging. The name “Tina” was spelled out in stickers on a plastic name tag. A flush spread from her neck to her forehead when she noticed the face of every diner in the restaurant turned towards her. She didn’t bother to hide the telltale sparkle of tears waiting to be shed as she rushed toward the restrooms.

Appetite gone, I tossed my napkin on my half-finished meal and watched silently as my dinner companion slowly made her way through two more slices of pizza and a second run through the salad bar.

Heading to the cash register with our check, I noticed Mr. Dough Ball had taken over cashier duty. Behind him, Tina and four other melancholy employees noiselessly prepped food and cleaned dishes in the open kitchen.

Without even looking up he asked the ubiquitous question, “How was everything?”

“The food and service were great, but it was hard to enjoy my meal with you berating an employee in the dining room. It is completely inappropriate to talk to people the way you did at the salad bar. You have no business leading others and I feel sorry for each and every employee here.”

Looking away from his tomato face, I saw ten bright eyes and five wide smiles looking back at me from the kitchen. I tossed cash on the

counter, turned on my heel, and practically strutted out the door. As the bright sunlight hit my face, I realized my favorite sunglasses were inside on the table. I like to think that they became Tina's favorite sunglasses.

This is the type of story I would tell you when we are getting to know each other. I might also tell you about the time I took an adventurous solo road trip or the time I stood up to the substitute teacher whose son was picking on me. These stories show you the parts of me I want you to see. The me who values respect, is independent, and isn't afraid to stand up to bullies.

Your stories aren't much different. You tell me about how you volunteered at a food bank, played in a band, and worked three jobs while you were in college. I learn that you are empathetic, creative, and hard working.

As time passes, I wonder if I could trust you to know the other me. The parts of me who want to be a better person.

The cruel me who can lie, steal, and cheat. The insecure me who makes mistakes. The lazy me who doesn't finish what she starts and blames others for her problems.

I want you to show you my whole self, to be authentic and true. It's exhausting maintaining this curated version of myself.

I'm not going to tell you about the time I lied to a friend, stole from my job, or cheated in school. That would be too bold, too scary. I won't tell you about my mistakes or my failed projects and relationships. That would be too embarrassing.

How fast will you run away when you hear those stories? How quickly will you forget the version of me you thought you knew?

These are the stories I will tell you instead.

"Can you believe what Jennifer did? She told her husband she had to travel for work and told her boss she was sick so she could spend the week in Vegas with her boyfriend!"

"I can't believe Angie hasn't gotten fired yet. She has no clue what she's doing."

"Did you hear about Tim? His accountant has been stealing from him for years and wiped out his retirement savings. He is so gullible to have trusted that guy."

Gossip is a safe way to test your reaction. If you judge Jennifer for lying to her boss and cheating on her husband, I won't tell you about the

ways I've lied and cheated. If you agree that Angie is an idiot and deserves to be fired, I won't admit how I feel like an idiot most days. If you laugh at how gullible Tim is, I won't share stories of when I trusted the wrong person.

However, this plan is fundamentally flawed. You won't react honestly to these stories. Judging Jennifer, Angie, and Tim allows you to keep your secrets.

Are you hiding your embarrassing habit of cheating at board games? Did you lie to your husband about your college abortion? Do you shop for your child's school needs from the office supply closet?

I've given you the responsibility of opening up first. However, just like me, you are afraid to be seen. So, we present shallow versions of ourselves to each other.

I treat you with disrespect by hiding my true self. I let go of my independence by allowing your judgements to color my opinions. I stop standing up for others and instead tear them down with our gossip. I start questioning whether you truly are empathetic, creative, and hard working.

Once we unleash the gossip juggernaut, this relationship is over. Like Jennifer, Angie, and Tim, your stories will likely become tests I use in future relationships.

I wonder how my relationships could be different if I stood up to myself like I did to Mr. Dough Ball. "Your sense of humor and storytelling are great, but it is hard to enjoy life with you berating others. It is completely inappropriate to talk about people the way you did today. You have no business having friends and I feel sorry for every person you've ever met."

How many bright eyes and wide smiles might I see if I built connections with others using empathy and vulnerability instead of judgment and gossip? Where can I find the courage to try?

# WHAT IS FAIR?

by Kenzie Grace

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I woke up to my third alarm just like always. Another day, another sleepless night, and another tiring morning. I was one month into student teaching, and I hated it. I had such a strong support system in my first three years of college, but during that month I had never felt so alone.

I queued up for a playlist, something sad. I was hoping to get all my tears out on the way there instead of sitting in the bathroom during lunch. The drive was fifteen minutes long, and in Fargo that meant about fifteen miles away from my home. I missed my commute back to Washington, where a fifteen-minute drive meant traffic and slow mornings. I would wake up during my drive, but here in Fargo, the day was still dreary and sad by the time I parked and started my walk to the classroom.

I dreaded all my classes at this point. We had just started another unit. The classes that I taught loved me, but did not respect me, and the classes I did not teach barely knew my name even though I had been helping in class every day.

I think that's why I felt so lonely. Being ignored by my peers is one thing, but being ignored by young children stings deeply. The more I felt alone, the more I felt like I was ruining my relationship with the kids. I radiated an energy of desperation and depression. Everyone knew I was dying inside. I talked and you could sense death on my voice, which only made everything worse. I was boring them, so the students talked over me. I was monotone, so the students ignored me. I was a failure.

I walked around the class quietly, like a ghost, because that's how I felt.

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"We need to talk about your teaching style." My cooperating teacher said, looking up from her grading. She was always sweet but stern with me. I felt like she matched my energy very well. Of course, my energy meant that I wanted to burn myself out trying to be the best in the world



at an impossible task. She had once told me she would never praise me for things I was supposed to be doing. So, no conversation was good conversation, it meant I was doing exactly what a teacher should be.

“What about my...teaching style?” I replied. I was a little anxious to leave after school. It was a Friday. I had already packed all my school stuff up and was ready to leave. I was hoping to make the drive to the Cities. My dad was in town, and I had not seen him in months.

“You’re very monotone. The students do not listen to you because who would want to? You also bring your bad mood from one class into the next and from one day into the next. That’s not fair to the students. Every day is new for them and should be for you too,” she told me point blank. It was needed criticism. But it stung.

“Okay. I will work on it.” I said with a blank face. “Anything else?” I was hoping for a no.

“Yes, that’s it. Have a great weekend.” She smiled and looked down to finish her work. I just gave a weak smile and made my way to my car.

I was speed walking and I just kept saying in my head, over and over, make it there before you cry. Do not let any students see you cry. Do not let any teachers see you cry. Do not let any administration see you cry.

I slammed the door to my car and bawled. I felt like such a failure. I turned up my music and with tears staining my cheeks and my eyes red and puffy I drove to the nearest place to get ice cream. It was a necessity. I sat in the parking lot, ice cream in hand. I didn’t even feel like eating, but I knew the sugar would be cold for my aching, swollen heart.

I finished my ice cream and called my dad. I could barely drive the five minutes from my school to get ice cream, I was not driving the four hours to Minneapolis. I was worried he would be mad or disappointed. But he was so reassuring instead.

“Things like this happen all the time. You did not make a mistake picking this major. You’re doing good and everyone hits a rut at one point or another. Just take some time and then process the advice she tried to give you,” he cooed at me through the phone. I knew he would have wanted to be here for me. I was his little girl, and I was more heartbroken over this than my first boyfriend. I just had to follow his advice.

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I spent that Saturday wrapped in a blanket of shame. I did not leave my room for anything that was not necessary. I cried, complained, and thought about starting a blog titled “Why Your Dreams Never Came

True.” It was all very dramatic, but I always have been. My cooperating teacher was right, I was being unfair to the students. My life and how I am feeling should not be a determining factor in how I teach. They do not know what is going on outside of school.

By Sunday, I was feeling different. My sadness had turned into pure rage and determination. I hated the teacher I was becoming. I spent all day preparing for my lesson and practicing. I made my roommates sit in the living room and watch as we teach them. I was bubbly and over the top, and even these college students thought that my 7<sup>th</sup> grade lesson was exciting. I was ready to fight. I taught first period, and sixth, seventh, and eighth that Monday back. I taught those classes consistently for two weeks straight.

“We need to talk about your teaching style.” We were in the middle of our prep period and both grading papers and projects. I really did not think this conversation would happen so soon. The determination I had felt these past two weeks melted away; I felt scared.

“I do not know what you changed. But you’ve gotten so much better at teaching. The students look more engaged, and we have had less behaviors. You improved.” Again, this was a point-blank statement. I had improved. I was better.

