

## [The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

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of lilies on the wind. The stream that ran down the center has been baked by the sun, like everything else; its impression in the dirt lost under scattered footprints and dust. She wonders if the souls are grateful to be hidden beneath the hardened, cracked ground, with a shield between them and the sun, which always seems a bit more unfriendly up here on the hill. Even the wind provides no respite.

Alice begins her way down from the gravesite. From here, she can see the main road that leads up into the town, the buildings broken and chipping, as if they cannot find the strength to stand in the sun any longer. The pathway down to the cemetery gates is steep; it always seems harder to manage on the way down than up. But she moves carefully, the worn soles of her plain shoes slipping only once on the loose gravel, and watches the geckos scamper swiftly between the headstones, dry and scattered like broken teeth. But her steps leave a scrape on the ground, and in the air, and she thinks about the difference between herself and the lost souls, even if it is only that alone.

She nears the edge of the cemetery, bordered by the heavy, blackened iron fence, each post sharpened into points that scratch at the sky. No rust dots the edges; no rain falls on this parched place in the earth. The only moisture this ground sees are the tears from the mourners. But they, too, disappear into the sun and the wind before they can seep down below the surface, leaving no trace, as if they were never there at all. The fence stretches along the border like prison bars, steadfast in the sandy dirt, unwavering against the sun. But Alice knows it holds nothing inside, and that the souls walk at night, when the hill is bathed in shadows too deep for the silvery light of the moon to penetrate.

She hears a scrape behind her, like a slip down the hill, and whips her head over her shoulder. The weeds sway in the wind, and the only thing she sees is the tall iron cross stretching into the sky, trying to pierce the sun. Perhaps it was a rabbit, or a soul trying to follow, or the wind just making its way down. Or perhaps it was just Alice's mind, still dancing and playing in this dried-out prison. She needs a drink.

She passes a rusty red pickup truck, a half circle cleared in the thick dust caking the windshield. A small note is tucked in the crevice where the windshield meets the dashboard: FOR SALE, CHEAP. CALL TED. A phone number is scrawled beneath.

Alice remembers her daddy. His name was Ted, too.

The cab is empty, and she shields her eyes, glancing back up the hill to note any shadow of movement. But there is nothing, and so, she continues down the dead end that borders the cemetery, the dilapidated yellow house with the rusted out shells of cars that litter the makeshift yard.

It isn't long before Alice reaches the main road, and the uneven wooden planks nestled into the sidewalk. Stretched ahead are the signs hanging from the shops, advertising antiques, and furniture, and handmade taffy. But the wooden walkways are empty, despite the sweet scent of caramel masking the salty dust. Up ahead, she sees the sign for the Delta Saloon, dangling from one hinge, its edge beating against the siding in the wind. She already feels the burn of whiskey, sweet and bitter all at once, at the back of her throat. Sometimes, she swallows so much of it that it tastes like water. She swallows so much that she does not feel the air filling her lungs; she swallows so much that she does not feel the steady thump of her heart in her chest. She swallows so much that she stumbles the entire way home. She blames the uneven sidewalk, the same way her daddy would.

She counts the steps it takes to cross the street. It is seventeen until she escapes the sun again, ducking into the Delta Saloon. Seventeen. That was how old she was when she first began wearing the plain yellow band around her left ring finger, a mini shackle on her delicate hand. It clinked against the edges of glasses and her finger swelled around it during the endless summer afternoons, as if her body were trying to swallow it the way she swallowed the whiskey. The shackle led her home at night, instead of to the saloons. It led her to cheap, scratchy sheets instead of crowded dance floors in airless rooms. The babies came after, while she stared up at spinning fans and the voices muffled around her, as if they were talking underwater. And then it was back up on the hill, the sun beating upon her shoulders as if it were punishing her. She watched as the piles of sandy dirt filled in the grave, and silently taunted the sun, telling it that it could not have her baby. Later on at night, Grady gently rubbed aloe and vinegar on her red and angry shoulders.

"I never seen someone with skin as sensitive as yours," he said gently, as if his words would sting worse than the vinegar. And then, "It's all right, love. We'll try again next year."

She does not count the minutes it takes until the liquor lights a low burning fire in her belly. Instead, she slides off the bar stool, her worn shoes pattering against the roughened floorboards. Inside the Delta, the floor creaks as she walks and it smells like stale cigarette smoke and faintly of the wood panels that line the walls and the bar counter. She holds the amber liquid in her mouth for a moment before she swallows, and after that, she does not think of the years that followed, or how many times she and Grady stood on the hilltop, tucking the babies that never cried away from the heat of the sun.

Instead, she wanders to the back of the saloon, to the corner where a piece of an old casino table is tucked behind a pane of glass. The hand-painted sign on the wall tells its story in shades of black and red, and of the men who lost fortunes and lives seated at its edges. Alice stands along the roped barrier, and recites the story to herself. She looks around the Delta, littered with blackjack tables and video poker machines, noticing this table is the only one empty. Or that maybe it isn't, and that she can see the ghosts like Ed Harlan, with nothing but a drink and a hope crowding its edges, if she waits long enough.

After the Delta, Alice visits the antique shop that hugs the candy store. She browses roller skates and ornately designed mirrors and ancient bottles of chloroform tucked behind locked glass doors. Eyes from faces painted on a row of terra cotta flower pots watch her from the shelves. Her mind is filled with memories of running through hills, the grass turned tawny beneath no shade. An old swing set stood near the top, its bright paint long gone, the seat of the swing bleached in the sunlight. She slid her skinny legs over the seat, and beckoned her daddy to push. Alice remembered his gruff hands on her shoulders, and the soles of her bare feet trying to kiss the sky.

Beneath the swing, she saw a flash of red. When it brought her back down, she saw one red tulip, bursting forth from a crack within the dirt.

"Daddy, look!" She cried, her index finger showing the way. "There's a flower growing!" And she heard him laugh, smelling the faint scent of beer on his breath as he spoke.

"Somebody planted that there," he explained. "Don't nothin' grow in the desert, baby."

She runs her fingers along strands of necklaces and rings crafted from polished rocks, and smells vanilla and cotton candy.

By the time Alice reaches the street again, night has begun to fall. But here in the desert, the sun does not give up so easily, and a ribbon of peach and pink borders the edges of the indigo night sky. The wind has turned chilly, and she unties the shawl from her waist to wrap it around her shoulders.

Alice remembers the nights they slept outside. She remembers the swells of cheap furniture, and boxes, and all of the other scant things they owned hidden beneath old tarps in the bed of her daddy's pickup truck.

"But tonight," he'd said, winking at her from beneath the brim of his hat, "we're on an adventure. It's just you and me, against the night." He'd spread an old woolen blanket on the ground, and wrapped Alice in his favorite shirt. The edges of the sleeves were ragged, as if they'd been chewed on, and it smelled like all the things that he was made of—sunshine and coal dust, soil and warm beer. While the night descended over them, he lit a small fire, and let her eat all of the sandwich.

"Now," he said, "is my most favorite part." He stretched out on his back, a half-full can of beer just where he could reach, and patted the blanket, beckoning her. Alice sprawled out too, and above them, a million stars blinked like a million eyes on the other side of the sky.

"Look at how lucky we are, honey," he said. "We get to count the stars instead of sheep." And he curled his warm, burly hand over hers.

Alice follows the hills and valleys of the wooden walkway past the church, and past the barbeque pit where the smoky scent of bacon and brisket tangles in her hair. She passes Emilia Torrance's museum, where white stenciled words crowd the window, trying to draw more visitors by claiming haunts. Alice shakes her head. Virginia City is made of ghosts, underneath the sidewalk, tucked in the cracks of the buildings, seated at bars, floating on the wind. She is tired, the dull ache left by the whiskey filling the space between her ears.

When she finally turns the key in the lock at the house at the edge of town, Mabel comes dashing from the darkness, hopping impatiently at her feet and tugging the edge of Alice's skirt between her teeth. She bends to ruffle the small dog's wiry brown fur, and listens to the clickity clack of Mabel's

nails on the floor as she follows Alice into the kitchen. She remembers the day Grady brought Mabel home, skinny, with mats of dirt and twigs tangled in her fur. She remembers how Mabel's toffee colored eyes would look everywhere, except their faces. Grady had found her, wandering around the hills with a limp that never went away, not even now. Alice had a feeling that Mabel hadn't always been alone. She looks out the kitchen window, to the stretch of the main street, once vibrant and bustling with new Westerners in search of fortune. She thinks about how everything has a history, whether it can tell you about it or not.

Alice drops food into Mabel's bowl and reaches into the cupboard past the coffee mugs for the bottle. She doesn't bother with the glasses, only swills the bitter liquor quickly before she can remember the night when Grady went to join the souls hiding beneath the ground. She sits at the table and does not turn on the lights, giving the spaces made for light to the shadows, instead.

The night is already swimming before her eyes when Alice hears the faint footsteps upstairs. At first, they are soft, and then they grow more deliberate as they move toward the stairs. Soon, they are in tune with her heartbeat, and she counts the moments between them. They move rhythmically down the stairs, each one making its signature creak or groan. Under the table, Mabel whines.

"Grady?" She asks, her voice hollow and gravelly. "That you?"

Alice turns her head to glance out the kitchen doorway, down the hall. In the dark, she is only able to make out the outline of the bottom step of the staircase, where something silvery is wavering. At first, she thinks it is only moonlight from the window at the front door. But the moonlight begins to take shape, at first a circle, and then into the toe of her daddy's favorite boots. She watches the silvery shadow stretch until he is there, moving slowly down the hall toward her, the thud of his boots echoing through the stillness of the house.

Alice watches him the entire time, until he has stopped at the edge of the table.

"Daddy?" She whispers. A wispy hand extends, and Alice feels the cool night breeze, tousling her hair. He smiles once, and then beckons her to

follow him. She clasps the neck of the bottle tightly in her fist, and she follows him as he moves out the back door of the house.

When she crosses the doorway, she sees him standing in the small patch of the yard, where the grass lies in uneven clumps amid the dirt. She watches him bend, and he tugs at a small patch, pulling it up to reveal deadened, dry roots.

“Don’t you see, now?” He says, and the dead grass and soil begin to fall through his fingers. His voice falls away, too, as if the wind has decided to steal off with it in the night.

