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Come in...and be captivated...



"The Tea Party" by Thea Maia; <http://theamaia.com/>

About this image: "I started this drawing, as I most often do, by drawing a face. Once I have drawn then inked the face I added other elements to my image. As I wanted this to be a tea party, like the ones I have held my whole life with my mother, I looked at my own tea cups and teapots, to get the right shapes and angles. Once they were in place in and around the teacups and teapot, I drew the flowers and berries. My husband loves dahlias, so I decided to use them

as the main flower. I use graphite pencils, Faber-Castell Polychromos Pencils, and Prismacolor Art Pens." —TM

Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

Featured Stories:

"Pamen" by Johanna Riehm
"Driving School" by Michael Tidemann
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Pamen

by Johanna Riehm

Tonton didn't leave anything behind except a wife.

When Pamen realized he was never coming back, she packed a leather suitcase with everything she had—which wasn't much—and moved in with Gran. She spoke French in fragmented sentences, the rolls and trills of her accent impossible to get rid of, even years after my uncle snatched her away from Spain. She was a waitress in some bar in Barcelona when he found her, sixteen with hair down to the arch of her back, and wanted nothing, absolutely nothing to do with him. *A sailor, for God's sake*. She knew what that meant. Broke, with a girl waiting in every port. Pamen had too much pride for that.

She'd run away from the countryside a full year before that, sick of family dinners squeezed between the aunts and the godmothers—the *madrinas*—sometimes past midnight when the uncles and the cousins got rowdy off house wine; sick of the farm chores her mother imposed on her, raking and plowing the stables all the while holding her breath, and sick of those she was forced to witness, like the slaughtering of the boars every winter. How their high-pitched, childlike screams gave her nightmares for weeks. Or that bitter joke her Uncle Fernando had played on her one summer, asking her to pick out her favorite rabbit in the shed. She'd

thought he would give it to her—a birthday gift—but the following morning it was gone. The little one Pamen called *Bigotes* (Whiskers) and snuck carrots to through the broken wire.

But even if country life had a way of hardening her, nothing made Pamen pack her bags faster than the constant threat of her father's stiff leather belt. Fifteen, on a night bus to Barcelona, because she'd had a friend who'd done the same. Pure fate really, that Tonton found her there a year later. The following morning, when he whisked her off on his ship, she found a pair of dull scissors in the cabin and cropped her hair short like his—wild, tangled strands of red and brown. This was the life she'd always wanted.

Gran said that when she met Pamen for the first time, her skin was marked with acne scars and sun spots, from years of sailing at Tonton's side. She barely spoke any French then, even less than she did later with us, and didn't care enough to try.

I always thought she was beautiful. Papa said she was crazy. Mama said she wore pants—as if that wasn't sacrilegious enough—made of purple satin to her wedding to Tonton, in 1989. People weren't used to women behaving like that at the time, but Pamen never cared what anyone thought, especially not us. She didn't even care that none of the aunts and great aunts kissed her on the forehead after the ceremony. That was the last thing Pamen ever cared about.

Mama might've been a little jealous of Pamen. That's what I secretly think. I think Mama felt bruised, battered, like her body had been ravaged by our births. Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know. I often caught her in front of her bedroom mirror, raising her linen top just enough to see the stretch marks under her belly button. They always reminded me of the inside of a seashell, pearly and smooth.

When I visited Gran, Pamen was always on the porch, her feet slung over a chair, a Gitanes at the very end of her thin, spindly fingertips. She always wore heavy golden hoops in both ears, but the few times I saw her when she didn't, her earlobes sagged anyway, like flat sheets flopping in the wind.

“Hola Cariña!” she'd shout from her rocking chair. Her voice was hoarse and her smile was stained, probably from the smoke always floating around the inside of her mouth, but her teeth were perfect, aligned, like an old keyboard. *Cariña*. I loved the sound of that word.

I always had the feeling that Pamen liked me more than anyone else in the family, but I never told Mama that. Instead I sat by her on the porch and listened to her stories about being nine years old in Spain, under Franco. How kids weren't allowed to smile, wear bathing suits in the summer, even listen to rock bands, watch television. About her cousin Lucía, the one who'd birthed a child she hadn't wanted.

"Who was the father?" I asked Pamen.

She shrugged, like it didn't matter.

Instead, she told me about that summer she'd found a boy in the cornfields. The army knife wedged into the soft part of his abdomen, the corn stalks bent under him like a cradle. She'd recognized his red hair—the Ramirez boy—the one everyone else laughed at for walking on the tips of his toes like a girl.

"Who did it to him?" I asked. "Why?"

Pamen shrugged and I waited, but she didn't say anything.

For weeks, all I could think about was the blade.

Pamen's room in Gran's house smelled like sandalwood, from the little incense cones she burned, and leather, from the display of high heels she had neatly propped against the back wall. When she wasn't there, I snuck in and tried them on, parading around the small room, imagining myself as nine-year-old Pamen sticking out my tongue at Franco.

"Take this, Franco," I'd spit, with a hand on my hip. "I can wear high heels if I want to."

She caught me once. Instead of scolding me, like I thought she would, she folded her arms and laughed. "Try these," she said, picking up a pair of golden stilettos with shiny buckles. "Go on, walk."

They were the first pair she'd bought after Spain's independence, a few months after she'd arrived in Barcelona. She looked sad when she told me this—but only for a second—before adding with a crooked smile, "my parents would've killed me if they found out."

Pamen insisted I take the shoes—a birthday gift. I wore them every single day, until the soles were thinned and the leather was peeling off in layers. By the end of that summer, I'd outgrown them, and Mama threw them out with that week's trash.

One night, a few weeks later, Gran fell asleep during the credits of *Casablanca* and I decided to sneak off to Pamen's room. I still remember my heart beating, like it was growing inside my chest. I tiptoed to her bedroom door, pressing my fingers deep into the curve of my left rib.

It was open just a crack. I saw her through the opening, staring at the white wall, her eyes empty and unfocused. When she saw me, even in the dark, she smiled and patted the bed next to her. I went in and we sat together on her stiff mattress, our backs pressed against the mesh of the mosquito net, knees almost touching. The fan blew warm air around the room. None of her lamps were on, just moonlight creeping under the door like smoke. It felt okay not to speak.

She sucked on her Gitanes and I watched her, eyes burning into the very hot, yellow tip of the cigarette. She noticed, and without the slightest hesitation, placed it at my mouth. I don't remember the taste, just the short-lived adrenaline of having a cigarette there, between my slightly parted lips.

I wondered what Mama would've said if she saw me. If I was going to die because of it. The smoke curling upwards made my eyes water and before I could inhale, Pamen took the cigarette away as quickly as she slipped it there.

I never forgot that day in Pamen's room, even years after she'd left us.

We woke up one morning and the heels and incense cones were gone. Gran said she was homesick, but I think that's just an excuse.

I always knew that Pamen wouldn't stay. She never fit in here, with us. The island rejected her and she rejected it back. Even the mosquitoes, who never bit the rest of us, feasted on her ankles and her wrists. Her skins was adorned with red bumps.

Like she was a tourist, Papa joked, and her blood was different from ours.

"It's suffocating," she said to me, once. "I miss the open seas."

I like to think that she got on a ship at dawn and is now sailing around the world, her arms tied around the neck of another sailor. Happy again.

Mama was convinced she flew back to that filthy bar in Barcelona, but I knew better. Pamen was a runner. The ocean, miles and miles of emptiness, where she could run forever. Tonton saw it in her eyes when he found her. The only woman he could find who would've followed him anywhere. It was shackles she didn't want, fences. A gypsy, like those cigarettes she smoked, all the way down to the filter.

Mama said I was too much like Gran with my made-up stories. "Just let it be," she said to me one night when I brought up Pamen again. "The sad truth is that she loved him, not us. Deep down, I'm sure she hated us all."

I thought of the way her tongue flicked her two front teeth when she called out to me. How her eyes burned into mine when the tip of her cigarette lit both of our faces in the dark. The golden shoes that marked her freedom. *Cariña*.

I never told Mama this, but I like my version of the story better.

Bio- Johanna Riehm was born in Toulouse, France and raised on the small Caribbean island of Saint Martin, the source of many of her inspirations. Johanna received both a BA in English and an MFA in Creative Writing from Manhattanville College in New York, where she has been living for seven years. Johanna's poems and stories have been featured in *Graffiti Literary Magazine*, Cactus Heart Press, and *The Balgore Review*. When she isn't writing, Johanna teaches English and Creative Writing at Fusion Academy and Westchester Community College. She lives in Dobbs Ferry, New York with her husband and son.