“Thanks, I am still working on it.” I felt like I was still stuck in the last conversation like this. I did not know what to say to her. But I felt proud. It was the first time I felt complimented about how I taught, and I was ready to finish that week off on a high note.

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I woke up to my third alarm just like always. Another day, another sleepless night, and another tiring morning. I was two months into student teaching, and I loved it. I had such a strong support system in my administration, cooperating teacher, and friends.

I queued up for a playlist, something happy.

# GERTRUDE CHANDLER WARNER: IMAGINATIVE IDEAS

by Grace E. Leier

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Ever since Gertrude Chandler Warner was five years old, she had dreamed of becoming an author. Instead, she had taken up teaching during the war and just stuck with it. But now, years later, as she sat at home with bronchitis, she began her dream by writing a children's book. Little did she know how such an imaginative idea would take off, even without the support of librarians.

Gertrude Chandler Warner was born April 16, 1890, in Putnam, Connecticut to Edgar and Jane Warner. She most likely was a very imaginative child. Her mother bought notebooks for her and her sister, Frances, to write stories in. Her father was a lawyer and gave her his first law desk to use for writing. When Warner was 9, she wrote her first story, *Gollinog at the Zoo*. Her Grandfather Carpenter lived close by on a farm and enjoyed her stories, so she would give some of them to him as a Christmas present through the years. Warner also loved to read; her favorite book was *Alice in Wonderland*. Reading and writing were not her only interests—she also enjoyed music. She played the cello in her family band and later on was a substitute organist at her church.

She grew up in a house by the Providence and Worcester Freight Line Railroad. One day, while outside watching a train go by, she took a good look at the caboose. The caboose was the last car on the train, the place where the train crew would live. She wondered what it would be like to live on a train, an idea she had never had before.

Warner was never able to finish high school due to an unknown sickness. She left halfway through her second year and studied with a tutor.

After high school, World War One had taken over the country. Warner was teaching Sunday School at the time and was asked to become a public school teacher due to a shortage of men to teach. She accepted, putting her writing dreams on hold, and became a first grade teacher at

Israel Putnam School in 1918. Channeling the imagination she had developed as a child, she used a puppet to teach her class about hygiene and had stone and wildflower gathering contests for her students. A former student of hers, Ruth Flagg, said, “[Warner] was aware that not all children learned in the same way. Each child was meant to feel special. She just had that gift...She always encouraged our imaginations.” She taught around 1,600 children in the same classroom for 32 years during her teaching career, retiring in 1950 at 60 years old.

Warner was inspired to write a children’s book while home sick from work with a case of bronchitis. She wanted to write a book that was about kids and fun for her students to read. Thinking back to her childhood dream of living in a caboose, she wrote *The Boxcar Children*. It was about four orphaned children, Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny Alden who left home after their parents died in order to avoid being taken in by their grandfather they had never met and assumed to be mean. They found a home in the woods, living in an old abandoned boxcar. The children even found a dog, Watch, to keep as a pet while they survived on their own. After several rewrites in order for the book to be easy to understand, she finished writing the book in 1924. Warner read the story to her class and published the book with Rand McNally. The book did not have a large reception.

In 1942, Scott Foresman Publishing Company published the revised version of *The Boxcar Children*, stripping down the vocabulary for a young reader’s level. This time, the book became a success. Surprisingly, librarians did not like it. They thought it portrayed kids as having too much success and fun without parents. Warner responded to this with, “Perhaps you know that the original *Boxcar Children*. . . raised a storm of protest from librarians who thought the children were having too good a time without any parental control! That is exactly why children like it! Most of my own childhood exploits, such as living in a freight car, received very little cooperation from my parents.” Warner persevered despite little support from librarians and wrote 18 more *The Boxcar Children* books, having them solve many interesting mysteries, including *Surprise Island*, *The Yellow House Mystery*, and *The Bus Station Mystery*. Warner wrote 15 other books for children and adults but none were as popular as *The Boxcar Children* series.

Gertrude Chandler Warner died on October 30, 1979, at 89 years old. This was not the end of *The Boxcar Children*, though. Albert Whitman and Company, who was now publishing *The Boxcar Children* series, received many pleadings for more stories about the Alden children. In 1991, Albert

Whitman and Company started publishing new stories about *The Boxcar Children*, all written by ghostwriters. Instead of saying who wrote the story on the cover of the new books, it only stated that Gertrude Chandler Warner created the series. These books included *The Box that Watch Found* and *The Mystery of the Stolen Snowboard*. The company also published multiple special edition books which included the children in very unique situations, like helping an ice skating troupe or visiting a honey bee farm. New books are still being published today. There is now a *Boxcar Children Museum* in Putnam, CT with a real boxcar, photographs, and a signed set of books among other artifacts. It was recently remodeled in 2022.

Warner probably never thought that her curiosity to what it was like to live on a train would impact generations of readers. Through her willingness to employ the most peculiar and imaginative ideas despite what librarians thought, she was able to create and write one of the most beloved children's series of all time.

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# THE FARMER TAKES A WIFE

by Maloye Lesmeister

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## Wedded Bliss

The wedding of a Catholic farmer and his Protestant city bride was planned and set. The officiating priest, Father George Werton, was a friend of the bride's sister and brother-in-law. Few of the guests would be Catholic. Father Werton was fine having the wedding without a full mass. However, the groom's mother said, "I'll not come, if you are not having a mass."

The son replied, "Don't come! It won't bother me." No mass would be celebrated and no mama was expected.

The wedding day dawned with a beautiful sunshine and a gentle breeze, and the ceremony began.

P.S. Surprise! There in the front pew sat the groom's mother.

P.P.S. And thus began the marriage of the Catholic farmer and his Protestant city bride and her mother-in-law.

## Visiting Enemy

The farmer takes a wife from the city. And thus begins the trials and errors.

The very first day the wife prepares lunch to deliver to the farmer in the field. Upon opening the door she sees a black and white cat with a long bushy tail—a.k.a. a skunk—in the driveway ten yards away. Knowing skunks carry rabies, she is stricken with fear.

Because lunch needs to get to the husband, the wife makes a plan—a small meat sandwich for the kitty. She propels it as far as she can, then races to the Fairlane 500. Once in the car, she thankfully expels her breath and, without looking back, proceeds with her task.

Mission accomplished. No food left. The Mrs. ponders, "What will I do if my mortal enemy is still waiting for me? Will I have to sit in the car

for the rest of the afternoon and evening until my rescuer gets back home?”

Shaking with fright, she maneuvers her vehicle three inches from the bottom step. It only takes five tries. She gulps a mouthful of air. No sight of the hostile enemy. The car door opens and slams shut. The bride hustles into the house.

Later the husband questions, “Why did you park the car there?” Laughing at the explanation, he says, “The skunk was more afraid of you than you were of him.”

P.S. Wife replies, “You can think that if you want.”

P.P.S. “But I know it’s not true!”

### **A New Use for Tools**

One day the farmer can’t get his tractor started. He chains it to another one, and tells his city wife she will pull it, and it will start. She climbs on to her tractor, as he warns, “Don’t yank the chain. Just go easy.”

“This will be a piece of cake,” thinks the farmer’s city bride. The pull begins, and a split-second later YANK! Both tractors stop. Forgetting she is new to farm life, the husband begins to berate his wife.

She answers, “Well, if you think you can do it better by yourself, FINE!”

She hops down from the tractor and heads to the house. As she opens the door to the entry way, a mouse scampers across the floor and hides under the shelves holding cans of fruit and vegetables. Quickly running back outside, she hollers, “MOUSE! MOUSE! MOUSE!”

Farmer hastens to the rescue. He hands a broom to the quivering frau, while instructing her to use it as an implement to scare the mouse from its hiding place. He grabs a shovel to murder the invader when it comes out. Hesitantly, the bride begins to poke with a broom. The mouse gingerly pokes its head out. Wife lets out a screech. “EEEE!” The broom flies into the air and she exits the entry into the kitchen at jet-speed.

Husband retires to the basement for a mouse trap. Problem solved in the next two hours.

P.S. Mrs. begins breathing again.

P.P.S. “It’s so nice to have a man around the house,” she thinks.



## Farmer to the Rescue

Seven hundred sixty acres of soil bank was up for sale, just half a mile from the home of the farmer and his city wife. What a fantastic opportunity to enlarge. Both withdrew their teachers' retirement and together filed for an FHA loan. The prize is won!

Now comes the hard work of breaking up the sod for future production. Driving couple's tractors—an orange 900 Case and a red International W9 about 40-years old—the couple begins cultivating the fields. The sun is hot and the mosquitos are numerous and biting. Flies are attacking in horrendous numbers. Midafternoon the wife's tractor tires suddenly begin to spin and then stop moving. Heaven HELP! She has fallen asleep and driven into a slough.