And then he is gone, and Alice is left alone in the dark yard, the cool desert night breeze hissing at the bare branches of the wiry trees. Shhhh.

When she opens her eyes, she is back at the kitchen table. Mabel is curled on her lap, snorting deeply through her button nose. Alice lifts her head, immediately glancing down the hall, and toward the foot of the staircase. But there is no one.

She gently rouses the dog and scrambles from the chair, pushing her way through the back door. Out in the yard, there is nothing except the broken bottle, its innards oozing into the dirt. She scans her eyes across the patches of grass. Mabel wags her tail and whimpers.

Alice stands outside for what feels like hours, or what could be just minutes. She remembers the cemetery, and the rusty red pickup parked just outside the heavy iron gates, waiting.

The sun moves out from behind a tufted white cloud, and she shoves her hands into the pockets of her skirt. She pulls out crumpled bills, counting quickly. Silver coins fall from the creases in the wadded bills, landing with thumps in the dirt. She counts, and hopes it is enough.

She counts, the seconds moving like stars across the apex of the night sky. Behind her, Mabel’s nails tap against the wooden boards on the sidewalk. Alice moves past the museum, still dark, and deeper into the vein of the town, past the Delta with its heartbeat of glasses against the bar and spinning reels. Rounding the corner, her shoes kick up a cloud of wispy dust as the sidewalk falls away. Ahead, the gravestones stand like weary soldiers underneath the sun.

Alice slows as she makes her way to the parking lot. She shields her eyes, but there is nothing, only her misshapen shadow stretched over the spot where the pickup had been parked. The wind kicks up like a breath in her ear. Shhhh.

Mabel yips and sits at her feet. In the sun, her pupils have shrunk to pinpoints, the irises like pools of whiskey.

Alice looks out over the hill, far from where the gravestones lay crumbling in the dirt, to where the Comstock Highway winds down the mountain and joins hands with Highway 395. She imagines the sounds of tires over the wounds in the roadway, and the twinkle of city lights in a challenge against the stars.

Bio- Jackie Dawn is a freelance writer and editor. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and Literature from Hofstra University in 2007, where she received the Eugene Schneider Award for Prose. Her work has also appeared in *The Writer's Apprentice* at Susquehanna University. She is currently looking forward to returning to New York after two years in Nevada, and is working on her first novel.

## Big Sky

by Cathy Worthington

The sound of my deck chair scraping the weathered planks jars the fragile silence. I drag it over to my favorite spot in front of the railing. Grasping the splintery arm with one hand and a can of Bud with the other, slowly I let myself down. Halfway, my knees give out and I drop with a plop. Beer sloshes all over the place. I brush a few drops off my pant leg and settle back. The Bud's nice and ice cold and makes my teeth ache. The air's hot and smells of sagebrush and wild mountain thyme. I stroke the stubble on my chin and gaze up at the sky, letting the stillness enfold me. For just a brief moment I stop feeling the pain.

A hundred or so feet below me the Madison River winds its way through the shallow valley, the ripples of its dark waters shooting off silvery sparks of light. From here you can follow its path east through the yellow-green meadows and into the distance where the snowy peaks of the Yellowstone mountains rise up. In the early evening sunshine they've turned that pastel color that all the western landscape painters try to capture but never really



can. Automatically my focus shifts to the right, up river about a hundred yards to where a dead elm stands by itself just down the embankment from a clump of pines. Sure enough. There on its highest branch perches my buddy, an American bald eagle. They used to be endangered, but in Montana they're coming back. He'll stay that way for hours, a white-hooded sentry, only his head moving. In profile, you can see the outline of his beak. Louise said he guards the river. I never argued the point. I raise my beer can to salute him. This is his river. This is his realm.

His wings unfold and rise. He leans forward and shoves off. Going fishing. I've watched him do it a million times before. He swoops down toward the river and glides just a few feet above. He'll snag himself a trout double the size any of the fly fishermen can catch. He puts those assholes to shame.

His wings flap hard. He rises in a steep arc and banks my way. Here he comes. My God, he's never come this close. He's almost overhead. Wingspan's gotta be at least eight feet. I can feel the beat of his wings. Rising halfway out of my chair, I shout, "Louise, you gotta come out and see this." I sink back down as I realize. She can't come out. She can't come see this. She can't because she is no more.

I grit my teeth as the familiar ache settles over me. God, for a second there it was as if she was still alive, as if I could call to her and she would come out. How long before my mind will stop playing these tricks on me?

I shake my head as I watch the eagle flap off. Wish I could soar off into the sunshine. I'd take off and never come back. About a month ago I thought of doing just that. Climbed to a place high above the river. Big ol' butte that jutted out over the water. It was a weekday. No tourists. No fly fishermen. Not a soul around. I must have been about a hundred yards above the water. Thought I'd cast myself off. Soar out over the silvery ripples, catch an updraft into that big blue Montana sky. Lost my nerve, though. Couldn't do it. Stumbled backwards and landed on my ass. That night I stood in front of the bathroom mirror staring at my sagging chest with its measly sprinkle of white hairs. "You poor slob, you haven't got the guts."

I sink further into my chair and try thinking about not thinking. Try to let myself drift off into the silence that surrounds me. When I open my eyes, the eagle's casing the river again. He swoops down, and just as his talons are skimming the water a dory full of fly fishermen appears around the bend. God damn it, they're going to ruin his kill. They ought to ban humans

on this river. Sure enough, the eagle sweeps back into the sky without his fish. I reach for the railing and yank myself to my feet. Waving my fist like some lunatic I holler, “Hey, you guys down there. You just scared the eagle.” Three blank faces look up. From a hundred feet away I can’t read their expressions. I don’t need to. The middle fingers tell it all.

Used to be fly fishermen in Montana were a high class group. Lots of camaraderie. Not anymore. Louise loved the sport. I taught her to tie her own flies. I can just see her now, sitting at the kitchen table, arthritic fingers working those tiny, intricate knots—brow creased, lips tight, breath held. Another image of her flashes before me as the dory slips out of sight. I see her standing on that grassy green sand bar down below, a cutthroat dangling from her line. There’s a big grin on her face and sunshine in her eyes.

The sound of someone knocking barely reaches my ears. Slowly I rise and shuffle into the house. Now, who’n hell could be coming over at five p.m. on a Sunday night? Who’n hell could be coming over period? I don’t have any friends in Montana—at least not anymore. Then I remember. The pastor from the little church in Ennis, Louise’s pastor. He phoned the other day and asked if I’d like to go fishing. I told him I don’t fish anymore. Fishing, my ass. He just wants to get me in a boat and start talking religion to me. Probably wants my money. They’re all alike.

I sneak into the guest bedroom and peek through a crack in the curtain. A male voice hollers out my name. Then silence. I hold my breath and tiptoe back into the family room.

“Jackson?” It’s my name again only this time it’s coming from the deck. I catch a quick glimpse of Louise’s preacher through the window before I duck behind the couch. Feel kind of foolish hiding like this, a little juvenile you might say, but, hell, I’m in no mood to face that preacher. Had enough of his type when Louise was dying—those young bright-faced hospice pastors who always sound cheery and upbeat. What’n hell do they know about dying? My legs are going to sleep. I bring my right index finger to my mouth and attempt to extract a splinter with my teeth. A trio of dust bunnies peek out at me from under the end table. There’s something gritty on the floor beneath my left hand—probably rat scat.

Footsteps enter the room. “Jackson?” I don’t move an inch. Jesus, it sure would be embarrassing if this guy caught me like this. I can just hear Louise

now: “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Jackson.” Well, I am. A little. But not enough to socialize with this preacher. After what seems like forever I hear him clomp back out to the deck and go around the side of the house. I crawl to a new position so he won’t see me through the window as he goes by. I hear his pickup’s engine start up. Feeling stiff and more than a little guilty, I struggle to my feet, go into the kitchen, and fix myself a good, strong scotch. I even pour a little on the hole in my finger where the splinter was.

I’m just getting ready to take my drink and go back out to the deck when the cell phone tinkles its stupid little tune. I check the name. Sure enough, it’s Pastor Elliot. Bet my daughter’s the one who’s been putting him up to bugging me. She’s been driving me crazy all summer long. “You shouldn’t be up at the cabin by yourself, Dad. I worry. Why don’t you come on home?” No way. I’m not leaving until the snow’s waist high. I glance at the photo on the kitchen counter—my daughter with the four grandboys. Last time she called she threatened to bring the whole unruly bunch up here.

I sit back down and gaze out at the river. My wife’s voice haunts me. “Jackson, you need to stop this silliness. You can’t just shut yourself off from humanity.” She used to try to get me to accompany her to church. I’d do just about anything for her, but that. She believed in such crazy stuff, like the spirits of the dead invading birds and animals—used to think the scrub jay that begged for peanuts at our window sill was her dead aunt.

Movement on my side of the river catches my eye. I rise to my feet so I can get a better look. It’s the eagle. He couldn’t be more than fifty feet below me. Clutched in his talons, still flopping away, is the biggest, silveriest, slipperiest ol’ cutthroat you ever did see. The eagle begins tearing at the fish’s flesh with his beak. Suddenly he stops and raises his head, full alert, his eyes darting everywhere. Man, he’s got a scary look about him. You wouldn’t want to mess with him, that’s for sure. His wings spread and he starts beating the air. Oh, shit, now I see why. Down the river, about a quarter of a mile away, here comes a grizzly bear, barreling full speed ahead. The eagle’s gonna try and take off, but I don’t know how in hell he’ll be able to with that big ol’ trout in his talons. The grizzly’s just a few hundred yards away when the eagle manages to get airborne, the fish dangling from just one claw. God almighty, no one’s ever going to believe this. Hell, I wouldn’t believe it.

The eagle heads up my way. If only I had a video camera. He's just a couple of feet above me, so close I could almost reach up and touch his wing when all of a sudden that damn fish comes loose from his claw. Splat. It lands right in the middle of my deck. Spikes of adrenalin sting the hairs on my arms. A bird of prey about to land on my deck, the most dangerous bear in Montana just down the hill—everything is happening too fast. The eagle swoops high into an arc, circles around, and heads back my way. I glance toward the house trying to estimate how quickly I can make it across the deck to the sliding glass door. Wouldn't you know, it's closed. Force of habit. Louise always insisted on it. You don't want to let a mosquito in. Otherwise it'll buzz you all night long.