Driving School (*prequel to "The Bather" featured in previous issue*)

by Michael Tidemann

When Jessica's father Bob had asked her to do the driving tests when their clients 'graduated,' she balked. "Why me?" That seemed to be a question she'd been asking a lot lately.

"Because we're in this together; we're family, remember? This is how we get through. You're just doing your part. Besides, I can't." He eyed a highway

patrolman in the rearview mirror. They were doing exactly seventy. Just fast enough for the cop to sit on their tail. And who knew. Maybe by now he'd radioed in a NICS check.

"Maybe you could slow down and let him pass," Jessica suggested.

"Okay." By now her father was sweating torpedoes, all of them firing from his forehead at some unknown target. He dropped their speed to 68—then 66. The police cruiser slid by slowly, the officer looking at Bob as though he'd already caught him in the act—and who knows—maybe he had.

"I really wish you hadn't gotten that DUI."

"I know, Jess. I know. But wishing for things doesn't get you anywhere. You have to accept the here and now."

How true. She'd been wishing for a way out for as long as she could remember and yet here she was.

"Maybe you should let me drive." She'd been drawing the surrounding countryside in her sketchbook. Farms. Cows. Clouds. All dreamily floating together into a mosaic of where she'd much rather be.

"Hey, that's a great idea." He hit the turn signal and turned off at the first exit for Sioux Falls. "Hey, maybe we could try this town. The sign says 160,000."

"Maybe." As she set her sketchbook aside, she wondered about art school. But then that was as faraway of a dream as anything. The here and now was all she had, and that wasn't much.

Bob was in the driving school business, and ironically, had lost his own license after his second DUI – pleaded down to first. Six months suspension, the judge ordered, slamming down the gavel. Fortunately, having a daughter kept him out of jail. Jessica suspected the judge didn't want to mess with all the DHS paperwork if she went into temporary foster care while Bob sat it out in the calaboose.

They would pick cities of between 50,000 and 250,000—big enough to not be noticed but not so big the FBI would catch on to him. The school always started at 6 p.m. sharp Thursdays and went until 10, the same times Friday night, with driving exams Saturday morning. Jessica would take their

photos and Bob would crank out fake driver's licenses complete with bar codes and voila—the graduates were on the road. Until their first driving infraction, of course. And then they'd be charged with driving with a forged license. That was why Bob changed the name of the school every town they came to—Universal School of Driving, Columbia Driving School, International Driving Academy—Jessica thought that one actually sounded reputable.

Bob would take out ads in the local newspaper a week ahead of time:

DUI? License suspended or revoked? International Driving Academy can help. Just call 555-5555 to save a seat today.

And the calls would pour in.

"Really? You can help even me get my license back?"

"Absolutely," Bob told them.

"That's fantastic. My lawyer said I'd be lucky to get it back in five years after I ran over that pedestrian. It wasn't my fault though. He was at least as drunk as I was."

They pulled up at a convenience store, the needle at a quarter. Jessica looked at her father with a don't-tell-me-we're-out-of-money look and he shrugged. "I guess this is as good a town as any."

"I guess so." The queasy feeling started in her stomach and ran all the way to her toes and head.

As Bob stepped out, the door molding clattered on the concrete. "Gonna have to fix that."

Jessica nodded, mainly to herself. As Bob went inside to borrow the phone book and look up phone numbers for the local newspapers and shoppers, the HP cruiser stealthed through the parking lot, the driver observing where people were from, checking for outdated plates. As he parked perfectly between the painted lines—exactly 18 inches clearance on each side of his car—he stepped out and donned his wraparound shades and ran a hand through his lawnmower buzzed flattop and headed straight toward the car.

Jessica came up with excuses, knowing that if her dad got into the car and the officer asked for his license and ran a check they were toast. She glared at Bob who smiled back from inside the store, a smile turning to abject horror as he saw the officer.

The officer bent over and picked up the door molding, studied it curiously, and looked at the rusted rivet holes where it had fallen from the car. “Is this yours?”

“No,” said Jessica, following Bob’s advice to always lie to a police officer whenever possible. *Plausible denial*, Jess. *Plausible denial*, he always told her. She wondered how many of his tricks he’d used on her and for how long.

“Hmm...” The officer studied the molding, then the bare door, and the molding again. “You know, I’ve investigated a lot of accidents, and I’d swear this was a door molding for a 1988 Pontiac Bonneville.” He nodded at the side of the car. “Just like the one you’re sitting in.”

“Really?”

The officer looked at the side of the car, kneeled, and fit the molding against the door and with a slight bop of his fist sealed it to the side. He stood slowly, Jessica’s guilty-as-hell look reflected in his glasses. “Well, I guess you have a new door molding.”

“Yeah, guess so. Thanks.”

The officer chuckled and went inside the store. Bob ducked around him and scrambled outside to the passenger door. “Let’s go. You drive.”

Jessica turned and rolled her eyes to herself as she slid over and started the car. She cringed as Bob sat on her sketchbook, an unnecessary affront, a blanket thrown over a candle.

“What did he want?”

“What did who want?”

“The cop. What’d he say to you?”

“He asked why a girl as pretty as me was driving a piece of crap like this.”

“No. He didn’t.” Her dad waited for her to continue, but she said nothing. “He didn’t hit on you, did he?”

Jessica looked both ways and pulled out on the street. “Something under \$40?”

“Oh, a motel. Yeah, right,” her dad said, unable to keep two ideas in his head at once. He stared straight ahead, finally calming down. “He didn’t hit on you, did he Jess?”

“Yeah, he did.” She smiled. “He asked me for my phone number and everything.”

“You didn’t give it to him. Did you?”

“Of course not.” A beat. “And please get off my sketchbook.”

There must have been a lot of drunk drivers in Sioux Falls because the calls poured in.

"Really? You can even get me a release for my SR-22?"

"Absolutely," her dad told them.

"Great, sign me up."

By Wednesday night—a day before classes were to start—seventy people had signed up, ranging from a teen who’d had his license revoked for habitual drag racing to a ninety-two-year-old man who’d lost his driving privileges when he couldn’t pass the vision test at seventy-eight. At \$600 a crack, they’d make a killing.

Her dad had rented a party room at a local tavern to hold the school in, something that troubled Jessica since the students would have to pass through the bar, and since most were probably alcoholics or at least committed drunkards, they wouldn’t be able to make it to class sober.

“And you know the drill by now, right Jess? If we’re busted?” Her father looked from the TV he’d been watching all afternoon between calls, a beer balanced on his bare belly.

“Yeah. I grab the cash, the camera, the computer, printer, and laminator and throw them in the trunk and split.”

“Good girl.” Bob smiled and sipped his beer, returning to his program. “I’m so proud of you.” Her stomach sank. Police sirens wailed on the program he was watching and Jessica glanced out the motel window to make sure they weren’t for them.

The first night brought in the usual suspects. If there was a profile of a typical student it would be twenty-nine years old, male, severe alcoholic, with a four-page rap sheet of driving infractions. Many had criminal records—some with felonies. There were others too, like a young mom who couldn’t afford insurance and whose license had been suspended but she kept driving and had it revoked. And now she was paying nearly a month’s take home as a convenience store clerk to get her license back. Jessica felt almost sick about that one. And then there was an older man, obviously blind, who asked help in finding a seat at one of the tables. She felt sorry for the vet who came in with his wheelchair, jeans pinned back on his stubs—they’d have to waive the driving portion for him since the Bonneville didn’t have hand controls. And then there was a fifteen-year-old boy—no driving infractions. In fact he’d never had a license. Jessica found his retro-fifties flat top dorky.

“The driver’s ed class was full. My dad asked if this would help get me an insurance discount.”

“Sure. This class will get you a fifty percent discount, at least,” Bob assured him.

The boy looked narrowly at Bob. “My dad said it would be only twenty-five.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Bob slapped his forehead. “I forgot this was South Dakota. We’re in all fifty states, you know. Canada too. It’s really hard to keep track of all these regulations.”

The boy looked at Bob as though he had bull crap written all over his face.

After seven or eight more students brought their beers and drinks in from the bar they were ready to start. Bob ran through a series of slides on the projector showing major traffic accidents—mangled cars, some burnt-out hulks, cars wrapped around semis and trains and telephone poles. Injured

people sitting dazed beside cars. Corpses covered with sheets and in body bags.

“And not one of them was a graduate of the International Driving Academy,” Bob concluded, switching off the projector and turning on the lights. “By Saturday afternoon, every single one of you will not only have your driving privileges restored. You can also rest assured that what happened to these people won’t happen to you.”