Driving on the next field, the husband sees the wife is not moving. He lifts up his chisel plow and goes to the rescue. As he arrives and slows the engine to idle, his bride mutters meekly, "I think I fell asleep."

"You THINK you fell asleep. Now, why would you think that?", the farmer vocalizes with disgust. He drops the chain off his tractor, hooks it onto her tractor, and pulls her out. She hurries back to her job without looking back while questioning, "Am I going to end up dead or just divorced?"

Sometime later the wife realizes her husband's bigger, heavier tractor has not moved. Gathering her courage, she drives back over to him and discovers he has sunk into the soft ground. She now must pull him to dry, solid land. Angry about losing at least an hour of work, the farmer realizes his best course of action is simply to keep his mouth shut. And then get back to work.

P.S. The farmer must have cooled off.

P.P.S. Now, fifty-four years later, the farmer's wife is neither dead nor divorced.

## The Plow

A beautiful, sunshiny April day. Slight breeze. The farmer drives an orange 900 Case tractor and red plow to the north farm, previously owned by his parents. To start the job, he plows two rounds in the field west of, and adjacent to, the farmyard. City wife drives the maroon pickup into the yard, parks it, and walks to the farmer who is now waiting on the east edge of the field. Together they make one round, and then the husband leaves

the Mrs. to finish the job. He heads south, up the big hill, to seed with the white and red 860 International and green JD drill.

In the middle of wife's field is a 12' long x 10' wide x 3' high area with a rock pile on it. With every round she continues getting closer to the rocks. Suddenly she realizes she is right next to the rise. Wife quickly and sharply cranks the steering wheel. Glancing out the right side-window of the cab, she sees the plow has climbed up the tractor tire and is now at eye-level. Braking immediately, she lowers the throttle and shifts into Park. Rushing out of the tractor, the wife scurries back to the yard and dives into the pickup. She pushes the petal to the metal, and careens up the large hill to inform her farmer.

Of course, he is at the far end of the field. Creating a dust storm, Mrs. flies to him across the freshly worked field. Yelling with rage, husband's first words are, "You just drove across a field I just finished seeding. What the \_\_\_\_ is wrong with you?" Shaking, the wife proceeds to explain what IS wrong with her.

Together they drive to the orange tractor with the red plow high in the air. Farmer vigorously shakes his head and fisted hands. He loudly projects naughty words from his tongue. Wife is ordered to take the pickup and leave. Once again she wonders, "Will it be death or divorce?"

She returns home. So ends a beautiful, sunny April day now with a ferocious wind.

P.S. Tire undamaged. Nothing broke, bent, or ruined.

P.P.S. Farmer uses the Farmhand—tractor with a loader—to lift the plow off the tractor tire and gently place it back on the ground. He finishes the field. He has composed himself by the time he gets home. Divorce or death averted once more.

# BLIZZARD PONDERINGS

by Brian Martin

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As the bitter claws of winter, in the form of a March snowstorm that shut down the city of Fargo, tighten their grip in defiance of the coming spring, it becomes hard to remember that spring does indeed come. As the snow blower bogs down and repeatedly dies, its face buried in the wind-packed drift that is our driveway, spring seems an impossible dream. Of course, it's an old snow blower, free, in fact, and it has been a blessing, as in my middle age, my back does not tolerate the shoveling of copious amounts of snow very well. I ponder the change in my attitude toward winter.

As a child, I loved winter. I loved snow, the deeper the better. I particularly loved the after-effects of blizzards, with the long, tall drifts and the resulting large snow piles from the snow plow clearing our country driveway and yard. I especially liked where it drifted over the edge of where the small hill that was our front yard dropped away almost straight down, like a miniature cliff dropping to the ditch of the country road that passed our house. This “cliff,” when drifted over, provided the snow structure in which I first built caves, and then, becoming more daring, tunnels that led to caves. These caves, first just small dark holes—refuge from the storms of winter and of my young life—eventually had seats carved into them, big enough to sit or lie upon.

Once, when I was about 12, I built a tunnel from the top of the drift that I could step into and slide down and shoot out at the bottom. After further snow storms it would drift closed, and I would simply jump in at the top, and pop out at the bottom amid a cloud of loose snow dislodged by my passage. A couple more times through and it would be completely clear again. After one such storm I went out, and again found it plugged. Not thinking of the fact that the wind had been stronger, and the snow that I walked across to get there was more hard packed, I jumped in,

expecting to clear it as usual. I jumped in, and was promptly stopped with just my head and the top of my shoulders out of the hole. I couldn't move.

My first reaction was to laugh with glee. This was something new. It was funny. I was sure that if I could kick my feet, I would be able to clear it and slide through. I was able to move my feet, and was able to clear some space, but it soon became clear that the problem was not that the tunnel was obstructed below me, but that I was wedged around my upper arms by snow hardened to nearly ice. I then started feeling embarrassed, and for the next half hour or so, every time I would hear a vehicle approaching on the road below, I would turtle my head down until the car passed. It would certainly not befit an intrepid adventurer to be rescued from a snow tunnel like some little kid!

Eventually, I managed to get my right arm free, but this seemed to wedge me more. I tried to dig as best I could, all the while trying to avoid the attention of cars going by. Slowly, the cold settled in. My body, encased in icy snow, began to get cold. My toes and fingers were starting to hurt. I had sweat a lot in my struggles to free myself. I started to get scared. Where before there seemed to be cars going by every few minutes, now there was a distinct lull in traffic, even by the standards of this country road. Time went by, and I got more cold. I started to shiver. I kept working, making little progress.

Then I began to yell. I called for help. A car went by and I yelled and waved my arm. I couldn't see the car, but it went by without slowing. I yelled until my voice was hoarse. I wondered, would they find me here frozen? I had read about hypothermia—I had read about mountaineers losing toes to frostbite, and I was bone-chillingly cold. As I said, we lived in the country, and as a kid, back in the early 80's, I had free rein with my play outside—to a point. I spent hours rambling our fields and woods, summer and winter. I spent whole afternoons playing at the "cliff." I always was supposed to give my mother some vague idea of where I was going, but that was it. I started wondering, had I told mom where I was going? My voice seemed little more than a croak. I was scared. Then at a distance of about 75 yards, I heard the front door open, and my mom's voice call "Brian?"

"Help," I yelled with as much volume as I could manage, waving my arm frantically. "Help Mom, I'm stuck." I assume she looked around. Later, she said she could barely hear me. Then I heard her say "I'm

coming,” and a few minutes later she was carefully breaking the packed snow away from me with a shovel. Then I was hustled back to the house.

Within minutes, I was sitting wrapped in a blanket on the metal heater grate in the floor above our wood burning stove, sipping hot chocolate as the shivers intensified and then subsided. The pain in the tips of my fingers and toes was briefly intense as they warmed back up. I settled back against the wall, safe and warm. The next day I made a new tunnel.

These caves and tunnels, in this “cliff” were the genesis of much childish imagining—Climbing Mt. Everest, storming or defending castle walls, or tunnel warfare. Other times, it was a place of solitude, of quiet, a place to be alone and to think. That has become something I have oft sought in my life, a solitary place to rest and to think thoughts sacred and profane, semi-profound and more often mundane.

There can be, I have found, solitude in a blizzard. There is generally no one else about. If you find a spot sheltered from the wind, it is almost like being enveloped in a bubble of silence, surrounded by a cacophony of sound, ice banshees screaming their rage at their inability to reach you. But if you stop, even in the wind, and especially at the edge of it, in your protected area, or even from within the shelter of your house, there is a music there. There is a music to the wind of a winter storm...if you but listen for it. I, who knows little of music beyond the fact that I love listening to it, music of many types, would suggest that one who has not heard the music of wind in the pines, or the symphony of fresh melted snow cascading in an impromptu waterfall while hiking the mountains of Idaho in spring, or for that matter, the music of the wind-whipped snow in a North Dakota or Minnesota blizzard, has not truly heard music.

So, while I ponder this, I watch my Golden Retriever running and pouncing and digging into drifts, and I smile. Yes, I am sick of shoveling, and perhaps a book in the sunshine may be preferable to this, and yes, my attitude toward winter has changed. It has changed, but thankfully not so much that I miss the beauty of the now, even on this cold, stormy day.

