

NORTHERN NARRATIVES

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

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by the Citizens of North Dakota and the
Red River Valley

Volume 2

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the second volume of Northern Narratives. This anthology features selected poems, essays, and short stories submitted to the Fargo Public Library during the Winter Read-A-Thon, which ran Jan. 8 – March 4, 2018. We hope to make the project an annual event.

All pieces are written and self-edited by citizens of North Dakota and the Red River Valley. Judging was done by the NDSU English Honor Society and community volunteers.

We hope you enjoy this publication.

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

POETRY

Poetry

DOPPLER

by Steve Aakre

When we were young
time inched slowly
as a schoolroom clock
ticking toward the final bell.

All the year crawled:
 Spring, a thaw that could not come soon enough;
 Summer, a sleeping dog day;
 Fall, the darkening descent
 to the permafrost of Winter.

Our time sprawled out to horizons we could not see.
Unrelenting, the days lingered
like boring guests who would not leave.

So much time was on our hands,
dross weighing us down.
We wasted what felt worthless,
not sensing time would become priceless.
Someday.

Someday came in our middle ages:
cascades of birthdays, holidays, first days, last days,
daycare and nights caring
sleepless through the fevers and nightmares
of our children.

As events and memories amassed
we wished time would slow down,
but sensed the lesson coming, unrelenting:
life's gravity pulls us faster and faster,
the pitch of life rises
as our future rushes toward us.

We christen the future
in the babies of our babies,
but as we hold these grand new lives
we feel our past compressed:
“It seems only yesterday
when you took your first steps,”
we tell our grown children,
knowing the time will come,
too fast, when days will leave us
like guests who had their fun
and left us for better times
with other hosts.

We cling to our measure of moments,
precious and radiant
like flowers that show their richest shades
when summer is ending and leaves shrivel,
blooms vivid until the killing frost.

Our memories dance with our dreams,
confounding what was
with what might have been.

Poetry

Time compounds our confounding.
Experts theorize that time is relative,
bending and stretching
across the arc of the universe;
but for all that matters to us each day,
all that we see and taste and feel,
all that feeds our sure and certain hope,
time is the constant acceleration
and we are the variables.

As life recedes and days race away,
seasons pass like days,
the pitch of life falls, harder to hear,
unrelenting, retreating faster and faster,
pulled by the overpowering gravity
of the empty darkness
to horizons still unseen.

VISITORS

by Nolan Alber

My mind turns over thoughts of movie stars
like Paul Newman, Patrick Swayze, or Brad Pitt.
Pinnacles of what we consider “the male form.”

I mull over their blind confidence,
their ability to attract by presence,
and the simplicity with which they can act

as slick as water running down the backside
of a duck’s streamlined feathers.

I run statistical comparisons of these men against other male forms,
like the stereotypical plumber, taxi driver, or engineer.
All far removed from the aforementioned transcendence.

I picture how they’re portrayed by the general masses

as incompetent in all social situations,
or off-putting by mere existence
(despite the fact that all the plumbers I know
and all the taxi drivers I know
and *certainly* all the engineers I know
are quite good people, and ravishingly
handsome or beautiful).

Even still, the sands left in the sieve
present us with two polar-opposite images of humanity,
as directly different
as the midnight moon and the lunchtime sun.

Poetry

We could pick out the differences between these specimens,
these rough representations of humanity,
as easily as identifying a cockroach
from a Monarch.

However, we have an undeniable bias
while recognizing those of our own species.

Entertain the thought,
for just a moment,
that visitors have come from a distant galaxy
and welcomed themselves onto Earth
like uninvited college friends who have
mistimed their new apartment lease
and need a place to “crash” for a few
years.

They may hail from Venus, Mars, Mercury, Neptune, or,
to the subtle delight of middle school classrooms everywhere,
perhaps they came from Uranus.

The origin is not of importance, really.
The idea of import, instead, is that these visitors,
green-grey and dark red in color, with tentacles
sporadically placed like a potato’s eyes, and gaseous fixtures
where we expect a myriad of limbs, all blur together
as one impression of the “invader.”

We do not see their individuality.

We do not see their Brad Pitts
(who have just the right asymmetry
between the fourth and ninety-second tentacle).

We do not see their plumbers
(who have a stereotypically nasty tendency
to disconnect their gaseous fixtures
while in particularly Nitrogen-rich environments).

Instead, we see their sameness.

And that sameness is a common threat.

They are an enemy we can all, collectively, bring arms to,
unified under the common understanding
that this “invader” is completely and unquestionably
the enemy.

We assume the unanimity despite
the slight variations in greenish tint of each visitor. Despite
the differently shaped gas formations that comprise each visitor.
And despite
the most invisible pieces that most visibly define the visitors:

how they treat their Venetian children;
who they voted for in the most recent Martian election;
what their stance is on Mercurian blaster laws;
when they’ll settle down with a Neptunian family; and
why they’d ever decide to inhabit a planet named Uranus.

Poetry

I AM YOUR BOSS

by Barbara Beckman

I live in your car, your purse, your pants--
Some even strap me to their wrist,
Taking me wherever they go.
Job well done.

With a ding, a whoosh or any sound you wish,
I tell you look here, listen to this, touch now.
I warn you when I need more power,
I push when you don't comply.

Whether you're listening to a coworker,
Trying to understand your kid's bad day,
Sitting at the bedside of a dying parent,
I don't care. Pay attention to me. Now.

The hesitation that says it's serious,
The look that says encourage me, draw me out,
The shift in breathing that says the end is near,
You miss the signals because of your loyalty.

I am your boss.
Thank you for your time,
Your attention,
Your soul.

SPILT

by *Dakota Breen*

Inevitably
The almost empty, glass bottle
Sitting on my parents' table topples.
The remaining distilled, pungent, burning liquid
Drips,
Drops,
Drips,
Onto the floor forming a fragrant puddle.
I attempt to wipe up the mess
But stall.
I'm caught by a girl's face peering
Back at me.
She has the same dull, almond eyes,
The same arched, brown eyebrows,
The same thin and rosy lips
As me.

She is trapped, but still
She's content there in the spill.
I reach to touch her face
To help her out
But my movement scares her away
Leaving only ripples and space.

Poetry

Patiently I wait
For her return.
She seems to know what I still
need to learn.
That spills
Created by a mother
Or a father
Are not her messes to scrub clean,
But she accepts
They are what made her who she is.

And at that same time I have seen
It is only herself she reflects.

PARLEY

by Anastasia Gustafson

Iron giants
with steel wings
Tethered in
Succession
Tower over
Wounded earth
Man-made machines
Gouge fertile soil

Rich land
that gave life
to Millions of
Golden faces
Softened by
the sun

Became a betrayal
the scent of
Sweet harvest
Long departed
in the changing wind

Poetry

A sliver of hope
Among the fallen
a glowing reminder
Bursts forth from
Chaos

Silent protectors
Summon
Tesla's fury
Rise, fight
Reclaim the innocent
Allow us to return
To solid ground

THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE WILD
TURKEY TRIBE
ACROSS THE I-94 TRAIL
by Anastasia Gustafson

Russet arrays of
Tightly packed plumage
Emerge from the mists
Scale the riverside stonehenge
Trudge the valley
Until they arrive to
The marked trajectory
With only a
Protuberance for guidance
Brave birds began
A meleagris exodus
The Turkey's
Manifest Destiny

Poetry

CHANGES
by Nancy Hanson

The prairies are diversified
And mixed cultures stand side by side
 We must learn to share
 Our needs and our cares
So in harmony we abide

WINTER

by Nancy Hanson

The cold North wind constantly blows
The South wind delivers us snow
 The people are strong
 For here we belong
It's our home and the life that we chose

Poetry

A BLIZZARD'S BLAST

by Pagyn Harding

Gray skies rim a vanilla sun
clouds packed heavy with snow.

The TV scrolls a blizzard warning,
you go to gather wood
I find some books to read.

The coffee perks while winds whip
drifting snow into stiff egg whites peaks
tall against the pines behind the house.

In the wood stove embers glow;
settle down, honey, you say.

GOODNESS, ALL THIS STORED SUNSHINE

by Dave Jameson

This fat month, this September,
brings the pelf of scratched earth
finally, the piles of fruit turning
to the colors of ripeness.

We carry home bursting
paper bags of corn, each ear
wrapped tight in the green husk
like some treasure held priceless
by a miser, secret sunshine.

We split the brown silk and rip
the husks away so fast they squeal.
We brush away the silk net, wrecking
the pale web of sex with clumsy fingers.

Someone brings us a bucket heaping full
of green and orange tomatoes, hard
as stone. They grow ripe and soften
on a red stool by the south window. Some

are round and some are small eggplants
just right for the curl of palm and fingers,
the feel of small fruit good in the hand.

My wife and I find cantaloupes
in rich plenty. We let them ripen
on a kitchen counter until the musk
is strong. My knife splits the globe
and juice springs from the first small crack.

Poetry

Spooning out the seeds is priest's work.
The dark hollow with its perfect rows of seeds
is a sacred room. Laid open to the light,
the curved walls show a frost
beneath the seeds too rare for breath.

Before I cut a cantaloupe,
I hold two against my chest in cupped hands.
I become for the moment an earth mother,
fecund and lovely, ready for birth.
I waltz twice around the kitchen
in praise of fruitfulness, in joy.

RUSSIAN OLIVE TREES AT HUGHES FINE ARTS

by Dave Jameson

These gray trees bear no fit fruit for holy
feasting, or hoarding against the known fear
brought in their paupers grip with thistle seed,
or for carting to market dreaming gain.

These black hands, thin and gnarled in crippled grip
grasp upward from the pampered grass, their ache
obscure behind cascading blades, gray, green
countless tears of the Russian olive trees.

Fruit fit for joking, these. Oval stones hard
as the earth, with moss-like gray rinds, a sign
for their life, their endless toil, and its scant
wage.

They used to say they were like the seed,
hard at the core, soft outside to the touch
of child or friend. But in the nights they dreamed
of town fair or hochzeit, and in the dream
gorgeous dancers ever whirled bearing high
salvers of rare produce.

After the dream
they understood the mirror of the seed:
How thin their hard crust. How their core trembled
against the weather.

Poetry

How many evenings
they hitched the spent team to carry water
from the puny creek to slake the parched dust
where olives clung with elms and laggard ash
in a dreamed brake against the searing winds.

These gnarled hands, thin and crabbed, reach out of rich
earth, grasping after some forgotten good.
They are strangers here, meant to hunch leeward
in thinner, drier dirt, not this fat loam.

That wet day we gazed lazy from the door
of the temple, lambent with art. Those dark
shapes like ghosts behind a veil of soft rain,
their tear-like gray leaves already fallen.

In fantasies they sent us, the old ones,
in dreams pinched by the ache of gnarled hands.

VOICES OF THE PRAIRIE

by Mari Jameson

Can you see them?

So many family Christmases spent there
Snow storms howling while children find warmth in the cozy
fireplace corner of the home.

Do you see them?

The strong structure holding dear all that was within.
Once holding the families who came to the prairie
looking for a life to build,
Looking for the Promised Land.
It holds memories of traditions of hard work of life and death in
that home that once stood sturdy and proud.

Can you hear them?

Now it stands with its paneless windows.
Breezes flow freely in and out
Not knowing what came before or what will come after.

Do you know them?

Voices of the prairie, each with a story to tell.

Poetry

WHEN EACH OF US HAS GONE OUR WAY

by Nicole Jasperse

When each of us has gone our way
And neither can be seen,
Imagine yet another day
When nothing's in between.

Perhaps the chapters of our lives
Will share a common word;
But until then, goodbye my friend,
My love for you deferred.

When we're miles apart already,
A familiar voice you lack,
When your steps become as heavy
As the load upon your back,

When laughter fades and smiles cease,
When vision's blurred with tears,
When you can't look west and can't look east,
Remember all our years.

In desolation's unheard sound
And silence all the louder,
You've fallen, fallen to the ground,
The deepest, darkest hour.

You'll hear my voice and feel my touch
For I will take your load,
And I'll be there to pick you up,
Together on the road.

When each of us has gone our way
And neither can be seen,
Imagine yet another day
When nothing's in between.

Perhaps the chapters of our lives
Will share a common word;
But until then, goodbye my friend,
My love for you deferred.

Poetry

CELESTIAL DANCE

by Bibi Khan

The waning crescent in the east
Is courting the brilliant Venus
Look up to the southeast
In the early dawn
You will be a witness to their dance -
A celestial dance -
That will yield an occultation -
A covering up of Venus -
By the brightest star in the sky
It's easy to join this party
Enjoy the festivity
No telescope -
No binocular -
No 3-D glasses -
Your naked eyes will do
You will be enthralled!
Bewitched!
Earth's sister has beguiled the moon
Now there's no turning back
So sit back and watch
As this celestial dance unfold

BROKEN

by Hannah Khan

I thought you were blessing my life, instead,
You were only a curse; you constantly
Were picking at my heart until it bled.

I could not find my solidarity
Within, loving only to be left with
bitter thoughts and a brain full of regrets.
You would need to take me to a locksmith
To have my heart come out of all its nets
Of protection because it was shattered,
Scattered and could show no love or forgive.

No longer did I have a set standard,
Or anything that I could choose to give.
You breaking me helped me to realize
That love takes many many many tries

Poetry

LIFE OF A UNIVERSE

by Reagan Lemar

In merely a blink of an eye;
Every soul has vanquished.
Our species has lived and died.
For the vast semblance has sighed,
Extinguishing what once was and what will be,
Of a speck of dust in infinity.
Never, yet forevermore seized by fear,
For the brave, end is here.

AGGRAVATION

by Renee Loehr

How can something so small
Be such an aggravation?
Why don't you leave me alone
And take a long vacation!

All weekend long
You've stuck close by my side,
Annoying me to no end.
Is there nowhere I can hide?

My attempts to eliminate you
Have all been in vain.
Trying to nap with you around
Is driving me insane!

I've tried to shoo you away
And all to no avail.
But now I have a swatter
There's no way I can fail.

I feel like I'm up to bat,
Missing time and again.
I may strike out
But you will not win.

Aha! Swat! Victory at last!
Finally, there's an end.
What's that sound I hear?
Oh no! You brought a friend!

Poetry

SECURITY

by Renee Loehr

The wind whistles fiercely
outside my window
as I lay in my bed,
reluctant to get up
from my warm cocoon
and face yet another day.

In my mind's eye
I'm transported
to my childhood bed.
Again, listening to the wind howl
like an enemy lurking,
trying to penetrate
my barriers of safety and security.
But I feel protected from the elements—
even the unknown.

I open my eyes
to find myself alone again,
and I futilely try to recapture
that sense of well being
I had as a child.

THERE'S NOTHING SCARY ABOUT POTATOES

by Anna Lynch

At first it's taboo.
If you don't say it,
It never happened.
He just "got sick".

Soon, the rules bend.
Call it Leukemia.
That's not the same.
It's just another illness,
Not a catastrophe.

Then the word
Becomes a challenge,
Throwing truth in the face of fear.
"He has CANCER."
I said it, its power is gone!
...right?

In the end,
The word becomes an old friend.
May as well be any other word.
Potatoes maybe.
There's nothing scary about *potatoes*,
And *cancer* is just a word,
A fact of life.
Like boring old potatoes.

Poetry

BREAKING FREE

by Stephanie Wilson

Concrete, steel rims, and glass
trail in the rearview,
like stars in our expanding universe
fading into the distance

Still wheels spin o'er packed earth
o'er coarse gravel
as our influence disintegrates
beyond the busy and blind

Here, watercolor blues
meld endlessly
with white billows, rolling gold, muted green
in this simple solitude

Slowly coast to a stop
for your spotted kin,
as he lures his willing cohorts from this
ever-broken prison

TO BE SOMEONE

by Stephanie Wilson

Dirty dishes tower ever higher
A crusty cityscape of grandeur

While customers buzz happily
Over smudged and crumbly tables

Some think us transgressors
To most we are mere ghosts

To us, we are tomorrow
At least that's what we hope

We clean, we smile, we thank
And we take every punch

While frozen cars at midnight
Become our lullabies

So that stacks of books and papers,
Can be our nemeses

Poetry

ODE TO COFFEE

by Eileen Youens

If you cut me,
I will bleed,
and my blood will be
tinged golden brown
from the elixir
that guides my morning journey
across the river Styx.

It is a perilous journey,
and without that tonic
I would be, like Eurydice, unable
to return to the land of the living.

While the potion brews, and as I pour it, steaming,
into my expectant mug,
it makes music as beautiful as Orpheus ever did,
But
it keeps faith with me.

THE PARKING LOT, AT NIGHT

by Eileen Youens

We ramble together in our pack,
our blood hot,
howling at our own crude jokes,
strong and loud

(I will be the bravest
so the others will follow me,
so they will not turn on me)

Together we prowl the lot,
unafraid
(alone means prey
not predator)

We circle our power around us
like a lasso
searching for a weak calf
to pull in and play with

Beware:

if I met you when I was alone,
I would pass you
with a nod or a smile

But tonight I am with my pack
and we are thirsty for violence
and hungry to prove our strength

How unfortunate for you

(Walk proudly away from us;
one day I might be you, alone,
and you running with your pack,
and what mercy will you show me then)

ESSAYS

TOP FIVE ON THE CURB

by Renee Loehr

Every spring when Junk Week rolls around, I'm reminded of how much waste we produce in this part of the world. Our country has a "throw away" mentality—so different than that of my parents' generation who lived through the Great Depression and those of the people in the majority of the world. Growing up in a large family that had little to spare, we reused, recycled and repurposed as much as possible. It felt sinful to waste—and it still does for me.

I was first introduced to Junk Week when I moved from California to Moorhead in the late 1980s. Back then it was more unusual to find things set on the curb in good shape or working condition. You'd see more of what was considered junk in the traditional meaning of the word—trash not worth saving. I remember my oldest son, who was about twelve at the time, saying he wanted a desk for his room. When I found one on the curb for him, he was excited to get it, even though it was nothing fancy.

Normally, a year doesn't pass without me spotting something on the curb worth while bringing home. This year I told myself I wasn't going to drag anything home because I had cleaned out my garage and organized it, making enough room for me to park my vehicle inside. That changed mid-week when I was out walking and couldn't help but get a close-up view of what was in the piles spread out on both sides of the street.

I mentally noted a few things I'd come back and get when I returned home and got my van, which I did. Although not all of it was still there when I returned! There were other bargain hunters out prowling the neighborhoods also. I didn't mind that the things were gone—they weren't stuff I personally needed but things too good to let the garbage truck, due in our neighborhood in the next few hours, take away.

Once I got in the van and started driving around it was hard to stop. Finally, after a couple of hours, I steered my van toward home resolving

to put an end to my search for treasure. I came home with a nearly-new exercise bench for ab-building that I thought my oldest grandson might like, a scooter and riding toy for the younger grandkids, a shelf my daughter took to her place, an infant seat in such nice condition I thought I could surely give it to someone, a cushion for my lounge chair to replace the one that blew away last summer and a box of scrapbooking materials I thought my daughter-in-law might like.

Friday morning, the last day for pickup by the City, I ended up in a neighborhood with junk still set out, and though not my plan or intention, I ended up driving from one block to another for the next hour. I came home with a few things, but nothing like my previous finds two days earlier.

Some things kept showing up again and again on the curb. The five things I noticed most were: vacuum cleaners, exercise equipment (especially electronic treadmills), mattresses, children's car seats and furniture. I think today's vacuum cleaners aren't made to last long—not like the Kirby we had nearly the entire time I was growing up. The exercise equipment takes up a lot of room and if it's not being used, out it goes—working or not. Years ago when a lot of migrants were coming to this area for the summer, mattresses were being picked up and temporarily used for their stay in the area. That's no longer the case.

Mattresses, like car seats, can no longer be donated to thrift stores and people are reluctant to pick them up off the curb. Though many of the mattresses looked to be clean and in good condition, the bed bug scare in recent years has many thinking twice about the possibility of infestation. The legal requirements for car seats change so quickly that people are afraid they are outdated by the time they end up on the curb. I have found and used secondhand car seats—I have four in my van now for my grandkids I transport frequently.

The most common item of furniture I noticed setting out were couches, even several wrap-around sets, several leather or fake leather. Though many had evidently seen their better days, some looked like they had life left in them. Another furniture item frequently seen in recent years on the curbside is entertainment centers. With the popularity of large screen TVs that don't fit on them, they have lost

Essays

their usefulness. A lot of the discarded furniture was cheaply made with particle board—you don't see much made of solid wood. Though I did notice a chest of drawers that appeared sturdy, it was far too heavy for me to life by myself.

I noticed in *The Forum* that I wasn't the only one writing about Junk Week. There was an article by one of the Forum staff inviting Garth Brooks to check it out while he was here performing four concerts at the Fargo Dome. The reporter said he knew where Garth could find a pretty nice entertainment center! There were some letters to the editor also. In one a resident of Fargo complained about people opening up bags looking through them and then leaving a mess on the curb.