Jessica quickly counted the people in the room, and dividing it into the number of hours available, figured they’d be lucky to have a ten-minute driving test for each student—even if they went all day Saturday.

The rest of Thursday night was taken up with more blood-and-gore slides and mountains of boring statistics. Most of the students were asleep except for the drinkers who had started a couple impromptu poker tournaments, some switching to shots. They seemed to pay the most attention.

Friday night’s class started with a driving attitude survey with questions like “Have you ever taken the right of way illegally?” or “How often do you speed?”

“Are we gonna get ‘dem tests back?” asked a heavily tattooed biker barechested except for an open denim motorcycle club vest.

Jessica glanced up at Bob from the tests she was ‘scoring’.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Well, why not?” the biker demanded, settling back in his chair, arms crossed.

“Well... We just take an average of the answers and tailor the rest of the class accordingly. Need I remind you that International Driving Academy has been in the business since 1946? No one does it better than we do.” Rehearsed and memorized responses.

The biker grimaced through his scars, shrugged, and satisfied himself with another shot and beer back and ordered another round. The bar was making a killing, with two servers scrambling to take the students’ orders.

Saturday morning came, and it was time for the road test—and graduation. Knowing that the first or second student would attract the attention of the police and get them busted, Bob had finagled a realty company to rent him the parking lot of a defunct home building supply. Knee-high weeds thrust through chunks of broken concrete and the students steered through a litter of beer and soda cans, trash bags, diapers, tampons and prophylactics. Jessica had spent four hours picking up broken beer and wine bottles—those she could see anyway. She didn't have any idea what might still be lurking in the weeds.

At about three, one of the students drove over a broken whiskey bottle and flattened a tire. As Bob scrambled to put on a spare, Jessica scanned the remaining students. Counting the student in the car, the biker registered as Grizz, there were just three left—Darwin, the boy with the flat top, and Mr. Phillips, the ninety-two-year-old blind man.

“There.” Bob dusted off his hands and got up from his knees. “Good as new.”

Jessica studied the bald spare as Bob got in with Grizz and they weaved through the lot as Bob told Grizz to pretend they were pylons. Since they'd taken photos the first night—it was impossible to flunk provided you paid in full, of course—Jessica handed Grizz his license once they were back.

“Sanks.” He tucked it in his vest pocket where a half-pint glinted. “Hey, yer kinda cute. Ya wanna go on a date or anythin?”

“Probably not today.”

“Unh, okay.” Grizz got on his panhead and kicked the starter and smiled one more time back over his shoulder before roaring out of the lot.

“Your turn,” Bob said to Darwin, the kid with the flat top. He cut his driving test short and three minutes later Jessica was handing him his license just as a highway patrol cruiser was pulling over Grizz.

“Great,” Darwin chirped. “I can't wait to show this to my dad.” He headed straight for the cruiser.

“Dad?” Bob looked grimly at the cruiser which the trooper now had Grizz up against, legs spread, as he pulled out his cuffs.

“Do I get to drive?” the blind man asked, searching for the car right beside him. Grizz securely ensconced in the back seat, the trooper was walking straight toward them.

“You do this one, Jess. Okay?” Bob’s voice trailed off into a whisper. “The money’s in the trunk with everything else.”

Jessica nodded and after she helped the old man get in the door she took the passenger seat.

“Is it running?” the old man asked, unable to hear the engine. The burnt-out muffler was loud enough to get them a ticket.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

The old man put the car in drive and they surged ahead. In the rearview mirror Jessica saw the trooper questioning her father while Darwin, the patrolman’s clone, stood smiling to the side, admiring his new driver’s license.

“How far do you want me to drive?” the old man said, eyes filmy with cataracts, barely missing a light pole in the middle of the parking lot.

Jessica flipped on the turn signal and miraculously guided him into heavy traffic. “Omaha. And don’t stop for anything.” It wasn’t until they reached the city outskirts that she realized she had left her sketchbook in the motel.

Bio- Michael Tidemann is coordinator of the Digital Media program at Iowa Lakes Community College in Estherville, Iowa. His fiction has appeared in *The Write Place At The Write Time*, *Struggle*, *Black Hills Monthly*, and *The Longneck*. His nonfiction has appeared in *Overdrive*, *Writer's Journal*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Western Business*, *The Des Moines Register*, and *Snowmobile*. He is currently researching a novel set in Lincoln County, Oregon, beginning with Sir Francis Drake's careenage at Whale Cove in 1579 and continuing through the Civil War to the present day.

Widow’s Thoughts

by Taylor Ashton

As I sit in front of the window, I watch and wait for his car to pull into the

driveway again—but I know it never will. He's been gone for over a year now and I still feel like he's just going to walk back through the door. It's strange how I don't feel like he's gone and how I still feel the same as I did when he was living.

After being married for over fifty years, people would always ask how we did it and it always makes me think about all of the good things from our marriage. The best thing about being married is sleeping next to someone every night, being able to have someone there to wake up if you have a bad dream. But then, at the same moment, that person lying beside you can make you feel even more alone. There is no lonelier feeling in the world than feeling alone yet having someone else sleeping right next to you, with you silently crying and trying not to wake them because there is no good way to explain that you're crying because you're thinking about your life. You're crying because you're in a marriage where you are alone and only at the very beginning did it ever feel different.

We were never the couple that cuddled in the corner of the room as they slept; we were the couple where he was long gone before I laid down and I sat watching the snow fall outside the window as the world went silent and my eyes grew heavier.

There were times throughout our marriage when I asked myself why I married him and the only thing I could think of was that at least I wouldn't have to grow old alone. Now that thought is ironic to me because that is exactly what I am doing. There were so many times when I was younger when I would be lying next to him and I'd get this sudden urge to run. To get up off the bed and sprint away, to try to get as far from him as possible. To try to get into a car and just drive away and travel somewhere beautiful by myself and find my bliss. But now I'm too old and I will never be able to pick up and just go like I could have in my twenties.

During our marriage, in my mind, the kids came first; they always did. They were the best thing I got out of this marriage. I loved him, I really did, but I also hated him in the end and I knew that he hated me. He barely spoke to me for the last five years of our marriage. He would mainly communicate in short groans or not at all. He would spend every day tinkering on his cars or working on his projects in the garage. I never knew what they were; but there were always projects to do in the house which he never addressed. As I look around this old house, I see all of the things he didn't do. Every day I

go up the stairs I step on the broken stair. I complained about this for ten years.

Many wives get upset when their husbands forget their anniversaries and such but I never had to. Phillip always remembered those things but never said that he did. Every anniversary or birthday I would just wake up to flowers or jewelry on the night stand beside me with a note that would say only: *For Virginia B.*

I look at those damn earrings again. The ones I threw at his head when he gave them to me on September 6, 1978. He gave me those damn earrings to say sorry for pushing me down. Sorry for the push that led to the fall down the stairs which caused me to lose the baby. She was mine. The doctors said that sometimes babies just die, but I knew that it was his fault. I couldn't leave the bed for months—not even when poor little Dean would cry. I remember sitting in that bed laying there numb and he came in and looked at me, checked my body over and said “Don't you hear him crying? What kind of mother are you?”

My older kids never understood why I always cried when I would see pregnant women or new born babies. But they were so young—how could they ever understand. I don't think any of the kids remember Robin. Shep never remembers that he had a third younger sister and it kills me every time he refers to Marnie and Georgia as his only sisters. But how could I get mad at Phillip for having lost a daughter when I have earrings instead?

There were so many things I wanted to do with my life and never did. I always blamed Phillip for that. I don't know why I blame him and not the kids, myself or my turbulent childhood, but for some reason I do.

When I was young I would think about what I wanted to be when I grew up and I always wanted to be famous. To be a star on the silver screen. I wanted to be an actress whose pictures would be flashed fifty feet high for the whole world to see. I smile when I think of these things but my smile always leaves when I look around and see the pictures on the wall and I realize that never happened. I wanted to be glamorous and happy forever. When I pictured my life and aspirations, I knew that I wanted to be immortalized in film so that the memory of me would never fade. I wanted the big house in Beverly Hills with seventeen bedrooms and a million friends. But for the bulk of my life, I didn't really have friends. One day, I had Phillip.

Things weren't always bad between me and Phillip. When we first met it was like magic. He'd saved me. My father was a terrible man and all I ever wanted was to be safe. I thought I'd filled a space that had been empty since I was a kid.

When I was little, my best friend, Pricilla was the only person I would ever talk to. She was more my sister than all of my sisters combined. We could sit by the quarry for hours sunbathing and talking about boys. We were constantly giggling; we would giggle even if we hadn't said anything. Every teacher we had loathed our giddiness and most of the townspeople did too. They would grimace as we skipped along merrily, arm and arm down the sidewalks.