DEFINING MY SELF:  
SKILLS LEARNED AND APPLIED  
IN A JOURNEY OF RECOVERY  
by Joshua Mjones

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The overpowering odor of stale cigarette smoke, sweat and the char-like tinge of flash burnt flesh permeate every memory of my father. Often he would scream so close to my face that I could almost taste the acrid combination. Most times by this point, I would disengage entirely and view the scene from a safe distance well within my own mind. A behemoth of a man standing over a 10-year-old boy, clutching at his collar, screaming angrily, spittle flecking the boy's face. Shaking him violently, a slap across the face or thrown to the floor. The reason for the event not as important as the relief the man will feel when he has exhausted himself, and once spent, retire to his room for the rest of the evening. "Fucking lazy son of a bitch, you are worthless!" The words continue to echo forever in the kitchen of the tiny house. The scene plays itself forever, an endless loop of like scenes arranged in order of severity, no timeline attached. One scene that replays is from the boy's sixth year of life, the next he is fourteen and unafraid to stand up to the man, the beatings ensue. "I fucking hate you, I wish you were never born!" The beatings preferable to being ignored, being treated as an afterthought. Sometimes there would be no explanation or reason for the attack. A look, the way a word was said and misinterpreted as disrespect. "I'll fucking teach you! I'm your father and you will listen to me if it fucking kills you!" The belt would come off and be looped over twice, for strength and durability, the whistle as it cut through the cigarette smoke, the crack as it lands below its target and across the top of the boy's legs. The first bite was always the worst, cutting a slash through his nerves and sparking a fire of flesh and once raging, the subsequent blows would seem less intense. The abuse continued. Innumerable days waiting for his father to

return home from work, not knowing which one of them would get the brunt of his frustration, the older brother or him. It seemed the older he got, the more likely he would be the recipient.

When I was younger there seemed to be no escape. I could hide in the basement but eventually I would have to come up for dinner and that is when it would begin. As I got older I could leave, go to my friends or ride my bicycle around till later at night but I would always have to come home. Once, when I was in my teens I ran out on one of the terror sessions only to be found later by the Moorhead Police Department and brought back home. I was actually delivered, by the police, to one of the worst beatings I had ever received. Neighbors tried to help, they would call the police who would then turn up to our house but back in the eighties it was always “You better do what your old man tells you or of course you’ll get your ass whooped.” No one ever thought to ask the child what was going on, nor would they have listened.

*“The effects of unresolved trauma can be devastating...”*

-Dr. Peter Levine-

I was 14 the first time I used alcohol. I was alone. I didn’t go to a friend’s party and drink to try to fit in to a social group. I didn’t use because of peer pressure. I drank because I was curious as to what it would do to me. I quickly found that it turned off the switch to the negative emotions I felt about myself. Suddenly I was no longer in the hyper-focused state of fight or flight. I felt liberated and relaxed. I didn’t care how temporary the feeling was, a few hours at most. I also didn’t care about how it made me feel afterward, depressed and anxious all over again. All that mattered to me was that for a brief time, I felt free. I was in love with the high and the accompanying feeling of liberation. I continued to drink to the point of intoxication at least twice a week well into my thirties. I was a binge drinker. Working all week in order to justify my “It’s the weekend, let’s party!” attitude. This is a sad norm for so many men of my generation. We justify our overindulgence with thoughts like “We work hard, we deserve to play hard too” or “Let’s get together with friends and blow off some steam.” This works fine for some people but for me, it became something much deeper. By the time I was thirty-four I was an everyday drinker. Not just one or two beers after work or with dinner, no I had to have five or six just to relax. This became five or six a night during the week and five or six before noon on weekends. I am an alcoholic.

I began to slide down this spiral of behavior at an ever more increasing speed. In 2016 I lost someone whom I was very close with, a man who had replaced the abusive father in my life with a positive role model for behavior. Gene was more than an in-law, he was a friend. A man whom I loved very much. He passed after a brief but severe illness. He was diagnosed with liver cancer in July of 2016 and we buried him in October of the same year. His illness and subsequent death was so much to process that I shut down, I did not want to feel the grief that was crushing my soul, so I drank and I began using cannabis to suppress my emotions. I buried myself in my work, not only my career but also my roles in the community. I couldn't say no to any task. I was coaching youth sports, sitting on a city council, a school board and working seventy hours a week at my job on top of the hours spent volunteering for Boy Scouts and various other community events. I was simply staying so busy that I wouldn't have time to feel anything and, for those days that I did feel something, there was a healthy amount of bourbon and cannabis to numb me.

My marriage suffered greatly during this time, I became more and more withdrawn. Resentful of the world as a whole, I felt isolated, alienated and unappreciated. I felt as if all of the things that I had been doing were in vain and that no one understood the sacrifices I had made in honor of their well-being. My sense of self-worth was at an all-time low, my depression had reached mammoth proportions and the darkness that I felt began to manifest itself in my daily life. My wife and I argued about small things that would eventually lead to bringing up big things, a cycle of dirty fighting that served only to escalate the situation, dysfunction defined.

It was during this difficult time in my marriage that I came to realize that my drinking and cannabis use were a greater problem than I had realized. I sought counseling help for thoughts that I began to have about the abuse that I experienced as a child, flashbacks and object permanence. While digging into the physical and emotional abuse sustained at the hands of my parents I began to realize that there were other abuses that I had never fully admitted to myself. I had to say aloud something that I had kept secret because I felt guilty.

I was molested by my older brother for over six years during my early adolescence. While I now know that I was a victim and am in no way responsible for what occurred, at the time, I felt as though I had been a willing partner of something dirty and disgusting and held a deep sense of shame. It was through EMDR therapy that I began to lift the fog and



begin to clearly see the shape and context of the events. In EMDR therapy they tell you that it will get worse before it gets better, and for me, this was most certainly true. During this time I began to drink even more, use cannabis from the time I awoke in the morning until I passed out at the end of the day. I could not handle the physical side effects of the emotional trauma that I was having to re-experience in my therapy sessions. Things came to a head with my wife during this time and I invited her into one of the sessions with my counselor. I chose to disclose the abuse, for the first time in my life I felt as though I were being completely honest with someone I loved. I became the most vulnerable version of myself that I had ever been and that afternoon, I thought, was the beginning of my process of healing. Several months later though, things were back to the cycle of chaos that my life had become and I stagnated in my progress. Looking back on things now, it was likely my unwillingness to stop using that put my emotional recovery in jeopardy. The substances I was abusing were keeping me from healing by numbing me to the pain that I needed to feel in order to process the trauma I experienced. I put up barriers with those who were closest to me and I withdrew from friends and family alike. In August of 2019 my wife came to me and disclosed that she had been having an emotional affair with a co-worker. She assured me no physical infidelity had occurred, but that she had developed feelings for the man. I was shattered. My thoughts of self were so interwoven with my identity as a husband and father that, when faced with the prospect of no longer having that role, meant the total devaluation of me as a person. I collapsed inward, I chose to set in motion events that would lead to the lowest point in my life.

On September sixteenth, 2019 I took a half a day off from work, went to a local sporting goods store and purchased a handgun and a box of ammunition. The next day I told my employer that I was taking a leave of absence to attend treatment. I packed a bag and let my wife know that I was checking into a treatment program in Fargo and left home. I purchased a bottle and got drunk for the last time. I began to drive west and found myself at a truck stop in Mandan, North Dakota at 1:00 am. I spent the entire night convincing myself that the better choice would be to drive to Yellowstone National Park, hike out as far as I could, and once exhausted, sit down to end my life. It was as if I were again seeing things from a third party perspective, watching the events unfold from the outside. Wanting to stop myself but being unable to control my own actions. I had completely dis-regulated and cut off from my own reality. After a completely sleepless night spent contemplating all of the perceived

wrongs that had been done to me, I entered the route into my phone and drove on to the park. While driving, I began to get text messages from my wife. The first was a text message asking if she could pick up something at my workplace that had been delivered by Amazon. I snapped, thinking that she was more concerned about a package than she was about me because she didn't ask how I was doing, and proof, in my mind, that I had made the right decision. I messaged her back and my story began to unravel. At some point she figured out that I had not checked into the rehab center. She panicked and started to ask me where I was and what I planned to do. At which point I told her that I wanted to see the man she had been having the affair with, I felt a need to see the person responsible for the demise of our relationship. The final insult to cement my decision to end it all. Looking back at it now, I needed only look in the mirror. I demanded that she send me his information stating that if she didn't I would continue to drive to where he worked and look for him there, texting a threat to kill us both and anyone in the way. I don't believe that I would have been capable of carrying out the threat, thankfully however, I would never get the chance to find out. My wife, along with her brother contacted the local Sheriff's department and they coordinated with national police efforts to track me using my cell phone. At approximately 10:00 am on September 18th, 2019 I was surrounded by a dozen officers from the National Park Service inside of Yellowstone and surrendered without incident. I will admit that there was a moment where I was considering exiting my vehicle armed, letting the events unfold in a violent matter. For some reason God stepped in and showed me a glimpse of a family running to get behind a vehicle guided by a Ranger. At that moment, a calm came over me and I could clearly see what I was doing for the first time in 48 hours. I dropped the magazine from the pistol, emptied the chamber and placed it on the dash. I surrendered thinking how could I do something like this, how could I have let myself get to this point?