I saw several people out looking—each with their own agenda. One was picking up tires, another appliance, a few looking for metals to sell, and one man was collecting several electronic treadmills. I spoke with a young mother pulling her two kids around in a wagon finding a few “keepers.” She had just moved to Moorhead so this was the first time she had encountered Junk Week anywhere and was enjoying the thrill of the search. I know the feeling.

And the weather this year cooperated by staying nice and dry. Some years high winds send garbage flying all over the block or rain saturates things, ruining them. All in all, I felt my time spent looking during Junk Week was justified by the items I rescued from the curb. A few less things to fill up our landfills.

A SHARP MIND

by Raymond Scot Sorrells

I think about aging. Will I age gracefully? What will age take from me first, and what will I hold onto the longest? Hints to these answers come from my dad, as I watch him age. Year by year his world shrinks as he becomes less active. He speaks slower, softly, and is sometimes far behind in the conversation. Yet evidence of a sharp mind persists. He can still beat me two out of three in Crazy Eight, and he's not above taking his kid's and grandkid's money in a game of poker. I have hope.

This past summer, Dad took a fall. Pushing eighty and unsteady on his legs for some time now, he has been dependent on a walker for mobility, and it got away from him on his way to bed that night. He fell and broke his hip, which got him an ambulance ride to the newly built hospital on its opening day. I told him that I would have taken him on a tour of the place if he'd just asked. He didn't think that was funny.

The whole thing was quite an ordeal. There was trouble with the x-ray, which had to be repeated a couple of times. They couldn't get a clear shot of the hip because he was curled up in a rictus of pain. Then there was a concern that he'd perforated a bowel somehow in the fall. More delays. More x-rays. The order for surgery wasn't approved until the third day and by that time we were all weary of the place.

On his last full day at the hospital, he had an odd visit from a social worker. She stuck out immediately; older than the orderlies and younger than the medical staff, dressed in plain clothes as opposed to scrubs, equipped with a fiberglass clipboard and file folder of medical records rather than a stethoscope and a prescription pad. She introduced herself with a forced smile, speaking in a too loud voice people reserve for both the very old and the very young. I was expecting a conversation about when we could take him home, but that wasn't what she was there for.

It slowly became apparent that she wasn't there to provide any medical service. Rather, the hospital wanted a mental health evaluation

before he left. I doubted the exchange would provide much information. Dad is a tough nut to crack; he plays his cards close to the vest, and he's known for asking people questions they can't answer. On that day he was still struggling through pain, the stress of an extended hospital stay, and the aftereffects of a pharmacopeia of drugs. I didn't think she'd get much out of him.

Once awkward introductions were made and we had the confusion cleared up, she went right into the evaluation with a forced cheerfulness. She opened with questions to see how aware he was of his surroundings, like what's your name? What's the year? Who's the president of the United States? He answered as if from a distance, clearly struggling through a haze brought on by the lingering aftereffects of the powerful painkillers he'd been on since admission. Thinking it was still 2016, he'd scored two out of three. I watched her sunny facade sort of slip as she finished this first section.

She then read a short story, which was something like 'Sally in the work force' and followed it up with questions designed to test his short-term memory. Questions like, who was Sally? Why did she quit her job? Why did she eventually go back to work? Dad nailed each question. She was still disappointed. He took a long time to answer each question; it gave the impression he was struggling to keep up. She glanced at her watch. Her face read, "This evaluation is a waste of my time." She was trapped by the system that needed a complete evaluation before he left; it was clearly too soon after surgery, but there wasn't time to do it before the rush to discharge him the following morning.

She closed with a few questions designed to detect depression: questions like, do you feel sad rarely, occasionally, or frequently? Do you feel unhealthy rarely, occasionally, or frequently? Are you frustrated with your life rarely, occasionally, or frequently? Dad came back with "frequently" for all of these questions and I could see her estimation of him bottom out.

As mental health assessments go, this seemed to be quite a blunt little tool. How could anybody be fully coherent and feeling good about themselves after such an ordeal? Dad endured the whole thing with patience, but the social worker had been in a hurry to rush through the evaluation, get out of the room, and on to her next appointment.

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As she made her pleasantries and rose to leave, dad asked in a soft voice for her to wait. “I have a story to tell you. And I have a question for you,” he said. This made her confused for a moment. It wasn’t how the engagement was supposed to go. She expected to come, administer the test, and get out in under twenty minutes. I could see it dawn on her that she wasn’t going to make a clean getaway. Her smile vanished and her brow furrowed. She couldn’t see an easy or graceful way to refuse him, not after putting him through the same thing. How could she decline?

“You want to tell me a story?” she asked as she slowly sank back into her seat, giving a patronizing nod, begging with her eyes that this be brief.

“A short story,” dad assured her. “And a question,” he repeated. She was trapped by social niceties. It would be bad form for her to bail on his story when he had so graciously listened to hers; she agreed to stay.

Dad told the story of the French executioner. But it came out slowly, painfully. His voice was weak, and more than a little gravely. He used dramatic pauses to cover for moments when he had to gather his strength to tell the next part. But the pauses were overlong.

The social worker wasn’t a good listener. She put in an “uh huh” and an “oh my” into each pause as if she was hoping to skip to, or force the end. They came less frequently as he went along as she slowly lost any hope of a quick getaway. The story he told was the one about the French Executioner and it went something like this.

During the French Revolution business was good for the executioner. There were a lot of heads to chop off, but he was only paid a flat rate. He was a family man with a wife and kids which came with a lot of expenses so he had to make extra money any way he could. He had two axes. One was a sharp ax that would take a head off quickly and cleanly. Death was instantaneous, but it wasn’t much of crowd pleaser. The other was a dull rusty ax. It was quite a bloody spectacle when he used this tool. It sometimes took a couple of swings to completely sever the head from the body. The crowds loved it and would throw money onto the platform when he used it. He did most of his jobs with the dull rusty ax. The occasional Noble

up for execution would take the opportunity to offer a bribe to the executioner to use the sharp ax and make it a clean quick death. If it was for more than what the executioner thought he could make from the crowd by using the dull blade, he would take the money and swing with the sharp ax. One day, after a particularly stirring Sunday morning sermon, the executioner became a Christian. He kept his job as executioner; he had no other skills, what could he do? However, he didn't take as many bribes as he used to, and he did most of his jobs with the sharp ax.

Silence stretched out after this last sentence. It was a bit before the social worker realized the story was over. "That was a really good story" she said as she was getting up to make her escape.

Dad wasn't finished with her. "I have a question for you." He said. This took a bit to sink in, despite it being the third time he'd said it. She slowly sank back to her chair. "Oh, y-you want to ask me something about the story?" she stammered. There was a growing look of not-quite-horror on her face as her smile went away.

Dad asked, "What did it mean to the executioner, for him to become a Christian?" It was as she feared, a question she couldn't answer. Maybe it didn't even have an answer. She clearly didn't know what to say, but couldn't get away without making some sort of effort. He waited. He likes to let silence work for him.

"Well, um ..." she hesitated. "Well, I guess it meant a great deal to him" was all she could come up with, saying it with a smile and a nod full of false finality. Dad nodded with her in sympathy. This was it, she realized; the end of the session. She could leave, not on her terms, but his. I could see on her face that she knew he had the better story. He also had the better question. And somehow, her meager answer wasn't quite enough; she'd missed something but didn't know what. She left, dad apparently learning more about her than she did about him, despite her questionnaire and his medical records.

Dad may be getting on in years, but he's not too old that he can't have one over on a social worker sent there to judge his mental state. The answer to his question is the same for everyone at conversion: becoming a Christian changed the executioner's life, but he still had a

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long way to go. Dad is still sharp; sharp as the executioner's now preferred tool. I hope I'm just as sharp when I get to be his age.

SHORT STORIES

Short Stories

1968: FADE TO BLACK

by Neil M. Frederickson

“Zippity doo, zippity dee. Snappy is the Infantry,” Toby muttered aloud. He moved carefully up the forest trail, watching his boot-clad feet most of the time to step around loose rocks and invasive tree roots. He came last in a line of five backpack-laden hikers. The heavy and cumbersome packs were capable of throwing a hiker off balance the moment his attention wandered. In front of Toby, his brother Dereck walked with equal care, strangely clad in the dark-green military fatigues he hadn’t worn for three years. Beyond Dereck on the narrow trail was their sister Kate. In front of Kate, their mother strode along, and at the head of the column—in the lead and therefore setting the pace—their father walked point. Rocks and boulders edged the trail and beyond these, heavy pine trees hid the distant waters of Lake Superior.

Fifteen miles off the coast of Minnesota, this was Isle Royale, an island forty-five miles long according to the map and, with its many inlets and demi-harbors, varying in width between nine miles and scarcely two. Toby and his family were hiking the length of the island, following the Greenstone Ridge Trail atop its rocky spine. Park literature described the trail as forty-nine miles long. Toby joked that the extra four miles must come from climbing up and down the ridge. Today, he was discovering that the joke wasn’t a joke; it was true.

The first day of their hike had been easy. They’d landed at Rock Harbor on the eastern tip of the island and set off immediately for the first camp. This leg of the trail lay on low ground along the lakeshore. Daisy Farm—the first camp—had small shelters for hikers and even several picnic tables.

The second day proved more difficult. The trail led them inland from the shore and slowly climbed through pine forest into hilly terrain. The second day’s camp was at a lake named Chicken Bone. Toby had expected the second day to be more strenuous than the first, simply because this was always the case with any sudden increase in physical

effort. Any first day, that is, the body didn't know what it was getting into. On the second day, the aches and pains came out like Gangbusters. But by the third day, the body would get into the rhythm of the effort, call forth its resources, and begin to feel better. Such was the case now: the aches Toby had felt yesterday were gone and he was feeling markedly stronger. However, this third day the trail had also become significantly more arduous.

They were now hiking the stretch from Chicken Bone camp to a place called Hatchet Lake. The map showed the distance as roughly the same as the previous two days, but the trail had suddenly climbed steeply and become extremely rough and narrow, with loose rock underfoot in places. From time to time, the hikers had to help each other work their way around or over boulders the size of a dump truck.

"I think I'm fit enough for the jaunt," Toby's brother Dereck said over his shoulder. "My jogging did wonders for my cardio-vascular system. But geography's still the random factor you can't control."

The gusting wind made it difficult for Toby to hear. "The what? Did you say geography?"

"Yeah. I mean, I've been running the same jogging route every day for months now, back home, and I know how tired I should be at any given point on the route. If I get, say, Franklin Avenue and I'm more tired than usual, I know I probably won't be able to charge the next hill. But if I feel stronger, well, maybe I can go into a surge sooner than usual."

"Oh. Okay, I see what you mean."

"Here in the great outdoors, we don't know what's coming up. Know what I mean? Is the trail going to flatten out or get even worse? We don't know; which means we have to hold back a little, conserve our energy."

"Right," said Toby, trying to hide the fact that he was short of breath.

No one in their tiny hometown had done backpacking like this, so Toby and his family had found themselves on their own without advisors. Toby's dad had prepared for the expedition by reading hiking articles in camping magazines and buying the recommended

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equipment. Consensus stated that the standard ratio of backpack load to hiker weight was twenty percent. Toby weighed 160 pounds and therefore his pack was loaded to thirty-two pounds. To this load he added an Army pistol belt from which swung an Army canteen.

Water would be a critical issue. They'd been warned that any water on the island from either Lake Superior itself or from the tiny lakes nestled within the island itself contained liver flukes, endemic to the Isle Royale moose population. They would have to boil it for at least two minutes before using it for either cooking or drinking. To their dismay, they found the recent heavy rains had thoroughly soaked all the twigs and branches they might have used for firewood, and these were difficult to ignite. They fell back on the solid-fuel Sterno camp stove, and this was surreally slow in bring the water to anything approaching a real boil. Up to now they'd been drinking water carried from the well at Daisy Farm, but the supply would never last the remaining three days of the hike.

Slog, slog, slog. . . The journey of a thousand miles begins with first five thousand, two hundred and eighty steps. Toby nearly laughed aloud. He could hear his mother singing up ahead. Her song was Gershwin's "*I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise.*" The words in the chorus, "with a new step every day" put him to smiling. It was as though she had read his mind.

"I always forget Gershwin wrote other stuff beside '*Rhapsody in Blue,*'" he remarked to Dereck.

His brother threw a glance over his shoulder. "Oh, *tons* of stuff. '*I Got Rhythm,*' '*Oh, Lady Be Good.*' Lots more songs."

"Yeah. But I forget."

"He was young when he died, too. Under forty, I think. Just think of how much more he could have written if he'd lived long."

Dereck stopped so suddenly Toby ran into him. The little family bunched up to hear what father was saying. He pointed ahead. "Here's some rocks we can sit on. Let's take a break."

The family dropped their packs and sat on low rocks along the edge of the trail. The rocks were so perfect for sitting, Toby wondered if perhaps they'd been lugged to the spot by some Good Samaritan.

They were on a high point of land overlooking a small lake ringed by small trees and foliage. It was one of the dozen or so tiny lakes that dotted the interior of Isle Royale. Within this nameless lake lay an island hardly larger than a tennis court.

"Funny, that little island," Toby remarked.

"What's funny?" Dereck asked.

"Well, it's an island in a lake which is itself on an island. And Isle Royale is in Lake Superior, which is in the middle of the continent, which is in the world-ocean. It's like . . . a bunch of concentric circles."

"Oh. Right."

They sat quietly absorbing the novel—and welcome—sensation of feeling no pressure on the sole of their feet. Toby unhooked the canteen from his pistol belt and took a swallow of the metal-tasting water. He handed it to Dereck, and the canteen passed up the line, then back down to Toby, now a bit lighter.

"Look at the left side of that island," his sister Kate said, pointing. "It looks just like J. P. Morgan's nose, don't you think? From the side, I mean?"

Toby laughed. "Old Mister Big-Nose!"

Dereck was retying the laces on his black Army boots.

Toby nodded in the direction of the lake. "There's a mouse on that island," he said, "and he's scurrying around in the grass looking for food. Just one little mouse on one little island, and he hasn't the vaguest clue of what's going on in the rest of the world."

Dereck looked up from his boots. "What *is* going on in the rest of the world?" he asked with a straight face.

"I haven't the vaguest clue," Toby replied with an equally expressionless look. They both grinned at the old joke.

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A Zippo clicked and a moment later tobacco smoke drifted past. “Two more packs,” their father said. “They won’t last the next three days.”

Off to the west, a cloud bank had begun to gather near the horizon. If the temperature dropped they were surely in for more rain. Hatchet Lake had no log shelters and they couldn’t build a fire inside one of the tents. If rain came, they would set up camp and go to bed without supper. And probably wet.

“Have you found an apartment for school yet?” Kate asked Toby.

He grimaced. “No. Lee is supposed to take care of that, and he hasn’t gotten back to me yet. We’re running out of time. Concordia starts classes only a couple of weeks from now. All their students come pouring into town and grab all the apartments. I suppose a few are in Chicago for the Democratic convention. Probably not many, though. Concordia students are usually political. Well, at least not as much as Moorhead State. If Lee doesn’t settle something before then, we’ll be more or less screwed, blued, and tattooed.”

“But you’re already registered for classes, aren’t you?”

“Yeah; preregistered. It’s going to be all language classes this next quarter: Spanish Literature, Spanish Conversation and Composition, Latin American Lit, and Beginning Portuguese.”

Kate smiled. “I see a language lab in your future.”

“No kidding. Anyway, if Lee can’t find an apartment before I go up to Moorhead, he’s promised I can stay with him at his folks’ house until we get our own place. But I’d really, *really* prefer not to do that.”

Their mother caught Toby’s eye and said, “I thought you might be rooming with your friend Chuck again.”

“No. I probably would, but he’s been getting some attention from his draft board. He’s going to volunteer for the draft next month, just to get it out of the way.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad *you guys* are done with that, anyway.” She meant Toby and Dereck.

“So am I. I got my final discharge papers last month. I’m done with the whole schmear: three years active duty, one year ready reserve, and two years standby reserve. The whole six year bit.”

“Have you filed your DD-214 yet?” Dereck asked. This was a document proving final completion of military obligation.

“No, but I will as soon as we get back home.”

They regarded the lake below where a large white bird sailed from the west and soared down to land on a fallen tree at the water’s edge. It perched looking around and then swooped still lower out of sight behind the wall of grass.

Dereck said, “If your friend volunteers for the draft now, he’ll go to Vietnam for sure.”

“I know. He knows.”

“And they’ll put him in the infantry.”

“I know. For sure.”

“And it won’t matter who gets nominated in Chicago and Miami. It won’t matter who gets elected. The beast has a life of its own.” Dereck picked up a pebble and tossed it down the hill. “To the peasant out in the fields, knee-deep in manure, it makes no difference who’s living in the manor house.”

“I wish I could disagree.”

Their father stubbed out his cigarette and carefully placed the butt into his shirt pocket. “About time to get back into the harness.”

The trail ahead twisted through a maze of boulders and smaller rocks. The most oppressive position in the lineup was number five, at the rear. If the last person stopped or slowed he would quickly find himself alone, unless he called to the others to wait. No one wanted to be the slowpoke. Dereck was at the rear now, having switched places with Toby to take his place as number five. Now a yard behind Kate, Toby shifted his pistol belt a few inches so the canteen would not bounce on his hipbone. The trail was no worse than it had been up to this point, but it was no better either.

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Kate dropped back a little. “I don’t care much for my tent,” she said in a low voice. She’d been assigned a disposable plastic tube tent.

“How come?” Toby asked.

“It’s too small. It’s right in my face. It feels like I’m in one of those MRI tubes! Is yours that bad?”

“No. Dereck’s tent is for two people. It’s pretty small, though. You know me and my claustrophobia. I’ve had to sleep with my head a little out the door, instead of head-in. If we get rain tonight, I won’t be able to do that.”

“We should have separate little canopies for our heads.”

Zippity doo, zippity dee. Snappy is the Infantry. Where did that come from? Some corny old movie? No, it was something from a book by a foreign author. Maybe Remarque’s *Im Westen Nichts Neues.* Nothing new in the west. *‘All Quiet on the Western Front.’* No, that wasn’t right either. Well, never mind. Let Mister Memory Man spin away at it and sooner or later the answer would surface.

The sun had already fallen low when they came upon a sign pointing the way to Hatchet Lake. The path led them steeply downward off the ridge to a small meadow-like area on the shores of the lake itself. Contrary to what the park pamphlet had said, there was a small sleeping shelter. To Toby’s disappointment, it was already occupied by a young couple who said they came in earlier that afternoon. The man quickly told them his wife had blisters on both feet, and they would be staying an extra day to let them heal. The wife apologized for hogging the facility, as she put it, and gave Toby’s mom some dry kindling they’d found inside the shelter.

The family stretched out on the grass using their backpacks as makeshift pillows. Dereck squirmed into a comfortable position. “Hatchet Lake,” he said. “From what I can see, it’s not shaped like a hatchet. Therefore, I suspect it was named after a famous—and particularly grisly—murder.”

Toby opened his drowsing eyes. “No, it was actually a suicide. Once upon a time, a man hiked the horrible trail from Chicken Bone to

Hatchet Lake, and in despair cut off his own head with a hatchet.” He grinned at Dereck. “Oh, that’s *gotta* hurt!”

Their mother got a fire started quickly with the dry kindling and began heating lake water to prepare their meal of dehydrated potatoes and mixed vegetables. The rest of them set their tents up in places where the ground was level and free of tree roots. Because inflatable air mattresses would have been too heavy, they carried only foam rubber pads about four feet long. These were just long enough to reach past the hips, leaving the legs sticking over the edge.

Everyone sat on the ground and watched the pot for signs of boiling. Toby took off his boots and socks, to let the socks air dry. “Something’s been bugging me all day,” he said to Dereck. “It’s a phrase or sort of a rhyme that’s been running through my head. Maybe you know what it is.”

“What is it?”

“ ‘Zippity doo, zippity dee. Snappy is the Infantry.’ Is that from *All Quiet on the Western Front*?”

“No, but you’re close. It’s Borchert.”

“Who?”

“Wolfgang Borchert. It’s from one of his short stories. I can’t remember the title. Something about walking the long road home. From the war, I mean. It actually goes, ‘Zicker zacker upidee, snappy is the Infantry.’”

“Ah, thanks! That’s been driving me nuts all day.”

“Weird how stuff gets into your head.”

“It is.”

Their father pointed at the lake. “This would be a good place to try some fly fishing,” he remarked. “No trees or bushes on the shoreline. Nothing for a lure to get caught in.” He took the cigarette butt from his shirt pocket, examined it a moment, and then put it back.

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After supper and dishwashing they lingered over the campfire, which was now mostly smoke because of the damp wood they'd added. Toby shifted his seat twice but the smoke followed him doggedly.

"Why don't you try the radio?" their father said to their mother. "Reception's usually better after dark. And we're on the other side of the ridge now. We might be able to pick up a Duluth station. I'd like to find out what's going on in Chicago."

Their mother rummaged in her pack and pulled out a pocket-size transistor radio. She switched it on. "Where is it on the dial?"

"About 710, I think. WDSM."