I've barely taken a step when I see the bear trampling through the fire weed and columbine, just a few yards from my deck. There's no time. Oh, God, should I run? Should I stay where I am? I move behind a chaise and in my panic manage to pin myself between it and the window. The bear practically rips my railing off, climbing over—big ol' sonofabitch, must be over a thousand pounds. His flesh jiggles like lard, but don't let that fool you, he's all muscle. He goes for the fish first, gets it in his mouth and lifts his head. That's when he senses my presence. With a roar, he drops the fish and rises on his hind legs. He's at least seven feet tall and so close I can actually smell his scent, a wild, rank odor of river bottom and rotting fish and pine.

Holy, Jesus, my knees are shaking. The sliding door is only a few feet away, but the bear is closer to it than I am. What do they say? Never run from a bear? Stand tall and wave your arms? Make yourself look big? No, that's for black bears. What was the advice about grizzlies? Oh, now I remember: Forget it, man, you're dead meat.

As I stand there looking into this bear's coal black eyes, every prayer I've never prayed comes to mind. My insides turn to liquid. Weird thoughts circulate through my head, my mother kissing me good-bye on the first day of school, the glow in my Dad's eyes when I was awarded my eagle scout, sitting back with the coffins of dead comrades on my way back from Vietnam, the sight of Louise's tousled blonde hair after the first time we made love, Janine, our beautiful, dimple-faced baby girl, Louise's last words, her dying breath. With my crazed sight I almost imagine that the bear cocks his head slightly, that his eyes soften. Then I remember—you're never ever supposed to look a bear in the eye. It challenges them. You do it, and they'll attack for sure.

What the hell, isn't this what I've been wishing for? Isn't this the easy way out?

Again the bear roars. Just as it does, the eagle swoops down and snatches at the top of the bear's head with its talons. The bear stumbles backwards and sits down with a thump that makes the deck shake. The eagle banks to the left and circles around for a second pass. Metal screeches against wood as I shove the chaise out of my way. Moving in what seems like slow motion, I make it to the sliding glass door, slip inside, and slide it closed. My legs give out. With a motion like limp spaghetti, I drop to the floor. Heart's fibrillating to beat the band. Know I ought to go get my shotgun, but I'm too weak. I lean against the side of the couch and close my eyes. The world goes blank.

When I open my eyes, there's no sign of either the bear or the eagle. First I go get my Remington, then quietly and slowly I open the sliding glass door. No sign of the fish either. Glancing from side to side I step out onto the deck. Way up off to the right my white-hooded sentry sits perched on his branch. He was guarding more than the river tonight.

In the distance an eighteen wheeler groans as it shifts gears going up hill. I pull out my cell phone and study it for a minute. Maybe I'll give my daughter a call after all. Time those grandboys learned how to fish.

Bio- Cathy lives in San Diego, California with her husband Barry, a child psychologist. Her inspiration to write came in high school when she surprised everyone, including herself, by winning the Bishop's School creative writing club contest. Four years later she graduated with a degree in English Literature from UC Berkeley. After pursuing a career in computer programming, she returned to her true love, writing.

She is a member of several writer/critique groups and has completed eleven short stories and two novels, *Watch Over Thy Child* and *Moskovsky Station*, both winners of the San Diego Book Awards. Her second novel, *Moskovsky Station*, received editor's choice at the San Diego State University Writers Conference.

### Extended Family

by John Tavares

"So, like, why do we have to go to the beach all the time?"

Hayward glanced through the *Toronto Star* newspaper, searching intently for the article his wife had told him he should find about her ex-husband the police officer. He finally came across the article in the city and regional news section, next to an advertisement for lawyers specializing in wrongful death and injury lawsuits. Jason's father had been acquitted on the most egregious charges of aggravated assault against a drug suspect who had been arrested and placed in his custody. Although there were discrepancies and inconsistencies in the purported victim's testimony—due in part to the injuries his client suffered, his lawyer stated—the suspect claimed he had been awakened in his sleep in his jail cell and then tasered, apparently in retribution for resisting arrest and refusing to cooperate with police. He glanced at the boy, who glimpsed up from his e-book reader, looking pensive and apprehensive. He tried to hide the damp, sandy *Toronto Star* newspaper beneath his beach towel, so that Jason wouldn't be able to read the offending article, but he later caught the boy glancing at the piece.

"So, like, why do we have to go to the beach all the time?" Jason repeated.

"All the time?"

"Well, today?"

"Because it's sunny, it's hot, and it's humid—once you factor in the humidity, for instance, it's almost forty degrees Celsius."

"So?"

Hayward sighed in exasperation. "So it's the best thing to do on a hot day. If you want to cool off, just jump in the lake. It's the best air conditioning out there. It's natural."

"That lake is a cesspool. The sewage from a million people at least is floating around in that water."

"There are no health warnings against swimming in that lake, and some environmental organizations have rated it as one of the cleanest for swimming around."

"You're trying to tell me that lake is clean?"

How did he manage to entangle himself in an argument with this boy, his stepson, who consistently scored in the highest percentile on intelligence

metrics and academic tests at his elementary and middle school. “I just thought you wouldn’t mind taking a swim.”

“But swimming isn’t the best thing to do. There’s plenty of activities for us on a hot day. We could go to the zoo or the amusement park.”

“We did those things last week when the weather was cooler. Besides, your brothers and sisters like the beach.”

“They are not my brothers and sisters. They are my half-brothers and half-sisters. They are my stepbrothers and stepsisters.”

Jason kicked sand onto Hayward’s beach towel and his rangefinder camera. The kid’s careless footwork even knocked over his cup of coffee, his beverage of choice even in the hot, scorching weather, spilling coffee on his collection of business newspapers and magazines. “I can’t help it if my mother sleeps with any man she gives an erection.”

“What are you talking about?” Hayward abruptly stood up and shook the sand from his legs. Later, after the police arrested him, he realized he should have disciplined the boy right at that point for his offensive speech and insulting his mother, nipping his bad behavior in the bud, instead of allowing his disrespectful conduct to run rampant throughout the day. “How long have I known you?”

Hayward had his back to the setting sun and Jason peered at him with an angry face, his eyes squinting against the light. “For as long as I can remember.”

“And I’ve known you since before you can even remember.”

“So what?”

“I thought we went through this before.”

“We’ve been through many things before.” Jason retorted, mimicking his stepfather’s English accent. “And I’m still wondering why you still speak with a limey accent.”

“Because I’m English.”

“My Dad says his division commander is English, but he lost his accent after just a few years.”

“Well, I’m Cockney.”

“So that gives you an excuse to talk like you’re the Queen’s butler?”

“Never mind.”

“And you have a degree from university?”

“I have a bachelor’s degree in psychology from The University of London and a degree in business administration from York University.”

“And you’re babysitting my mother’s kids.”

He was once again prepared to tell him he had first met his mother, an intense, physically and mentally strong, well-educated, dark-haired woman, with high cheekbones, whom a colleague in the theatre arts department at the university had described as built like a porn star—when she was his professor of microeconomics at York University. Hayward had first met Jason’s mother while he was riding the Toronto Transit Commission express bus from Downsview subway station to York University’s Keele campus. She was wearing skin tight black jeans, snakeskin cowboy boots, and a short waist-length leather jacket, looked to be about a decade older than him, and was reading an obscure academic journal in pdf format on her razor-thin laptop computer. Hayward stood up to disembark from the bus to take a shortcut, a trail across the campus to the Schulich School of Business, and the bus-driver abruptly stopped. When his shoulder struck a guardrail, his takeout coffee went flying, and he spilled a venti Sumatra roast Starbucks coffee he had been nursing on her lap and laptop computer. She wanted him to pay the cost of replacing the laptop, which Hayward afterwards learned wasn’t even damaged, and they dickered back and forth for a few weeks through e-mails and hasty meetings in faculty department corridors until they agreed on reasonable compensation. The following semester he discovered to his dismay he was enrolled in her three credit, third year course *The Microeconomics of Canadian Real Estate*. But, by the next semester, when he enrolled in her Price Fixing seminar, they were engaged to be married.



Poking with his big toe, Hayward started drawing lines in the sand. "Time-out." The boy was grimacing, tense, looking as if he was ready for a knockdown brawl. Hayward did not want to argue with Jason, who insisted on viewing his e-book reader all day and all night, refused to swim or play volleyball or tag football with his brothers and sisters, and wallowed in the misery of a life of mind deprived of the pleasure and conditioning of physical activity. Hayward strolled across the expanse of hot sand to the ice cream vendor's truck parked close to the boardwalk. He returned with several soft ice cream cones. Jason refused the offer of an ice cream cone, saying he refused to be bribed or conned by gifts of junk food. Then he watched resentfully as everybody ate them. Jason gulped, grimaced, and gazed at the lake and pressed buttons and tabs on his e-book reader as he flipped the electronic pages on the matte white screen. He muttered something about his stepfather buying vanilla ice cream cones when he knew he preferred chocolate, which wasn't available from this particular ice cream vendor. But when Hayward asked him to repeat what he said, the boy looked away from him, pretending he didn't hear.

"So."

"So." Hayward gazed straight into Jason's eyes, envying the deep blue, a feature he found particularly attractive in his mother.

"So, when are you going to get, like, a real job instead of being, like, our day-care worker?"

Hayward gritted his teeth and clenched his fist.

"We've been over this before, too. We're starting to go in circles all over again. You know your mother makes enough money. I can afford to stay at home and look after you and your brothers and sisters." Hayward had even argued with Syrena over whether they should tell the kid about the ever growing amount of money he made investing her portfolio in the stock market and real estate, but he thought it best if the boy remained in the dark, while Syrena thought her son's opinion of Hayward was overdue for a revision. For his part, he thought the talk of money might cause him to worry needlessly and, anyway, the couple's financial transactions were none of his business, even if it might help him gain a more realistic perspective of his stepfather.

"I can look after myself. And, she's my mother, not yours."

“And?”

“And you’re a man.”

“Right.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“What is the problem?” Hayward asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“You have no idea.”