*"We must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey."*

-Kenji Miyazawa-

Through the ordeal of incarceration and treatment on the inside along with three years of journaling, cognitive behavioral therapy, researching trauma and the healing process, I've come to understand myself, the thoughts that led me to make the wrong choices and the motivations behind those thoughts. By embracing the uncomfortable emotions

associated with the trauma I have experienced and learning to reframe the events that shaped my life, I have begun to heal and continue to experience the positive changes that come along with self-realization. Pain is a motivator, it is what drives me as a human to solve problems, to keep myself moving forward towards a brighter tomorrow. I share my story out of a desire to help others who have experienced the multiple types of abuse that I survived and let them know they are not alone, that there is a way forward and you don't have to struggle alone. My challenges are not unique. Every day millions of people go through life needlessly burdened by their suffering. Stumbling in the dark and finding the bare minimum to survive. I desire to see people scream out loud, "I am worth something more than what I have learned is my value, I own this life, I guide this journey and I will not be denied the joy I deserve!"

*"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."*

-Eleanor Roosevelt-

For adolescents and adults who may be experiencing narcissistic abuse, bullying and/or physical violence, this quote can be an empowering springboard for a discussion about cognitive behavioral therapy. The idea that our thoughts ultimately influence our emotions over time is a powerful one. I have found throughout the process of recovery that there is no single emotion that anyone outside of myself can "make" me feel. Certainly there are some inane reactions to others' behavior but, when I look inward and think about the emotion I am feeling, it is most often my thought about the behavior that triggers the emotional response. Outrage, anger, disappointment and fear all come from our perception of the situation. Our assumptions about others' motives are a huge part of this equation. I expected you to do X but you did Y and now I feel Z. Learning to let go of preconceived ideas of other's actions and the subsequent reactions have been a key element of my being able to work toward happiness.

There are many religious principles that go along with letting go of expectations. A popular Christian mantra is "Let go and let God." Buddhists speak of how unfulfilled expectations lead to suffering. The stoics also spoke on this topic, Seneca said it best when he says, "The greatest obstacle to living is expectation, which depends on tomorrow and wastes today." Why this seems so crucial to me in taking back the power over my own emotional state is this: I have to let go of my expectations of others, whether it be their reaction to my behavior and ideas or that

they did not act in a predicted manner in order to take accountability for self. I now realize that my own thoughts led to these feelings in the first place. To own something is to have power over that which you own. If you own your feelings, there is no power that any one person can have over you. Healing from childhood trauma involves processing emotions that were too difficult for the child-mind to understand. As an adult with PTSD, I had to learn this and apply skills that go along with these principles in order to process the events that were so damaging in the past. It was very difficult for me to begin to heal until I could get past a lot of the negative supports that were put in place when I was younger. When we tell children it's not your fault you are upset, this person did a bad thing and they hurt your feelings, we are not allowing them the privilege of owning their own emotions. We take away the responsibility to heal from within and place their well-being on external expectations. I would much rather tell my own children that I'm sorry this happened to you and I realize that it hurts and that is ok. But, and this is a big but, ultimately you need to decide how you are going to feel about the situation. It may be someone else's fault that you got hurt, however, it's your responsibility to either continue to suffer or move on to a more healthy emotional state.

"So what?!" you might be saying. Why is it not ok to tell someone it's not their fault for how they feel, why not let them attach the blame and responsibility for their emotions to others' actions? Well, consider we give someone a license to feel however and whatever they want without accountability. Now this license comes with a shiny new clown car with big balloon tires. We see this car happily bouncing down the road with this individual's feeling brain behind the wheel. For a short time they are just cruising along, happy as a lark, looking at the scenery pass by them without a care in the world. Suddenly they feel angry because of a memory, something that happened decades ago. And in this moment they see someone acting or speaking in a way that reminds them of the traumatic event. Now picture that sitting beside them is their rational mind, he's holding the map and the shopping list but because we have given the license to the emotional brain, he really can't do anything but sit there and make suggestions about staying on time and making sure not to forget trash bags. Imagine his surprise when the emotional brain decides to veer off the road intending to hit the person who reminds him of a traumatic event. The rational mind has enough wherewithal to grab the wheel temporarily and steer the car just past the person but now the emotional mind is embarrassed and will do anything to change the route, to get out of the vicinity of the personal reminder of the trauma, even if it means

driving through a McDonald's parking lot at high speed, wrecking several other consciousness clown cars and ruining a child's birthday party in the process. Meanwhile, horrified at the direction they are taking, the rational mind sits there powerless to do anything but complain and yell at the emotional mind thus making the situation worse. This cycle continues on an endless loop until the rational mind is given the tools to help guide the emotional mind along the route. Things like patience, understanding and being able to connect in a positive manner with the emotional mind can help the rational mind give gentle nudges and make healthy suggestions for the direction the emotional mind should be going. Here's another scenario that plays out with the same characters. Let's assume for a moment that we've given the rational mind the day off and he is fall-down drunk in the back seat of the clown car. Blissfully unaware of what the emotional mind is doing. The emotional mind experiences the same trigger, sees the same person and takes the same course of action. Without the presence of the rational mind the outcome is different and far more damaging. When we allow our emotions to absolutely control the direction of our lives without the least bit of direction that the rational mind offers, we are in danger of getting in a wreck at any moment. When we give license to people and make it ok for them to believe that they are not in control of how they feel, the wreck is a foregone conclusion. In his book *Everything is F\*cked*, Mark Manson uses this metaphor of the consciousness clown car to explain how our conscious self is merely along for the ride and that our emotional self is happily running amok behind the wheel, trashing everything in its path and leaving nothing but pain and destruction in its wake. When we incur traumatic injury whether that be from abuse, violence or loss, our conscious self becomes numb to the influence of anything outside of the car. We drop the map and allow the emotional self to run in any direction it may choose. The term for this is cut-off and, in my case, is what ultimately led to my cycle of addiction. This is common in people who have experienced trauma.

*"The best way to live life is to show up for it."*

-Jennifer Healey-

Early on in my treatment at Englewood FCI RDAP (Residential Drug Abuse Program), I was given a piece of advice from Dr. David Morelos (co-host of the podcast Psychology After Dark): "Just fucking show up. If you say you are going to be somewhere, be there." This isn't just a good tip for keeping appointments, I look at it in the broader spectrum of

things. If I say I am going to work on a program of recovery, I have to show up. I have to be present every day. Even if it's just going through the motions, if you put the task before you, you have no choice but to work on it, to be present. This means that I cannot build a comfortable life, I cannot become complacent in what I do every day. I have things in my life that are a constant reminder of why I need to be focused laid about my living space, my work desk and even in my car. Specifically, I have a copy of *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz on my nightstand to remind me of the essential things in life that I value, I keep my water bottle from RDAP on my desk at work as a daily reminder of the program, the friends I made and the ones that are still locked up. If you look in my car right now you will find a picture of me with three of my friends, a day when we were feeling blessed and decided to have a picture taken at the rec yard, I know it's hard to believe but happiness can be found behind bars. It's often found with the people who support you and whom you support in return. These items keep me grounded by serving as a reminder of where I've come from and the positive things that have grown from the seeds I have planted. By having these physical cues around, I am motivated to continue this journey of recovery and self-discovery, I want to see how good I can get, how far I can go. I do however caution against making such things a focal point. To be cognizant of the past does not mean that we need to live there, they are meant to inspire simple reflection relevant to today's circumstances. Today I am sober because of the choices I made yesterday, tomorrow I am likely to be sober because I made good choices today. Setting up the positive cognitive loop has been a lifesaving habit for me, far better than the implosive cycle of substance abuse I had lived in for decades.

*"Shame and regret live in the past..."*

-Mark Heim-

For a very long time I did not value myself. I was under the misguided illusion that my worth as a person, as a man, was strictly tied to what I could produce, whatever result or success I was able to achieve in pleasing others. This created a situation for me that made me hyper focused on success and analyze my shortcomings to the point of exhaustion. As a man raised in the Upper Midwest, there are certain expectations, mainly that you will provide, produce not only for your family but for your community as well. My parents placed a very high level of importance on what face you show to the world. Things like weakness and vulnerability

were ridiculed and my ability to persevere, to suffer and not complain were rewarded. Men don't cry and you had damn sure better put on a happy face and move on. That's all well and good for some things but in the grand scheme of life this can be extremely detrimental to a person's self-esteem, especially when what they are suffering for is not fulfilling in the end. I appreciate what Mark Manson says in his book *Everything is F\*cked*, it's so much more about what you are willing to suffer for what you are willing to gain. If you are led by the motivations of others, then suffering is empty.