The tiny radio gave out static and faint scratches that might have been human speech. "This is all the louder it goes. The battery's almost dead. Kate, why don't you try listening with the earphone? You have better ears than the rest of us?"

Kate took the radio and plugged in the earpiece. She fiddled with the dial. "Yes," she said after a moment, "I can hear the commentary. It's not very loud, though. It keeps fading out." She stopped and listened, brow furrowed in concentration. She turned the radio about in search of a stronger signal. "There's some kind of fighting in the park. There were demonstrations today, and. . .and speeches. . . It's. . . There are police and National Guard." She listened intently. "Whoa! Twelve thousand policemen, more than seven thousand National Guard. . . Are you *kidding* me?" She trailed off, her blue eyes wide and fixed.

"Man, I have friends there tonight!" Toby said. "Where is this all happening? In the convention hall or out on the streets?"

Kate tossed her long-billed baseball type cap to the ground as if it were interfering with her hearing. "In the park *and* in the streets. This battery is almost dead. I can hardly. . ." She pushed the earpiece deeper into her ear. "In the park. . . Seven thousand more troops. Regular Army. There's tear gas. The soldiers have bayonets. Humphrey has issued a statement calling for calm. He and Edmund. . ." She shook her head. "Who's Edmund Muskie?"

Their father shrugged. "He must be the vice presidential candidate."

“Humphrey and Muskie. . . I can’t make it out; the station keeps fading. Something about a statement . . .” Kate said nothing further for a long time, then shook her head and pulled the earpiece out. “Sorry. The battery’s completely dead.” She handed the radio and earpiece back to their mother. “The reporters are being harassed right on the convention floor. Some demonstrators were forced out of Lincoln Park. It’s absolutely nuts.”

“Sounds like the politicians have lost control,” Kate said.

“*Im Westen Nichts Neues*,” Toby said to Dereck.

His brother smiled without humor. “Both sides will claim the other started it.”

“It takes two to tango,” their mother reminded them. She put another small stick on the fire.

“I’ve got friends there tonight,” Toby said again.

It was dark now, but for the smoldering campfire and the flashlights in the shelter, where the young couple moved quietly about. A buzzing overhead drew Toby’s eyes upward. He spied a red light moving through the stars: a small plane, from the sound of the engine, heading towards Duluth. He tracked it until it abruptly vanished behind a blackness that was beginning to shroud the stars in the west. Then there was nothing but the crickets and the dark.

SHOOTING THE DOG

by Dave Jameson

When Winston first laid eyes on me, as he liked to say afterwards, I was bare naked. True enough, but I had just come from the bath and was drying with a pale yellow linen towel when he burst in, so I was able to shield my breasts and privates from his amazed gawking as soon as I recovered from the shock of male incursion into what should have been the most secret, most secure inner sanctum of the women's dormitory at Mt. St. Joseph Academy and College. Even as I screamed and tried to shrink my nakedness behind the scanty towel, I perceived that my invader was as dismayed as I, and was golden and beautiful, an angel.

I don't . . . don't . . . don't, he managed to blurt out, raising his arms to hold his hands out in front of him, fingers splayed, as though shielding himself from a forbidden vision. But I noticed he kept his eyes open and on me as he backed away toward the lavatory door. And then, just as he reached back with one hand to fumble for the door knob, he took his eyes from me for the first time in our brief acquaintance and seized the panties draped slipshod over the back of a boudoir chair and disappeared with them through the doorway.

I was eighteen that evening in the baths, and vulnerable. Vulnerable not so much because of my nakedness, but because I was something of the alien, exposed to the crafty victimization of the Catholic women at St. Joe's, as one of the few Protestant oddballs at the college, and certainly the only low-church one. Certainly the only one not in on the hoary tradition of the annual Columbus Day bloomers sortie visited upon the womanhood of St. Joe's Pyle Hall by the gentlemen of the German Theological School of the Northwest, a Presbyterian institution of distinguished repute. Only today, the German has been dropped from the name, because of the war, and other modernizing changes have been made, and now it is simply Dubuque College.

Later, after he had tracked down the red-haired girl in the bath and come a-courting, I told him I hope you realize the unmentionables you purloined are not mine, but belong to Annabelle Maloney (truly an armful of a young woman) and if you think my bottom can fill out that voluminous garment, you may be sadly disappointed. His face was the one to show vulnerability then.

Today, eighteen years on—it is March 31, 1918—Winston, my strong, capable, self-assured Dr. Winston Gage Ross, truly is the vulnerable one, back from the war which broke him, and I must be the strong one. I have retrieved him from the British Royal Military Medical Corps, a broken-down castoff. I have gone to Toronto and practically stolen him from the care of his parents, and I have brought him here to Kanbrota so we may restore him to health, to the fullness of his life. We have decided, my brother Henry Messer and his wife Rachel and I, we have concluded that after this wretched winter has finally ended and the warmth of true spring days has arrived, a sojourn at the quiet Messer farm near Trikney—a hundred miles to the west of here--will be salubrious for his well-being, for Winston's recovery, and that some light partaking of the work at the farm may entice him out of his retreat, his withdrawal.

His illness—is it an illness?—is a mystery. A doctor in neurasthenia at the Toronto center told me Winston's is a curious case, though not totally unknown to his colleagues in the psychiatric profession. His disorder is not precisely shell shock, Dr. Neugebauer thinks, but is akin to that affliction visited upon so many who survived more than a few days or weeks of intense battles in the trenches under the gunnery barrages.

And so, what is his illness, his condition? He will be forty in June, and he has not aged or changed physically since he left in 1914, except he is a little thinner, his golden hair is duller, white at the temples, his gait is no longer brisk, but slow and uncertain. He often wants to go down for a nap. In the morning when I ask, he says I didn't sleep much or I couldn't sleep. He doesn't complain. He doesn't converse, by which I mean he never brings up a topic to talk about, whether his feelings, the war, the weather, our children. When I ask simple questions, like Are you hungry? or Do you want me to play the

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Victrola? he answers briefly. When I ask deeper questions, like Do you want to get back to your practice, he says I'm too tired to talk about that now, or I just can't think about that yet. Someday. He mostly seems vacant—empty, though some days he seems more engaged than others. We have not made love since his return from Belgium, though he lets me hold him in bed. That is his disease.

* * *

It is Friday, June 26, 1918, and Winston and I have settled in at the farm in Appleton. We have been here three weeks and we have observed quite a transformation of the countryside here in the end of spring. Last week we read an article in the newspaper to the effect the winter of 1917-1918 was the coldest that they have records for almost everywhere in the United States, at least east of the Rocky Mountains. The government weather statisticians say, from what they can tell, looking at the historical data that has been kept, we have just survived the coldest winter ever. Well, we who shivered through it could have told them that, almost without troubling to look through their files. Neighbors here tell us the bad winter that was did not relax its grip on this area until about the twentieth of April, similar to what we observed at Lewsgock.

Wheat seeding didn't get started until nearly the end of May, so the crop was just popping up when we came, and for the first few days we were here the brown earth of the wheat fields looked like the face of a man with a three-day's growth of beard. We have gone out for good walks around the farm and up the section line road to the next farm, too, and what we see now is a solid green carpet that in the past week has been almost imperceptibly changing from a deep emerald to a sort of sage green as the little wheat plants put out additional, tougher leaves. So the whole land is green now, different hues of green, as the flax that some fields are planted to was seeded a little later and has a different shade from the spring wheat.

What a delightful bonus from nature! The plums and the chokecherries were late to blossom this spring, so they were just starting when we came, and their little petals are just now starting to fall off. A good wind will finish them. Henry and Rachel planted these

eight years ago. The chokecherry trees are coming along very nicely. The plums and bullberry trees are smaller, though they bore fruit last year. They grow more slowly than the chokecherries, but one year they will pass in height the chokecherries, which are really just bushes. The chokecherries have a sack-shaped composite blossom, about the size and shape of my pinkie. They will produce a cluster of shiny black chokecherries when they are fully ripe. The chokecherry blooms, when you sniff them close, have a peculiar odor, I think. It is sweet like a fruit blossom should be, but something pungent (if that is the right word), something wild is also in the smell. But when we walk among the trees, we smell a blending of the aromas from all the fruit trees. At night especially it is quite powerful, the good smell, almost intoxicating. Winston says the blossoms' aroma is so strong in the evening because the breeze is calmed and the perfume from all the tiny flowers becomes concentrated. Last week he said it is so good to walk out in the morning and not be swallowed up by the stink of death. In the days when I walk out among the fruit trees I notice many flies and little wild bees visiting the blooms. It seems strange not to see the trees almost swarming with honeybees, like the groves back at Greenfields when Pa kept bees. It is three springs he is gone, now. I can still see him checking the swollen plum and apple buds every day, anxious for his bees to be able to get at their pollen and sweet nectar.

We made the move from Lewsgock on June 4, poor Katie's birthday. My niece said she didn't mind, and she came along to help us get settled in at the little farmhouse. I don't need any big party on my birthday, she said. With all the people in the Messer clan, I've had plenty of birthday cake. She turned fifteen that day and is a beautiful young woman, and is the most handsome of Rachel and Henry's kids. She rode over that morning with her dad on the train. Lucky them! It takes all of three hours. We rode in a little Diamond T truck Henry borrowed from the drayman. We loaded our clothing and some extra furnishings, cooking pots, and other conveniences on the truck. My nephew Joseph and I took turns driving (yes, I can drive a truck!) and the two people riding shotgun, Winston and either Joseph or I, changed off our positions, too, so that no one person would have to be scrunched into the middle all day, sharing space with the shifting rod. We got on the road at 9 a.m. and didn't arrive at the farm until just after 2 p.m. Fifteen

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miles out of Lewsgock we went south ten miles out of our way to get on a good graveled state highway, otherwise who knows how many times we would have gotten stuck in the mud, as Joseph said.

Katie, Joseph, and I worked hard until suppertime unloading our boxes and few furniture pieces from the truck, unpacking, and organizing, and Winston helped some at first, but soon said he wasn't up to it and sat in the rocker by the dining room window and watched the afternoon shadows in the tree rows slowly grow longer. Henry wasn't much help at all. As soon as we showed up with the truck, he took off with his farm caretaker to look over the fields and see how the crops were coming along, wearing his beat-up old cowboy hat that he keeps here at the farm.

* * *

In our reading of the newspapers that come to us, in some of the conversation we have with our neighbors, in the letters we have from Rachel and Henry back in Lewsgock, Winston's family in Canada, and my sister back in Iowa we hear so much about death and suffering. There seems to be a constant stream of reports of soldiers killed or wounded in battles overseas, or of soldiers still in training down south, suffering horribly and even dying of pneumonia or measles in the terrible cold of last winter. And now more and more we are hearing and reading about the ravages of influenza, both of soldiers in Europe and now in the cities of this country, too. The Spanish flu, they call it, though for the life of me, I don't know how the flu could make its way from Spain all the way to New England and then to other parts of this big country in the middle of a war.

I do not like all the talk and news of death and illness making its way to our quiet retreat on this farm, for I fear it all works against Winston's regaining his full health, though he does seem to be getting better, day by day. But still, the war wears on him, I am certain, even from a great distance.

War has an insatiable appetite for life and blood, Winston remarked last week after we had read over a letter from my sister Maude in Iowa, which Henry had sent on from Lewsgock. It is a cruel irony, Winston said, that in the history of warfare disease has killed as many soldiers

as have died in the heat of battle. Disease and malnutrition and the harshness of environment. His wisdom about the whole business of warfare annoys me, though of course I say nothing against his reciting his lore.

Anyway, we have had news enough of deaths in mortal combat to surpass what we have heard of the toll of disease. Maude's letter told of the death of a Marine from Greenfields, a Sergeant Kiernan, taken down by German machine gun in bitter fighting at a place they call Belleau Woods, which is about fifty miles northwest of Paris. Since her letter, we have seen several stories of Belleau Woods in the paper. It seems there has been a long, hard battle at that place and the U.S. Marines fought there very bravely, and now the Army is helping in the fight, too. The generals are confident of defeating the German force there, but it is hard fighting. There isn't anything said about casualties in that battle that has been going on for a month or more, I think, but Winston said, You may be assured many boys paid dearly to give the generals their confidence.

Henry wrote us that a cousin of the manager of the grain elevator at Lewsgock, who lives back east and had been in the state guard there for some time, was killed in a German thrust in early April at a place called Seicheprey, which is in northeastern France, and that was some of the first battle action by Americans, but it will surely not be the last, as millions of boys have been taken in for training, with more being drafted. Also, in a note from Rachel we received just Monday she says one of her musical students, one of the Crombie boys, has been reported killed in action in France, though she didn't know where. It is an unbelievable shock to picture that fun-loving Melvin Crombie killed in war, she wrote, and well can I believe her.

We Americans are just now getting a taste of the bitter dish the people of the Empire have been gorging themselves on for nearly four years, Winston said after we read Rachel's note, with what I thought a rather self-satisfied bitterness. I let his remark go without response, though, because his mood of cynicism is progress, believe it or not. He hasn't had much news about how the Canadian armies are faring over there, except for the newspaper stories we read, which do not impart much. Letters from his folks do not add much, in deference, I suppose,

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to his condition. He does not express any curiosity about the activities of his beloved Canadian boys, but I have quickening hopes that he will, one of these weeks or months.

Some days, Winston seems to sink deep within his shell, but I am greatly encouraged that most days lately he has been willing to go for a walk with me about the farm and even on long walks to neighbor farms. A week ago we had a curious and, as I thought, affecting experience coming out of our outings. It involved the Schmidkunz family, whose farm is a walk of a little less than a mile and a half from our house. They have a nice but modest house, built fours ago to replace the tiny claim shack they made do with for several years.

We had called on them the previous week, and we liked going there. The couple, Charlotte and Conrad, are pleasant and bright. Henry and Rachel had made good friends of them, and we first called on them only a couple days after we arrived here because of Rachel's especial encouragement. They have been cordial hosts to their drop-in visitors, Dr. and Mrs. Ross. They have four well mannered children—a boy, Charles, twelve years old, two very pretty girls, Treeny and Amelia, ages about ten and seven, and a boy who will soon turn four, a stocky little sunshine face named Oscar, but called Buzzy by all but his mother.

On that first visit to the Schmidkunzes, we were greeted by the joyful barking of a short, mostly black, thick chested mongrel named Freckles. As soon as we were welcomed by the people, Freckles took his ease and lay quietly without paying the visitors any further mind. Later in our visit, in getting reports from the children about the various animals on the farm, Freckles was brought up as a subject of conversation. As Mr. Schmidkunz told it, Freckles, now five years old, had been raised from a pup. When less than half grown, he had run out in the road to challenge a passing Model T, and gotten driven over, not by the wheels, fortunately, but probably was conked by some part of the Ford's undercarriage. What few injuries the young dog suffered, he soon recovered from, as he was tenderly cared for by the Missus. But afterwards, the family noticed that the worst of Freckles's injuries must have been the loss of his hearing. If Freckles was lying looking away, they could call him or whistle and he would make no response. But if

he saw Charley come out with the egg basket or a bucket for picking beans from the garden, he was up and leaping for glee, for he loved accompanying the boy on his chores or on his rambles about the farm.

A week or so later, two weeks ago, now, a pleasant day offering, Winston and I made another hike to the Schmidkunz farm. We were invited in as before to enjoy coffee, triangles of Charlotte's delicious cottage cheese kuchen, and conversation about farm activities and news of the community and farther afield that any of us knew and cared to share or comment on. Our pleasant conversation was never deep. I did not notice any change from our previous visit except that the boy Charley may have been extra quiet and hung in the background, but that was hardly remarkable, as he had been bashful around us during our previous visit.

We were making the customary comments preparatory to taking our leave when little Buzzy went to his mother's knee, turned to us and blurted out, Charley shot Feckers. Kilt him dead. I must have replied something like, Oh, my, that's a dreadful story. (Humoring him.) And what would make Charley do so mean a thing to poor Freckles? The Schmidkunz adults seemed taken aback for a moment by Buzzy's outburst, but the husband, who had come in with Charley from haying in a meadow near the house shortly after we arrived, spoke out from a saddened demeanor: It's true. Our young man Charles has taken upon himself the job of making weighty decisions for this place. As a result, last Sunday afternoon he and the neighbor kid, who is a little older, led poor Freckles out from the yard and ended him with a couple shots from a .22 rifle. I guess it was punishment for Freckles being a mean dog. But now the place is without a dog.

Though the farmer imparted this information with a sort of sneer on his lip, possibly signaling a flippant attitude to the whole affair, I concluded, from the note of sarcasm in his voice, that this had been a matter of some contention within the family and that it ought not to be pursued with our comments or requests for details. Winston, as has been his custom, was likewise silent. We proceeded to say our farewells, make demands for an exchange visit, and depart from their house as quickly as seemed polite. As I stepped out into the entry, I turned back to glimpse the darkly anguished face of the young boy as

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his dad said, Oh, yes, Charley has gotten to be quite the manager around here.

The story of the dog had its denouement (if you could call it that) three days later—the fourteenth, that was—when Charley came to call at our place. He came alone, which surprised me, but I invited him in and the three of us sat at the dining table, which I had already cleared off after the light Sunday noon meal I had prepared. It was a gloomy day, with a gray cloud cover that seemed to threaten rain, and, though none had yet fallen, we had not felt in the mood for a walk. I was writing a letter to Rachel, and Winston had interested himself in an old book on the farrier's art, which he readily set aside when Charley came to the door.

Missus Ross, I wanted to talk to you about the thing I did, and Doctor Ross, too, the lad said immediately after I greeted him, as though anxious to lay out the purpose of his visit before he lost his nerve—or got sidetracked by adult control of the talk. What my dad said the other night. He was right and all in what he told you. He paused to look from my face to Winston's and back to me with what I thought was an expression of pleading. But it's not right, it's not how it happened, really, what my dad said.

Now, Charley, you take your time and tell us all that happened, in your own words, and don't worry, Son, we'll just listen to you and hear you out. Winston's piping up to gentle the boy and encourage him surprised me some, but I thought it was a good sign, too. Charley's face and a relaxation in his whole body showed the boy's gratitude for Winston's kindness, I thought, and he began telling us the story of the shooting of Freckles, helped along by some gentle probing and prompting from Winston and me.

It seemed that Charley's most usual playmate, his almost exclusive friend outside the family, is Delbert (or Bert) from the Holzer farm just a half-mile north of the Schmidkunz place. Bert is two years older than Charley, two grades ahead in school, and he knows a whole lot more about how things are, in Charley's words.

The trouble started early in June when Mrs. Brockel, whom everyone agrees is snooty and persnickety, made a stop at the

Schmidkunz place, collecting for the Red Cross, as she is chairman of the Trikney Chapter of the American Red Cross. As she is very fussy with her record keeping, she took some time in filling out her work sheet and writing out a receipt after Charley's ma gave her the fifty cents. And by the time she had visited some more and made her exit, Freckles had plumb forgotten there was a visitor in the house and was taking his ease in the afternoon sun. So when Mrs. Brockel came too close to Freckles, walking up behind him, she scared him awake and he jumped up barking and snarling a little, too, and, yes, probably nipped at the back of her shoe in his surprise. And that was the end of that, they all thought. But it wasn't.

Bert's ma, who is very smart and knows a lot of things, just like Bert himself, happened to be in the post office in Trikney a day or so later and heard Mrs. Brockel tell Dandy Pulvitz, the town cop, that the Schmidkunzes south of town kept a very mean dog that had bit her on the leg, making a hole in her stocking, and that it was too bad the Red Cross had to be impeded in its official duties of helping the war effort by vicious dogs allowed to go free off a leash and biting people just passing by. Such dogs should be destroyed or at the very least their owners given a good stiff fine for permitting a vicious dog to be at large. Well, Dandy Pulvitz said, yes, it was too bad. But Mrs. Brockel would have to take it up with the sheriff down at the country seat as it was out of his, Dandy's, jurisdiction, and Mrs. Brockel said she would certainly do that.

Well, Mrs. Holzer came home and had a talk with her son, Delbert, and they worked it out together that Bert ought to take the .22 and get young Charley to agree to shooting that dog, seeing as how the dog is deaf and the biting situation is not going to get any better as time goes by. And that Bert ought not to go to the older Schmidkunzes because Conrad Schmidkunz is just too soft hearted and would never permit the obvious solution to be carried out. And that would save the Schmidkunzes trouble because when the sheriff shows up to see about the biting dog, all they will have to say is, There is no problem, Sheriff, as we have shot the dog.

So when Delbert Holzer came over to the Schmidkunz farm last Sunday and told his young friend where things stood and what had to

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be done, Charley agreed, but had a very sick feeling because of the necessity and cruelty of things. He got a little rope made out of braided binder twine. Freckles willingly went with them, two boys out for a walk, one with a rifle, maybe to shoot a pocket gopher or a cottontail with, if they should happen to see one.