Jason’s half-brother couldn’t finish his ice cream. Hayward debated with himself as to whether he should offer the kid the cone for which nobody else had an appetite, when Jason started uttering more imprecations that angered him; in the end, he licked the melting ice cream from his hand and hurtled the cone down at the sand. Several young women in bikinis gazed fiercely at Hayward through their dark glasses. Hayward began to wonder what sort of conversation and dialogue and discussions Jason was having with his father, his biological father, when he went and visited him during the weekend over the summer. The rest of the year he was in the custody of his father but during the summer he spent weekdays with his mother. When he returned home from supper, Syrena wanted to know precisely what it was that had transpired between him and Jason that day. Saying he had a headache, Hayward started brewing a fresh pot of coffee. As far as he was concerned coffee and caffeine, Hayward told Syrena, were the best cures for a headache.

Jason attached his e-book reader to the desktop computer to recharge the battery. His mother barbecued steaks while she listened to her oldest son complain and insist he wanted to stay with his father from now on, even during the summer, even though the boy had discussed his summertime living arrangement with his mother before, and she had nixed his plans. Jason’s father also didn’t think it would work out, that is, Justin staying with him, since he was currently dating and living with another police officer who wasn’t that certain about stepchildren since she wanted to have children of her own.

After Jason ate a piece of cake, he went to his bedroom with his e-book reader fully charged.

“As far as I’m concerned, he can do what he wants.”

“That’s not the right attitude to have.”

“He doesn’t have the right attitude, period, and I was, I am, disgusted with it. I’m just wondering what his father is saying to him during his weekend visitations.”

“The usual things. He’s a very traditional man, morally.”

“Well, I don’t think his philosophy is meshing with our family.”

“You have to make it fit and work,” Syrena said.

“I’ve done everything I can to make it mesh. I’m tired of it. I’ve given up.”

“Well, it’s beginning to sound like it’s not enough. You need to do more.”

“You know, I think that at the rate we’re going, you’re going to have to choose between Jason and me.”

“I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

“I’m just being realistic.”

Jason came into living room wearing only his Batman costume without the helmet over his pajamas and slippers. “He’s right. You’re going to have to choose, mom.”

“Jason, you’re supposed to be in bed.”

“You have to face facts, Mom. He’s not a good father, and he’s not a good man.”

Hayward crossed his arms and looked at Syrena, as if to say, see, I told you so.

“Jason, where did you ever get ideas like that?”

“I can think.”

“He can think.”

“He’s a nothing, a loser, a deadbeat dad, and a misfit, Mom. I don’t know why you married him.”

“Take that back.” Syrena approached him.

“Listen to your mother.”

Jason told him that his ugly face would burn in hell for eternity. Stunned by the hatred on the boy’s facial expression, and the menacing tone of his voice, Hayward backhanded him. For the first time in his life, at least since grade school, Hayward actually struck somebody. He later told Syrena he had been drinking coffee with an Irish cream liqueur non-stop since he returned from the beach and Lake Ontario. He wasn’t fully conscious of the force he put into the blow. The boy howled and screamed and wouldn’t shut his mouth until Syrena drove him to Toronto East General hospital. When they arrived at the hospital emergency room, they explained to the emergency room physician and nurses’ that he had fallen down the stairs. The physician couldn’t find any sign of physical injury, bruises, cuts or abrasions, but, to be on the safe side, the doctor prescribed some low dose pain killer and performed a neurological examination to determine if he had a concussion.

After he was discharged from the hospital, Hayward apologized, saying he hadn’t intended to hurt him, but Jason went into a colossal sulk and became mute. As his mother drove him home to his father, she also apologized to Jason and asked the boy not to leave her with a guilty conscience; he said nothing. However, he did tell his biological father during a weekend visit what had happened. As his father was a police officer, the complaint was expedited, handled in near record time. Hayward ended up being arrested and charged with assault.

As soon as Syrena learned he was in police detention, she drove to the west end detention facility with a lawyer she had hired, a colleague from York University, who taught at Osgoode Law School. They both tried to reassure him they would obtain his acquittal. Later that night, as Hayward slept in the cell, he received a visit from Jason’s father. Hayward heard a click in the lock of the cell as he napped. The next moment he was tasered with a fully charged stun gun. He writhed and thrashed and screamed in agony against the jolts from the electrified prongs stuck to his chest. Then his assailant dropped the stun gun. Hayward caught a glimpse of Syrena’s ex-husband, and he cowered beneath the blows from a nightstick. Afterwards, the side of

his face was swollen so that he could not see out his right eye. Syrena photographed his injuries and brought him to the emergency room after he was released into her custody.

Hayward tried to explain to her that he had not meant to strike her son. He couldn't say their son, which was how he previously referred to Jason with Syrena simply because now he could simply no longer think of the boy as his son.

"You already told me that."

"Because it's true."

"Then why do you need to keep repeating it?"

"Because it was an accident."

"I know. I understand."

"I mean, I had meant to strike him, as a form of physical discipline."

"Of course."

"But I hadn't meant to hit him hard."

"I know. And you didn't hit him hard. You struck him with as much force necessary to discipline him—with as much force as any father would have struck him when I was growing up. But I guess the times have changed."

He told her he didn't care for this parenting business anymore.

"What sort of nonsense are you talking about?" She stroked his hair. "It was an accident." She kissed his cheek, which was unshaven, and, in fact, initially he had abandoned shaving out of neglect, but now he deliberately wanted to grow a beard. "You're just being too hard on yourself."

After Hayward was released on his own recognizance into the custody of his wife, he started taking nightly strolls along the rustic old city neighborhood along Bloor Street West. His wife thought he was hiking through the park, but usually he stood peeling stickers from the composite glass in a phone booth as he spoke on the pay telephone long distance with his mother. Using a prepaid calling card, he called from Old Mill subway station to the

family residence in a suburb of London. To comfort and console him, his mother reminded him of the time she hurtled a small frying pan, the force of which knocked him out, after he accidentally killed her pet baby duck when he slammed the kitchen door.

He wound up making several shopping trips on the sly to Walmart as he wound up using several ten dollar prepaid calling cards, racking up long distance charges to his mother. He told his mother that he had decided that after five years with Syrena it was time for a change. The boy was right. He didn't think he could be a nanny to her children any longer. He thought the ten year age difference between him and Syrena was now too large.

At the provincial courthouse in the heritage building downtown, Old City Hall, no one came forth as a witness when his court case was heard. Raising his brow, piqued by the number of children Syrena had from different fathers and Hayward's younger age, and other unusual circumstances surrounding the case, the judge heard the crown prosecutor's monotonic voice make a plea to drop the case against Hayward, as if the charges had been as routine as a parking infraction. The judge summarily dismissed the case. Hayward's gratitude and relief in the courtroom was palpable, as he painfully rapped his knuckles when he knocked his fist against the hardwood railing. He would have thanked the judge, but Syrena's lawyer advised him to keep his mouth shut. He warned that kind of gesture, expressing those kinds of sentiments, would have been gratuitous, against his best interests.

Hayward had already decided to put the business administration degree that he had earned at York University to work in the financial district in London. Through his mother's family connections, he would find work as a commodities broker in the City of London. He decided that after five years of marriage to Syrena, after five years of parenting her children, whom he had initially regarded as his own since they were a couple, he could no longer undertake this role. He tried to explain this frustration over the long distance telephone to his mother, across the Atlantic in London, much to her consternation. He couldn't help regarding Jason as some recalcitrant child in some classroom he had been asked to mind as a substitute teacher. None of Syrena's children were his biologically—since Syrena was twice divorced by the time he met her. He simply decided that since he wasn't a father and couldn't help thinking of himself as a lackey to Syrena, that he would fade from the picture so that they could resume their lives and presumably live happily ever after. He boarded the British Airways 747

jumbo jet late from Pearson International Airport on a summer night, almost five years to the day after first meeting Syrena and becoming her husband. Strangely enough, as he felt the energy from the bustle and the hurly burly in the vast concourse of the airport terminal, he experienced a sense of exhilaration and liberation. Feeling the enormous energy of the thrust from the huge turbine engines as the huge passenger jet took off, he felt grateful to the boy for startling him out of a sense of complacency and tranquil domesticity, for opening his eyes to the vastness, electricity, and vibrancy of the rest of the world around him.

Bio- Born and raised in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, John Tavares is the son of Portuguese immigrants from the Azores. His formal education includes graduation from the 2-year General Arts and Science program at Humber College in Etobicoke (1993); graduation from the 3-year journalism program at Centennial College in East York (1996); graduation from the BA, Specialized Honours in English literature at York University in North York (2012).

He has written a large amount of fiction, mostly short stories, but some novellas, since 1986. His previous publications include *Blood & Aphorisms*, Plowman Press, *Green's Magazine*, *Filling Station*, *Whetstone*, *Broken Pencil*, *Tessera*, *Windsor Review* and *Paperplates*. During journalism studies, he also had some articles and features published in *East York Observer*, *East York Times*, *Beaches Town Crier*, *Outreach Connection* (the 90's version) and *Our Toronto* as well as community newspapers such as York University's *Excalibur* and *Hospital News*, where he interned as an editorial assistant. He has recently written a novel and is an avid photographer.

## Fortune

by Richard Luftig

With this town going broke, there's not much future in fortune telling anymore. Folks out of work and scuffling to pay the mortgage don't need me to predict how bleaker things are likelier to get.

Clementville is halfway between Indianapolis and Fort Wayne, what newspapers call the Rust Belt. But there's not much left around here left to rust. We had a lumber mill, but that shut down. There's the RV factory fifty miles away in Kokomo but even that's holding on by a thread.

You're probably not clairvoyant, so I'll tell you about myself. My name is Bernadette Reilly, I'm fifty-two years old, and I'd be shading the truth if I

didn't tell you I look five years older. I have gray eyes and even grayer hair that I've stopped tinting. I was pretty good looking once, but that was a long time ago.

That's what happens when you marry at seventeen, have a daughter, and the guy leaves you.

Luckily, when I was a girl, my mother told fortunes on the side. She ran it out of her apartment in Philadelphia to help pay the rent. I watched her and learned. When my husband left, I slid into that line of work. People say that I'm good.

Yesterday, Amy, who runs the beauty salon a few doors down, came over to see me. She did that when business was slow. I didn't mind-- after all, how many times could I practice reading tarot cards that gave bad news?

Her real name is Amihan, and she's from the Philippines, but folks around here are used to names like John and Mary so they just call her Amy. Don't ask me what her last name is, it's unpronounceable.