When we were twelve, Pricilla was coming to meet me at the quarry and when she was crossing a back road, a car hit her and never stopped to see if she was okay. She would have lived had someone called an ambulance sooner. She bled out there on the road just trying to get to our own little safe haven. I hate to think about how I was so mad at her for not coming to meet me like we had planned. I'd stomped all the way home in the rain.

I stormed off to my room, fuming, until my older sister Geneva came to talk to me. She knocked on the door so softly that I didn't think it was her. I thought it was one of the younger ones coming to play or being annoying. I threw a pillow at the door and told them to go away. But Geneva said in this soft, sad voice, "I need to talk to you. Can I come in?" I told her she could. I was so afraid that she was coming to me bloody again after another one of father's episodes. But instead she was tearing up and had this sad sullen face that grayed as she looked at me. I asked her what was wrong and she told me about what had happened to my poor Pricilla. I was inconsolable. I still cry for her.

After Pricilla died I was never the same. I carried on the way I used to and tried to pretend like she was still right there by my side. The teachers turned their loathing into pity. Everything changed after that summer. I was alone and everyone knew that. There was no one to stop me from doing bad things with the boys at my school and no one to tell when father was being bad again.

She was the only salvation of my childhood. I needed her so much in my youth and I know that I still need her now. After that summer I constantly was asked to parties by boys and I would always go because I just wanted to

be numb. I just wanted somebody to love me. But no one ever did. They all said they did so they could get what they wanted but after that they would all leave.

Until Phillip. When he said he loved me, I could tell that it was different from anything I'd heard before. There was a look in his eye that he used to give me that felt like he could see only me.

When he gave me that look I thought we would have everything together.

Phillip never knew what things I had gone through in my past, but he knew that my home life wasn't good and why I wanted to get married as fast as possible. We ran away together when I was seventeen and eloped. I had to lie and say I was a year older than I was so we could marry but I did it gladly. Being married and living with Phillip was a dream come true. He was so sweet when we were first married. He would bring home flowers randomly, even if it wasn't close to any special holiday.

Yet I couldn't keep myself from waiting for the other shoe to drop. I was always looking around the corner, worrying that soon everything would turn bad as it had in my childhood. Though initially I thought my happy ending had arrived, a short time later it would be obvious that it hadn't.

When we first married, he promised me that one day, when we finally had the money, we would take the honeymoon we never took to wherever I wanted to go. Years afterward, when I asked if we could finally do it, he looked at me like I was crazy. I had dreamed for years of me and Phillip kissing at the Eiffel Tower. I dreamed of taking trips with him everywhere in the world. And I had dreams of living this life with him that would forever be good and happy. But as always with Phillip, my dreams came shattering down.

Sometimes I still dream. I still foolishly wish that Phillip would be my knight in shining armor again and tell me that everything is okay; but it's too late and he never will.

He's gone and the kids never come around anymore. They have all gone on with their lives and forgotten about me. Shep has his own family and a job that he is always too stressed over. Georgia moved some place without all this snow and no longer comes back at the holidays. Marnie works far too long shifts at the hospital and doesn't sleep anymore, let alone call. And

Dean never came back; when he graduated he drove away and never looked behind him. I envy him.

Marnie told me on the phone one day that Dean never came home because he had got a girl pregnant out west and had to marry her. I don't know what that woman's name is or what my grandchild looks like. I know Phillip would have been furious with Dean if he had known but I would have accepted her and learned to love her. I love my son and I think he loves me but kids grow up and realize that they don't have time for their elderly parents anymore.

I look out at all the snow outside that's trapping me in and I wonder how long it would take for me to starve to death trapped by myself in this house. Nobody has come to visit me in months—not even the other elderly neighbors have stopped by. Maybe they have grown tired of my existence too. I think how much easier it would be for everyone if I did go. And I wonder if they would miss me if I died. Would my grandchildren miss my cookies or stories? Would my kids cry over me? They didn't cry at Phillip's funeral, so I doubt that they would cry at mine.

I don't think I have enough food in the house to keep myself going for too long. When I think about my life and how long I lived here, I wonder when exactly it was when my neighbors all started to dislike me. I never did anything to them. I was always pleasant and I still wave and say hello when I see someone trimming their hedges or crossing the street or getting their mail. Maybe they started to dislike me when I got old and boring and locked myself away in this house. Or maybe when I became the crazy woman who would never stop weeping. I wonder sometimes if they know about Louis. I hope they don't. Though it was a mistake, he wasn't really a kid anymore—he was a man in my eyes. I don't think it should matter to people who'd never understand.

I didn't mean to cheat. I was just so lonely. In '75 I had an affair with a young man named Louis Arrington. I knew it was wrong—he was only seventeen and I was forty and married. When I finally came clean to Phillip about the affair, he slapped me so hard across my cheek I could feel the stinging in my eye. I'd made a mistake. Louis made me feel like I was beautiful and that I wasn't just some undesirable old lady as Phillip had seen me. I knew that Phillip had strayed with Nadine from down the street but I never said anything. I just hated myself more for not being beautiful like she was. I didn't yell or scream at him. I just sat there as I saw him

smile at her, silently wept as she flirted with him asking him to “come help her bring a chair in from the garage.”

Considering that, I didn’t understand why he was so upset with me for my transgression, other than its circumstances. He hit me and told me I was disgusting. I am disgusting; though I regret the affair, I still remember it as the most exciting time of my life.

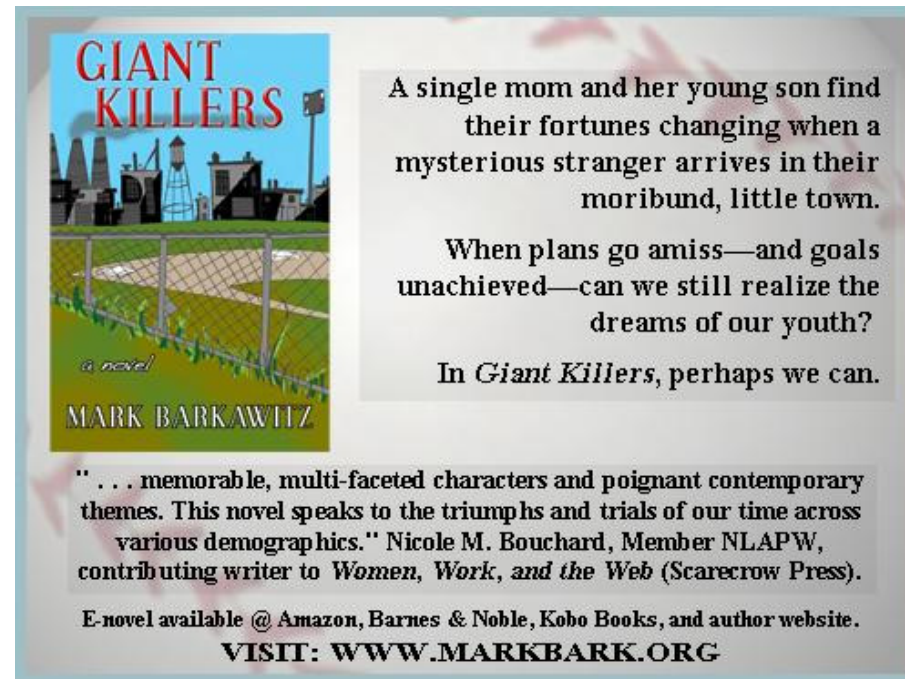
For most of my marriage, I just wanted to not be lonely. I tried so hard to make Phillip love me. I would cook all of his favorite meals and the house would always be clean. He liked a clean house. I stopped bothering him about going to church with me when we got older and wouldn’t nag him about things if I could help it. I even tried to memorize stats and things like that about his favorite sports teams. But nothing worked; he just looked at me like I wasn’t even there or like I was a bother to him.

After awhile, I stopped trying to please him and finally grew to hate him. I feel like his dying is my fault because I wished for it so often. I wanted to be free from him for so long that it ended up happening. But now I’m an old maid and I can’t be free. I’m forever trapped to this old saggy corpse that I am forced to live in now. I was once vibrant and beautiful—my long curls would bounce off of my back as I skipped along the street. My red lipstick clung to my pretty smile. I was the luckiest of my sisters as I had naturally straight teeth. But now all I have is ill-fitting dentures.

Thinking of this I throw myself into a fit of anger and hurl a mug across the room—but as it crashes to the ground, the anger not only fades, yet as I looked at the mess I made, I grow terribly disappointed in myself. This is not what a lady does. I clean up my mess and start to think of other things.