I continually put myself through rigorous self-examination because I felt inadequate, never enough. I was holding myself to others' standards. Regretting decisions I had made because they did not please those close to me. Embarrassed because I judged myself according to how others saw me. Constantly trying to live up to an external expectation to please, to produce. Most of my goals in life were tied to external happiness, the feeling I would get for doing something that pleased my parents, my friends or my wife. Only to be crushed when the next expectation would be ever higher and even more unattainable than the last. I will however say this, the expectations of my wife were for the most part, mutual. Had I been in a state of being able to communicate better and receive feedback I do believe that some of this, at least in her case, could have been mitigated. Ultimately though, the chasing of vaporous desires placed upon me by those who had no interest in my well-being and who held the selfish desire for their own personal gratification, had me chasing my tail. I no longer live in the past, I have no regrets, not a single one. I have come to realize the fact that while I am greater than the sum of the circumstances that have befallen me, I would not be who I am without those experiences. Without the tests and trials of the past, I could not be aware of who I am now. I would be wholly without the tools I have accumulated and have learned to apply today. Instead, I feel a sense of gratitude towards those challenges. Oprah Winfrey phrases it like this: "Forgiveness is when you can say to someone, thank you for the experience."

*"Fear and Anxiety live in the future..."*

-Mark Heim-

Once I learned how to re-frame my past in a way that would help to reinforce the positives I was so desperately seeking, I began to worry. What if I slip back into those negative thoughts and manifest those same



old behaviors and emotions? What if I miss out on achieving something because I may not think it's what I want? What if, what if, what if? I started to spend more of my day thinking of ways that I could end up in the future than actually working on the things that were in front of me. What if I don't finish the program? What will happen to me when I get back to Fargo? How are people going to react when I return? I started to play scenarios out in my head a hundred times a day, each time with a different ending. I was doing mental gymnastics in order to keep my plan moving towards a destination that I couldn't even fathom. I began to fear the time when I would be free. I feared that I wouldn't have done enough to prepare for my arriving home. I feared that those people who I so disappointed wouldn't welcome me back. I feared starting life completely from scratch. I feared. There is a common misconception that it says "fear not" in the Bible 365 times; while not true, it does reference fear some 500 times. I am a Christian and many of the things I have learned throughout this process come from my Christian faith but, I have also learned that fear is an emotion that accompanies expectation or rather, unfulfilled expectation. When we say let go and let God, what we really need to understand is this: let go because there is nothing outside of today that you can do that will influence tomorrow. Let go of your expectation of what will happen and focus on what is happening now. Living for today means just that, do what you have to do today to be successful because there quite literally is no tomorrow. I have an anxiety disorder, this means that often times I experience an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and sometimes I have racing thoughts. I've learned through therapy how to recognize these physical cues so that I can manage the coming tide of anxiety. As long as I can recognize the cues and think about the feelings that I am experiencing, I am able to somewhat manage my anxiety and keep it at a healthy level.

Don't get me wrong, a little worry can do you good, it all comes back to what you are willing to suffer for what you are willing to gain. The majority of my anxiety is now centered around my children, I'm a parent, I worry about their futures. I also know that they are capable young men and have made good choices in the past and are likely to do so in the future, they will be fine. These thoughts come with practice and I've had ample opportunity for that because when you are incarcerated, you have to learn that there is absolutely nothing you can do to affect the outcome for anyone outside of yourself. Once I accepted the situation and the limitations of what I could control, I arrived at a place of peace. When I was able to let go of my fear for the future and the often crippling anxiety



over things I could not control, I was free. I continue to exercise this newfound freedom by owning my today. I now set goals, but I am not beholden to them. I have an idea of where I would like to be in five years and in order to adjust for how the situation is always changing, I now set my days up to support my weeks and my weeks for my months. By being confident in the choices I make in the now, I will be able to take that next step tomorrow. It's been quite a ride so far and I am happier and more confident now than I have ever been.

*"Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."*

-Desmond Tutu-

For the very first time in my adult life, I feel as though I really know who I am. I like the man I have become and I look forward to learning even more about my own recovery and by extension, learn more about myself. I have set a goal to work towards, I intend to become an addiction counselor and have set things in motion to attain that goal. I continue to work each day to maintain my sobriety and build healthy relationships. I am willing to do what is required and suffer the long hours of study, work a full time job and be there for my children. My goals are now about what I want to achieve and, at the end of the day, I know that I am capable. I also know that I am enough, and I am worth the work.

# MY FATHER'S DRESSER

by Victor Pellerano

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As the sunlight slipped through the curtains and danced upon the dresser it revealed a fine layer of dust.

I just stood there looking at the wooden dresser, the memories of my childhood played in my head. The dresser was standing in the corner of the room where it was placed years ago. It was silently beckoning for me to look inside and follow my Father's journey in life.

My Father passed away several years ago and yet it seems like only yesterday. Of course, I realize that is not the case. Maybe it is the spirit of him that touches me every day or just maybe, it is the connection whenever I touch something of his or can it be both. It is the little things, like the scarf my Mom made for him that I now wear or his watch that has not worked for years or his World War II medals. I have so many items of my Father's that he is present with me everywhere I go.

Ah yes, those little in signification things that we always seem to have taken for granted when we are young and wrapped up in our world of learning life. Those every day encounters with the people we love, the hugs, the kisses and yes sometimes the anger. How those days turn the memories into photographs and are forever cherished in our minds. I wished I had paid more attention to those little everyday things with my folks, because eventually memories have a habit of becoming foggy.

We live in Fargo which is about 1500 miles from our families in New Jersey. We usually try to visit the family once year around the major holidays. We had just seen my Father a couple months earlier and he appeared fine. I was at work when I got the news that my Father had passed away. I had spoken to him just the night before to see how things were going back east. So it was a surprise to say the least about the heartbreaking news.

When we arrived in New Jersey, most of the unpleasant arrangements had been done by the family. Nevertheless there were other items that

had to be looked into. One item was my Father's dresser. My mom felt it was best for my brother and me to go through my Dad's stuff. I being the older son took the lead to initiate that difficult and heart-wrenching task of going through the dresser drawer by drawer.

My Father was not a wealthy man that is in a monetary sense; but he was a modest man and hard worker. His family always came first. There were times he did without. I recall watching him cut out cardboard to slip into the bottom of his shoes. He didn't know I was there, but that tells you the measure of man he was.

There are four of us, two girls and two boys. There was a third son Russell, but he had passed away from an unforeseen medical condition in the first year of his life. We always had what we needed and never went to bed hungry. I am sure there were tough times when my mom and dad ate lean to make ends meet just to make sure we had enough to eat.

Staring at that wooden dresser it occurred to me that this simple four drawer wooden dresser still held my father's fingerprints. Those fingerprints told a story of a good man, a sensitive man. A man that was wounded serving our country during World War II and did what it took to provide for his family. My father was a working class Hero.

I stood there and looked at my brother. We both knew what we needed to do. The dresser was a typical four drawer dresser, no big name company, just your run of the mill wood dresser that you would find at any discount furniture store. I am sure it was stained many times through the years as an attempt to return the dresser to its original luster.

I do not remember when my father bought it, just that one day there it was.

That was what I meant when I said in our earlier years we are so engrossed in learning life that we miss the little things that surround us. I opened the top drawer; it was like opening a chapter into my Dad's life. My brother and I stared at the contents with wonderment and with a kiss of sorrow we began to sort through some of the items. It was a dreadful task that many have done before us and many will do after us, but nevertheless had to be done.

The drawers were loose and squeaked as we gently opened them one by one. The sound was familiar. I heard that sound many times and never gave it much thought till now. Today in a strange way that sound was

comforting. I felt strange inside, this not my property, it is my Father's and I do not have the right to invade it this way. Sure, I understand the situation but it still does not feel right. Those painful moments that day were tough. So, here we are my brother and I thumbing through my Dad's stuff. Some of the items surprised us, others made us laugh. Like the small cap pistol that came up missing one day or my brother's Jim Bowie knife. I often wondered what happened to some of those items.

There were other items, coins, stamps, baseball cards and letters in Italian from relatives in Italy.

Obviously these items were important to my Father in his life. Other items brought tears to our eyes. Like the unfinished model plane and battleship that he never found the time to finish. My Father always enjoyed building plastic models, a habit I picked up from him. He said it relaxed him from the hustle bustle of riding the subway in New York City.