They walked some distance away from the house toward a little creek that runs south of their place. They stopped at a plum thicket that grows near the creek and there Charley tied the rope around Freckles's neck and the other end around the small trunk of one of the plum trees. Then the boys stepped back, maybe ten paces. Freckles just sat there under the plum trees, looking like he was smiling at them what with his panting. Bert raised the .22 to his shoulder, aimed, and fired. Freckles just sat there, looking at Charley. Bert squeezed off another round and Freckles kind of jerked and lay down real quick. And then Bert went over to Freckles and looked at him and said, Yah, he's dead.

I don't know why I didn't think about asking Dad, Charley told us after he had whimpered a bit and I had gotten one of Winston's handkerchiefs out of the bedroom so he could blow his snuffling nose. I should have asked Dad, but the way Bert explained it, just doing it would be best. And most of me didn't want to kill Freckles, but there was a part that listened to Bert when he said, this is the thing folks have to do with a biting dog, and you can take charge here, and I have come to help you get the job done.

Charley's face was filled with the most pitiable anguish. I didn't want to kill Freckles. He was so faithful to me and liked me as good as anyone in the family, like I was his best friend. Oh, I keep turning over and over in my head, I should have told Dad, I should have told Dad, but the picture of me tying up our dog to get shot is what keeps coming back into my head. I know I did wrong and I told Dad I was plumb wrong. And I said I'm sorry. And Dad said You did it and it's done. It's all right, have your cry and get over it. But I don't know if I can get over it, because the picture always comes back into my head.

The boy told us he didn't want us to see him bawling like a baby. He said he came to tell us because he knew we are good people and he didn't want us to think he was a bad kid. He didn't want us to

think he was trying to run the farm, like his dad made it sound. Only that he did something bad and didn't mean it.

When his confession was ended, I offered Charley a glass of milk and a cookie, he said, I'll take water instead of the milk, please ma'am, but could I have the cookie? During his talk, in addition to words of encouragement, I had also offered expressions of acceptance and forgiveness. We all in our lives have done things that were wrong and that we bitterly regretted, I told him as he nibbled at his oatmeal cookie. If we express our sorrow, we are forgiven, and we go on and try our best to be good and kind. And you, Charley, have shown this afternoon that is what you are up to. Now you must smile and try very hard to forgive yourself.

I did not expect Winston to join in my moralizing, but when I finished, he had something to say, too. Charley, my young friend—and you are my friend, you know—you have done the most painful kind of wrong, and that is the wrong that cannot be put right, no matter how much we cry and fret about it afterwards. It is very hard to cure the bad feeling that comes into our guts when we do such a wrong. But you have taken the first step in the cure, and that is to admit to yourself the wrong. Missus Ross tells you to go forth and try to do good. That may be all right, but it is probably not going to make the hurt go away. It may never go away. And if the wrong a person does is a big enough wrong maybe that is the way it should be. I thought he was done and was a bit piqued that he had made Charley's face take on a sullen look, but he had one more thing to say.

One lesson I know you have taken from all this is a good one, Charley. Taking life away from someone or some thing, whether your enemy in war or your dog, Freckles, or the grouse or the big buck you hunt, you must think hard about the killing before you do it, because once you kill, it cannot be undone. And Death does not forgive.

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PRIDE AND JOY

by Lyle Jorgenson

Dreyson stared at the heavy metal doors of his Grandfather Dreyford's old workshop. It was given to him several years ago when he had finished his weaponsmith training and began to learn the art of being a magicsmith. He looked at the old key that hung from his neck. It was the last gift he had gotten from his grandfather.

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and looked at it. It was a work order from his father, the head of the FireFist family had requested a new blade to be made for the use of the next head of the family, Kyden. Dreyson was familiar with Kyden, as was usual for his family. The MountainBlade family had been crafting weapons for the FireFist family for generations. Just as Dreyford had made a weapon for Kyden's grandfather, Dreyson was to craft a weapon for Kyden.

He crumpled the work order and shoved it back into his pocket. He turned away from the old workshop and went into the house. He glanced over his shoulder to the old workshop, he hadn't entered it in three years and the last thing he wanted to do was take another step in there because of some silly tradition.

"My father can make Kyden his blade," he sighed. It'd be better that way, the magic infused within the crystal blade would be stable then. There'd be no need for him to worry about things going wrong in the midst of combat. The last thing he wanted was someone's blood staining his hammer again.

The house was empty as he walked to his father's study. Nobody was home, so he quickly snuck into the office tucked the work order into one of the drawers of the oak desk. As he turned around to leave the room, a picture on the wall caught his eye. It was from when he was young and learning how to make normal weapons. He was holding up the first sword he ever crafted.

The young man couldn't help but chuckle. He clung to those memories of his childhood, where he'd use his special brand of metal magic to forge weapons so ornate and practical that it made even his father's patrons jealous. He was scolded several times by his teachers for bringing the weapons to the combat academy where he'd wanted to show them off. He grabbed the framed picture off the wall to look at it. A slip of paper fell out from behind the frame, it was a small notecard. He picked it up and instantly recognized it as Dreyford's handwriting. Dreyson flipped the card over and read the back of it.

The Pride of My Joy, was written on the back in large letters. Written underneath it he read, *Dreyson's first sword, crafted nearly as well as my last.*

Dreyson bit his bottom lip. His own inadequacies stared him in the face. Everything he had striven to be when he was a kid fell flat when he entered the realm of adulthood. His eyes drifted around his father's study, pictures of his older siblings were found in random spots, nestled between mounted weapons and bookshelves. Each of them had a picture like he did, showing off their first weapon. But there was more. There were pictures of his brothers opening up their own weapons shops in other towns or of becoming a blacksmith in a larger city. The success of the MountainBlade lineage decorated the walls. Pride and Joy? Dreyson threw the picture of him on the floor.

The glass shattered when it struck the floor. He kicked the shattered frame into the wall, where the wood splintered and broke. The picture they shielded crumpled as he stepped on it and ground it into the floor.

"Pride and joy," he cursed under his breath. "Damn your pride, and damn my joy."

The house felt more empty than before. As Dreyson crushed his picture in the study, he felt his place in his parents home shrink exponentially. Ever since his first magic weapon failed in active combat, he felt like he had lost his home. He was a failure at what he had always thought he would become.

He looked back at the oak desk where he had tucked the work order away. Why had his father given it to him even after everything that happened? Something down by his feet caught his eye, it was another

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notecard. He reached down to pick it up and froze when he saw his father's handwriting.

A Blade of Curses, it read.

Dreyson raised an eyebrow. He picked up the picture and took a closer look at it. The blade was flawless, wasn't it? What about it was cursed? He looked up to the exact sword he forged that was hanging on the wall. It was a simple steel shortsword with an ornate design embedded into the handle that invoked the image of two dragons circling from the pommel and rising up into the blade.

He grasped the blade in his hand and pulled it down. The balancing was perfect, it felt good in his hand. What about this blade would make him think it was cursed? It was perfect, wasn't it? He couldn't help but laugh, he went from making a flawless blade to something that would shatter in the heat of battle. He picked up the picture and looked at it, and then back to the oak desk.

He sighed, "One more try." He went and pulled the work order from the desk. "I'll give this just one more try."

Dreyson marched out of the house and stared down at the metal doors to the workshop, his workshop. He grabbed the key around his neck and unlocked the doors and then shoved the doors open. They slowly swooped into the old room, letting light enter the place for the first time in who knew how long.

Dust and ash caked the floor, leaving clear footprints around the shop. He walked over to a storage space and heaved a heavy slab of garnet onto his workbench. He dusted off the crystal slab and looked around the room. The shattered remains of failed projects were scattered around the ground. Ghosts of a time where he desperately tried to rectify his mistake.

Forcing a smile, he reached for a set of strange goggles. They had a tick and heavy frame that he fastened to his head with a couple of leather straps. The top half of the lenses had two flat pieces of quartz built into them. There was a long cable that stretched from the lense frame to a computer next to the workbench. He reached for a pair of thick woolen gloves that had small crystals sewn into the fingertips. He

snapped his fingers, triggering the goggles and gloves to activate as the entire workstation whirled to life.

Lights, mounted on floating crystals, hovered down to the workstation. Other scraps of metal with various gemstones flew around the workshop and docked into different machines and benches. The goggles lit up, projecting a circle of holographic displays around Dreyson. He used the gloves to slide the displays wherever it was needed. They reacted to his movements and touch, dancing as his hands waved around him.

He threw a screen of commands flying across the room into a nearby computer terminal. Some contraptions that rest above the workbench lowered down and hovered at Dreyson's side. Another screen of commands caused the workbench to turn and suspended the slab of garnet in mid-air.

Dreyson placed the palm of the glove against the slab of garnet and felt the energy flow from the crystal into his gloves, through his body, and into the display on his goggles. His view of the slab became flooded with highlights of the natural fault lines that lay within the crystal structure. The weakest points of the slab were now available to him, and with this, he grabbed a chisel and went to work.

The chisel had a reinforced diamond blade, it was on a tray of tools that hovered beside him filled with other cutting tools with various crystal edges. He grabbed a steel hammer off of another tray to prepare to dive in.

Before he went to work chiseling away at the slab, he focused on the scent in the air. The rough scent of burning garnet filled the room as machines heated and cooled the crystal. Cracks formed from this process. He held his chisel near the most prominent crack and split the slab in half.

The two halves hovered before him, the workbench keeping them suspended in mid air. He looked for a place where the weaknesses in the structure would form a perfect edge for a blade. With a couple more swings of his hammer he found himself working with two thin halves of a blade slowly taking shape.

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He set his tools down and ran his hands through the air sending another volley of holographic screens flying around the room, each with their own detailed list of commands. One flew up, bringing the lights closer to the workbench. Another rushed to a tool shelf and brought forth the next kit he'd need. The workshop buzzed with the whirr of machines and the magical energy of a magicsmith at work. Looking around he felt the nostalgic breath of his grandfather breathing down his back as he'd point at the different tools and explain what worked best for any given situation and material he was working with.

"Dreyford," he closed his eyes in prayer. "Be with me while I make one final attempt at everything you taught me." With a deep breath, he grabbed the tools and went to work.

Dreyson felt the garnet speak to him, urged by the magic in the air and the memories of his grandfather he began to cut at the crystal. The slab of stone told him where to best cut it, where the sharpest edges were, what kind of blade it wanted to become. Dreyson was merely the loyal servant to the crystal. His job was to let the crystal take its proper shape.

He smoothed out the rougher edges, and looked at the angles of the two halves of the blade. It would be a single-edged sword with a thick flat edge for durability. It was a blade for cleaving. He placed his gloves on the workbench and cracked his knuckles. So far, he was still in comfortable territory. The final stage was about to begin.

A table off to his side was lined with metal rods. Dreyson grabbed one and looked it over. It appeared to be the proper length for the blade he envisioned. He placed the rod down on the crystal and closed his eyes, focusing on the energy he felt deep within himself.

He took grasp of that energy, he imagined it was something deep in his gut. A giant lump of power that lay dormant until he dragged it to the surface. He pulled that power forth and thrust it into the metal rod and willed its shape to warp. His eyes snapped open and he whispered to the metal, he urged it on like a father encouraging his child. He was firm with his command of the mineral, but gentle in his approach as he guided his magic through the steel.

The metal morphed into a semi-liquid state and began to sink into the first half of the crystal blade. Dreyson quickly grabbed the other half of the blade and clamped it down on the metal ooze. He willed the crystal and steel to become one, to reinforce each other. He watched the weak lines of the crystal structure through his goggles as they slowly began to disappear. The metal crept its way into the weakness of the crystalline structure and magically bonded to it. He had moved from whispering to the metal to singing to it. He serenaded the blade as it began to take shape, changing the songs of the enchanters and the crafters. His voice reverberated through the blade, and the sword buzzed in harmony with his voice.

As the harmony created a melody, the blade reached its near final form. All that remained was to enfuse the blade with the magical element the crystal desired. Flames began to dance around the workshop. The fire magic oozed from an artifact that was mounted on the workshop's wall. It swirled around the blade and waltzed to Dreyson's song. Then he took a final breath, and began to wrestle the magic into the blade.

The flames reacted wildly as they were shoved into the blade. Dreyson closed his eyes and focused on the energy of the fire magic. Just as he had dragged his own innate magic to the surface, he tried to drag this magic into the blade. The flames rebelled with ferocity, the stronger he pulled them in the harder they struggled for freedom. The blade began to crack under the pressure of the magic's refusal.

Dreyson opened his eyes and saw cracks forming in the blade. He grasped at even more of the fire magic around him and funneled it into the blade. The brilliant glow of the blaze made the broken shards of swords strewn throughout the workshop glisten. Dreyson felt them tug on him and drag him down. The spectres of soldiers who were to wield the shattered blades crept through his mind. The flames flailed wildly and threatened to engulf him, dragging him down to hell.

In the midst of the brilliant inferno, Dreyson saw the figure of the soldier who wielded his last failure. He froze as the figure turned, revealing the stump that was once his sword arm. The only color seen within the shadow was the crimson flames that poured from his wounds and the ruby tears that poured down his cheeks.

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Dreyson collapsed to his knees and wrestled with the blade. The world he saw before him was registering as mere flashes. The cracks in the blade were growing more numerous. The shadows of the soldiers that could have been scratched at his thighs. The flames of hell threatened to swallow him whole.

Then he felt a firm, but gentle hand grasp on his shoulder. A voice whispered to him, “The Pride of my Joy.”

He stood to his feet. The fire still swirled around him, but instead of wrestling with it Dreyson let himself bask in its warmth. He became swept up in the torrent of flames and embraced it with a firm, but gentle touch. He envisioned the process as it was when his grandfather first showed it to him. He gave himself to the magic, and in turn the magic gave itself to him.

Singing once again filled the workshop. The flames danced around the blade and nestled up next to it like a mother bird warming her eggs. The magic drifted into the blade, nuzzling up to the nooks and crannies where it felt the most comfortable. Dreyson was just there to guide it as a conductor. The magic flowed on its own, coordinating with the garnet slab and the metal rod to form a cohesive whole.

When the final ember fused with the blade, the music died off. The workshop grew silent as Dreyson picked up the blade. Not a weakness was found in the structure, and the magic inside the blade had stabilized. It was complete, and now all the blade needed was a name. There was only one name that he could think of. It was written in four characters in an ancient language handed down by the magic crafters. It read as *Fodria y Sonis*, Pride and Joy.

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THE FUNERAL DRESS

by Kim Larson

“I got the job!” A gust of autumn wind accompanied Kat’s entrance, whipping the Macy’s bag draped across her arm. Her husband, Gary, took the garment bag and hung it over the nearest door.

“That’s my girl.” He whirled her around their kitchen and backed her into the pantry’s frosted glass door. With his arms around her waist, he gazed into her green eyes. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

Kat swallowed hard. “Mm-hmm.”

He relaxed his stance. “So, when do you start?”

“Soon, I imagine.” She slipped from his embrace and grabbed the garment bag. “They want someone to start right away.”

“What do you mean *someone*? Did you get the job or not?”

“I’m ninety-nine percent sure.” She scurried to their bedroom, Gary trailing behind. “Sharon and I really hit it off.” Kat hung the bag over the master bath’s door. “She’s the V.P. of Marketing, filling in for H.R. until they hire—me.”

Gary stared at the bag. “That better not be another suit. You promised not to buy any more until you got a job.”

“But it’s been six months. Do you know how hard that’s been?”

“You’ve bought plenty of other things.” He glanced around their bedroom. Since her unemployment, she’d redecorated all but one bedroom of their three-thousand-square-foot rambler. He shook his head at their new Laura Ashley comforter set. The smell of fresh paint—buttercup yellow—permeated their bedroom.

“You’ll see,” Kat said, “only one more interview.” She unzipped the garment bag.

Gary glanced at the row of designer suits, organized first by color then by skirt length, hanging in their closet. The names Alfani, Lauren,

and both Kleins—Anne and Calvin—once foreign to Gary, were now part of his family, too. “Another interview?”

“With the owners, James and Vivian Nystrom.” She took off her blouse. “And some bald guy, V.P. of Sales. Sharon calls them the Trio. She asked my take on guys who shave and wax their heads.” Kat clicked her tongue, mimicking Sharon, as she slipped into the simple black dress she’d purchased. “I’m sure she has a crush on him.”

“That looks like a dress for a funeral.” Gary raked his thick chestnut hair with his fingers.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Kat squealed. “You don’t think it’s too sexy, do you? It’s very fitted.” She ran her hands over her curvy, petite figure. “I don’t want others to think I’m flaunting my body at a funeral. It looks great on me, right?” She admired herself in the dresser mirror.

“Funeral? I thought you needed something for an interview.”

“I do. I mean, I did.” She pulled a periwinkle double-breasted blazer from the same bag. “Now don’t get mad. The next interview is crucial. I needed a suit that says conservative yet powerful, with a splash of pizzazz. Like this Giorgio Armani.”

Gary left for the family room. He sank into his La-Z-Boy, arms folded across his chest. Kat scurried behind in her tight-fitting funeral dress, the Armani flapping over one shoulder.

“It was half price, honest.” She held the periwinkle suit in front of her briefly then tossed it aside. “And this one was on clearance.” She turned and pivoted. “I couldn’t resist such a good deal.”

“Since when are you concerned with price? And how many funerals have we ever gone to?” He made a goose egg with one hand.

Kat chewed on her bottom lip. “I hadn’t wanted to tell you this, but the dress pulled at me. You know. I got that feeling. The one you don’t like me to tell you about. Mark my word, there’s a funeral in our near future.”

“Yeah, yours.” Gary chuckled and pushed back in the recliner.

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“Don’t you dare bury me in black.” She fell into his lap. “Promise me it’ll be red.” She snuggled against his broad chest, breathing in his cologne.

“As long as it’s something red you already own.” He rested his head against hers and sighed. “So, which do you want to tell me about first? Your interview and why you’re ninety-nine percent sure you’ve got this job, or whose funeral we *won’t* be attending?”

Kat shared a little about the interview but kept returning to Sharon’s appearance. Both women had worn knee-length navy suits with classic white blouses. Sharon’s flaxen hair was similar to Kat’s, though Kat referred to hers as champagne. “And we’re both barely five feet—”

“Wait a minute,” Gary interrupted, “you’re getting this job because you two look alike?”

“It helps, but let me finish.” She snuggled closer. “I asked her my favorite interview question.”

Gary nearly choked on his laugh. “The one if your house were on fire?”

Kat playfully socked him in the arm. “Yes.”

“So what three items would she save?” He almost sounded interested.

“You know I’m not concerned with the answers. I watch what they do while they think, read their body language. This paints a more accurate picture.”

“So what picture did Sharon paint?”

“She swung her chair toward the row of continuous windows overlooking the city.” Kat sat up. “What an incredible view. From the thirty-fourth floor, I could see for miles. The streets and buildings looked like a grid. I hope my office has windows.” She sank back into his arms with a smirk. “Sharon stared out the window as if lost somewhere in that maze. Like I always say, some people can’t make decisions. Others lie about their answers. And very few have the confidence to tell the truth, whatever that is to them.”

“You turned the tables on her and you think you’ll get the job? From someone who can’t make decisions?”

“I apologized.” She snickered. “Then I told her she needn’t answer the question since I was the one being interviewed.”

“Good, good for you.” Gary chuckled. “Did you give her your spiel about people giving off vibes and you being like a tuning fork? How you know who’s sharp, flat, or playing off key.” He waved his hand as if conducting an orchestra.

“Stop that.” She hit him playfully again. “Sharon and I are having lunch on Monday, after my interview with the Trio.”

“Finally, a real sign,” he said. “Which reminds me, your mother called *me* because you weren’t answering—”

“Has someone died?”

“Bzzzz.” Gary pushed on the arm of his chair. “Guess again, Madame Gypsy. This shouldn’t be that tough. What does she always call about lately?”

Kat knew it was about her finding a job. Her mother didn’t want their mutual gift of “reading people” going to waste.

“I’ll call her later,” Kat said, with no intention of doing so. “Sharon loved me. She may even be girlfriend material.”

“What’s not to love?” Gary’s hands meandered like a gentle stream over the curves of Kat’s body. He pushed back her hair and kissed the nape of her neck. “You definitely can’t wear this dress to a funeral.” He nibbled her ear. “Let’s start a family. You can still work if you want to. And you’d have a blast buying a new maternity wardrobe.”

The grandfather’s clock chimed, and Kat sprung from his lap. “I promised Lily I’d meet her and her co-workers after they got off work.”

Gary closed his eyes and counted the five long chimes.

“I can’t wear this.” She hurried to their bedroom and reappeared wearing the navy suit from earlier. “You don’t mind, do you, honey?”

“What’s to mind?” He stood, his chest deflated. “It’s great you’re going out. Honest.” It had been months since she’d spent time with

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anyone besides Gary. “Who knows, you may even like one of these women. So try and behave.” He kissed her goodbye.

Gary was always the optimist, she thought. A funeral would be more fun than the trivialities she’d soon endure. If only Lily hadn’t been so insistent. She didn’t dare risk losing her lone friend. They had met at a human resources seminar last June. Both were married and in their early thirties, but that’s where all similarities stopped. Yet, a magnetic pull of opposites had connected them. Kat thought about their last conversation. Had Lily succeeded in getting pregnant? She gripped the leather steering wheel tighter. Was that why they were meeting?