The oven timer is going off. Dinner for one is ready, but I’ve lost my appetite.

Bio- Taylor Ashton is a student at Hartwick College and a recent graduate of Sherburne-Earlville High School. Taylor studies Sociology and Criminal Justice. From the age of four, Taylor has aspired to be a writer. Although she has never been published prior to this piece, she has won scholarship awards to Colgate College's young writers' camp twice and has been writing stories ever since she learned to write.



Window Screens

by A. C. Monks

It was a revelation of the highest degree. I came to the sudden, unexpected understanding that, in essentially every movie in existence, the main character's window never has a screen on it. No, she can just pry that sucker open and spread her arms into the world, like a bird preparing for flight. Sometimes there's a boy waiting with a boom box, sometimes she's making a midnight escape, sometimes she's about to embark on a paranormal adventure. If I take out my window screen, I'll probably only get bugs in my room, nipping at my skin and sucking at my blood.

"Probably" is not "definitely." And even if it was, it couldn't have stopped me. Categorize this under "Foresight: A Virtue I Never Learned."

"What are you doing?" my live-in boyfriend, one Mr. K. J. Vierg, asks as I unlatch the mesh from its holder. My face is drawn in concentration. Our

apartment is on the second floor and I'll no doubt hurt and/or kill myself if I fall. He seems to be under the same impression and grabs my waist.

"I'm taking out the window screen," I tell him.

"Yeah, I see that, but why?"

"Because," I say, pausing for effect, "it's anti-magic."

He doesn't let go until I've finished removing the contraption and heaved it inside. I'm proud of myself. He looks like he wants nothing more than to wrap me in a straightjacket and reinstall the thing. It's not his fault. KJ hails from a town that censored the word "spontaneity" from every dictionary crossing the borderline. I've been curing him for some time now: 3 mg fun, 2 mg "kidnapping," and no bed rest. However, there are still little things he doesn't get—like this. I explain to him my theory, to which he only nods in mild comprehension before backing away into our pantry of a kitchen. "I'm going to make a sandwich," he says, "and check the cabinets for drugs."

I scowl at him. (As a side note, I really wish I had a better scowl. Something more formidable than cute, which is what KJ thinks my current scowl is.) "If I had any drugs, I wouldn't keep them in the cabinets."

He checks anyway.

"You have no sense of imagination!" I yell, turning back to the renovated window. The breeze coming through is the cool air of mid-spring. Its wind carries in the smell of dirt and cement rather than flowers and hope. Because, I tell myself, hope definitely has a smell. An irreplicable smell. Not one that can be soaked into any air freshener, destined to dangle from the rearview as you rocket toward the yellow traffic light that needs to hold for just three more seconds. Nor is hope a perfume you can coat yourself with as you embark on a blind date with a boy whose name you've barely heard (i.e. Kyle John). No, hope is a fleeting fragrance, and one not present here. From the kitchen, the scent of cold meat wafts over in its stead. I stick half my body outside, if only to ignore it.

"Don't fall, princess," KJ warns me.

I wonder if I already have. I've fallen head over heels for a world that isn't mine. I've stumbled down the rabbit hole and I can't climb back out. (Can

this window be my rabbit hole? If I slip, can I be in the fairylands of my childhood daydreams?) I don't say this. I say, "I won't."

Later, when it's finally become cold enough that I have to close the window for the night, he stares at me in contemplation. Serpentine eyes, borrowed from the snake in Eden. In a mumble, he offers up the apple: "You know, you don't need any more magic or fairytales. You have me, right? We can be our own fairytale."

And while it's the sweetest thing he's said since "I love you," the words in the weeks following grow more bitter. It starts when I return home from a "day out with the girls," which amounted to them taking a leisurely nature stroll while I found higher and higher rocks to jump off of. My knees are bruised, my palms scraped, and he hates the way that makes me smile.

"What did you do?" he demands. As I explain, he darts over to the cabinets—which *still* do not contain drugs, might I add—and pulls out insufficiently-sized Band-Aids. "KJ," I laugh, "that's not really going to help. Plus, they'll wash off in, like, three seconds. I'm good."

"The last time you said you were good, you tried to go on a bike ride with pneumonia."

"I needed fresh air."

"No, you *needed* twelve stitches. Remember? Or were the pain meds that incredible?"

"You know I love me some Vicodin."

He is a lot less amused by this comment than I am. So, begrudgingly, I accept the Band-Aids and plaster about eight of them to my hands. "Sorry," I apologize, though I'm not sure what for.

"Yeah, well, I'll believe that when I can let you out of my sight for three minutes without blood ending up on the carpet."

He walks out. With a sigh, I limp over to the window and heave it open. There's still no smell of hope, but the space is now wide enough that I can slip into the red evening if I so choose. The fact that I don't kills a small part of my soul. (About the size of a golf ball, if my soul is the size of my body.)

What I fail to notice is the parasitic nature of this dead tissue. It wants to eat.

A few days later, I can't find the key to my bike lock. The apartment is turned inside out and upside down, until it looks like something from a Tim Burton movie. The stupid little piece of cheap jagged metal remains missing. I ask KJ if he's seen it.

"No, sorry," he answers. There's no actual remorse there. If anything he almost smiles around his tea thermos as if he was waiting for this day to come. "But I'm running early if you want a ride to work."

I don't have much other choice. It takes a week of carpooling for me to buy bolt cutters and a replacement lock, and *then* my key shows up in a drawer I know I checked three times. Its ridges are cutting into my skin as I call, "KJ, did you find my old bike lock key?"

"Didn't you get a new one?"

"The old one showed up in my drawer."

"I told you it would turn up eventually."

He's so nonchalant. *Practiced* nonchalant.

"KJ, I *checked* that drawer."

"I guess you overlooked it."

We've been together long enough that I am positive he is lying. Key still in hand, I march over to the living room to tell him off. He's stuffing a duffle bag. Well, stuffing is an understatement. He's trying to turn the bag into a black hole of preparedness. His back is to me. The key keeps hurting.

"Going somewhere?" I ask. "You look like you're packed for a week."

"A few days with a friend." Note: no specification as to *which* friend. Maybe his mother. In that small town. Where I never want to step foot again. "I'll be back Monday night after work."

“This is sudden.” Sudden equals spontaneous. Spontaneous does not equal KJ. Consider me concerned. “What? No month-long planning? Or did you just forget to tell me?”

“Must have slipped my mind.”

The zippering of the bag sounds an awful lot more like, *See how you like it when people disappear without warning*. I half-expect him to say that when he instead mumbles, “Don’t destroy the place too much. I can’t have you deciding the lock to the front door is ‘anti-magic,’ too.”

I spend the weekend toying with the key and thinking of ways to tell KJ that we have to talk. A wound has been made to our relationship. Stitches and Vicodin need to be applied. Well, metaphorical stitches and Vicodin. The latter is a narcotic we don’t have a prescription for and the former implies a surgically-oriented obsessive compulsive disorder. Also, it would be kinky as hell.

And if those words had come out of my mouth verbatim, we might have been okay. They, of course, did not. I put forth a jumble that sounded offensive and escalated quickly.

“You know,” he says, “you can really be insensitive.”

“And you turn into a Debbie Downer whenever I want to go out and do anything other than takeout and TV.”

“That’s unfair.”

“Oh, and you controlling my life isn’t?” I snap. “It was cute at first, *honey*, when I thought you were worried about me instead of trying to arrange me into your nice, neat little life schedule where absolutely nothing can go wrong.”

“I am worried about you,” he says. “I’m worried about you all the damn time, and you don’t care! Also, if anyone is the controlling one, it’s you. ‘KJ, let’s go spelunking. KJ, let’s get closer to the edge of the cliff that could kill us with one wrong step.’ I’m constantly putting myself second because you ask, but you won’t put on a f-ing helmet for my peace of mind.”

“So you steal my bike key?! Because I know it was you.”

He doesn't bother to deny it.

The conversation degrades from there. I want too much, he says. I'm selfish. I don't respect him. He's *boring*, I shout. He never wants to do anything with half a thrill. He'd rather take pictures of a tree than climb it. He'd pick smiling over laughing and sleeping over dreaming.

By the time summer comes, my bags are packed into a new apartment. They're crammed into corners, stuffed to the brim, ready to vomit their contents across the floor. First things first, though: I open both of the windows and yank out the screens. I think that *he's* doing the opposite. *He's* putting the screens back in, cursing my name as he does so. I hope he leads a safe, lackluster life where nothing magical ever happens. I assure myself that I'm going to do better. I'm going to go on an adventure. I'm going to be someone.