Amy's about five-feet-nothing and on the plus side of two-hundred fifty pounds. Let's just say she makes me look svelte and I've been told by my doctor to shed forty pounds. She came to the States fifteen years ago when she was twenty. She was one of those mail order brides that horny men who can't get a date have come over from poor countries in Asia. She was expecting a good provider who looked like Tom Cruise and he was counting on a sex-kitten. Suffice it to say they were both disappointed.

He had a nasty habit of drinking then beating on her like a Chinese gong, so one day she put enough Ambien in his coffee to stun a moose and hopped the first bus not even asking where it was headed. How she finally drifted to Clementville, I've never been able to figure out.

This morning, she walked in my shop wearing a white surgical mask that she keeps on whenever she does someone's nails. "If you're coming in to rob me," I said, "you're wasting your time. I haven't had a customer all day."

Amy laughed. "No, I'm just too ugly to show my face in public. I don't want to scare any children." We've been sharing the same joke for years.



“You got anything to drink in this place?” she said.

“Jesus, it's 11:00 in the morning. A little early to start hitting the sauce.”

She took off the mask. I could see that today's shade of lipstick was purple making her heavy lips look like overripe prunes. “It's 10 P.M. in Manila,” she said. “Perfect time for a nightcap.”

I took out a bottle of cheap whisky, two juice glasses and poured us a double. “Knock yourself out.”

She took a swig and grimaced. “This stuff is terrible.”

“Thursday was a good year,” I said. “Don't knock a freebie.”

“I heard a rumor that the RV plant is closing.”

I emptied my glass in one gulp. I'm Irish on both sides. Downing shots are part of my birthright. “That rumor's been circulating for months.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But this one is from a pretty reliable source.”

“What source? One of the people on the assembly line? They spread things faster than a slut with herpes.”

“Slut?” she asked. Even after all her time in this country, Amy still hadn't mastered the nuances of English.

“Forget about it.” I said. “What sources?”

“The wife of one of the assistant managers. She comes in every other week to have her nails done. One of the few regular customers I have left.”

“How does she know?” I asked.

“Her husband fills her in on all the gossip She seemed pretty sure.”

“Damn. That plant closes and you might as well put the last nail in the town's coffin.”

Amy's voice lowered. "Bernadette, what are you going to do?"

"I have no idea"

"Aren't you a fortune teller?"

"Very funny," I said.

"What about Paula. Couldn't you stay with her?"

Paula is my daughter. She lives in Orlando. We hadn't spoken in three years. She's married to a successful businessman. She didn't go around telling friends that her mother reads Tarot cards for a living.

I shook my head. "I don't need to run the Psychic Hotline to know that idea isn't going to fly."

"You don't know if you don't try."

We'd had this conversation before and it was always a dead end. "Please Amy, give it a rest. If this is the best we can do for sparkling conversation, I might as well go to Mike's for lunch. Besides, it beats sitting here all day waiting for nonexistent customers."

Mike runs the only bar left in town. He serves food as an afterthought. I used to eat the hotdogs at the Seven-Eleven; you know the ones that have been cooking on that rotisserie since six in the morning. They don't taste bad and they're two for a dollar. But Mike said that if a person could sell hotdogs for fifty cents, pay the store's bills and still make a profit, what's in the meat? He had a point.

I felt bad that I had snapped at Amy. She was my best friend in what passes for this crummy world.

"How about coming over tonight for dinner," I said. "I'll boil up a pot of spaghetti."

Her face brightened. "I love spaghetti. Did you know it's the national dish of the Philippines?"

I laughed. "Whatever. About five?"

"Let's make it six," she said. "I have a woman coming in for a foot massage and pedicure."

I conjured up the image of that in my mind. "Some people have all the luck."

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As soon as I walked into the bar, Mike made me a boilemaker. Some folks might think that has something to do with a furnace, but people in Indiana know it's a shot of Southern Comfort and a beer.

"About time," he said. "I've been waiting for you all day." He said that every time I came in. "Business is slow. How about you and I go in back room for some heavy necking?" Mike is seventy-five years old and uses a walker. He's asked me the same question for twenty years.

"I don't have sex with married men."

"Then I'll marry you."

I feigned shock. "That's bigamy."

"Yeah, it's big of me, too. But what the hell."

I have to admit the old jokes work best. "Thanks anyway," I responded. "I'll pass."

I saw his mood had gone serious. "Kind of sad, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"The RV plant is closing."

"That's just a rumor," I told him.

He sighed. "You ain't much of a fortune teller. I heard it from someone who knows about these things. The announcement's coming in a few days."

It was cold and dark in the bar, like death was closing around us. “What are you going to do?” I asked.

He wiped his lips with the back of a liver-spotted hand. “Damned if I know. All me and Rose got is this bar and the apartment in the back.”

He paused. “Besides, we’re too old to pick up and move everything to some strange city in some strange state.”

He eyed me, slyly. “Not like you youngsters who can pull up stakes and move on a dime.”

I laughed and drank some of my beer. “Thanks for the youngster part.”

There was a few seconds of silence. “So, if the worst comes to pass, are you going to move down to Florida to be with Paula?”

I felt myself getting angry. “That’s the second time today somebody has brought her up. Is there a conspiracy to get me to leave town?”

Mike ignored my question. “What is it with you two, anyway?”

“She’s ashamed of what her mother does for a living.”

He wiped a glass and put it back on the rack over the bar. “Maybe, but that’s not the whole story. What’s really going on?”

I swirled what was left of the beer in my glass. “Is this a confession? This place doesn’t look like a church.”

Mike took the hint and refilled my glass. “Maybe it is. They say confession is good for the soul.”

“Only on a deathbed,” I said. “Who’s dying?”

“Just the town,” he answered. “So what’s the issue between the two of you?”

I wondered if I wanted to go into it but I figured, what the hell, he was good at keeping things to himself. It was a bartending prerequisite.

"It's her father," I began, "my ex. Harrison was terrible to me, but he adored Paula, and she idolized him in return. Neither could do anything wrong in each other's eyes. He left when she was twelve. Instead of turning her anger on him, she put everything on me. She told me every chance she got that it was all my fault that he left, that I drove him out. When she was sixteen, she told me that the wrong parent had moved away. After that, she started getting high or drunk every chance she got and telling me that she wished I was dead.

"Finally, one day when had gotten suspended for showing up drunk to school, I had enough. I told her if she wanted to be with her father so badly, that the door leading out was right in the front of the house. She left the next day."

"And you haven't seen her since?"

"We've seen each other off and on over the years...but we're like oil and water. She says something, I say something, and the same crap starts up again. The last time I saw her was when Josephine, her daughter, my granddaughter, was born. I flew down to help her, but it was a lost cause. I came back to Indiana two days later."

"Things change, times change," he said. "A granddaughter needs her grandmother. And with the town dying a mother may need her daughter."

"I don't think it would work."

Instead of answering me, Mike turned and hobbled over to the register. He opened the drawer and took out some change.

He plunked the coins in front of me. "Go call your kid."

I looked past him into the mirror. The woman who stared back at me looked so old, so tired. No, the best word for her was *beaten*. I wondered when it had all gone south, my loneliness, the loss of my daughter, my whole sorry life.

I rolled the sides of the quarters between my thumb and index finger like a poker player pondering to go all in.

Mike put his hand over mine. "Do it," he urged.

I walked to the phone booth in the back, put in two quarters, surprised that after all this time I still remembered Paula's number.

Her phone rang. She was probably at work. I was ready to hang up.

On the fifth ring Paula picked up.

"Hello?"

I tried to say her name, but no sound came out.

"Hello? Who is this?"

I quietly hung up the phone, stared at the receiver for a few moments and returned to the bar.

"That was quick," Mike commented.

"Nobody answered," I lied.

"Doesn't she have an answering machine?"

"I don't know. It didn't pick up. Maybe her message box is full." I consoled myself. At least the last part of my statement was true.

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Amy showed up for dinner at seven. I learned years ago that if I invited her at six she would show up at seven at the earliest. So, I didn't start cooking until six-thirty.

She had two bottles of cheap red wine that she had picked up at the 7-Eleven. I'd seen them there going for \$2.99 and that was full price. If the owner of the store made a profit on fifty-cent hotdogs, what was he squeezing out of a three-dollar bottle of wine?

Amy put one bottle in my freezer for a quick chill and walked to the stove. "Your sauce smells great. What's in it?"

“Ragu,” I said.

“I don’t understand. What’s Ragu?”

I smiled. “Think of it as Italian Hamburger Helper.”

She nodded, obviously not getting the joke.

We sat down at the table, unscrewed the wine and dished out dinner. I had to give it to Amy; the girl is what we call in Indiana 'a good eater'. By the third helping of spaghetti and halfway through the second bottle of wine we were both gorged and tipsy.

Amy cleared the table and I went into the living room, sat on the couch and turned on the television. I found an old movie starring June Allyson.

Amy joined me on the couch with a large bag of potato chips. God only knew where the chips came from.

About halfway into the film, she said, “Bernadette, I have to tell you something.”

I glanced at her sideways. “Right now? We’re getting to the good part. Can’t it wait?”

“Please, it’s important.”

I put the television on mute. She could probably see that I wasn’t happy. “What is it?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Are you sick? I told you that spaghetti, chips and cheap wine don’t mix.”

“No,” she said. “I’m leaving Clementville.”

“Why? When?”

She sighed. “Why is for the usual reasons. The town is dead and I can’t make a living here anymore. When is as soon as I can make arrangements.

I felt like crying. Amy was the closest thing I’d ever had to a sister.

“Where?”

She looked at her wine glass as if she needed a reinforcement of courage. “I have a cousin near Chicago. I’ll stay with her a while. Maybe I can get work in somebody’s salon.

“Jesus,” was all I could say.

“What about you,” she asked. “What are you going to do? Why don’t you speak to Paula?”

“Matter of fact, I spoke to her this afternoon.” Lie number two.

“You did? Are you moving to Orlando?”

“We’re working things out.” I was getting pretty good at this lying thing. “I’m not sure, though.”

Amy’s face brightened. “Why don’t you do a card reading?”

She caught me off-guard. “On myself?”

“Sure, why not? Then you’d know what to do.”

I didn’t know how to answer. Did she really believe that I could tell the future? I thought she always knew that it was at least half a ruse.

“It doesn’t work that way,” I tried to explain.

“Why not?”