Lily was too nice for her own good. Children would destroy her and wreak havoc on her marriage. Children always produced disharmony in relationships. Kat’s parents had taught her that. They had quarreled over everything about her: what she would wear, how she should act, who she could play with. She’d rarely brought friends home, hating her mother’s droning critique of their imperfections and insistence Kat could do better. Her father had packed his bags when she’d packed hers for college, disappearing from both their lives.

Gary came from a large family, the youngest of six children. She loved watching him play with their nieces and nephews. He’d be a great dad, she thought. But she couldn’t risk having children and passing along her gift. Thankfully, he had been preoccupied with his law practice and hadn’t discussed having children until recently. She intended to delay their decision until her biological clock ran out.

The matron opened the door and Kat stepped into the Avar D’loj Lounge. On every table, a flickering red candle in the shape of a rose floated in a glass bowl with water. The shiny gold wallpaper looked like something from the ’70s. Rowdy country music overhead completed the eclectic atmosphere. Kat noticed Lily waving at the back of the room. She ambled toward her, intuitively nodding approval of Lily’s pink chenille pantsuit as she approached.

Lily introduced Kat to her co-workers. Tonya, a stout, middle-aged woman with short graying hair quickly monopolized the conversation. Upper-management, Kat assessed of Tonya, noting her masculine-cut suit. Four protruding hairs from a mole on Tonya’s neck mesmerized

Kat. They curled like a blooming tiger lily and tussled with the chain affixed to the reading glasses hanging around her neck. If only Kat had a pair of scissors and could operate. She dismissed the thought, realizing it would be like amputating a little toe when the whole foot was gangrene. Tonya's husky voice jerked Kat in and out of her thoughts as the others droned on about their work at 4-U Advertising.

"Kat and I met at a human resource seminar," Lily said, attempting to draw her in. "She's very talented and gifted at reading what people are like."

"You don't say." Tonya placed her forearm on the table and leaned toward Kat.

"I'd guess you're the boss," Kat said. "You have a take-charge personality."

Tonya nodded and took a drink of her whiskey sour. "I'm easy. Tell me about Kathy, here." She pointed to the woman at her left, wearing a tweed suit with elbow patches. Kathy lowered her gaze. Kat had watched her recount the change left by the waiter, time and again, with her eyes.

"You're in accounting, correct?"

"Amazing." Tonya slapped the table and took another drink. "How about Rhonda? What's her position?" The woman in a clingy red dress sat up straighter.

Kat wanted to say homewrecker, as she'd noticed her coy winks at their waiter wearing a wedding band, but she decided to have some fun. "Are you in compliance?"

Tonya nearly choked on her drink.

Lily giggled. "Rhonda's rarely in compliance."

Kat smirked and turned to Tonya. "Clearly, I was joking. Rhonda's your top sales person and very good at what she does. Am I right?"

"Incredible!" Tonya waved for their waiter. "Let's have another round and hear more."

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“Thank you, but—” Kat feigned a yawn. “I’d better get home.” She stood to leave, and Lily excused herself to walk with her. At the front door, Kat raised her eyebrows. “Thanks for an interesting evening.”

“It was good to see you,” Lily said. “Gosh, has it been over a month since we’ve talked? How’s the job search—”

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I just got hired.”

“That’s great.” Lily hugged her. “Congratulations. Where will you be working?”

“Nystrom Advertising. We’ll be competitors again.” Kat laughed.

“Really.” She glanced away. “Good to see you, Kat. Keep in touch.”

While driving home, Kat replayed their awkward parting, fixated on the word really. Was it Lily’s tone or lack of tone that bothered her most? Had she heard an inflection, as if questioning her answer? Lily couldn’t have known she had lied. Besides, she’d have the job soon enough.

The image of Tonya’s blooming mole poked at her mind. Even a vampire would avoid that neck, she thought. Too bad Tonya didn’t have a friend close enough to suggest she have the mole surgically removed. But neither did Kat have such a friend, only good old Mom who never minced words. Someday she wouldn’t care what her mother thought. Someday she’d succeed at having a close friendship. Perhaps, with Sharon. Lily didn’t seem to be an option any longer.

Monday morning came, and Kat’s interview with the Trio went as well as she’d imagined. Sharon had obviously primed them about her gift, as they’d come equipped with questions about mannerisms and body language. Kat was sure they had referenced their own employees, asking what tongue clicking meant, an unfortunate habit of Sharon’s. To protect her new friend, Kat told them it occurred in highly intelligent people who found it difficult to express their vast amount of knowledge. In reality, Kat knew insecurity caused Sharon’s nervous tick.

After the interview, Kat met Sharon at a restaurant across the street.

“So, how’d it go?” Sharon greeted. “Were they as wowed as I was?”

Kat sat at her table. “It’s safe to say we’ll be having many more lunches together.”

Sharon beamed. “It’s going to be such fun having you around.”

The women visited about their favorite boutiques, exchanged beauty secrets, and chatted like old friends. Sharon was single and eager to marry Mr. Right, who Kat surmised was bald Brian even though Sharon and he had dated only once.

When finished, Sharon placed her napkin on her plate. “The Trio has one last interview at four. They’d be crazy not to hire you. But then again . . .” She rolled her eyes. “What did you make of them? Could you tell they’re secretive? Something’s going on I’m not privy to.”

“Vivian definitively has an air of entitlement,” Kat said. “Is this her family’s business?”

“Daddy’s still on the payroll,” Sharon whispered.

“James is a proud man. No wonder it’s not public knowledge. I’m surprised Daddy let James change the name.” Kat stroked her neck with one hand. “It’s too bad he’s been so consumed with creating a name for himself that he’s neglected his wife.” She raised her eyebrows.

“An affair?” Sharon leaned across the table. “When would Vivian find the time? She’s busier than James.”

“Busy with what? Or, should I say *whom*?” Kat smirked. “Who does she spend the most time with?”

Sharon tilted her head. “I don’t know.”

“When Vivian dropped her pen, who do you suppose picked it up?”

“Brian?”

Kat nodded.

Sharon’s eyebrows knit together. “She and Brian are—” With a tongue click, she stopped mid-sentence. Her neck turned a blotchy pink. “That sleazeball!” she said. “Right under my nose, and to think I almost—” She shook her head and composed herself. “Poor, James.”

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“I’m sure he’s grateful someone keeps Vivian occupied. Daddy’s shadow eclipsed any hope of their ever having a happy marriage.” The news was difficult for Kat to share, but it was better Sharon learn the truth about Brian sooner than later. What were friends for?

After paying the bill, Sharon stood to leave. “Thank you for your honesty. I’m sure I’ll be calling soon to offer you the job.” They parted company.

Not until two days later did Sharon call with the regretful news the Trio had hired someone else. She apologized without detail, other than giving an excuse for the delay that she’d been sick. Kat eked out a few syllables before saying goodbye. Why hadn’t Sharon offered an explanation? Wouldn’t a friend owe her that much? She could have suggested they have lunch at least.

When Gary came home, Kat was lying on the couch in her funeral dress with an empty box of animal crackers on her chest. “Hey, sweetie,” he said. “How’s my girl?” Kat stared into the empty box that once held the animals she had decapitated and devoured.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I keep going over and over,” she mumbled, “what happened. Who I read wrong. Why no one’s died yet—besides me.”

“But you’re not wearing red.” Gary’s smile went unreturned as he knelt beside the couch. “You didn’t get the job?” He brushed cracker crumbs off Kat’s chin. “Maybe you’re losing your powers.” His chuckling incited a glare from Kat. “Or maybe you can’t read people. Is it even right to try? Nobody’s perfect.” He cupped her face in his hands. “You aren’t your mother, and that’s a good thing—a wonderful thing. Stop looking for telltale signs and notice the obvious ones in front of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not getting the job could be a sign for us to start a family.”

She placed the empty box over her face. “Please, Gary, I’m too depressed to argue about having children.”

Gary lifted the box from her face. "I'd love a little girl who's just like her mommy." He kissed her forehead. "You'll be a great mom someday."

If only someone could guarantee their children would be like Gary. The possibility of having a child like her was too great a risk to take. Her gift was a curse she'd vowed never to pass along.

Sunday morning Kat awoke before Gary and tiptoed to the kitchen. After starting the coffee maker, she retrieved the newspaper. She checked the obituaries first. Still, no one she knew had died. Was she losing her powers? She laid out the classified section on the countertop and sat on a bar stool. Sipping coffee, she scanned the help-wanted section under professional. "Yes." She tapped her finger on the ad for a human resource director. She drew the page closer and mouthed each word in a slow, deliberate manner. She paused at the employer, 4-U Advertising, then tossed the paper aside.

How could that be? Lily would have called to let her know. Maybe she wanted to tell Kat last week but something had stopped her. Could Lily have gotten fired? No, that seemed too unlikely. Maybe she quit because she was pregnant. She hadn't looked pregnant. The scenarios wouldn't stop coming. She drew the paper close again and read it over and over as if it held the answer.

Perhaps they were hiring another human resource person. But then why hadn't Lily called to tell her? She replayed their last evening together, searching for clues in Lily's posture, expressions, mannerisms, and words. Had Lily always been so hard to read? Or was Gary right?

Kat squealed, remembering she had told Lily she'd just been hired. She picked up the phone and called Lily.

"Kat?" Lily sounded surprised. "I've been meaning to call you."

"About the opening where you work?"

"Where I used to work," she corrected. "It's been crazy with this new job and all. The owners are leaving on a month-long cruise next week to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They're so in

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love.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I meant to call. That’s why I invited you for drinks with my boss. To give you an inside edge if I got the job.”

“Oh, thanks.” Kat paused to process the information. “Did I make a good first impression?”

“You were great,” Lily said. “They need someone who can start immediately. I was shown the door on Tuesday when I told them I was going to work for a competitor.”

“Who’s your new employer?”

Lily cleared her throat. “Nystrom Advertising.”

Kat couldn’t speak.

“I didn’t know what to say,” Lily continued, “the other night, I mean. When you said . . . Well, I’d already interviewed, too. I was shocked when they offered me the job, but I couldn’t turn down the opportunity.”

“Congratulations,” Kat said. “I’m happy for you.”

After ending the call, Kat thrust her forearm across the countertop in a wide sweep. Sheets of newspaper whirled through the air and scattered to the floor. She leaned her back against the wall and her body slipped downward until her butt hit the floor. She pulled her knees to her chest and covered them with her nightshirt. With her head bowed, she closed her eyes.

How could she have been so wrong about everything: the black dress, Sharon, bald Brian, and the Nystroms? She truly couldn’t read people. Then there was no curse to pass on! But could she be a good mother? She bombed as a friend. Perhaps even as a wife. How had Gary put up with her? Drifting to sleep, she vowed to become a better person.

“What happened here?” Gary walked into the kitchen.

Kat opened her grateful eyes and stretched her arms toward him. He reached down and pulled her to her feet. She leaned into him, her arms draped around his neck. “How did I marry such a wonderful man like you?” she asked. “You’re the kindest, sweetest, gentlest, most loving person I’ve ever met.”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” he said, “but I like it.”

Kat took Gary’s hand, kissing him intermittently as she led him to their bedroom. “Tell me again I’m not like my mom.”

“You’re definitely not like your mom.” He pulled off his T-shirt.

“Then I don’t have any special abilities?” She threw back the ruffled comforter.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” He fell into bed with her.

“You really think I’d be a good mother?”

“Mm-hmm.” He kissed her passionately as the morning sun impregnated their room with hope.

Tomorrow, Kat thought, she’d call Lily and Sharon to apologize. Maybe she could learn to become a good friend before becoming a mother.

THE ASSASSIN

by Anna Lynch

Tara ducked as her opponent swung at her head, coming up under his arm with an elbow to his diaphragm, satisfaction flaring with the light of his grid. As he curled around his now empty lungs she struck out at the bright spot on the back of his neck, taking him out of the fight for good as she looked for her next target.

The alley was dark, but she could easily see the grids of the fighters around her. Two more bodyguards lay on the ground along with the one she had just felled, and Scad was making quick work of the last one. That left her with their assignment to take care of.

The gangly man in the fancy suit huddled into the corner of the dirty alley, looking more out of place than a basket of puppies in the Chamber. He clutched a knife and pointed it vaguely in her direction. Unconcerned with his feeble attempt at defense, she swung her leg in a lazy arc, knocking the blade aside and leaving him clutching his bruised hand. As she advanced on him she assessed his weaknesses, as she had been taught.

She could see a tangle in his grid over a weak knee. The fading over his heart meant that was weak as well. A rapid red pulse in his neck showed the speed of his blood pumping through the vulnerable artery there. That would be the best place to strike for a quick end, messy but efficient.

"Please," he begged as she stood over him, assessing her options, "I've done nothing wrong. I-I have a family. A wife, children, they need me." She could see tears in his eyes, the grid over his heart fading more as the fear weakened it further. It was strange, emotions never seemed to show on a grid. Perhaps that meant they came from something beyond her perception, like a soul. But animals have emotions. Does that mean they have souls as well?

“Ple-ease,” the man interrupted her musings, his voice cracking in the middle of the word. And then she looked at him. Looked not at his grid, but at his face, the lines around his eyes and mouth, the blue of his eyes behind the unshed tears, the wrinkles of fear in his forehead. This man is not evil, she thought, he does not hurt others or destroy lives. What am I doing? This is not a righteous kill. And for the first time in her life, she hesitated. The Matron had given her a task, and for the first time, she questioned.

“Tara!” Scad hissed, “What’s the hold-up? Quit playing and finish him already, we have to get out of here before the Watch shows up.”

Silent now, the man begged with his eyes. She hoped her own showed her remorse as she slashed down, precisely striking the red pulse at his throat. She barely needed to look; it felt like she had been doing this all her life. And she nearly had.

“Come on, fluff for brains,” Scad scolded, grabbing her arm and towing her out of the alley. He let go once they were on the street and she followed of her own volition. As they made their way back to the safehouse she came to a decision. She would kill no more innocents, no more weak, vulnerable people who were just unlucky enough to get on the Matron’s bad side. Her mind decided, she had only to tell the Matron.

* * *

Every time she set foot in the audience chamber was as nerve-racking as the first. This was no airy, ornate room like the nobles kept. The Chamber, as they called it, was underground, below the assassins’ rooms, and built to intimidate with fear rather than wealth. Made of dark stone, it was always cold, even in the height of summer. The ceiling was lower than expected, never letting visitors forget that they were underground. Shows lurked in corners and along the walls, broken by harsh, white magical lights that only made the shadows darker. Glyphs were carved into all the walls, moving like live things.

The novices were taught that the glyphs spelled out a prophecy. A prophecy that Tara herself was part of. In every generation would come one who could read the energies of the body like words on a page, and they would be the greatest of the assassins, ensuring the survival of the

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Guild throughout all of time. The language of the glyphs had been lost to time, but their message survived.

The Chamber was long, had it been narrower it would be more hallway than room, and at the end was the Chair. It was not a throne, for the Matron was not a ruler, but there was only one Chair. Made of the same dark stone as the room itself, the Chair was larger than any other Tara had ever seen, and yet it did not make the occupant look smaller. Quite the opposite, it presented them, drawing all eyes to whoever sat in the Chair. In it now sat the Matron.

An elderly woman who looked much like someone's friendly grandmother, the Matron was the oldest member of the Guild, rumor said she had killed any older than herself in order to secure her position, but her age was as much a disguise as any mask an actor might wear. Beneath the wrinkled skin lurked muscles like iron and reflexes that were honed like a blade. Nor had age weakened her senses, as many novices had learned to their detriment when holding whispered conversations in lessons taught by the Matron. Tara had been one of those novices, and her fear of the matron was still as stark as the scar that mistake had left.

Stepping out of memories and into the present, Tara held her chin high as she approached the Matron, bowing before the Chair and keeping her eyes down, as courtesy demanded.

"Ha!" exclaimed the old woman, her voice rough. "When you requested an audience I thought you had done something wrong, and your courtesy makes me certain! Your mission was completed; Scad gave me your report just this morning, so tell me girl, what have you done now?"

"I have made a decision, Matron." Tara strove to keep her voice steady, knowing the Matron would not be pleased by her decision. "I am done killing innocents, for you or anyone else. I will not fulfill even a single contract on an innocent victim from this day forward." Emboldened by a spike of courage, she raised her gaze to meet the Matron's eyes and added, "In fact, I will not fulfill any contract which I do not negotiate myself."

The Matron laughed, harsh and long. Tara forced her eyes to stay on the woman's face. She had hit a nerve and she knew it. The Matron had used this same tactic on kings and princes, merchants and businessmen, when they had the upper hand. And Tara had watched as she did so, amazed at the effect it had on the recipient. Now she understood, but she was determined to stand her ground, as the Matron herself had taught her. The Matron's face when she stopped laughing was more terrifying than the laughter had been.

"Foolish girl, you will do what I tell you, when I tell you. No more, no less." Tara felt her anger rising and her mind focusing on the Matron's grid, beginning to pinpoint weaknesses she could exploit.

Before she could even consider an attack, the old woman had her hand around Tara's throat, slamming her against the wall and holding her off the ground.

"Just because you are a Seer," she rasped, "do not think that you are any less expendable than any of the others. I made my first kill when your mother was in diapers. I had more kills than you do now before your father first lifted a woman's skirts. I have known other Seers, and they died as easily as every other living creature."

The Matron stepped back, dropping her hand and letting Tara drop to the floor. "You will complete the contracts I tell you to complete, and kill who I tell you to kill, or you will die," the old woman spat as Tara crouched, trying to get her breath back. "Is that understood?"

Tara eyed the Matron's knee, which was in front of her eyes. A pulsing tangle in the grid there told her of a weakness, likely caused by an old injury. Even a weak blow with the side of her hand would take it out, dropping the old woman to the floor and Tara's mercy. Before she could consider the consequences, she lashed out.

The Matron caught her wrist mid-swing. She squeezed, grinding the bones until Tara felt one give. She stared into Tara's face with cold, dead eyes. "Is that understood?" She asked again, this time in a whisper all the more terrifying for its uncharacteristic smoothness.

"Yes. Matron." Tara choked out, breath catching from the pain in her wrist. Apparently satisfied, the Matron dropped her wrist and

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walked out the door in the back of the Chamber, leaving Tara broken on the cold floor.

* * *

That was the last mission she had with Scad. The last she had with anyone other than Vanka, a woman nearly as old as the Matron. Vanka was one of the people who spread the rumors about the Matron killing everyone older than herself to secure her position, but she repeated them with pride and relish, rather than whispered fear and awe, as if she had done the deeds herself. And for as much as she toadied for the Matron, it was possible she had.

For all the Matron's bluster, Tara had not been sent on any more assignments involving innocents, or even any moral gray areas. Either the Matron truly was afraid of her, or she wanted to keep Tara around, at least for now. Not that working with Vanka was a treat. The woman enjoyed bloodshed far too much, and looked at Tara like she was lower than a bug.

Their current mission was to take out a warlord who had been terrorizing the local countryside. They had made it past the guards with more bloodshed than Tara preferred, thanks to Vanka's bloodthirsty nature, and were poised outside his bedchamber. Vanka cracked the door, keeping watch on the hall as Tara slipped inside, before following and closing the door again. Tara could hear their target snoring and Vanka positioned herself by the head of the bed, motioning for Tara to pull the blankets off.

Rolling her eyes, Vanka sometimes liked to play with her marks and Tara had quickly learned not to interfere, she yanked hard on the quilts, throwing them to the side where they wouldn't entangle her. A woman screamed and fell off the bed as Vanka stabbed, driving her giant knives through the warlord's arms and into the bed, pinning him to it. Still screaming, the woman scrambled away from the bed and into the corner near Tara.

"There's no time," she hissed at Vanka as the other assassin drew one of her smaller knives, about to start in on the struggling warlord. She had stuffed a wad of cloth into the man's mouth to keep him from

yelling, but someone was bound to have heard the woman. “Just finish him and let’s go before more guards arrive!”

Vanka shot Tara a murderous look, as if she had screwed up their information and somehow conjured the woman there to scream for guards, before turning back and slashing the warlord’s throat. Tara heard a cry of grief from the woman in the corner who lunged toward the bed, before shrinking back into her corner as Vanka’s gaze fell on her. Tara, knowing what Vanka would have in mind, put herself in the other assassin’s path as she stalked towards the woman.

“No.”

“Ugh, forget your crap about innocents, Seer,” Vanka never called Tara by name. “She’s a witness, she has to die.”

“I said no.” As she stared Vanka down, Tara realized that she was done with this life. This man was immoral, he was murderous, he had killed hundreds of innocent people, but when the life went out of his eyes and that woman, whatever she was to him, cried out in grief, Tara’s heart had cried out with her. No matter how bad the person, a life was a life, and she had no right to take that from others. She would not let Vanka hurt this innocent, and she would never kill for money again.

Vanka must have seen something in her eyes, because she stepped back, lowering her blade. “The Matron will hear of this.” Vanka sneered in a voice that promised pain.