I dream angry dreams that night, but not nightmares. I picture that he's a big, mean dragon and I am not a princess (the nickname bothers me now). I'm a knight. I have a sword as sharp as a diamond, forged by a friend, meant to cut his heart out. He breathes fire as I approach. It's hotter than summers we used to share and redder than the blood from my palms that was probably still on his carpet. I charge forward then. He tries to trap me beneath his claws. Squishing, caging, flaunting dominance. I wriggle out and stab the sword through dull gray scales. They look better painted red. More exciting. Then, I climb a tower, not to rescue a damsel in distress or a kind-hearted gentleman, but to take in the view. It's so much nicer up here. The air is clear. Well, for the most part.

I can still smell dead dragon. His remains have the fragrance of dirt, cement, and cold meat. Past it, my nose picks up flowers. Flowers and hope. The hope-scent overpowers everything else. I lean out the open window further—there's no window screen lodged into the stone opening—in order to embrace more of it. Across the river, the sun is rising, and down below, I can hear the faint tunes of a boom box lifted high in celebration. The dragon rots into nothing but a skeleton, bones mangled to look like an ivory playground, and I think his ribcage would make the most wonderful set of monkey bars.

When I wake up, the room is cold because I left the window cracked. The sun is playing its game with the clouds, struggling to create a breach

through which it can throw shafts of light and warmth, while the clouds struggle to block its attempts like soccer goalies. I poke my head outside.

There are mosquito bites on my arms.

Bio- A. C. Monks lives in New Hampshire and attends college along the North Shore of Massachusetts. She is studying film and creative writing, and works at the school's Writing Center as a peer tutor. Her previous work includes pieces in *Festival Writer* and *The Quotable*. Quirks include an insatiable sense of curiosity, a fondness for sticky notes, and a slight addiction to adrenaline.

Wait for Me

by Connie Chappell

A ghostly fog hung over the wetland. Two unblinking inky pools looked out of it.

The asphalt road beneath my feet gave way to gravel, but my focus didn't waver from the goose's head, shrouded in slender reeds.

In the cool May morning, stillness prevailed.

I stepped around a clump of wheat-colored grass for a full view of the goose. Her visibly quick heart told me to hold my distance. We stood fifteen feet apart in uncanny communication. The goose remained virtually frozen in one spot while I ran an early-morning errand. Both times I passed, I felt her piercing eyes, silently summoning me.

The wetland served as Wildwood Preserve's entrance. Within Wildwood's borders, homes were tethered to a string of preservation covenants.

Twenty-plus years ago, as a young wife, I moved from my father's house to this home. In all that time, I never knew a goose to wander this close to the road.

Satisfied the Canadian Longneck wasn't injured, I headed back toward the pond to look for her mate.

“Wait for me,” I said over my shoulder to the feathered sentinel. My words caught me mid-stride, as natural as the habitat surrounding me.

I pushed down the beaten-dirt lane, remembering the day I bounded into my father’s study. He wasn’t its only occupant. The interruption brought both men to their feet. In the sacred moment that passed before Drew Nelson and I were introduced, a bond at a level we could never explain sealed around us.

Daddy sensed it instantly. He slid nervous eyes from me to Drew and back again.

“Anna,” he said, his voice the bearer of reason.

I’d upended their business discussion, so, with a wave of dismissal, Daddy agreed I could show Drew the grounds.

That day, I uttered the same three words to Drew. “Wait for me.”

They were not a plea, not for that place, not for the five steps he gained on me while I stopped to latch the corral fence, but for the future rushing at me so quickly, I feared it would run me down.

Coming back, he let his dark eyes search mine. “I don’t believe I have any other choice,” he said.

I spent the next few weeks persuasively countering Daddy’s arguments. “Yes, Daddy, I know Drew is twenty-four and I won’t be sixteen for two months. Yes, Daddy, you’re his boss, but remember—Mother was eleven years younger than you.”

I was raised in a home filled with love and intelligent conversation, where my parents spoke to their only child as an adult. Maturity came early, and Mother’s sudden death months after my twelfth birthday set that maturity on an accelerated course.

Until I came of age, Daddy would only approve an old-fashioned courtship. His watchful eye assured all was the pinnacle of propriety through the two intervening years. Drew and I played tennis on the backyard court. We rode the chestnut mares out, then walked them back along the bridle path.

Every day, I prayed that Drew would wait.

And he did.

The path to the pond ended at a flat boulder. I stepped up to look around a young willow and into the shady cove sheltered by a perimeter of tall pines. Cattails stationed at the hidden inlet's mouth stood soldier-straight like a platoon of armed guards. I stared hard into the misty gloom. Through that span of seconds, the sun struggled through breaks in the trees.

I knew a Canadian Longneck would stay behind to nurse its mate while the flock moved on, but defused light showed an empty bank, and still water as unyielding as glass.

When I turned to step down from the rock, I saw the scattering of evidence: bloody feathers and animal tracks in the dirt. My chin dropped. Nursing could not prevent the course of nature that led through thick underbrush into the trees. The goose and I, both new widows, shared the same endless days hollowed by the loss of a mate. My Drew was taken, too. In his case, the predator was cancer.

I plodded back. The Canadian Longneck had not strayed. She watched while I eased as close as I dared, then bowed her head. An unbearable longing was all that remained.

Carrying that mournful image, I walked out to the road. There, I spoke my heart's relentless question. "How long will this hurt?"

The words caught on a breeze and hurried away, along the immeasurable stretch toward home.

Bio- Connie Chappell's debut novel, *Wild Raspberries*, was released by Black Rose Writing in April, 2015. She is a lifelong resident of Springfield, Ohio, where she serves its citizens from her office in City Hall. She also produces videos about Springfield, government projects, and community events for the government-access channel. Visit her webpage at: conniechappell.com

****Editor's Note: The following story due to some of its content and language is rated "R" for mature audiences. There are a few detailed scenes of physical intimacy as the female protagonist wishes to conceive a child to save her marriage. The raw, visceral nature of certain aspects of the story is pivotal for character portrayal. Though outside the realm of*

material we typically publish, this well-written piece meets our fundamental aim in choosing stories that make you think, re-examine life and leave you with something learned—the sympathetic female protagonist and her plight make this story serve almost as a cautionary tale.

Followed

by F. X. James

Melanie was rubbing lotion on her heavy arms when she told Jeff she'd been followed earlier in the day. They were in bed. Jeff had just showered and now sat naked at the foot of the bed, clipping his toenails, the little opaque clippings zipping through the air like tiny scimitars. Melanie hated when he did this, hated that he never collected and trashed the clippings like a normal person, hated whenever she stepped on one of them, like she so often did, the tiny sharp point digging into the sole of her bare foot. The image filled her with a quick and veritable disgust. She had meant to tell Jeff about the man who had followed her earlier, but their dinner together had once again become awkward and tense. She had overcooked the London broil and forgot to get Jeff the particular German beer he liked.

Jeff was bored to death with her, she could tell. This was his second marriage, and her first, and after only four years Melanie could see the cold indifference in her husband's eyes, hear the flat apathy in nearly every word he said to her. In her mind there was only one chance left to keep the marriage afloat, she needed to have a child, *his* child.

When she initially made the suggestion of conceiving, Jeff simply nodded and smiled and said, "Sure thing, Mel, a kid sounds just fine." A reaction she was not expecting and one that bolstered her hopes for their ailing marriage considerably. But now after six months of near constant sex, with a fair amount of it having little to do with the biological fact of procreation, Melanie was seriously beginning to doubt her husband's virility.

Jeff had thoroughly enjoyed the plentiful sex for the first two months, with all the various positions, the unfettered hunger Melanie brought to the act now that it had more of a tangible purpose to her than mere physical pleasure (which would always be purpose enough for Jeff), and he felt no need to inform Melanie of the vasectomy he had had two weeks into his first marriage, some six years ago.

But even this spate of abundant sex had become stale and uninspiring to him, so now during their frequent bouts, Jeff let his mind drift to other thoughts, most of which centered around the common themes of his personal passions and money, Jeff's most venerated subjects. He would think about his trout fishing gigs up in Washington, his twice yearly hunting trips in Wyoming and Texas, the '68 Corvette he was passionately and painstakingly restoring, and his ongoing financial investments in South America, investments Melanie knew nothing about (and why should she, Jeff would argue, she had no mind for finance, just like all the other women he had known). These were damn good deals his fishing buddy, Terry, had turned him onto.