There were a stack of holiday and birthday cards from my mom and us kids that were held together by a rubber band. Personal things that were important in his life have now become a part of ours. The leather wallet, a birthday gift that once carried his life now shows signs of wear. That well-worn wallet now has no value to society anymore other than to us his family. My father's wallet was thin, telling me that a man should be judged by his deeds not by the thickness of his wallet.

My Father was home with my Mother when he collapsed. I know that must have been immeasurable pain for my mom, but I feel better in a way, because he spent his last moments with my mom, hearing her voice. Maybe that is the way it should be for anyone that devotes their life to another, not in a subway train among strangers or on a busy sidewalk.

Today my Father's dresser has found a new life. My Father's dresser is in my brother's possession, with all the items as they were before, though my brother said he only uses the top drawer and that is ok. Maybe that is where the dresser belongs and I imagine it will remain till who knows when.

Why? Because that four drawer wooden dresser that was stained maybe once too often was my Father's, a man that meant the world to us. Everything we know and everything we have learned in our life has been imprinted on us from our parents. They are our first teachers in life and eventually we become teachers to our children. The social graces of society, the rights and wrongs were all established in our childhood. We are who we are because of our heritage.

# THAT WOMAN

by Mary Sand

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I am “That Woman.” That is what she calls me. I do not have a name. I am a stranger to her. I am unknown. I am “That Woman.”

In the last week, I have been told often that I am still around. As I sit and read the paper at my kitchen table, I hear her tell others, “That Woman is still here.” She is told that “That Woman” lives here. She asks others why I am here, that this is not my home, that we are in her childhood home in another city, another place in time. As I work on my computer in the den, I hear her tell others, “That Woman is in that room again.” As I walk into my kitchen to start supper, she sees me and says, “You’re still here, why haven’t you left, why are you still here?” I am “That Woman.”

When “That Woman” arrives home from work, I greet her. She doesn’t greet me but instead she informs me loudly that I must help her put all the children to bed, but that she can’t find them. “That Woman” reassures her that they are all fine and I will help her in a minute. She tells me that she can’t stand all the phones ringing from all the other apartments in the building, even though we are in a house, and can’t I please answer them. “That Woman” reassures her that I will.

She helps “That Woman” fold towels and blankets from the dryer. She helps “That Woman” set the table. She thanks “That Woman” for dinner.

As she looks at a family photograph that was taken a month ago on her 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, she names every single person in the picture by name, and goes right down the line. When she comes to me, I am called “That Woman.”

As I finish calling for an ambulance to help with her husband, I go back in the bedroom she is staying in. She is lying down next to him in bed, holding his hand, stroking his hair, telling him that she is there, telling him that help is coming, quietly, quietly talking to him, in a soothing, loving voice. When the ambulance and fire trucks arrive, “That Woman” helps her into the kitchen, where she stands in the window and asks “That

Woman” all about the pretty bright lights on the trucks in the street and wonders why they are here. She starts down the hall to her mate but is told by “That Woman” that she cannot go down there, that we must let the people do their job, that we must stay back. Instantly, she does not like “That Woman” at all. She struggles with “That Woman,” doesn’t like being held back, but “That Woman” tells her quietly, soothingly that we will know more soon. Suddenly, she decides she must prepare to leave. She gets her coat, her purse, her books, sets them all on the kitchen table, all the while being watched by “That Woman” who watches but simply observes, lets her be.

When the ambulance leaves, she is assisted to a car, stops in the driveway, turns around and tells “That Woman” who is standing at the front door, “Thank you for coming, hope to see you again, please stop by again and come and see us.”

“That Woman” goes back inside, goes back into the bedroom, and starts to pick up. “That Woman” notices that the books and binders that her house guest brings with her everywhere are quite full. I start to go through them and find my own personal pictures stuffed in-between pages. I find my own piano music, my favorite magazine, and my books. I remove them all. I notice a bag on the floor, open it, and remove the contents, realizing that they are my clothes. I remember hearing rummaging in the closet the other night but did not realize she had taken my clothes. Perhaps she does like “That Woman.” Or some of her things.

I stand in the bedroom, looking at my things, wondering what it is about these items that she likes. I think back to the very first gift she ever gave me, a church cookbook. I think about the words she wrote on the inside cover, words I have often read over the years as I used the book, words that came from her heart, words that I memorized long ago. “For Mary: My first daughter-in-law, wife of my first son. What a special place you both hold in my heart. May you both have all the good things on the table and in life.”

I think back to years ago, when life was simple and carefree, when all of us were busy working, raising children, tending to our homes, meeting for meals and holidays. With age comes wisdom, but also heartache. The heartache of a loved one who has always been there physically, but mentally has been robbed of everyday memories of time and place, of names and faces, of the present and now.

“That Woman” does not have to be Wonder Woman during all of this, although she sometimes thinks she must. “That Woman” realizes that she has given her best this past week.

“That Woman” knows that she...needs...to...slow...down...  
and...breathe.

And so, she does, knowing that she did her best.

Epilogue: After a few years of living in a lovely, private memory facility, my mother-in-law passed away in her sleep, very peacefully. She is deeply missed.

# CHARLIE

by Linda Schell

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*A gift for my son, the adventurer*

Have I ever told you the story of meeting Charlie? It was a memorable if not unusual experience I certainly had not foreseen or intended. It seems it was fate that Charlie and I were to meet. You may remember a few years ago I flew to the west coast and did a road trip from California to Oregon for a cousins' reunion. The reunion would be held in a small resort town, Sunriver, just south of Bend, Oregon, in a large rented house big enough to house all the cousins planning to attend. The reunion was planned to be a fun get-together with cousins I had not seen in years, one not since childhood, but that has nothing to do with Charlie.

The trip from California to Oregon was a day and a half drive with stops along the way. Setting out from Placerville, CA, with one of my cousins and her husband and headed north along Interstate 5, the terrain varied with mountains and snow to the northeast. I had not checked a map before leaving my home in Minnesota or from Placerville so was not aware of the communities and mountain ranges we would experience. Before reaching Mount Shasta (I had no idea I would see it), we could see the high snow-covered peak far in the distance with a halo of light hovering above. There was a haze surrounding it while you could see the remnants of snow at a lower elevation. I had never heard the tales of Mount Shasta, but my cousin and her husband who were California long-term residents filled me in on the mythology related to the mountain. It was believed by many that Mount Shasta had been and still is the landing site of extraterrestrial craft and beings. The halo we could see was supposedly a sign to other extraterrestrial aircraft of the landing site. The three of us decided to venture off the highway for a side trip onto the mountain. There were still drifts of snow here and there along the road as we drove higher and higher. We stopped almost to the summit and walked paths to overlook the valleys and terrain with wide expanses of vision across California. Unbelievably, there are those who hold true the stance



that aliens live deep in the mountain leaving occasionally for places beyond. Some say they have seen strange lights over the mountain at night. Since Mt. Shasta is a “quiet” volcano last erupting 3200 years ago, who knows what could be there. The “vibes” on the mountain were certainly there, but that could be the energy of the volcanic action that lies below. The mountain is considered one of the “energy” sites that are situated across our planet. The mountain, volcano, is considered a spiritual site of Native Americans and believed to be the center of the Universe by some. None of this has anything to do with Charlie.

As we drove into Oregon the land flattened and became semi-arid, and we came to a Veteran’s Memorial site in the middle of wide open plains dedicated to members of the U.S. military who had died in action somewhere in our vast world. A walking labyrinth to encourage peaceful thought had been constructed at the site and was surrounded by abstract metal sculptures of oversized humans. The most fascinating were the sculpted metal pipes of various lengths installed so that the winds over the prairie would blow through and produce beautiful eerie musical sounds. We walked the maze and listened to the sounds which were ever changing as the breezes blew from various directions. It was as though you could hear the voices of those souls to whom the memorial had been constructed. Again, none of this has anything to do with Charlie.

As I mentioned, the reunion was fascinating getting to know, again, cousins I had not encountered in 30 to 40 years. All of us had headed out from our ancestral origin in North Dakota in different directions geographically, spiritually, and professionally. Interestingly, only one of us continued to be involved in mainstream religious practice. One cousin became an opera lover (who by the way filled the rental house with opera through a high quality sound system) and translator of German language; one a PhD engineer and inventor of an airwave contraption used by the military which I certainly did not understand; one a talented artist and designer; one an attorney/psychic, and then just boring me, the social worker. The common denominator was our open minded thinking, creativity, and curiosity. No, none of this has anything to do with Charlie. Well, maybe a little bit.