“I’m done.” Tara said flatly, surprising even herself with the statement.

“What?” Vanka’s confusion was visible.

“I said I’m done. I’m done with you, the Matron, this life. I’m leaving the Guild and you can’t stop me.” Vanka’s confusion turned to rage and she leapt at Tara.

Tara stepped aside, barely avoiding the wild slash of Vanka’s blade. They fought for mere moments, but it felt like a lifetime. The woman from the bed scrambled out of the room, screaming for the guards, and moments later Tara had Vanka pinned where the woman had been huddled. Tara drew one of Vanka’s large knives from the assassin’s

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belt and thrust it through her hand, pinning her to the floor. Vanka only grunted at the pain. The Guild trained novices from the beginning to be silent in the face of pain, lest they attract unwanted attention.

Panting, Tara stepped back. It would take Vanka some time to work the knife free, and she knew the woman wouldn't rip her hand from the knife. An assassin's hands were her greatest weapons and not to be damaged for anything less than to save one's own life.

"The Matron will kill you for this." Vanka ground between clenched teeth. "I will kill you for this."

"Tell the Matron I am leaving." Tara said, her voice even as she spoke from the well of calmness she suddenly found at her center. "I will not betray the Guild, but anyone she sends after me will not return."

"What will you do, little girl?" Vanka snarled at her back as Tara left the room. "Your gift must be used, and it is only good for killing." The words echoed in her ears as Tara left the compound, neatly evading the guards who rushed towards the dead warlord and his pinned assassin. What would she do?

* * *

The light was dim, but she had no trouble seeing the grid of the man in front of her. Focusing, she found a tangle in the grid, watching it pulse with pain. She struck, pressing hard until the grid flared and the man groaned in pain. The tangle flew apart, the pain pulses following the threads of his grid as she traced them, before fading away. She followed a thread to the next tangle, attacking this one as well. Another grunt, quieter this time, and fewer ripples spreading from the broken tangle.

She continued for an hour, finding tangles and tracing the man's grid. The grunts and groans of pain slackened off as she worked, eventually giving way to silence. Finally she was finished and left the room, the man lying naked, covered in a sheet, on the table. This was her new life; she had found a way to use her gift that brought her joy, every day.

The man emerged from the room, fully clothed. “I don’t know how you do it Tara.” he said jovially, “It’s like you can see the knots in my muscles and go straight for them.”

She smiled knowingly. “Years of practice and good training, that’s all.” He promised to recommend her to his friends, as if she had time for more clients, and left with a spring in his step.

Ten years had passed, and she had not seen or heard from the Matron. At first she had been afraid, but now she was sure that the old woman had let her go. She had her own massage parlor and apprentices of her own. She used her gift every day. Tara was making her own way in the world, making her own choices, and using her gift. And she was content.

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A MURDER OF CROWS

by Dan McKay

Gary barreled down the hall at the community college. He glanced at the time as he muted his cell phone: 6:55 p.m. Technically in time for class but late for prep-time. So much for *that* New Year's resolution.

A European accent carried down the hall. "*Ja*, American girls are quite nice. They love European men. I get away with anything here. I cannot believe how stupid and blind American men are." Gary stepped closer. He'd seen him before, a guy called Jagger. "Oh, no, Saint Valentine's here is different. Very much... what is English word, maybe cheesy."

Jagger turned and eyed Gary. "*Ja, ja, dummkopf.*" He held his phone behind his back. "Excuse me, this is private call."

Gary put his hands on his hips. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I do not want troubles." His smile said otherwise.

Mr. Fisher walked out of the classroom with a curious look. "Is everything okay here, boys?"

"*Ja*, is good." Jagger entered the classroom. Mr. Fisher stared at Gary, who shrugged and held up his empty palms. He wondered what his therapist would have suggested. So far, nothing seemed to apply in the real world.

The other students stood at easels and squeezed paint from tubes onto their palette boards. Gary looked for Stephanie. Last week she had left while he discussed his project with Mr. Fisher and he missed the chance to ask for her phone number.

He retrieved his blank canvas, taut and fresh. Of the three open easels, Gary picked the one directly across from Stephanie. Jagger had taken an easel next to her. Gary took some calming breaths. From therapy, he had learned frustrations come from wanting to control

something he couldn't. Like his ex-girlfriend, Laurie. Or the current job market.

Someone walked up beside him—a lady in an oversized floral blouse and neon pink leggings. Her earrings hung nearly to her shoulders and swung wildly as her head moved. “Hi, there! We haven’t met. My name’s BethAnne. That’s all one name, with a capital *a* in the middle and an *e* at the end. BethAnne.”

“I’m Gary.”

“Pleased to meet you, Gary. When I meet someone new, I always repeat their name so I remember it.”

Gary smiled and opened his backpack. He dropped his keys into an inside pocket, distracted by Jagger and Stephanie talking about their projects. He set up his paints and prepared his palette board while keeping an eye on Stephanie. He shuddered as he relived last week’s nervous feelings about being out of her league. She probably had a serious boyfriend but since she hadn’t mentioned anyone, he’d have to ask to find out. Getting back into the dating world was tough.

He should have tried harder with Laurie. She had been right to ask for better behavior from him. His reaction had been spiteful. That bridge had burned with a sickening finality. But with some counseling, he could try to cope.

BethAnne tapped his shoulder. “What are you painting, Gary?”

“Well, BethAnne, it’s like this.” He pointed at his canvas. “A rural scene with a flock of crows flying over a cornfield, and a scarecrow, all seen from the point of view of one of the crows.”

“It’s a murder, Gary.”

“Excuse me?”

“A murder. A flock of crows is a murder.” She crossed her arms and nodded.

“I didn’t know that.”

“I know lots of weird things like that, Gary.” She glanced at her blank canvas and back to Gary.

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“Oh. What are you painting?”

“Well, Gary, I decided to paint my favorite character from Jersey Shore. Snooki. She’s such a doll. Did you see what she did last week?”

“No, sorry, I’ve never watched it.”

“Oh Gary, you *have* to watch Jersey Shore! It’s the best TV show ever.”

Mr. Fisher walked to the front. “Good evening and welcome back. Tonight we’re going to start our projects. Now that you’ve picked a subject, you should have a photograph or sketch to work from.” He approached the semi-circle of easels, writing notes in his gradebook.

Gary groaned. He had forgotten to find pictures of crows and rural landscapes. He had planned to wing it but Mr. Fisher had advised against that. Another old habit to break—procrastination.

BethAnne pulled out a framed eight-by-ten glossy picture, autographed: *BethAnne, a true friend who would share her last pickle. Keep it real, Snooki.* She tapped the glass with a long fingernail. “Isn’t she just adorable, Gary?”

Gary raised his eyebrows. “Wow, that’s quite the dress she’s wearing!”

“If you got it, flaunt it, baby!” She perched the picture above her canvas, leaning it against the easel.

Gary picked up his sketch pad and roughed out his idea. Farm buildings, a shelterbelt, six crows, and a scarecrow. He labeled the crows one through six. A wing in the foreground belonged to the seventh crow. The sketch didn’t match the vision in his head. Frustrated, he started erasing.

Mr. Fisher walked up. “I see you’re using a sketch. That’s a good idea. What was your subject again?”

“A crow’s-eye view of a rural landscape. With a cornfield, farm buildings, and a scarecrow.”

“Oh yes, I remember. That’s quite ambitious for someone at this level. I’d recommend scaling back and simplifying. Get rid of some

crows, have fewer buildings, and move the perspective back to keep it simple. I don't think the scarecrow fits. But it's your project—you decide."

Mr. Fisher turned to BethAnne. "And how about you, Beth? Sorry, *BethAnne*."

"Mr. Fisher, I'm painting Snooki."

"Snoopy?"

"No, Snooki, from Jersey Shore."

"That show with the guys who wear orange tanner stuff, right?"

"It looks orange because of TV. In real life it's a healthy glow." BethAnne pointed to the photo. "Here's her picture."

Mr. Fisher blinked. "I see. Okay, I'd love to see your color work with this, especially the contrasts between the background, her dress, and her, uh, bosom." He moved on.

Gary returned to his sketch. He drew the scarecrow with a hat and a plaid shirt. The scarecrow had more detail than the rest of the sketch. He stepped back to take it all in.

The top of the silo looked like a UFO flying over the field. A crow obscured the bottom of the farm's buildings. Since it was one of the closer crows, it was large in comparison, and moving it affected the position of the others. He redrew it so only the far wing and tail appeared on the canvas. He'd have to move the scarecrow to the other side of crow number seven, obscuring most of it. While this fixed that problem, it was not the original vision he had. He needed to adapt and roll with the punches. Rigidness breeds frustration, another thing he'd learned in therapy.

Gary watched Stephanie concentrate on her painting. He felt someone looking at him and caught Jagger's eye. Jagger looked from Gary to Stephanie and back. He raised his eyebrows and smiled. Jagger said something to Stephanie and she grinned at him.

Gary chastised himself for being late. Thanks to that bad habit, he had to listen to BethAnne humming pop songs instead of chatting with Stephanie. He went back to his sketch. The perspective of the tree row

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was wrong and he didn't know how to fix it. Refusing to disappear into the horizon, the trees snaked upward, unnaturally large. He aligned a pencil with the vanishing point. The trees needed to be repositioned along with three crows.

Mr. Fisher walked back to the front of the classroom. "One last thing before I leave you to your projects. Since this is an intermediate class, you should already know the fundamentals. I'm going to deduct for mistakes in layout, perspective, color scheme, and what-not. If you have questions, now's the time to ask."

Gary arranged lines on his canvas, laying out the seventh crow's wing in the foreground. He moved the trees further back which emphasized the cornfield. He had only labeled the cornfield in his sketch. Now he saw it would have the same perspective issues as the tree row, but for every row of corn. Having two vanishing points made the layout more complicated. Even the scarecrow was affected. The closest arm needed to be larger.

Jagger stood by Stephanie's easel. They pointed and made gestures at her canvas. Her shoulders snapped up as she suppressed a laugh. Eyes sparkling, she beamed at him. They moved to his canvas. Last week, when she stood next to Gary, she had only glanced impassively at his work.

"Uh oh, Gary. The layout for the trees doesn't match the corn." BethAnne pointed at his canvas.

He took a deep breath. "Yeah, I'm struggling with this. It's going to take some time for me to figure it out."

"What do you think of my color scheme, Gary?"

"Is it supposed to match the picture?"

"No, I want to liven it up with bolder contrasts. Imagine that, Gary—me improving Snooki!"

"I see. Yeah, I think those colors look okay. Listen, I'm probably in over my head here. I want to paint, but I don't understand all of the concepts. I thought it would be easier than this."

“That’s how I felt when I first started, Gary. You should have seen my first attempts. They were truly awful!” Her earrings jangled. “Once you get the fundamentals, it gets easier. How did you do in beginner’s class?”

“This is my first class. I thought beginner’s class would be too easy.”

“In my opinion, Gary, you should drop out of this class and sign up for a beginner level.”

Gary counted to ten and concentrated on breathing. He forced a smile at BethAnne and turned back to his canvas. He heard a giggle and looked towards Stephanie. She and Jagger quickly looked back to their canvases. His face felt hot. He counted to ten again, taking deep breaths with each number. Jagger sneaked a peek his direction and then casually glanced around the room. He glanced sidelong at Stephanie, and she stifled a giggle.

Gary examined his progress. The trees were wrong, the corn was wrong, the crows were wrong, and the scarecrow was wrong. He went back to his sketchpad and saw they were wrong there, too. The perspectives were skewed and amateurish. He pulled his painting fundamentals book from his backpack and propped it on the easel. There was an entire chapter on perspectives and vanishing points. The illustrations in the book made it look easy. He pulled out a plastic ruler and checked his canvas. Nearly everything needed to move. He started erasing crows and considered using five instead of seven. Getting rid of the scarecrow would help, too, although he wanted to keep it.

BethAnne’s face appeared next to his canvas, her eyes downcast. “Gary, I need to apologize. I was out of line suggesting that you drop out. I’m sorry.” Her face brightened. “You know, I used to pose—” She mimed the motions of untying a sash and dropping a robe. She stood with her back arched, one hand behind her neck and the other on her hip. “I was told full-figured gals make the best models. I’d be willing to pose for you, Gary. Just you and me.”

Gary heard a high-pitched squeak and turned. Stephanie ducked behind her canvas. Her face glowed red and she clamped her hand over her mouth. Her knees shook as her feet danced. Mr. Fisher looked up from his book and scanned the room. Jagger stared intently at his

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canvas, slowly moving his paintbrush. The corner of his mouth twitched, and he moved his free hand to his face.

Gary looked at BethAnne. She glanced at his hands with a worried look on her face. He had snapped his pencil in two. "I'm really struggling here. I'm losing control. Painting is supposed to help me calm down and focus. Yet another useless suggestion from my therapist."

BethAnne put her hand on his shoulder. "Is there anything I can do to help, Gary?"

Mr. Fisher cleared his throat. "We're about to the end of class time. You have about five minutes to pack up before the next class comes in."

Gary went back to erasing the last crow, using the broken pencil instead of his eraser. He stared at the torn spot in his canvas. The rest of the class continued packing up their gear.

Stephanie's voice snapped him out of his trance. "Thanks, I'd love to try that restaurant." She walked past looking straight ahead. Jagger followed behind, carrying his bag, her bags, and both canvases. He smirked at Gary and waggled his eyebrows as Stephanie went out the door.

Gary launched himself forward and knocked Jagger to the floor. The canvases broke with a loud crack. BethAnne screamed. Jagger leapt to his feet and crouched in a fighting stance.

"Hey! You two knock it off!" Mr. Fisher bellowed.

BethAnne grabbed Gary's shirttail. He flung her arm away and turned back to see Jagger's fist just before it slammed into his nose. Jagger's other fist hit his cheek. Gary's head snapped back and he crashed into BethAnne's easel before landing on the floor. The framed picture of Snooki landed on his forehead, shattering the glass. Blood ran into his eyes while more blood from his nose flowed onto his T-shirt. Jagger darted out the door. Stephanie came back and glared as she retrieved her bags.

BethAnne screamed again and straddled Gary's chest. "You killed her! You killed Snooki!" She pummeled him with her fists. He made a

weak attempt to sit up and fell back to the floor. BethAnne stopped hitting him and sobbed. The room spun and everything went black.

“Ma’am, please get off him.”

Gary opened his eyes to see Mr. Fisher and two security guards towering over him. The guards helped him to his feet. “C’mon, let’s go cool off.” One guard kept his hand on Gary’s shoulder while the other talked to BethAnne.

“It’s all my fault,” she sobbed. “I upset him by suggesting he drop out of class.”

“I don’t care,” said Mr. Fisher, “as long as I never see him again. Twenty-five years of teaching and I’ve never seen anything like *that* happen.”

Outside, Gary leaned against the building and tried to clear his head. BethAnne came out with her canvas, duffel bag, and his backpack. “Oh Gary, you poor thing!” She dabbed at his head with a tissue. “Here, let me take you home.”

She pulled him along by his wrist as he staggered to her car, a late model Cadillac. He slid onto a furry, pink seat cover. BethAnne closed the trunk and got into the car. She handed him a fresh tissue. “It’s your lucky day, Gary. There’s a new episode of Jersey Shore tonight.”

As Gary’s consciousness faded, he saw his original idea, the crows positioned perfectly over a field. A scarecrow overlooked the cornfield with neatly arranged rows. The tree row vanished properly at the horizon. The scarecrow lifted its head and spoke, “Capital *a* in the middle and an *e* at the end. BethAnne.”

* * *

Gary woke in an unfamiliar place with a dull headache. His whole face hurt, especially his nose and left cheekbone. The lights were dim. His head rested on a soft pillow with a delicate floral scent. When he tried to sit up, the bed moved. A waterbed! Who had a waterbed anymore?

As his head cleared, he heard someone humming and the sound of running water. Her voice sounded vaguely familiar. He slid to the

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padded sideboard and used the rocking motion of the bed to boost himself up. The bedroom definitely looked like a woman's. Candles lined the headboard and dresser. Bright decorative pillows on the bed. His backpack leaned against a chair with his jacket folded neatly on top. Light seeped out from a door at the back of the bedroom.

He walked around the bed towards the door. Through the opening he saw a mirror. Someone stood in the shower. He saw her silhouette reflected in the mirror, through a translucent shower curtain. The water stopped and her hand appeared.

"Hello?" Gary called out.

"Oh, I almost forgot about you, Gary! Excuse me while I get my robe."

The curtain slid open and Gary turned away. "I'll just stand out here while you get dressed."

"How's your head, Gary?"

"It's throbbing. I can't remember what happened."

"Do you remember art class with Mr. Fisher?"

"Yeah, I remember that. I had problems with my painting. Too many crows or something."

BethAnne's voice came closer. "You don't have to worry about that class anymore."

"Why? What happened?"

"You were fighting with that European guy. He was kicked out, too. Is my robe out there, Gary?"

"Here it is, on the door knob." Gary reached in, holding the robe on one finger. "That European guy—Jagger?"

Her hand lingered on his. "I guess that's his name. I don't know him."

Gary paused. "BethAnne?"

"Yes?"

It came back to him: the frustration with the layout, Stephanie flirting with Jagger, BethAnne, and the broken pencil. “Did Jagger hit me?”

“Yeah, I’d say so, Gary. You went down pretty hard.”

“Did I get a piece of him?”

“I don’t think so, Gary. It was kind of a sucker punch.”

“That bastard!” Gary swung his fist at the door but caught himself and pulled back. His knuckles tapped the door and it swung open. “I can’t believe Stephanie was flirting with him.”

“Forget about her. She’s not worth your time.” BethAnne stepped out of the bathroom. In her robe, she looked less brassy, more vulnerable. She touched his cheek. “You can clean up in there. Take a shower. You’ll feel better.” She steered him towards the bathroom by the elbow.

Gary wanted to resist. This was moving way too fast.

“Are you hungry, Gary? How about a beer?”

“I want a beer so bad I could cry. My therapist says I shouldn’t drink. I haven’t had a beer in three weeks.”

“Can I ask what the therapy is for, Gary?”

“Anger management, mild depression, loss of focus. I talk to her about stuff like that.”

“How’s that going?”

Gary shrugged. “Okay, I guess. She said the changes would happen slowly.”

In the bathroom, Gary inspected his face in the mirror. Dried blood mixed with stubble. He touched the bruise on his cheek. He dabbed some cold water on his forehead. The gash wasn’t as bad as it had looked at first. He hung his clothes on a towel hook. He wanted to close the door but that felt unnecessary. Why had BethAnne left it open? The shower smelled like flowers. All of the hair product bottles were pink. Even the bar of soap was pink.

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After showering, Gary stood at the mirror with a towel wrapped around his waist. A can of woman's shaving cream and a pink razor sat on the sink.

Laurie used to complain about his stubble. After a while, he'd shaved less frequently out of spite. She, in turn, stopped being spontaneous with her kisses. Gary became frustrated and the cycle continued. He thought about how he could have reacted differently. Maybe the anger management techniques would have helped.

He squirted some shave cream in his hand and picked up the razor. BethAnne appeared in the doorway. "Can I watch you shave, Gary? I love to watch the transformation from stubbly to smooth."

Laurie used to watch him shave, back when they were in love. "Um, I guess I wasn't expecting an audience." He looked over his shoulder to where he had hung his clothes—they were gone.

"Oh, Gary, I should tell you—I put your clothes in the washer. There was blood on your shirt. While I was at it, your jeans and boxer shorts, too. Blood stains come out better if they're washed right away in cold."

Gary reached down and cinched the towel tighter. "You know, BethAnne, we hardly know each other. I just woke up in your place after getting beat up. I'm standing in your bathroom wearing a pink towel and shaving with the razor you use on your legs. Don't you think this is kind of—I don't know—weird?"

BethAnne paused. "I know what you're saying, Gary. I really do. Whenever I'm around a guy I find attractive, I start doing funny things. He gets the heebie-jeebies and then he runs away. I sense you're getting the heebie-jeebies, Gary."

Gary sighed. "Yeah, I'm feeling sort of iffy. I just broke up with someone, not very long ago. Totally my fault which makes me self-conscious about my behavior. But you're different from the girls I'm used to, BethAnne, and I don't know how that works for me."

BethAnne stared at Gary. Her lip quivered.

"See? There I go again." Gary winced. "Did I say something wrong?"

“It depends on what you meant by *different*, Gary.”

“I didn’t mean anything bad.” He tried his best innocent grin. “Honestly.”

BethAnne managed a weak smile. “Okay, I believe you. Would you feel better if I didn’t watch?”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll shut up and shave.” Her razor was different than his, bigger with an angled handle. After finishing, he rinsed the razor and set it on the sink. “You wouldn’t have any aftershave, would you?”

“Only for women.” She winked. “It might be illegal for you to use, Gary.”

“I’ll take my chances.” He washed the last bits of shaving cream from his face. “What am I going to wear?”

“I have a cute robe for you. It’s silk.”