These were safe bets, for sure, his friend of many years said one night after they had picked up two middle-aged whores in a bar and ran them ragged in adjoining rooms in a cheap motel. A bit pricey, yeah, true enough, but safe, Terry said, as the men sat on the curb outside their motel rooms, sharing a pint bottle of Jim Beam, while the women wandered off in disheveled states of dress, searching for a taxi (the one with the red wig cursing back over her shoulder at Terry for the bite marks he left on her ass). You gotta spend a little money to make a little money, buddy-oh, Terry told his good friend, the whore's voice coming to him with no more meaning than the buzzing of a fly.

All these things, the hunting and fishing (and whoring), the Corvette, the investments, all had been in place long before Melanie came along, and all would remain in place still (whoring included). They were Jeff's prior commitments, and to date, his most important. He made sure Melanie understood this by their fourth date together out in some slick foreign restaurant down on the pier, a thick oily candle burning between them on the small table, and her hands, her awful clammy hands, constantly in search of his (a demonstrative need that began on their very first date, a need Jeff pretty much cured her of outright by the end of their first week together).

Jeff was a bare bones type of man, priding himself in saying only what needed to be said, and little more, and saying it directly. An easy thing to do for a man who was guarded as a rattlesnake in a bed of autumn leaves. And why the hell should he share everything? More information only led to more questions and Melanie already assaulted him with enough bloody questions every damn day: where are you going after work? Can I come with you? Can we visit my mother next week? What's that mark on your

collar? Would you like fettuccine or rigatoni tonight? Could we talk about getting that hot tub you promised? Would you like to go camping together for a few days? Who are you texting? Should we paint the bedroom yellow? Have you seen my purse? My keys? My new bra? My credit card?

So let her keep f#\$%ing him like she was, even if it was starting to bore him, like most things about her did. She'd lose interest with the whole maternal thing soon enough, Jeff would see to that, he probably wouldn't even have to confess his duplicitous behavior either (why the hell would he?). He was very good at planting seeds of doubt in the fertile grounds of needy minds. He did it at work all the time. And minds like Melanie's were easy enough to manipulate. She was exceptionally obedient and loyal and seemingly subservient enough. He knew he would always come first in her mind. Always. And now that she no longer overwhelmed him with her earlier acts of intense need and emotional dependency, he felt pretty good about making her his wife. There would still be other women of course, many. Like his good buddy Terry always said, why give up hamburgers just because they'd settled for pork chops. That Terry was a funny guy.

A nail clipping spiraled out and clicked against the cabinet. Melanie tutted and shook her head. Jeff grunted. What the hell was she just talking about? Something about being followed? Jesus. She should be so lucky. Followed. Good God.

He finished his work and stood, brushing remnants of toenail from his hairy thighs. He was naked and figured he'd be laying her in just a few minutes anyway so there seemed little sense in looking around for his goddamn shorts and T-shirt. Better take a piss first, though. No point aggravating the old bladder while she did whatever she planned to do to get his lifeless seed inside her.

Last night she had straddled him on the couch, and this not twenty minutes after he'd succumbed to the midnight munchies, wolfing down half a club sandwich and a big glass of milk. Jeff used to joke a lot about Melanie's weight, back in the day when joking at her expense came naturally to him and made him laugh, back before boredom set in with that too, and the humor, cruel as it was from the start, turned even darker, then sloughed away entirely, like a snake shedding its skin. One of his common quips surfaced whenever they had friends over for dinner (which they had not done now for nearly a year), pointing out the broad width of Melanie's ass as she returned to the kitchen for another helping of whatever overly-spiced

meal she had spent half the day preparing, he would say, the *only* small thing about his wife was her goddamn attention span. Ha ha.

On the couch last night she had ground herself against his groin and full belly with tremendous weight and force, her huge milky white breasts flopping above his face like a pair of giant bota bags. Had he not come when he did, he would have vomited instead, no doubt about it. Sex with Melanie had gone the way of humor with Melanie, lacking any natural ease, it had become tedious and perfunctory, replete with too many odd sounds and peculiar scents which were indicative of Melanie's often histrionic state of arousal, and which Jeff had long tried to ignore. But even so, it was still sex and he was still a man, and the positive end result for Jeff usually outweighed the minimal effort he put in to the event. Low investment, high return. He could certainly appreciate that.

Feeling tired and slightly out of sorts, Jeff sat down to piss, farted a couple of times, then stood and went back to the bedroom without flushing or washing his hands. Melanie was rubbing lotion into the lined flesh of her throat. When Jeff slid in beside her she capped the bottle of lotion and placed it back on her bedside table. She moved over and touched his groin gently, just to let him know what she had in mind, which of course, he was well aware of.

Prior to her marriage Melanie had slept with only two other men, one of them a friend of her brother's, the other a coworker. The friend of her brother was a one night stand sort of thing. There had been alcohol and music, marijuana, even some unknown and oddly colored pills. He was heavy, heavier than she, and there was a thick swatch of hair across the tops of his shoulders that she loathed to touch.

He was her first, and it was quick and suddenly painful, and as far removed from pleasure as she could have imagined. The encounter with her coworker was a little better, though not much, and evolved into a brief relationship, but it was nothing like being with Jeff.

At the beginning of their relationship, before he no longer cared to secrete his boredom, Jeff was forceful and confident, always guiding her hands and her head, moving her around easily like a ragdoll, big as she was, entering her in every imaginable way without apology, taking absolute control every time. At first she was overwhelmed, even a little afraid, but the feeling soon dissipated, and she quickly gave over to the pleasure to be found in his

roughness, in his almost vitriolic energy, his unabashed dominance. But that part of him was gone now, not the aggression as such; that was still there (and no longer much of a turn-on for her), but the connection she felt during, which she realized now could well have been a connection only she enjoyed, this was what she missed most.

Jeff made a sucking sound with his mouth. He dropped a hand roughly on her left breast and pinched the small nipple there. Melanie winced and lightly patted the back of his hand (an action she knew he disliked intensely, one that took him instantly out of whatever he was thinking or doing at the time. “I’m not a goddamn dog!” he would snap at her. “Or a fucking child. Don’t *pat* me!”). He turned over on his side and grunted.

But Melanie really wanted to talk first, to tell Jeff about the man who had followed her today, the way the man had looked at her in the grocery store, how she had recognized him later, driving close behind her, turning when she turned, staying right on her bumper, his heavily bearded face flashing into view intermittently as their cars journeyed between shade and sunlight, sunlight and shade. He followed her all the way home, but when she at last pulled into her drive and quickly looked behind her, he was gone. Her heart was racing, sweat had broken out above her top lip, her hands clutched the steering wheel in a death grip. She had gotten out of her Prius on trembling legs, looked up and down the street, saw nothing. Yet the one clear thought barreled its way through all the others: he knows where I live.

She didn’t share this last particular part with Jeff, but she did talk about seeing the man at the store, and gave details of his appearance: the tatty brown jacket, scruffy dark hair and beard, black fingerless gloves, a large mole just below his left eye. He was taller than Jeff but not as broad, wearing jeans or perhaps khaki pants. No, it was definitely jeans she recalled. Her look at him could not have lasted more than a few seconds, but her eye for detail had always been good. As a young girl she had written poetry (nothing she had ever shown anyone) and one of her favorite books at the time was Rainer Maria Rilke’s, *Letters to a Young Poet*. One of the master poet’s key points was always pay close attention to your surroundings, every day, no matter how mundane they initially appeared to be, detail was everything, and a good poet could not create art without it.

Jeff was silent as she spoke. He had shifted onto his back, his large hands cupping the back of his head, the hair in his armpits sticking up in dark moist tufts. When he finally spoke it came to her with all the disinterest she

had anticipated. Forget about it, he told her, it was just some bum. What's a guy going to follow you for? She dismissed the commonplace putdown in her husband's remark (dismissing Jeff's negativity was her default mode now, had been for a few years), knowing better than to let herself be affected by the callous words of the man she once vowed to love forever. She had learned how to toughen up her epidermis, just like her husband always wanted. *Stop being so damn girly*, he would say.

She did not speak further on the subject and moved to the other business on her agenda. She trailed her fingers gently down along his front and gathered him in her hand until he quickly thickened and hardened, and she did not protest when he roughly pushed her head down beneath the covers. She took him into her mouth and worked diligently with her lips and tongue, squeezing with her right hand, while stroking the shaft up and down with her left. When the balls suddenly tightened and lifted, she stopped her skillful actions cold, not wanting to waste the precious fluid this way. She moved up and kissed his scratchy chin and asked how he wanted her.