“It’s kind of like how a doctor isn’t allowed to operate on anyone in his own family. It’s one of the rules.”

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t know.” She looked crestfallen. “So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t have a clue.” That time I was telling the truth.

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I awoke from a nightmare. I didn’t know where I was. Then, I slowly I became used to my surroundings. I was on the couch. The television screen



was filled with snow. Amy was gone. It must have been the middle of the night. I had fallen asleep and Amy had let herself out.

My temples were pounding. I swore to lay off cheap wine no matter how many bottles Amy brought over.

My breath became regular and I tried to remember what I had dreamed. Frame by frame, like a movie, it came back to me.

I was in my shop. There was someone sitting across from me but I couldn't see who. They were shrouded in darkness.

I was doing a reading. I uncovered card after card, but each one was bad. I became afraid that I was going to lose the customer who might refuse to pay.

I panicked, fearing that I was running out of time. I had only one more chance to turn a good card and make things right.

I turned over the card. It was the *Major Arcana*, the *Thirteenth Trump*. The Death Card.

My customer gasped. Slowly, light moved down her face from forehead to chin. By the time it reached the nose, I realized the client was me.

I knew the Thirteenth Trump could mean physical death or it might mean the death of the past and the birth of something new. When a customer got the Major Arcana, I always gave the second explanation. It seemed to satisfy them and they left reassured and hopeful.

Did it signal my death? I tried to figure out what the card in my dream meant. Maybe it meant that I was starting out on a new path. I cursed that I hadn't been able to stay asleep for just a few moments longer to see which was the right reading.

I remembered how Amy told me that she was leaving Clementville. I had thought her foolish but maybe she was the smart one. At what point does a person give up on a town, give up on their life? At what point is it the right decision to just move on?

When I got up to turn off the television, I saw the message light flashing on the telephone. Between dinner, drinking two bottles of wine and the movie,

I guess I had missed it. I didn't have caller ID. It was probably a salesman or, even worse, a bill collector.

Bending slightly, I pushed the button. "Mom," a voice came over the speaker phone, "this is Paula."

I sat down, shaking. Paula never called unless she absolutely had to. I figured someone had died. I prayed it wasn't my granddaughter.

"Someone tried to call me today from your area code. I didn't recognize the number. They just hung up. Was that you? Is everything okay?"

There was an awkward silence as if she was waiting for someone to pick up. "Alright, Mom. Call me if you get the chance." Then the phone hung up.

My daughter had called and she sounded concerned-- no worried-- as if she really cared. I sat back down and tried to figure out what I was feeling. Afraid. Confused. But the third emotion took me a long moment to identify.

What I felt was loved.

I thought about calling Paula back, asking her if I could crash in her basement for awhile, more importantly, asking her if she would share in the next, new chapters of my life. But I knew that she'd be mad that I woke her. Besides, what would I do if she hung up?

First thing in the morning I'd pack the car with what I needed. Then I'd mail the keys to the landlord. He could keep the furniture and appliances and get what he could for them.

And the tarot cards on the table in the shop. He could keep those too. I didn't know exactly for sure how my fortune was going to play out, but I was reasonably certain that in the part of Orlando I was going to, they weren't going to be in great demand.

Bio- I am a professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio now residing in California. I am a recipient of the Cincinnati Post-Corbett Foundation Award for Literature and a semi-finalist for the Emily Dickinson Society Award for Poetry. My stories have appeared in numerous magazines including *Bloodroot*, *Front Porch Review*, *Silkscreen Literary Review*, and *Pulse Literary Journal*. One of my published short stories was nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize.

## The Good War

by Lee Marc Stein

As we pulled away from David and Rebecca's house in our rented car, we did not speak. I wanted to make sure we navigated the local streets leading to the freeway successfully, and was concerned about possible traffic tie-ups and then snarls at the security lines at the airport. Carole, afraid we'd miss the rental-car return exit off the freeway, had her head buried in the Google map David had printed out. Our drive went smoothly, and a half hour after we left them, we were through security and sitting in the Starbucks a five minute walk from our gate.

"Mother of God!" Carole exclaimed.

I smiled. "More like Mother of the Devil."

Her face was a poster for disbelief. "Never have I seen anything like it," she said. "How mean-spirited – to yell at him, to pick at everything he said, for three days – and in front of us. I mean she berated him for taking us to the wrong gas station."

"A couple of times I wanted to scream 'I can't take it any more' and run out of the house."

"And I didn't want to talk about it, even in our bedroom after they went to bed, because I thought she might have our room bugged."

I reached across the table for her hand. She kept shaking her head as if it were a way to erase the horror we had witnessed.

"David is so sweet," she said. "How could they be married for 43 years? How could he take it and not walk out? Doesn't he hear what she's doing to him?"

"I think he does. Once, when she said he was wrong about something but it wasn't worth fighting about, he said 'Why not? We always fight about everything else.'"

Carole squeezed my hand. “We’re so lucky,” she said. “After 31 years, we have such a good marriage, such respect for each other that we’d never say anything negative in front of anyone else.”

“Oh, I totally agree, but I think this is something beyond respect. This is perverse. My ex-wife had no respect for me, yet for all the nasty things Diane said to me over 15 years, she never once yelled at me or made snide remarks outside the house.”

“But in some ways, Rebecca has a lot of respect for him. When you and David were out walking, she was telling me what a good father he was, how kind he is to her brother and sister, how caring and conscientious he had been as a dermatologist.”

On the long plane ride back to the East Coast, the sheer exhaustion of the three day Punch-and-Judy Show kept us nodding off. We didn’t bring up the topic again in our limo ride from the airport home either, but in our phone conversations with family and friends over the next few days, we always talked about the experience. It had been like witnessing a ritual murder.

When I talked to my daughter, her first reaction was, “That must have made you and Carole terribly uncomfortable.” “Yes, you’ve got it,” I said, and because her own children had recently told Carole how mean my ex-wife was, I added, “David’s wife made your mother look like a saint.”

Over these days, every time Carole or I would get off the phone, we’d walk over to the other and give hugs and kisses. Yes, our marriage had been happy and strong, but now we were more grateful than ever.

My mind kept going back to the scenes of the crime. There was something out of sync.

One night they took us to a sushi place in the student quarter of Seattle. Her sniping was not nearly as rapid-fire as it had been at home. At one point, she excused herself to go to the bathroom and when she returned, she went to the back of David’s chair, put her arms around him and gave him a hug. The same thing happened when we went for lunch the next day at a restaurant on Bainbridge Island.

While these touches were not nearly deep or frequent enough to heal the terrible burns she had inflicted upon David, they did raise my curiosity.

What was their married life truly like? Did she reprise *Ethan Frome's* Zeena for all their guests?

I decided I had to call Nathan Rosen. He, David and I were a childhood triumvirate from the time we were eight. I had last seen Nathan about five years ago in New York City. Carole and I had come in to have dinner with him and his then girlfriend. I hadn't spoken to him since.

He didn't seem surprised to hear from me – with him, the past was always the present and the future. I asked how his children were. David had told me that his girlfriend had broken up with him.

"Nathan, Carole and I just came back from three days out in Seattle with David and Rebecca. He sends his regards. When's the last time you saw them?"

"Let's see. Must have been maybe 18 months ago, after Iris and I broke up."

"How were they?"

"He was having some problems with his back again."

"No, I mean how were THEY. Were they getting along?"

"Oh, same as always. She picks at him, yells at him, he smiles and doesn't say anything."

"You've spent a lot more time with him over the last 40 years than I have. Does this always go on with them?"

"Almost all the time. I thought maybe it was just me being there – she doesn't seem to like me much and maybe she gets back at him for that. But you know what? When I was there this last time, they made me feel better."

"Really? How?"

"Well, when I left, I didn't feel so bad about coming back to an empty apartment, about my breakup with Iris."

I let Nathan go into his litany of our childhood adventures for awhile. I owed him that since I wanted something from him.

“Nathan, I’m worried about David. I thought I might talk to his friend from college – the one we met at his son’s wedding. I don’t remember Harry’s last name. Do you, by any chance?”

Of course he did, and for some reason he had Harry’s phone number as well. He was our chronicler. I promised Nathan I would soon call him again and that the two of us would have dinner in the city (I did not want to subject Carole to another night of his nostalgic ramblings).

I made several attempts to have a phone conversation with Harry. When Carole asked why I was going through all this trouble, I explained that I couldn’t live with the fact that my friend was a beaten man.

When I finally reached Harry, I expressed sympathy for the loss of his wife, and recalled our conversation about Rushdie’s novels at David’s younger son’s wedding some eleven years ago. “Now Jacob’s married again, with a one-year old son,” I offered.

“David is so happy. He loves that child so.”

“That’s why I’m calling, Harry, about his happiness. My wife and I just came back from spending three days with them – three days of Rebecca constantly picking on him, yelling at him, grimacing. It’s so tough to see him going through that. Was she like that the last time you saw them?”

“Very much so. It was difficult for my wife and I to stay there, particularly because she had just come off a cycle of chemotherapy and was returning to Sloan Kettering for more. But a few days after we left, my wife felt better about her own situation. Funny thing is that Rebecca is never like this at our college reunions. She’s all over him with love.”

Just what was happening between them? Had David embarrassed her or yelled at her in public early in the marriage and now suffering from never-ending revenge? I could not let this rest. Maybe Ellen, David’s sister, had some insights, and I asked Harry for her phone number.

He did not have it. So I emailed David, saying that one of our neighbors was planning to move to Tucson where Ellen now lived and needed some advice about neighborhoods.

It took several days for David to return my email – unusual for him. Carole and I were now home from Seattle for almost two weeks, and our closeness had not abated. I kept telling myself how lucky I was, showering Carole with more affection than she was used to from me.

We had spent a few hours with Ellen and her husband Jon after the wedding eleven years ago, and I didn't know her very well when David and I were childhood friends. But David had described her once as a female Holden Caulfield – disgusted by the phoniness of the world – so I knew I should play it straight with her.

"Ellen, this is Steve Leavitt. We just came back from a few days with your brother."

"Oh, yes, I know," she said. "He was so happy you were coming. I spoke to him the other day and he said you'd be calling."

"Truth is, Ellen, I'm not calling for the reason he thinks. My wife and I were witnesses to something terrible when we were with him. Rebecca was incredibly nasty to him on a continuous basis – yelling at him, glaring, mocking. He looked so beaten. Since you're with him much more frequently, I wondered if it were like this all the time."