Gary stared at it. “If anyone sees me in that, they’ll take away my man-card.”

BethAnne looked at the bathroom clock. “Fifteen minutes to Jersey Shore. I forgot—beer or no beer?”

“Yeah, I’ll have a beer. Why not? I’m standing in a strange apartment—”

“It’s a condo, Gary.”

“—uh, a condo deciding between wearing a towel or a silk robe. I just got beat up by some foreign guy, kicked out of art class, and rescued by a beautiful woman—”

“Flattery! I like it, Gary.”

“So why the hell not have a beer? Besides, I need some man-cred.” He pointed. “What color would you call that robe?”

“It’s floral. Think of it as a Hawaiian shirt, Gary.”

“Okay. If anyone asks, it’s a Hawaiian shirt.”

“I’m going to order pizza from an Italian place I like. Would you like the house special?”

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“Sounds good. I’ll eat almost anything on pizza. Nothing weird like anchovies or bleu cheese.”

BethAnne hung the robe on the door knob. “I’ll be out here in the living room.”

The robe fit around his chest but barely reached mid-thigh. He glanced around the bedroom. An oil painting of a nude hung on the wall. He walked over and studied it. There was something alluring the way she peeked over her shoulder. Light fell across her back creating delicate shadows. The perspective was perfect. Her coy expression and eyes followed him as he moved his head. It was inscribed at the bottom, “To my favorite model, BethAnne.” The artist signed the painting in an illegible scrawl and an ego-laden flourish.

There were no photographs on the nightstands or dressers. He opened the drawer in the nightstand by the bed. There were a couple of ladies’ watches, a lace sachet, a pink pen, and a small diary. He glanced toward the door. The sounds of the TV came from the living room. He picked up the diary and flipped it open. Cursive writing in a neat feminine style filled the pages.

Lunch at the deli. I must have been wearing my “single on Valentine’s Day” face because the nice old man behind the counter gave me my lunch for free.

He felt a pang of guilt. BethAnne called from the living room. “Is that robe going to work for you, Gary?”

He carefully slid the drawer shut. “It’s kind of short but it’ll work.” He walked into the living room holding the robe in place over his thighs. A large flat screen TV seemed out of place with the feminine décor.

“Nice shirt, Gary. Hawaiian, isn’t it?” She motioned to a beer on the coffee table. She had one, too. “I ordered us a pizza. Come sit over here and watch the best show on TV.”

Gary eased onto the couch. He stretched for his beer. The robe slipped off his legs and he pulled it back.

BethAnne leaned closer. “Mmmm, you smell good, Gary. I won’t tell anyone about the aftershave.”

“Thanks.” He set his beer on the coffee table. “BethAnne, what do you see happening tonight?”

“I thought we’d watch Jersey Shore, drink some beer, eat some pizza, and see where it takes us. Do you have to go to work in the morning? Because your car is still at the school.”

“I haven’t been called, so I have the day off. Gives me some time in case my junky car won’t start. Half the time I end up taking the bus to work.”

“Where do you work, Gary?”

“I’m on-call at MidState Assembly. They call when there’s extra work but it’s been really slow lately. I’d deliver pizzas but I’d need a better car.” He shook his head. “Here’s your pizza, sir. Instead of a tip, would you mind jump-starting my car?”

BethAnne laughed and clapped her hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry to laugh, Gary.”

“It’s okay. I’m trying a new outlook on life. Positivity in the face of reality.”

A theme song started and BethAnne brightened. “Oh, here we go,” she said in a sing-song voice. “I’m recording it, too.” She hummed along with the song, head bobbing back and forth.

Gary watched the show as BethAnne pointed out each character. The show was fairly close to what he expected. “I don’t know what it is about it, Gary, but Jersey Shore makes me giddy. It puts me in *such* a mood.”

Gary tried to think. “Those guys are something else.”

BethAnne beamed. “Aren’t they? I love them.”

A panel on the wall buzzed. BethAnne jumped up and pressed a button. A tinny voice came through the speaker. “*Pizza for apartment four.*”

BethAnne made a face. “It’s a condo, not an apartment.”

“*Excuse me?*”

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“Press one-one-two-three on the keypad.” She turned to Gary. “The door code is printed on the receipt under the address but they never look.”

Gary hung back while BethAnne answered the door. Some of his friends delivered pizza, and he didn’t want to be seen. She disappeared for a while and came back with two plates and a stack of napkins. “I put your clothes in the dryer. The blood came out fine. Cold water for blood stains, Gary.”

The pizza aroma reminded him how hungry he was. He drank two more beers with it. It had been a long time since a couple of beers had felt this good. BethAnne pointed out the door code on the receipt taped to the pizza box before she brought it to the kitchen. She came back with a laundry basket and set it on the floor. She dimmed the lights and snuggled next to Gary on the couch. “Do you like old movies, Gary?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t watched very many.”

BethAnne turned the TV down to a soft volume. “I’ve seen this one before. It’s pretty good but a little slow. Too bad it’s half over.” She pulled a blanket over both of them. He leaned his head towards her. The kiss felt natural, like it was meant to happen. The black-and-white movie played in the background. Gary fell into the moment.

He woke on a waterbed for the second time in twenty-four hours. It took a minute to replay in his head how he’d gotten there. BethAnne lay curled up beside him, her skin warm. The mattress sloshed as he moved to the edge. If he sat up, it would probably wake her. He slid out head first until his hands touched the carpet.

He carried his backpack and jacket to the living room. Their robes laid tangled on the couch. Gary found his clothes in the laundry basket and dressed in the dark. The front door creaked as he opened it. Standing in the hallway, he reached inside and twisted the lock on the doorknob. No going back now.

Outside on the street, the clouds glowed red. He flipped his jacket collar up against the morning chill and walked to the bus stop on the corner. The first bus would come in twenty minutes. He sat on the bench and pulled the silk robe from his backpack. It smelled like BethAnne.

An unseen crow scolded him.

* * *

Gary stood on the sidewalk outside a storefront. He'd just had yet another interview where it was obvious they were hurrying him along to get to the next person. Over a hundred applicants for three jobs. He noticed his paperwork went onto the larger pile on the interviewer's desk. Not a good sign.

He looked through the window at a TV inside the store. A weatherman pointed at a map and then to the lake north of the city. A few people gathered to watch the forecast. Traffic roared behind him. Bullet points showed the forecast at the bottom of the screen, along with a shivering cartoon snowman.

The weatherman turned and locked eyes with Gary. "I know you looked in my diary, Gary."

He stepped back wincing, and shook his head. "How did you do that?" He ran to the bus stop, pulling his hat down to keep the wind out of his ears.

A bus pulled up to the curb and he got on. He sat in the middle, in the first row after the step-up. Familiar landmarks zoomed by as the bus continued along its route. Gary squirmed, feeling as if someone was watching him. He glanced at the other passengers. No one paid any attention to him. He looked up. The driver stared at him in the large mirror above the windshield. "I want my robe back, Gary."

He grabbed his backpack and stood. The bus lurched over the rough streets. Gary fell against the safety bar connecting the front of his seat to the roof. "Pull the cord if you want to exit the bus," the driver called over his shoulder. He returned to his seat, aware other passengers were staring at him as if sizing-up a potential threat. Some scrutinized his backpack, their eyes darting to the driver and back. Gary smiled and tried to act nonchalant. He stretched and pulled the cord. A bell sounded and the bus slowed to a stop. He walked to the front, feeling the eyes of the other passengers on his back.

The wind blew his coat open as he watched the bus pull away. An old man stared at him out the back bus window. The old man's lips

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moved. In his head, Gary heard, “You need to call and apologize.” The bus drove off. What had his therapist said about guilt? Something about his subconscious self?

He walked to a department store with a display of mannequins wearing the latest spring fashions. An artsy sepia poster caught his attention. On it, a lady clutched a bottle of perfume to her chest while crows flew past a forest in the background. The perspective matched what he had tried to paint. He walked into the store, leaving the wind and street noise outside. A clerk stood by a cash register, staring vacantly over his head.

Gary walked to the counter. “Excuse me, ma’am? I’d like to buy some perfume.”

The lady smiled at him. “Of course. Is this a gift?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He noticed her nametag—Penelope.

“What’s the occasion? A birthday or anniversary, perhaps?”

He took a deep breath. “Well, I sort of need to apologize. Or maybe not. I don’t really know. Something happened but she probably thinks about it differently than I do.”

Penelope furrowed her brow. “Okay, let’s take a different approach. Which perfume does she wear?”

“Something floral, I guess. Pretty and lady-like.”

“Can you narrow it down?”

Gary opened his backpack and pulled out her robe. “This smells like BethAnne.” He handed it to Penelope who took it with some trepidation.

She waved her hand over the fabric, toward her face. “Just a minute, please.” She walked to the end of the booth and motioned another sales lady over. They talked quietly and the other lady held the silky robe to her face. Penelope came back and set it on the counter. “It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, I understand. I couldn’t guess anything just by smelling it.”

“That’s the name of the perfume she wears—‘It’s Complicated’. It’s for the empowered yet feminine and delicate lady.” She reached under the counter, brought out a sample spray bottle, and spritzed a paper card. “Is that the right one?”

Gary held the card to his nose. “That’s it!”

It cost more than a couple of monthly bus passes, but it felt like the right thing to do. He dropped the robe and the perfume into his backpack.

It was dark when Gary got off the bus. Cold air seeped down his neck as he turned to get his bearings. He pushed his tired legs and hunched his shoulders against the cold. It was a gamble. She could be angry. He did leave without waking her, as if he were ashamed. The markings on the buildings dissolved in the gloom. He walked along, looking for a landmark. The sidewalk ended at a softball field. Gary crossed the road and came back on the other side.

One of the buildings seemed familiar. “This has to be it,” he muttered and walked into the entryway. He read the names on the mailboxes, found “B.A. Martz” for unit four, and pressed the buzzer. No answer. He waited and buzzed it again. Nothing. A keypad caught his eye. What was the code? He tried a couple of guesses before the latch clicked.

Gary walked down the hallway to the door with a brass “4”. He knocked and waited. He tried the knob—the door opened. He glanced around the hallway and walked in. “Hello? BethAnne?” He checked the kitchen and then looked in the bedroom. The bathroom door stood open. He called her name again.

A gust of wind whistled against the window. He set his backpack on the floor, took out the robe, and hung it over the back of a chair. The perfume went on her nightstand. He opened the drawer and found her diary. A pink ribbon marked the current page. He stretched out on the waterbed and read.

Why is it so hard? I liked Gary. He left without saying goodbye. Is it me or was it him?

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My favorite robe is missing. I think Gary took it. Do I dare hope he'll be back? Probably not, they never come back.

Gary replaced the diary and lay back, listening to the wind. He pulled the comforter over himself and inhaled BethAnne's fragrance. The bed rolled gently, head to foot, rocking him to sleep.

PIPESTONE

by Nolan Schmidt

The fall was on its way when they came. Leaves and grass began to change from green to yellow and orange. Mother and I were harvesting the maize, our winter stockpile, when we saw horses approaching from the east. Aboard those steeds were blue uniforms and white faces. We had encountered the white man before, but only in passing as they made their way west by order of their “President”. I assumed this President was one the gods they worshipped. Yet, we had gone unbothered by anyone since then.

It was a hot early fall day, the sun beaming down with no cloud cover. Seeing those men in their thick navy jackets and pants made me think of the buffalo. With their heavy hides they clamored for shade in the warm summer sun. I only hoped these white men would be gracious and kind to us, like the buffalo have been. As I reflect on it now, that was a terribly misguided comparison.

A haggard face full of grit and perspiration led the white men’s troop. He was wide in the waist, but had a very stern face. The brown mustache growing above his upper lip had descended down past his mouth. Nine other soldiers, all donning grizzled demeanors, accompanied him. They came closer and closer to Mother and I as we placed the ears of corn into our basket. Mother stopped me from picking more as they came within shouting distance. We gazed upon them as they heeled their horses right in front of our baskets full of the summer’s product.

They finally reached Mother and I. Still sitting aboard his horse, the man with the mustache removed his tethered cap. He spoke swiftly and sternly to Mother.

“I seek a conversation with the Chief of your tribe. Chief Running Bear, I believe,” he said.

Mother did not speak his language fluently, but she was able to make out a somewhat coherent sentence.

“Me, Blue Cloud. This, my son, Jumping Wolf,” she replied.

“Ma’am. I am looking for Chief Running Bear,” he said again, announcing it even more than before.

Again, Mother responded with the same answer, not understanding the white man’s request in full. This frustrated the white man, and he hopped off his horse and walked towards Mother and I. He stepped on whatever was in his path, including a few ears of our corn. The utter lack of respect angered me, and I scowled at the man. He simply looked at me and gave me a smile with his yellow and brown teeth. Then, he turned his attention back to Mother, coming face to face with her. Still, Mother showed no fear, standing tall and staring the man in the eyes.

Now, the white man pointed further West, where our village could be seen. Mother understood what the man wanted now, to be taken there. Just in case she resisted, the white man had his soldiers point their weapons at us. This threat was short-lived as Mother gripped my hand with great force and we began walking back home. We left the ears of corn behind.

* * *

Father stood on the outskirts of our village, arms crossed over one another. He was always observing it seemed. This particular instance saw him focusing on the white men riding their horses behind Mother and me. Not only was he ready to act if they threatened harm upon us, but he also seemed perplexed by the situation. Wondering why these foreign men have come to our land, and more importantly, what they wanted. As soon as we reached Father, he pulled me close to his chest in an embrace as I began to weep in fear. Mother was side by side with Father, looking at the mustached man and his band of interlopers.

“You are Mr. Chief Running Bear, I presume?” the white man said.

Father stared blankly at the man, almost looking straight through him. I knew Father knew their language well, he had even taught me some words. He had been taught by the kind troop of white men who had stayed near our village for a number of weeks. In that span, Father

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picked up on the common words and nuances of their lexicon. He must have been a fast learner. Still, he looked at the current white man as if he did not understand.

“Ugh, you hard of hearing there friend?” he asked Father.

No answer from Father, the blank stare continued.

“I said, you must be Mr. Chief Running Bear,” the white man said.

Father took a deep breath, looked at my mother, then at me.

“Yes, I am Chief Running Bear,” he said. “Who are you and why do you come to my land?”

“Well, finally I get an answer out of you. I am Colonel Richard J. Perkins, and we have been sent here by order of the President.”

“We do not share the same leader as you.”

“I’d beg to differ,” Perkins said. “The President rules this here land you stand on, and I’d reckon he dictates what you can and cannot do.”

“I believe that is your opinion, sir. But you have not answered why you are here.”

“We’re actually here on a goodwill mission. The President wants a report on the people that live out in these parts, and he sent us to meet and greet you, Mr. Chief Running Bear.”

The tension seemed to lighten a bit after Colonel Perkins told my Father of the goodwill mission he and his fellow officers had been sent on. Colonel Perkins claimed that our tribe lives in what is called the “Dakota Territory”. Apparently, their President had not discovered our part of the Earth yet, and he was eager to know more. Father invited Colonel Perkins and his men into the village for a celebration, like we had when the other white men arrived. Mother and I went and retrieved our ears of corn we had left behind. We assumed we would need it for the evening’s feast.

* * *

Our tribe orchestrated a tremendous celebration for our visitors. We had pemmican to hold them over until the raw buffalo meat was fully cooked. The corn Mother and I had picked earlier in the day now lay

on stakes above the fire. Every now and then, Mother or Grandmother would turn the maize around to evenly cook it. By the time of the feast, we had enough corn and buffalo meat to feed three tribes and our guests!

The white men ate like savages. No manners or value for our customs, which slightly upset Father. However, he was willing to forgive them based on the fact that they had been travelling all day long. They feasted on all of the pemmican before the main meal was ready. By the time we finished our dinner, nearly all of the cooked buffalo was gone. Their glutton put a significant dent in our rations of food for the winter. Colonel Perkins claimed he would make up for all of the food they ate.

Then, it was time to sit around the fire and dance. The white men watched in silence and awe as the tribal leaders danced to the beat of the drums. Though they seemed skeptical at first, I could see some of them tapping their feet on the cold dirt by the time the dancing was finished.

Once the tribal leaders were done, Colonel Perkins stood and began applauding. As his claps slowed to a silence, he spoke to our tribe and his men. Father translated as he talked.

“Thank you Chief Running Bear and your people for the kind welcome!” he said. “We come in peace and shall leave in peace in the morning. However, I cannot feel anything but horrible after we indulged so exquisitely on your food. As promised, I shall pay you back!”

Father nodded to Colonel Perkins in approval of his reciprocity between his men and ours. After the white man saw this sign of acknowledgement, he spoke to the congregation again.

“You provided us with Native food, so we shall supplement that with American drink!” he said.

His men went into their packs and began pulling out large glass containers I had never seen before. Within them was a liquid that the men began to pour into tin cups and distribute throughout the tribe.

“The finest Kentucky bourbon for my Native friends. Drink up and let’s have ourselves a night!”

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The men and the members of the tribe began drinking as the moon rose into the night sky. Mother rushed me off to bed as I fell asleep by the fire as the night wore on. The last image I saw before heading into our teepee was my father stumbling around the fire and laughing as loud as I have ever heard him. This laughter went well into the night and rather than the silence of the night, the hollers of my brethren guided me to sleep.

* * *

I awoke the following morning to sounds of distress. As I sat up, I turned over assuming I would see Mother and Father asleep. What my eyes saw was something so horrible, I cannot begin to recall the details in full. Mother was there, but there was no father, it was Colonel Perkins. He was groping and violating Mother while he covered her mouth. She locked eyes with me as I looked on in terror. Then, a surging anger overcame me, I rose from my resting place and ran over and began hitting Colonel Perkins on the back.

The white man was naturally perturbed at not only my presence, but my disruption in his escapades. He rose, turned to me with bloodshot eyes and came after me with his belt still unbuckled. Colonel Perkins drew his knife and chased me towards the entrance of our teepee, in an effort to eradicate me. That was when Mother picked up a nearby spear and lunged it at the white man. Before he had a chance to reach the outdoors, he had been struck in the back with crimson rolling out around him. I only wish I would not have had to go outside.

Father lay in the dirt, face down and disoriented. He looked haggard and sick along with the other men in the tribe. They were all tied up, being held captive by the other white men who patrolled around them. As the women and children emerged from their dens, they were taken down and tied up too. One of the white men saw the corpse of Colonel Perkins as Mother retreated from the teepee. He sprinted towards the both of us, tossing us into the dirt as he feverishly entered our home. Minutes later, he appeared again, looking for Mother and me.

“Did you do this to the Colonel?” he asked.

We quivered and shook, not answering his questions. He pulled Mother by the hair and threw her violently to the earth. Then, he turned

and slapped me with the back of his hand. It was not long until we were tied up too, laying next to Father in the warm sun.

* * *

Father would consistently ask as we trailed behind their horses where we were going. None of them answered Father's inquiries. Mother limped, she had cuts on her arms from Colonel Perkins' knife. Though we had been walking for days, the bruise from where she had fallen still looked fresh. Father could not look at Mother the whole walk, he would immediately begin to weep if he did.

Still, Father persisted on asking where we were headed. The entire tribe had been taken and was now following the white men minus Colonel Perkins. After days of constant asking and begging for information, the men began to get agitated with Father. They would slap him and beat him, stopping our entire tribe in the process. The white men would force us to encircle them as they would beat Father for asking a mere question.

Finally, after a week of walking, progress was finally made. Father asked his usual question:

"Where are you taking my people? Why must you force us into such hardships? We were so kind to you men, and you have treated us like animals!" he said.

"Because you are animals god dammit," one man said. "You're all just a bunch of savages. No place for you in the open land, so we're movin' ya."

"Where are you moving us to!" Father cried out.

"A nice, beautiful place where we can keep an eye on ya there Chief," the man replied. "All the men will stay in what we call a 'reservation' because we're so god damn kind that we reserved land for you folks. As for the women, some may stay, but other might come along with us, like that pretty lady of yours. Gets awful lonely out here travelling, you know Chief?"

Father scowled at the man, who was a portly fellow, almost weighing down his horse. However, he continued.

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“The children, Chief, oh, the children,” he said. “We are going to take them to a special school and teach them our culture, how we live, in America. How privileged your child will be Chief!”

That was the end of Father speaking on that long walk to the “reservation”. I did not hear Father speak until he said goodbye to Mother and me. After we had gone from the reservation, the white men split up. Mother’s group went South, mine further East, to a place called Minnesota, that is where I am today. The fate of my parents is unknown to me, and I feel as though it is not worth knowing.

* * *

I pulled my papers away from my face, revealing the rest of the class. They all sat in painful agony, knowing they went through the same thing. None of us have our braids, and most of us have forgotten our native tongue. I look over and see Mrs. Wilson fighting back tears as I step down from the podium and find my way back to my desk.

“Thank you, Simon,” she said. “That was lovely.”

I nodded my head and stared out the window, watching the rain hit the schoolhouse. A horrible realization came over me, and I wished to cry. There were no tears though, crying was not allowed at Pipestone Indian School.