Anyway, after 4 days of togetherness, it was time to head out in our separate directions again and for my cousin, her husband, and me the trip back to California and after a couple of days my flight back to Minnesota. We had put in a half-day’s drive and as dusk was settling, the three of us decided that looking for a bed and breakfast in a town en route was a good idea. My cousin read of a place in a small town set near mountains and a

river that offered a bed and breakfast with enough rooms for the three of us. Sitting in the back seat while I was in the front passenger seat, and her husband driving, she had just finished reading the description of a B&B in a travel book when her husband stomped on the brake flinging all of us forward, me almost into the windshield. Simultaneously he suddenly did a sharp right turn into a residential neighborhood and then stopped. Our joint reaction was a loud, “WHOA, why did that happen, and what was that all about?” When asked why he made such a shocking, and possibly dangerous, maneuver, my cousin’s husband said he had no idea. It was as if someone had grabbed the steering wheel and had directed him into the street. We drove slowly into the neighborhood and lo and behold three houses in on the left hand side of the street, there was the sign for the B&B my cousin had been describing. We chalked it up to just being darn lucky to have found the location. This was before the days of extensive GPS or mapping on our phones. This still has nothing to do with Charlie. Or possibly.

After failed attempts to rouse the host of the B&B, we talked to the neighbor next door who was working in his yard. Gaining the information that no one actually lived in the house, we learned we could find the host who was the niece of the longtime owner at a restaurant and bar down the road. She was likely there working as a hostess, so we took off looking for the B&B host. Why we did not go elsewhere looking for rooms, I will never know. We found the host working at the restaurant, explained our interest in staying at the B&B, and she seated us for dinner with the promise to talk with us about rooms during her down time. Nearing the end of our very good dinner, she approached us and sat down. “I am not actively seeking guests for the B&B,” she said, and surprisingly tried to dissuade us. For some reason we insisted that we were interested in staying since the home was very appealing, a quaint cottage, well kept, and sitting in a beautifully landscaped yard with the river running through to the back of the property. Shaking her head she reluctantly gave us keys with instructions on which rooms we could use and said she would be by the house when she finished her shift in about an hour. We returned to the house, let ourselves in, and found a very comfortable, cozy environment. We climbed the stairs to the second floor and found the 2 designated rooms. A third room was located on the level as well but with the door shut and locked. (Yes, we tried it.) My cousin and husband took the room at the front of the house while lucky me took the room with a nice view of the backyard and the river and located next to the locked room. Okay, I still have not met Charlie.

The niece/host kept her word and arrived a short time later after we had unpacked for the overnight. We asked questions about the third bedroom and were told it was Charlie's room. Okay, another guest named Charlie, right? We asked if we could see the room because the whole house was cozily decorated. The host was hesitant, but she took out her keys and opened the door. As the door swung open a rush of frigid air escaped and struck us. Hardly a room decorated for a man, Charlie, but really quite feminine with ruffles and flounces and immaculately clean, but the rest of the house had the same décor and was well kept. We inquired if Charlie would be returning later that evening since there was a shared bathroom near our bedrooms and shared living space on the main floor level. Curious we asked if the air conditioning in the house kept this room exceptionally cold. "No," said the host. With much hesitancy she slowly said, "This was Charlie's room where he spent a good deal of time when he was alive." "Oh, so he no longer lives here," was our response. "No, he has been dead for a number of years, and the house was inherited by my family, and I am Charlie's grandniece." She explained that she maintained the home but did not live there. She chose to live elsewhere in the community. Quietly and with hesitation she asked, "Do you still want to stay?" "Yes!" responded my cousin enthusiastically. I, on the other hand, had my reservations. Spending the night in this house now given more information was really not an experience I thought I necessarily needed. Still no Charlie, but are you beginning to get the picture?

The three of us prepared for bed but agreed to meet downstairs in the living room to talk awhile before bed. My cousin (remember the reference earlier to the attorney/psychic, well she's the one) wanted to talk to Charlie! "Talk to Charlie...!?" I said. "He is dead. She said so." "Well, maybe his spirit remains. Let's find out," was my cousin's answer. I had been doing some journaling, which I tend to do, while waiting for her and her husband to join me in the cozy space. I had my journal and pen in my lap open to the entries I had just completed. The living room was comfortable with the fireplace lit and candles burning, each of us meditated in our own way, and my cousin began in a conversational voice by saying hello to Charlie and explaining that we appreciated staying in his house overnight. She introduced us and began to ask some questions of Charlie. Even with the fireplace warming the room, a cold chill and quiet enveloped the room. With my cousin's efforts, she indicated she did not seem to be getting any response but kept trying in her pleasant conversational tone. As she asked Charlie about his death and how he

died, my hand went to my pen and the pen to the paper of the journal. I wondered why I had picked up my pen again, but I began to write. The words I put on paper were, "Am I? Dead? I have been here for a long time. Waiting a long time. I was so sick, and I have wondered." Charlie's words came as written responses in my journal explaining that he was a follower of the naturalist John Muir. He had spent time with him, traveled with him, but had returned to his home and family for a time as John went on elsewhere. "I did not feel well and seemed to be getting worse. But I have been waiting here for John." He went on to say that he did not understand what was taking so long. John had promised to stop for him on his return, and they would again travel together south through California. Charlie said, "I have waited, and waited. Did he forget me? What has taken so long? Is he on his way? I need to stay here and wait. I promised I would wait. I promised I would be here."

My cousin continued the questions and conversation, and I continued to write the responses. Was I unnerved? Yes and cold, and yet it seemed natural to be having the words come to the page, and I was curious. Gently my cousin explained to Charlie that he had died while at his home. It had happened suddenly and was a physical health incident (this we had also been told by the niece). Charlie was disbelieving at first but eventually seemed to believe our explanation of his death because he had been in the house for such a long time (apparently since 1943 we learned later) experiencing family coming and leaving as well as strangers coming to visit. He had waited day in and day out for John Muir to return. "He is my friend. Why did he not come?" It was necessary to explain to Charlie that John was also now dead. It had been years since his death as well. He could not return for Charlie for another adventure, another trek. Charlie was disbelieving and sad at learning of his friend's death.

With our joint sense of another presence in the room and continued cold air enveloping, my cousin informed Charlie that John was present and offering his hand for them to leave together, for John to help Charlie take another trip. "John is waiting for you. He is extending his hand. You can take his hand and head off together. Another walk together." The words were spoken quietly and with caring from my cousin to Charlie. After some time and continued encouragement, Charlie indicated agreement that he would like to leave with John. It was finally time to leave. My cousin continued in a slower, quieter tone to her voice, and my scribing eventually stopped. The room was still, not cool or cold or with a sense of presence and began to warm again with heat from the fireplace. We sighed collectively, spoke little, and felt a sense of total quiet. Off to

bed in our separate rooms, I did not fall asleep until the wee hours. In my room, I had no sense of Charlie's presence. It was quiet and peaceful, no sign of movement or sound in the neighboring rooms, but I processed our evening experience all night long. Finally, I fell into a deep sleep only to be awakened early morning by my cousin reminding me that our host would be coming with breakfast and of our need to complete our road trip.

Our host did arrive with a simple breakfast of fruit, rolls, and coffee. With her own cup of coffee in hand, she sat with us. My cousin explained to her that we believed we had experienced an evening with Charlie and of the effort to encourage him to leave the house and cross over from this world. Our host did not seem surprised with our experience and explained that she had been reticent to have guests in the house because of the presence. She was aware it was there having had instances from family and guests over the years of their experiences. She had been uncertain about what to do. Charlie had never been a problem to anyone other than the cold breezes in the house, sounds heard at times, and objects sometimes being turned or moved. She thought of Charlie in a positive, endearing sense. The family considered the home his even after death, and some family members had lived in the house fixing and redecorating it. But, how long could they maintain the house, the taxes and upkeep looking for ways to be able to financially support it? She had no desire to live there, and now the niece was tired and had considered selling it, but again, what to reveal about the energy therein. After talking with her, her thanking us for our efforts, we packed the car and backed out the driveway of the house we had found so abruptly. As we drove away we noted the niece through the window remaining there in the house, cleaning the kitchen, tidying the rooms.

Did Charlie really exist? Did Charlie leave with John? Should we have attempted to have Charlie leave, and were we attempting to intervene where we should have not? Only the host/niece, future guests, or possibly a new owner would know if Charlie remained. I know that I felt saddened for Charlie. Whether a ghost, spirit, or not, it seemed difficult for Charlie, but I felt privileged to have met him and to have had this experience. So my trip, an adventure, to experience new landscapes and stories, and to reunite with and enjoy a cousins' reunion is how I happened to meet Charlie.