She was silent and I thought I had lost the connection with her.

"Oh, my God, I can't believe it."

"What?"

"It's the reverse. When Jon and I are with them, David is usually picking on her. Making cracks about the fact she can't cook, asking when she might do the wash, mocking her social and political stances. I don't like it. It turns my stomach when we're with them...but when Jon and I are alone again, somehow we're closer to each other. Earlier in our marriage – frankly, when I was doing some drugs – Jon was very critical of me and often in public."

Now I was the silent one. So many questions ran through my mind, questions I could not ask her. But I did ask for David's daughter's phone number and did not make any excuse.

I called under the pretext of wanting to buy some jazz recordings for her father's seventieth birthday since she shared that passion with him. Joyce was their middle child, now in her early 40s. She had moved away from their Seattle home some 15 years ago, but saw her parents once or twice a month.

"Joyce, I'm normally not a nosy person, and I certainly haven't been a big part of your parents' life over the past 30 years, but your father and I were very close as children. Your mother seems to be very angry at your father, criticizes him for every breath he takes. My wife and I witnessed it for three days a few weeks ago. Are they alright?"

"Oh, no," she said, with obvious distress in her voice. "I can't believe they've started this again."

"They?"

"Yes, they. It's all an act, a psychodrama."

"I don't believe it. Why? Why would they subject friends and family to that?"

"I don't know how well you knew my dad's mother and father."

"Not that well. He seemed like a fun dad the few times I was with him. She seemed more serious than most moms, a bit of a snob."

"Well they fought constantly when my dad was a kid. And Rebecca's parents were the same way. They were always terrified one of the parents would leave. There was never any peace in the house. Mom and Dad had a blowout fight that lasted for days when my brother was eight. He wouldn't stop crying for days and that got me crying too. I guess it was then Mom and Dad decided they would stop and also prevent children from suffering from arguments. As they got older, they wanted to get their married friends to enjoy the second half of their lives even more."

I reported this conversation to Carole.

"Do you buy it?" she asked.

"Makes some sense, particularly because David and Rebecca switch roles when his sister is there. But if their marriage is such a model, why did Joyce



never marry? She's a smart, attractive woman. Why did her older brother move away when he was barely 21 yet wait until he was 46 to marry? Why had her younger brother married twice out of the faith when the parents were so insistently Jewish, and why was he now living in Osaka watching his own infant son learn Japanese?"

Carole looked up at me. "Steve, does it really matter? We'll never know about them, whether they were putting on a play or just being themselves. But I do know about us -- seeing them act that way brought us to a new high as a couple. We traded three days of discomfort for more love for a long time."

I put my arms around her and hugged her tight and tried to contain the grin stealing across my face. "Right. You know that couple down the block? Whenever we see them socially, he's always making faces at her, as if she were the dumbest thing on earth. Suppose we..."

She stopped me there of course. "Steve, don't even think it. And don't think we're going to spend any time with David and Rebecca if they come to New York next summer, you idiot."

Bio- Lee Marc Stein is a retired marketing consultant living in East Setauket, Long Island. His poems have been published in *River Poets Journal*, *Still Crazy*, *Miller's Pond Poetry*, *Slow Trains Journal*, *The Write Room*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Blue & Yellow Dog*, *Blast Furnace* and *Message in a Bottle*. He has published short stories in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Cynic Online* and *Down in the Dirt*. Lee is finishing a chapbook of ekphrastic poems. He leads workshops at Stony Brook University's Lifelong Learning program on modern masters of the novel.

## Grievous Angie

by Ann Marie Meek

Angie crouched down, with some difficulty, in her tight green satin bell bottoms between a Camaro and a Mustang in the driveway. Squatting there, balanced on her platform shoes, she lit a cigarette and smoked it down as she waited for the Auld Lang Syne-ing, Happy New Year-ing, and midnight kissing to be over. She had followed this same procedure through all the high school parties and saw no reason to stop now that she was at a college party. Angie was not one to take a chance on being left out during the midnight kissing ritual, and the whole thing seemed ridiculously contrived

anyway. Fortunately, no one discovered her hidden there and she re-entered the house to the sound of “Stayin’ Alive” with her dignity intact.

The house was full of invincible college freshmen home from their universities for the winter break. As she walked through the sea of Izod shirts, sparkling “New Year’s Eve” attire, and feathered hair searching for her friend Kate, Angie cringed at the shrill laughter of the sorority sisters and the loud, testosterone-driven crowing of the frat boys. She had graduated with these people and was considered to be one of their crowd, although, while they had all gone to college in a mass exodus last fall, leaving Jackson for Ole Miss and Mississippi State, she was still living at home, selling make-up part-time at the mall and working on her drawings and paintings in her childhood bedroom. She had a stack of college applications and catalogs on her nightstand, and every night after leaving the mall, she went home, walked past the sounds of rage and sobbing coming from her parents’ bedroom, and sorted through them. She compared course requirements for art degrees and perused the pictures of students walking around campus and hanging out in dorm rooms, confident and beautiful, like young gods and goddesses cavorting about in their newfound realms.

Her dreams were strange and convoluted, full of fevered images of debauchery and ancient mythology mixed with images of LSU, Auburn, and Tulane from the catalogs. Night after night she went to sleep excited and hopeful, having made her final decision about which application to mail the next day. But every morning, the chosen application stayed on top of the stack on the nightstand, and she softly kissed her mother’s often red and swollen cheek on her way out of the door, promising to come straight home after work.

She made her way through the disco-thumping, inferno-burning, night-fevered rooms until she found Kate, stoned of course, giggling on the sofa in the basement with some like-minded Greeks, watching Monty Python and rubbing thighs with a smiling, dark-haired boy wearing mirrored sunglasses. It was quite a challenge to extract her from this warm, fuzzy cocoon, but Angie was persistent. Once she had Kate firmly in hand, the two girls shouldered and squeezed their way through the mass of sweating, disco-inflamed bodies and escaped through the kitchen door.

The night was clear and cold for Mississippi; the southern sky was lit by a heavy moon with a full complement of stars, and the girls’ breath came out

in clouds of vapor and cigarette smoke. They got into Angie's Olds 442 and sat shivering in their suede jackets, waiting for the car to warm up. When Kate started rummaging through the pile of eight track tapes on the floorboard, Angie quickly said, "Put in the Stones. I've got to get that disco crap out of my head." This was a sore spot between the two. While Kate was being swept away with disco fever along with most of her sorority sisters up at Ole Miss, Angie was firmly in the "disco sucks" camp. Kate still dug the Stones, though, so she popped in "Black and Blue" without complaint.

They drove off to the sound of "Hot Stuff", past the TG&Y parking lot where the jocks and cheerleaders were hanging out, past the Jitney Jungle parking lot where the band nerds and church kids were having their good, clean fun, and into the huge neighborhood of ranch houses where Angie lived. As they pulled into the neighborhood, they saw that there was a kick-ass party going on at Dion's house, which was normal, but tonight cars lined both sides of the street all the way to the stop sign. Dion was the magnetic, undisputed leader of the local hoods and heads, and he supplied most of the pot that was smoked in the area. Although he was known to all and adored by many, he was a couple of years older than the girls, so Angie and Kate had only admired him from a distance. However, they did have a connection. Kate's older brother, Stan, was one of Dion's lackeys, and his Chevelle was parked in the driveway. Fueled by the sexy, driving music, the mental image of Mick Jagger posturing on stage in his androgynous, erotic way, and their own young, warm blood, they slowed down to a crawl as they passed the house.

"Kate, I know what you're thinking, but we can't go in there."

"Why not? Stan's there. It'll be okay."

"No, it won't. I don't know those people and I'm not crashing their party. If you want to go, I'll drop you off and Stan can take you home later."

The argument went on like this while they slowly circled the block. For Angie, going to a party at Dion's just didn't seem doable, although the draw was almost irresistible. These were the kids who had parked their hot-rods behind the vo-tech building instead of in the main lot and smoked cigarettes behind the gym back in high school. They were the ones who had sat with arms folded during the pep rallies, sheets of long hair obscuring their expressionless faces. Angie had badly wanted to be one of them, and had decorated her bedroom with the psychedelic posters and candles that

were the ubiquitous design elements of their culture. She too had parked behind the vo-tech building and leaned against the gym wall during break, smoking Virginia Slims by herself while her own childhood friends hung out in the courtyard and flirted with the jocks. Despite her efforts, she never was able to break into their world. Pegged as a college-bound preppy, a characterization which she despised, she had given up on breaking into the group by graduation. However, she couldn't see herself as a sorority sister like Kate either, and was therefore lost in the proverbial chasm between two worlds.

Kate ultimately won the argument. They parked the Olds on the street and approached Dion's house. They could hear the Stones' "Jumping Jack Flash" playing, growing stronger and louder as they drew closer. It was a house just like the others on the street – flat roofed and red bricked. There was no need for Angie and Kate to knock at the door; it was standing open despite the coldness of the winter night. Through the doorway, they could just barely see people moving and dancing slowly in the murky, smoke-filled darkness. Angie, though tentative and a little frightened, followed Kate out of the night air and into the crowded room, telling herself that maybe they could just speak to Stan and leave.

Like the college party, a vague sense of abandon surrounded the revelers, but that's where the similarity ended. The Izods and sparkles were replaced with concert tee-shirts. The bodies moved more slowly, the music was louder, and the air seemed thicker, filled with the sweet yet acrid smell of marijuana mixed with incense. Under the black lighting, colors seemed strange and unfamiliar. Long hair hid many faces and talking was subdued; Angie couldn't make out what anyone was saying. What she had thought was a living room seemed to go on and on, or was she going in a circle? Holding fast to the back of Kate's shirt, she scanned the crowd nervously. When next she glanced at her hand, it was empty and Kate had disappeared. She looked around, panic-stricken, for the bright pink fabric and blond hair that would mean Kate was nearby, but her search proved futile.

Pressed forward by the dense crowd and with no idea where she was going, she figured that if she just kept moving, she would find her friend or maybe wind up back at the door. With this thought, she turned and looked behind her for the door that she had entered only a few moments earlier, or had she been here longer than that? Although the door had stood open, with the cold night air blasting through unhindered, it was not visible from where

she stood, nor did she feel the fresh air anymore. Only the steamy heat put off by the writhing bodies encompassed her.