TRAFFIC SAFETY

by Raymond Scot Sorrells

It's an especially cold and windy winter's day as Rachel starts out on her way to the skating rink across town. A heavy dusty snow is coming out of the overcast sky, falling almost sideways in the strong winds. The extreme cold freezes even the briny solution the city uses on the roads. The car, a Saturn Ion which has been borrowed from her grandmother for the winter, shudders in the gusting wind. Rachel is running a little behind schedule and, gallingly, was required to promise her dad that she'd drive carefully before she could leave.

With the antilock brakes clicking like cards in the spokes of a bicycle wheel, she slides through an intersection, past a red light. Luckily no one is coming cross-ways. Almost missing it, she fishtails a bit as she crosses to the I-94 on-ramp. "This is my last chance to call the whole thing off," she thinks. As she enters the highway, she prays; "Please, Lord, don't let me hit anyone. Don't let anyone hit me. And don't let me hit anything."

On the ethereal plane, Gabriel comes to Michael with a look of alarm on his face. "What's wrong?" Michael wonders. It's not often that things happening on Monday require help from the Archangel of Sunday. Gabe is good at what he does, he thinks, and knows when he's in over his head. This must be bad.

"Mike, I have a problem," Gabriel says. "Rachel is headed for trouble and I haven't been able to stop it." Of course, he doesn't use 'Rachel' when passing on this alarm. He uses her secret name, the one he and the other angels have heard Jesus use when talking to God about her.

Michael realizes that the situation must be dire when he hears Gabriel use her special name. It implies God himself may be needed to intervene on this one. "Tell me about it," Michael says quickly.

Gabriel is clearly exasperated; his normally shimmering white robes appear to have lost some of their luster, and his eyes are open wide with alarm as he lays out the details of the problem. “She’s headed out on the highway in bad weather. It’s negative eleven, with a wind chill of almost negative fifty. It’s snowing sideways! The road is covered in black ice. I’m afraid of what might happen.”

“How could you let things get this far,” Michael blurts out. “Didn’t you try to stop her?”

“I’ve done everything I’m allowed to do,” Gabriel replies, his voice rising defensively as he crosses his arms and his feathers ruffle. He hikes up his belt of truth, takes a breath to calm himself and lowers his voice. “You know I wouldn’t come to you without trying everything in the book. Yet she’s pulling onto the on-ramp right now.”

“Didn’t you give her a sense of foreboding?”

“Yes.” Gabriel replies, spreading his hands and wings out wide in an expression of helplessness. “It didn’t work,” he continues, “You know how strong her will is, Mike.” Gabriel finishes, looking straight at him.

Michael nods and rolls his eyes a bit in a knowing manner. Of course, he’s had dealings with Rachel as well. “Just try to get her to Sunday School,” he thinks. But this is much more serious. “Didn’t you show her how slippery it is?” he asks, with growing alarm. “All you’d need to do is let her slide through an intersection or two when no one is coming. That’s a pretty safe and effective deterrent.”

“She’s got the car with ABS,” Gabriel says flatly.

“ABS!” Michael exclaims, drawing out the letters as if each one is a word in and of itself. It comes out sounding like “Aye-bee-ess!” Unconsciously, he adjusts his gold encrusted helmet. “That’s made so many of them overconfident!” He looks around a bit, grasping for ideas. “Why didn’t you start earlier and just make her late? She usually just gives up when she’s late!”

Gabriel looks down helplessly, his light dimming even further. He pokes a few holes in the cloud at his feet with his spear. “Yes, but ... it was different this time.”

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“What? Why?”

Gabriel manages to shrug despite his rigid breastplate. “Well ... I think there may be a boy involved,” he says as if it explains everything. And, in a way, it does. There is a moment of silence between them as they avoid each other’s gaze. Gabriel appears to be looking at the buckle on his sandal.

“Where is her father in all this?” Michael asks sadly.

“At home, fixing lunch. He’s clueless,” Gabriel replies, fidgeting with his shield.

“Gabe,” Michael reaches out to put a hand on his shoulder. “Did her father pray for her this morning?”

“Well ...” Gabriel is reluctant to say. He looks around helplessly, and finally admits, “the cat interrupted him.” Michael nods his understanding and sighs. Gabriel, trying to sound more hopeful than he really is, continues, “Actually, there’s been a lot of prayer for her lately from other people, even one or two new voices.”

“Let’s hope it’s enough,” Michael says with no expression on his face at all.

Before Michael can finish, silent thunder peals across the sky and God makes himself manifest before them. Light fills their realm and they fall to their knees.

“MICHAEL,” booms the voice of God, like a trumpet. “Take a contingent of angels and slow down everyone on the highway behind her!”

“Of course,” Michael thinks, “He knows who and what we’re talking about.” With a shout heard across the heavenly realms, Michael calls more than he needs and deploys them from the University drive exit all the way back to Dilworth. For no reason at all, every driver for miles eases up on the gas as they enter the city, and begin to coast.

“GABRIEL,” booms the Lord of Hosts again; “Take everyone you need to speed things up a bit in front of her. I’m going to need a lot of room here.”

With a triumphant yell, Gabriel, too, calls for more than he needs. His robes brighten back to their usual dazzling white. Looking like a time lapse film of a coming thunder storm, countless angels jump at his commands and roll across the heavens. This is just the kind of mobilization he'd been hoping for. Angels rush from the heavenly realm to cars from the I-29 overpass on into West Fargo, giving drivers a sense of confidence and well-being. Not knowing exactly why, and suddenly feeling quite safe for some unknown reason, each driver speeds up a bit. Rachel marvels that she's the only car on the highway in her area.

Without needing a direct command, the King of King's personal battalion leaps into action. Not knowing exactly what's going to happen, they invisibly deploy themselves on both sides of the westbound lane from Rachel's location through to the overpass. Like snow snakes, some rush across the surface of the road, helping the wind to clear off rocks, chunks of ice, anything that might cause a swerving car to flip. The rest of them prepare to stand firm.

Taking complete authority over her life at this moment – authority He's had since she gave her life to Him and was baptized – He silently cautions her to slow down. She first covers the brake with her foot, and then taps lightly. This doesn't diminish her speed one bit. Rachel begins to be concerned. The rear end of the car begins to drift out of alignment with the front, sliding to the right, starting what would likely turn into a spin. Still hoping to regain control, she turns the wheel into the slide with no effect. It's at this point that she realizes she's probably broken her promise to her dad.

God deploys his honor guard directly to the car itself. They fill it, and cluster around the bumpers, the front, back and sides. They brace and strain against the very laws of motion. The laws hold true at first, and after just a moment, they begin to bend. Jehovah Jira places his hand on the roof of the car as it turns broadside, going down the road at 40 miles an hour, holding it to the road.

The car completes a 180-degree rotation as it crosses from the center lane to the left lane and drifts into the shoulder. Careening backwards, it slams into the median broadside. Angels on the passenger side of the car crush into the angels lining the concrete median, sliding past each

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other as the car scrapes along the barrier. Their invulnerable bodies give with the impact with feathers flying invisibly from the force of the collision.

Inside the car, it is so full of angels, their incorporeal bodies cushion Rachel's lurch to her right. Her hat flies off her head, smacking into the passenger window before falling limply to the seat. The car comes to a rest. Only then does it become apparent to the angels in the car that God has had his hand on her neck and shoulders the whole time.

* * *

Traffic control is problematic for the Lord of Hosts, few drivers have given Him authority over their lives. Nevertheless, cars now easily change lanes and pass by on the far right rather than crashing into the wreck of the now reversed Saturn Ion.

Rachel sits in the car, her hands covering her face. "If I don't look," she thinks, "the crash isn't real." She is uninjured but shaken badly. Her first sensation is that her head is cold. She looks at her hat in the seat next to her.

By this time, one of Michael's most compassionate angels has taken corporeal form. Only the angels notice her appear out of thin air, lightly settle to the ground, and walk up to the car. She taps on Rachel's window and asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Rachel replies miserably. She gets out of her car. They hug. The angel makes a show of calling the police just as a Highway Patrol officer pulls over to see what has happened. To him, as he walks up, it looks like there is nobody injured and he is relieved.

Officer JJ is a trained professional and takes control with a practiced authority; "Let's get you turned around, Miss. I'll follow you off the highway and we'll see what we can do to sort this out." Unbelievably, the Saturn is still drivable. JJ redirects traffic as Rachel gets into the Saturn, turns it around and heads down the road to the next exit, with the highway patrol following closely. Neither Rachel, nor the patrolman notice as Gabriel's angel slowly fades from view as she rises into the air and returns to the spiritual realm.

Rachel meets up with the officer again at a gas station parking lot right off the main road to assess damage. “There’s no need to call a tow truck. You can drive it home if you like,” he assures her. More sternly, he says “And slow down! There’s a lot of traffic out here and nobody else seems to be having any trouble. You need to be more careful.”

Rachel thinks this is unnecessary, and not entirely honest. “I bet he’s really busy today dealing with weather related traffic issues,” she says to herself. She limps the car home thinking of all the reasons she shouldn’t have set out that day, all the hints she ignored. “Next time, maybe I should listen to myself a little more closely,” she thinks as she pulls into her driveway. And she ponders these events in her heart.

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KISSES FOR PUPPIKINS

by Jennifer Thurman

Hi, Graham! I saw your puppy on Flickr! You got a border collie just like we talked about! She has the most adorably sweet black face with a white mask. What's her name? When did you get her?

I've been well for seven months now, I'm so happy and thankful to say! ☺

Not sure if you still use this e-mail address. Just thought I'd give it a shot.

Belinda

The send button was illuminated in blue at the top of the mobile e-mail site, but seemed to be lost in a shaky haze that suddenly enveloped her. Bell took a deep breath. Graham hadn't returned any of her messages since her confrontation with him last year.

The face-to-face opposition had been an attempt on her part to find out if he had in fact moved on with some other girl. Although, she knew he couldn't be in love with someone else. It was too soon after their 6-month, live-in, San Diego, summer tango of a relationship. If there was in fact someone else, it would just be a piece of meat to help him stop thinking of her, she told herself.

So when Belinda went to North Carolina to surprise Graham, she had flown into Raleigh-Durham International, rented a white Lancer, and driven from her hotel to his driveway first thing the very next morning after her flight had landed. A small bag of freshly-baked biscotti over her wrist, Bell knocked on the door of his new address.

A surprised Graham came to the door and blinked back the sleep that still hung over him. He hugged her, but remained aloof and kept looking at the wooded gravel driveway and onto the street to see who else might have accompanied her. When no one else showed, he invited her inside for eggs and coffee.

Graham was quiet, and Bell prattled on about her latest personal cycling records, routes, her job, travels, and life. He was definitely happy to see her. She could tell. But, he had done something that he couldn't bring himself to talk about. She had known that he probably hadn't been a faithful boyfriend by the way that he didn't return her messages. Deep down, Bell knew, but she had to really know. She wanted him to tell her the truth, but she couldn't bring herself to ask.

"I have to go to work today," he said when she had finished her breakfast.

"But it's Saturday," Bell had replied. "And I came to see you."

He nodded and looked down at his phone scrolling through e-mails. "My job is demanding and there is a dinner for my coworker tonight. It's her birthday. See there," he pointed to a brown paper Yankee Candle Company bag on his counter top. "I bought her a candle."

Bell nodded. "Can I go?" she asked hopefully.

"No, you can't go," he said flatly.

Bell nodded. "Ok," she said.

"We're going to go eat oysters," he said awkwardly.

"OK," Bell said. "I don't really like oysters. I just like the sauce that you put on them. And the crackers are good too."

Graham looked down. He sighed and took their plates to the sink. He had forgotten the biscuits that he had put into the toaster oven, and he hadn't eaten all of his food. Bell felt a little sick too.

"Well, I just thought I would surprise you since we haven't seen each other in seven months...since the abortion..."

Graham gave Bell an awkward eyebrow raise and uncomfortable smile while he stopped and stood in front of her. In a familiar way, Bell wrapped her arms around his 6'1" tall shoulders. She stood on her tippy toes and kissed him on his mouth, but he remained stiff and unmoving. Her heart gave an unexpected flop. Graham's hands remained at his sides, but he didn't take a step back either. She kissed his cheeks and his neck, and she could feel him swallow hard. She moved closer to him to feel him rigid against her belly, yet he didn't touch her at all.

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Stepping back, hurt, and confused, Bell looked up at him. “I have to go to work,” he said lamely. “I have things to do today.”

“Well, I’ll be back to surprise you again!” Bell replied, hurt and oozing fake enthusiasm. Graham walked her to the door and stood with his back holding open the glass outer door. “I love you,” Bell told him meekly. Her body turned; she waited for him to respond.

Graham nodded solemnly.

“Do you love me?” Bell asked hopefully.

“I care about you, Belinda,” he said plainly. His eyes turned down sorrowfully.

“I’ll take it,” she said. It wasn’t what she had expected when she had booked her ticket to Raleigh-Durham International, but maybe something would happen in the next 16 days. Although, she hadn’t brought her bicycle which had been the substance of their relationship a year earlier in San Diego. It shouldn’t matter, though, if he loved her.

As she walked to her car, her sandals crunched on the gravel. It was still morning and she had 16 days left in Durham. What would she do?

She could follow him, and see who he was going with that evening, where he worked, who this coworker was. But that would be terribly embarrassing if he happened to notice her.

He didn’t love her. Belinda turned the ignition. She had been wrong. Or had she? He hadn’t turned away from her. It was like he wanted to kiss her back, but something or someone had more power than she did.

If he loved her, he would have had her keep their child in San Diego that she had been pregnant with. There had been other factors, though. Graham had been writing his thesis for his master’s degree. He didn’t have a job or an income. And Belinda’s job would definitely fall short of supporting three of them.

They had been carefree in the days of her pregnancy, feeding the seagulls with walks along the ocean shore, picking up seashells, and enjoying the breeze and the salty air flipping the tendrils of their hair on the sides of their faces. Their little family was a fairy tale that they could live for in the moment.

After the pregnancy termination, Bell had fevered and bled her hope out with those two huge pills they had given her at Planned Pregnancy. A piece of her soul died, and while Graham had insisted on the procedure, he seemed to blame her for the situation. They rode bikes once more, but Bell developed schizoaffective disorder. Crying and delusional, she left him a short week later to go back to her parents for recovery.

Bell went through denial of her condition, the death of her dog, and denial of her unborn baby's soul being so carelessly lost all the while Skyping with Graham. Yet, they never acknowledged the pain of those traumatic events or the loss of Graham's Jewish Grandpoppy. They glossed over the trauma with happy videos of puppies frolicking in meadows or balancing on floating pool toys. They read stories of fortunes made and second amendment rights activists. Then, Graham graduated with his master's degree. Their Skype calls became fewer and fewer as he interviewed for jobs across the country. Finally, he was offered the job in Durham and became more distant than ever as he immersed himself in new people and their demands.

Bell pondered these past events for the rest of the day while walking the streets of Durham to pass the time. Emotions flooded her and memories of those tragedies milled through her mind. That night, she slept in short cycles, and the next morning, she woke early to surprise Graham again. She was sure that the only problem they were facing was that he was just unable to keep those unfortunate events of their past from overtaking the good times that they had begun their relationship with. Her glowing, happy face would remind him of the times when they met in San Diego – dancing in their living room to Youtube videos and sipping the pasta water of their dinner with a spoon like a special gourmet soup they had created together.

Graham's house was just a mile from her hotel, and she drove over on the dreary, cool, rainy spring morning with ease.

How odd that another car was parked in the driveway. A small, black little boxy car that she couldn't imagine a man driving, sat next to his. She looked inside, and saw a pair of skimpy black cycling shorts with the tag still on and a crumpled McDonald's bag in the back seat. The door was locked. Well, maybe one of his coworkers had needed a place

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to crash after drinking too much the night before and Graham had offered to let the person stay in his spare bedroom.

Bell walked around to the back sliding door. Expecting it to be locked, she pulled a test tug on the handle. It slid open without a hitch. She stepped inside and looked around. All was quiet and she thought he must be sleeping still. Bell stood at the front of the hall. She could see that Graham's bedroom door was wide open, and Graham lay face down on his bed. He came into focus, and Bell realized he was naked. And there weren't any sheets on his bed. How odd, she thought. He looked cold and uncomfortable.

He looked up and smiled warmly, so Bell breathed a sigh of relief and smiled back. The trim of her sundress swayed about her thighs as she waved down the hall. He stood up then, completely stark, and realizing who she was, that she was Bell, he began snapping his fingers and maniacally waving his hand for her to leave.

Bell turned, but there was no one else around. Could he be acting so enthusiastic about seeing her? She was so relieved that there wasn't a girl beside him on the bed next to him. But the door was open. Why was he being so silent? Maybe she was in the bathroom.

Rushing past him, Bell asked in her most courageous voice, "Where is she?"

He was silent and had moved out to the living room helplessly as Bell scanned the room opening closet doors thinking she was going to catch this other woman. Not finding anyone, she now stood in his bedroom and stared down the hall to where he stood completely opposite to where they had been when she first entered. She smiled at him since she could find no one else there and breathed deeply.

Then, she stopped.

He was staring at her so incredulously and oddly.

She had passed another bedroom, hadn't she. One in the middle of the hall with a door open. Bell strode a few steps forward and stopped in front of that open door where a naked girl lay on the guest bedroom bed. At the sight of her, the girl buried her face in the mattress.

Bell stared for a moment not quite sure if she was imagining the horror she felt filling her belly like a spigot of acid. Then she looked over at Graham who looked away. Bell crinkled her nose at the dark-haired minx and shook her head at Graham disapprovingly, beaten, and beyond words.

As she moved toward the living room to confront Graham, he told Bell that she had better leave to which she responded that she was doing nothing of the sort. After all, they had a lunch date to fulfill that afternoon. She turned her chin defiantly upward at him. In an attempt to firmly escort Bell to the door, Graham ended up throwing her against the wall where she hit her head hard and slid to the floor.

The room spinning, Bell could feel Graham kneeling next to her. He began to tenderly lift her up, but Bell wasn't leaving so easily. This was uncomfortable, but if she just left, Graham wouldn't have to face the consequences and endure the confrontation any longer. The anger inside Bell boiled as she remained firmly planted on the floor, still splayed from Graham's assault.

In exasperation for her to get out, Graham grabbed Bell's ankles and pulled her across the foyer carpet to the door as the skirt of her sundress rode up around her neck. Her underwear exposed and part of her belly, she firmly planted two feet on the frame of the door and wouldn't budge. Graham stared at her. He was still naked and now stood outside on the front porch, in horror and in disbelief of the situation that wouldn't seem to end.

Angrily, he picked up Bell's purse and emptied all of the contents over the wooden porch planks; keys and hairbrush flew into a high boxwood hedge below. Senses beginning to return, Bell mortifyingly crawled out the front door and curled into a tight ball to the side of it, legs and knees up against her chest flinching as she touched her bruised flesh. Immediately, she heard the heavy door being latched and bolted so she couldn't reenter as she began to shake from the encounter. The cold rain hummed in an umm-ummum-uhmm rhythm as if it too were at a loss for words.

While she should have, Bell didn't leave. She couldn't really leave. Her head was throbbing from the contact it had made with the wall as

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she had been thrown against it, and she had no idea where her keys were. Battered, she rounded the back of the house to the screen room and found a cushy chair to wait in where a dried golden butterfly corpse with large faux eyes on the wings sprawled on the armrest and told her how its owner liked to kill and preserve beautiful things.

After two hours and forty minutes, Graham emerged from the house, showered and shaved and ready to meet her. Realizing that her car was still in the driveway, he peeked around the back of the house where he found the girl who had once been hopelessly in love with him. He asked Bell if she still wanted to go to lunch. And while she didn't have much of an appetite, she agreed so that the little vixen inside wouldn't have won. Neither apologized and neither had much to say. They parted with a long hug and goodbye.

So, now a year later, Bell discovered that Graham had moved to Chicago. He lived in an apartment with a border collie just like the one they had talked about getting during their Skyping sessions.

Her memories subsiding and senses returning, the “send” button finally came into focus at the top of the e-mail page. As she hovered the mouse cursor over the control that would deliver her message, panic overtook her like the one that shook her when Graham had said that he “cared about her” instead of that he loved her. He probably no longer used that e-mail address anyway, she thought. There was most likely a work address that was issued to him at his new job at the University. But then why had he posted his pictures of his dog to a Flickr account for her to stumble upon? They were meant for her, she knew it. The dog was the same breed that Bell had wanted. Had he meant to apologize and work things out, but never found the time, she wondered?

Bell never heard from Graham. She guessed that he had made a personal vow to never speak to her again. Who could blame him, really. After all, she hadn't been taking her schizophrenia medicine and she hadn't been entirely herself. She forgave Graham after she forgave herself for confronting him like that in the first place. She erased the long e-mail that she had composed, deleted it, and instead decided to remember all those glorious bike rides in San Diego when they first fell in love. The vivid dreams of before that awful, rainy morning in Durham

flooded her mind. She forgave him to herself, then and there, and just wrote, “kisses for puppikins” and pressed send