It began to appear that the paneling was closing in on her and the shag carpeting under her feet was growing like grass, becoming longer, and starting to entwine itself about her ankles. The music had changed; it seemed to flow into “Gimme Shelter” with no break, and with no time to switch records or tapes. In fact, Angie had never heard music that sounded like this. It was almost as if the Stones were playing in the room, or all over the room, or were they playing in her head? With an effort, Angie pulled herself toward the paneled wall, thinking that maybe she could lean against it, catch her breath, and search the dark room for signs of Kate or the door through which she had entered.

Drawing closer to the wall, she noticed that ivy leaves covered much of the paneling. She sunk her hands and face into the leaves, inhaling their alluring scent. Soothed and comforted, she pressed further into the foliage, as if trying to hide herself from the cacophony and confusion behind her, and marveled at the thickness of the ivy. She couldn’t reach the end of it; the wall itself seemed to be made of green, fragrant leaves. What she had thought was paneling seemed to actually be thickly woven branches and vines. Soon, she was becoming entangled in the living wall, which got thicker and woodier as she tried to extricate herself. Fat, purple grapes appeared, hanging heavily from the boughs as sweet smelling honeysuckle brushed her face and anointed her hair with its nectar. The vines were densely intertwined, preventing any further progress forward or backward, and Angie was trapped, helpless and bound by the verdant green prison which held her captive.

Despite her bondage, she had no fear and was mesmerized by the beauty around her. When she tried to move, the tendrils tightened about her thighs and waist, ripping away the clothing that she had so carefully chosen for the evening, replacing it with leaves and honeysuckle, and covering her as if she were in the Garden of Eden. Having thus transformed her, the foliage began to recede slightly, and Angie could see beyond it into another room, or was it a clearing in a forest? A towering male figure, partially obscured by the foliage, appeared just beyond the perimeter of the vines, and reaching forward with gentle hands, he tenderly released her from her confinement, brushing away the last tendrils that were holding on to her greedily, as if they were jealous and could not bear to let her go.

As she came closer to the tall, slender figure, she could see him more clearly. He was dressed in a coat of fox fur that reached the ground and a wreath of leaves encircled his untamed copper curls. His clear blue eyes were heavily lined with kohl, a long tiger's tooth hung from his ear, and silver bracelets and rings adorned his elegant arms and hands. His skin was pale and smooth, and his slim fingers were graceful; they touched her face carefully, as to not scratch her with his long, black nails. Then he said, in a soft, low voice, "Welcome to my party, sweetheart."

At this, laughter rang out from the edges of the clearing, or was it a room? Startled, Angie looked around quickly. Reposed upon the green grass/carpet were other lovely girls, arrayed in flowers and vines like her, and handsome young men, wearing animal skins. One of the girls shouted out joyfully, "It's Angie!" Angie looked carefully at her face. Astonished, she realized that this was Mae, who was one of the girls that had smoked against the gym wall during high school and had ignored her when she attempted to join her group. Mae jumped up, and smiling, embraced Angie, saying, "I knew we would see you here one day. I knew that Dion would want you."

Dion watched her closely as she looked around in amazement at all of the familiar faces. All those people from high school, the ones that she had so badly wanted to join, were smiling and welcoming her with upraised goblets of dark red wine. She suddenly realized that the music had changed again; hypnotic percussion and Jagger's wild, animalistic screeches signaled the beginning of "Sympathy for the Devil". The beautiful ones on the ground were instantly up and twining around each other as the vines, speaking seductively in an unfamiliar language, and mimicking the cries and calls of wild animals, with their lips stained red from the wine. Where once there had been a sullen lack of expression, there was now animation and life. Where once there had been acne and greasy hair, there were now clear, glowing faces and thick tresses that curled and flowed down their strong, perfect backs.

Angie felt a touch on her wrist, and Dion handed her a crystal goblet of the dark wine. Dazed, she raised it to her lips and drank deeply. She had never tasted such wine; it was smooth and warm, as if it had been squeezed directly from grapes lying hot in the sun, still on the vine. As it flowed down her throat, its power forced her to close her eyes. Standing with eyes shut, she felt his gentle hand take the precious liquid from her, and place bracelets on her wrists and rings on her fingers. Then he pulled her inside

the fur coat to his body, where the smell and feel of him, honey, wine, and fierce heat, excited her beyond all reason; her mind was overwhelmed by the dreamlike images and sensations. They were dancing - slowly at first, then faster. His hands were running over her body and she was holding him tightly, when a searing image flashed in her head, nearly knocking her to the ground.

*She saw herself in a strange bed alone, waiting for him to join her. She heard his voice on the phone, and picking up the extension in the bedroom, heard him talking to another woman, saying the things she desperately wanted to hear herself.*

Angie, with pupils dilated and breathing shallowly, was too disoriented to acknowledge the vision; it was just part of the party. Dion was kissing her neck, then kissing her mouth with his soft, honey-flavored lips, gently at first, then with increasing insistency.

*She saw herself on her knees, begging him not to leave. Then she was asleep on the floor by an unfamiliar door, like a pet dog, waiting for him to come home.*

No longer in a crowd, she was alone with Dion. He gently pulled her to the ground, and she was consumed by him entirely; there was nothing left but his body and the music that surrounded them. Looking around her, she could see only him, and beyond him there was darkness. But a shadow fell over his stunning face and it began to change; the beautiful eyes became deeply hooded and dark. The music became distorted and echoed bizarrely all around them.

*She saw herself crying out in pain as he slapped her hard across the face before walking out the door, again. And yet, she felt the same old intense yearning and desire for him that no amount of pain or humiliation seemed to destroy.*

He was kissing her still, deeply and passionately, but the honey had turned bitter. There was a strange, pungent smell in the air, like the rotting flesh of animals. She felt that she could scarcely breathe; all was plunged into blackness. The music had become a reflection of madness as all of the songs from the night blended into one dissonant, orgiastic symphony.

*She saw herself in a big room with expensive looking furnishings, holding a broken wine bottle in her hand. Her face was lined and tired. She walked up to the still beautiful figure of the sleeping man and plunged the broken bottle deep into his neck. Dark, red blood, like wine, flowed from the wound and covered her ageing body as she sliced her wrists with the same bottle, and lay down beside him.*

The darkness that had surrounded her gradually faded as the light of dawn dimly illuminated the silent room. Farrah Faucette beamed down beneficently from the wall with her mega-watt smile upon Angie, who was lying on a bed in a typical 1970s bedroom, complete with lava lamp and psychedelic posters. Next to her was Dion, the cool leader of the hoods and heads in her suburban home town. Mae and others that she remembered from high school, the vo-tech-parkers and gym-wall-smokers, were asleep on the floor, dressed in the usual uniform of concert tees and jeans. She turned to look at the sleeping Dion, who was without any signs of eye liner or long black nails. She was amazed by his intense beauty; a beauty that was almost too perfect and ethereal to be possessed by a mere mortal man. She felt an overwhelming, almost painful desire and longing for him and was filled with joy at the thought that he had chosen her. Struggling to understand all that had happened the night before, she thought that maybe somebody had slipped her some acid and was relieved that everything looked so normal now.

Quietly, she got out of the bed, tiptoed around the comatose revelers, and made her way down the hall to the bathroom where she splashed her face with water from the tap. Looking up, she caught a glimpse of green in the reflection of the mirror. She whirled around, and there on the floor by the tub was a wreath of vine leaves.

The sight of this startling relic caused fragments of her visions from the night before to begin flashing powerfully through her mind. Leaving the bathroom and walking numbly down the hall toward the bedroom where her god was sleeping amongst his followers, she now noticed that there were ivy leaves and stray grapes lying on the dark green shag carpeting. She saw a twitching, budding vine extending from the paneling on the wall. There was an empty wine bottle lying on the carpeting, and when she tried to pick it up, the carpet began to wrap itself around it, as if protecting its master from potential danger. She pulled the bottle away from the carpet, strode purposefully back into the bathroom, and slammed it down hard on the porcelain tub, transforming it into a deadly, jagged weapon.



Carrying the broken bottle back to the bedroom and approaching the side of the bed, she looked down at Dion's exquisite face and body for a long time. Finally, she leaned over and whispered softly into his ear, "I have to let you live, you beautiful son of a bitch, and you have to let me do the same." She threw the broken bottle on the bed, and put on her somehow still-intact green satin bell bottoms, sparkly shirt, and platform shoes. Dion was still and silent, but his blue eyes, clouded with rage and tears, followed her as she walked out of the room.

Angie walked back into the living room, where people were passed out, including Kate and her brother. Although the front door still stood open, the room was as sticky hot as if it was a mid-summer day. Somewhere in the house a transistor radio was playing softly, and she could just barely hear the familiar melody of "Wild Horses". The volume increased and the music seemed to come alive, as it had the night before, commanding her to return to the bedroom she had just abandoned. She covered her ears with her hands and with great effort ran across the floor, where the shag carpeting was undulating as if blown by a breeze, and past the reaching vines that were growing rapidly from the walls. The door was closing quickly, but Angie was able to squeeze through just before it furiously slammed shut.

She walked down the suburban street in the cold, early morning light, got in the Olds 442 and cranked it up. The Stones tape was still playing on the eight track and the music burst forth loudly. Suddenly aware of something bulky in her pocket, she reached in and pulled out a collection of silver rings and bracelets. After contemplating them for a moment, she rolled down the window and tossed them into the street. Then she ripped the tape out of the player and pitched it out too. She threw the Olds into gear and peeled out toward home. There were applications to be finished and mailed; time would not wait. Down from above, as if from Mount Olympus itself, the Stones' "Bitch" thundered throughout the sleepy neighborhood, drawing residents out of their homes to stare wild-eyed into the sky, like the trumpets of heaven had sounded.

Bio- Ann Marie Meek has been a college professor for the past fifteen years, teaching mainly in the area of criminal justice. Prior to beginning her teaching career, she worked in the criminal justice system as a counselor and prison education coordinator. Ann Marie has written extensive life skills instructional materials for use in correctional facilities as a part of pre-release programming. This led to her main research focus, which centered on the impact of pre-release programs and life skills training on the inmate's post-release adjustment and future criminality. She has recently switched her focus from academic

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