Without so much as a word, Jeff flipped her on her side. He checked her wetness with two clumsy fingers, then slid into her and began a series of quick hard strokes. When a thick finger then began to probe into her other place, a place she knew he longed to enter however he could (as if her regarding this part of their lovemaking as taboo, an opinion she had shared with him more than once, only heightened his desire to enter her here, a specific desire she found to be quite sad, and one that always left her feeling violated and cold, but a desire she usually complied with just the same), she again did not protest.

Yet even during this familiarly rough manhandling of her body, she could not move her mind far from the image of the man in the grocery store, the man who had followed her; the intensity of his stare, his overall appearance, how he had followed her home.

Jeff was not in it for the long haul tonight. He grunted loudly, then quickly climaxed with his wet mouth pressed hotly against her neck like a leech, his fingers gripping her hip painfully. He muttered something she could not make out and pulled his softening penis out of her. Melanie tightened her sphincter as his finger quickly followed. He slapped her hard on the ass and rolled back over to his side of the bed. She closed her eyes and worked a

series of tense shallow breaths through her open mouth. She unclenched her hands.

Even before he began his inevitable post-coitus snoring and intermittent farting, Melanie slipped out of bed and assumed a handstand stance against the bedroom door. For a large woman such a position came surprisingly easy to her (one Jeff had mocked her for over the last month, yet a position he himself had tried more than once and failed each time, wrenching his knee on his last attempt after falling heavily to the carpet like he'd been shot in the head). Yes, she was big, but she had never considered herself *fat*, no matter what her cruel husband intimidated.

As a young girl she had been an active bike rider, hiker, and long-distance swimmer. Handstands and cartwheels had been the two parlor tricks she could do that most of her friends could not, and she did both with grace and fluidity and near perfect alignment.

When her toes landed softly against the top of the door, she brought her heels together and flexed her feet, carrying this flex all down the length of her full body, feeling the powerful muscles beneath her soft outer layer tighten. She wiggled her broad hips from side to side, willing her husband's sperm to seek out her precious egg and find purchase there. She kept this position up for a good five minutes, then gracefully kicked away from the door and brought both feet gently down to the soft plush of carpet. She stood, feeling only mildly lightheaded, and rubbed at the warmth of her belly, at the miracle she dearly hoped was beginning to take shape there.

She went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth and hair, padded a wad of tissue lightly at the fluid now beginning to leak between the tops of her thighs, balled up the tissue and flushed this and Jeff's urine away, then shut off the light and came back to her side of the bed where she slid in beside the bulk of her snoring spouse and soon fell into a deep sleep herself, her fingers spread wide across the softness of her belly like tributaries on a map.

In the morning she awoke alone in bed and felt little sadness for the familiar fact. She got up and went to the kitchen and poured herself a half cup of coffee. It was Saturday and Jeff had no work, but maybe he had golf, or he was off visiting his parents. Maybe he was even at the store, though this seemed highly unlikely. She didn't know where he was, and in truth, she really didn't care. She sat at the kitchen table and thought about the

current issues that swirled about her like a fog. Her husband no longer loved her, of this she was certain. This of course led straight to the next obvious question: had he *ever* loved her? But here a primal mode of self-defense kicked in and Melanie quickly denied any light to the depressing query, just like she had done so many times before, focusing instead on her slim hopes for marital rejuvenation through childbirth.

She believed she could live in a marriage without her partner's love (was she not doing that right now?) if she had a child of her own to make up for the deficit. She had read countless books that testified to the power of the mother and child connection, the force of this particular love being so strong it had become the stuff of legend. And so it was with this clear-cut combination of fear and hope that Melanie remained just where she was, right by Jeff's side, the good-for-nothing son of a bitch.

She poured herself another cup of coffee and stood at the kitchen sink, looking out the window at a street she had known for too long now, the same street along which a stranger had followed her only yesterday, looming like a dark cloud behind her, disturbing her in deeper ways she could not yet fully discern.

Melanie had no work to go to this Saturday morning because she had recently quit her job at the arts and crafts store where she had worked for the last two years. She had liked the job well enough, and she liked the other women who worked there, though most were dotty blue-haired retirees who had grown uncomfortably afraid of their lonely thoughts of death and bored with their daytime "stories," and who had happily taken the job at a nickel above minimum wage just to stay alive. Melanie really liked the interaction she had with the customers too, especially the ones who could not quite put their finger on what it was they needed and readily deferred to Melanie's "expertise" to guide them.

But then one morning Jeff strongly suggested (demanded?) she give up the job and focus more on her ability to maintain a home for them both. He didn't require much, he told her, but he did expect to come home to a clean house and a nice cooked meal every day, and there was just no need for her to go out and lose so much of the precious time required for that to a job that paid so damn little, not when he was making more than enough for the both of them to live on. And as she had done so many times before, Melanie quietly acquiesced to her husband's suggestion (demand?), and put in her two weeks' notice.

She poured out the rest of her coffee and rinsed the mug and turned it upside down on the draining board and wiped down the sink and draped the cloth over the chrome neck of the faucet to dry. She remained there looking out the window, her eyes taking in the procession of cars slowly passing by, the ubiquitous brown of a UPS delivery van, a young boy on a small bicycle, standing up on the pedals, coasting silently by, a large breasted woman jogging along ungracefully, dragging a tiny white dog behind her on a thin pink leash, the jogger's blond ponytail bouncing between her shoulders like a giant finger tapping out a beat.

All these things her eyes absorbed while her mind once again offered up the bearded man with the brown jacket and fingerless gloves, the man who had crept along behind her, right there behind her, like the skulking image of something dire and deadly moving between the dark cloak of shade and the bone white glare of sunlight, like something dreamt of, something moving ever closer, something the dreamer could never outrun.

She did not expect to see the man who had followed her again (though she had no real reason for thinking this way, for they lived in a relatively small city, and chances being what they were, with the more negative aspect of chance coming her way than the positive, she should have at least entertained the notion of seeing him again), and when she did, almost a full week after her first encounter, her breath locked itself in the middle of her throat and every muscle that hung upon her solid frame seemed to liquidate beneath her warm skin. She was coming out of Once Upon A Nightstand, the last independent book store in town, with the latest Lee Child paperback tucked under her arm.

She was digging through her purse for her keys when she looked up and saw him not twenty yards away on the opposite side of the street. He was dressed in exactly the same manner as the first time, and he was just standing there watching her. He was doing nothing else. He was not talking to anyone. He was not coming out of a store with a purchase of his own under his arm. He was not just casually walking along, minding his own business, oblivious to her random existence. He was simply standing there, still as stone, arms at his sides, bearded face blank as a snow covered field. He was barely fifty feet from her, just staring at her.

Melanie could not move, and within this sudden and hated immobility, blossomed a shrewd and sharp awareness. She was aware of her breath, finally weaving its way up and down her broad torso, she was aware of

elderly voices engaged in conversation directly behind her, some friendly debate over which wine would go best with lamb cutlets, she sensed the fluttering motion of a pigeon alighting on the roof of a silver Volkswagen not five feet from her left side, from the corner of her right eye she watched as a young girl leaned across a metal table outside the Tastefully Buzzed Coffee House, and kissed an even younger looking man on the tip of his nose.

She heard the distant blast of a train klaxon, felt the warmth of the midday sun upon her cheek, the slow descent of heavy drops of sweat working their way down along the smooth curves of her sides, and she knew, if she opened her mouth at this precise moment she would clearly hear the wet tackiness of her gummed lips parting.

She could not bring herself to look into the follower's eyes; that would be too much. But she could see how his hands clenched and opened, opened and clenched, like the speeded up film she had seen of flowers on a nature show late one night when she couldn't sleep, and Jeff's snoring had driven her from her bed and out to the silence of the living room, where she had curled up on the leather couch, everything around her bathed in a sickly amber hue from the streetlights outside.

This is like a film, she thought. Hitchcock, of course. Or maybe one of those black and white French films from the fifties, the kind where every character is beautiful and young and they all smoke unfiltered cigarettes, and the streets are cobbled and wet, shining like jewels, and then from the darkness of a shop doorway, steps a man with something sharp glinting in his hand and the innocence of the film dies in a heartbeat.

It was a sharp little pain in her hip that brought Melanie back to herself. A young girl was standing beside her, her little fingers giving the flesh of Melanie's hip a quick twist. Melanie looked down into the face of a miniature angel, bright blue eyes, a mass of yellow wavy hair, a big heartwarming smile revealing a clutch of tiny white teeth. Next to the girl stood a tall woman, her hand laid gently across the little girl's shoulders. Melanie saw brightly colored tattoos of flowers and ornate fish running along the woman's forearm and all the way up to her bare shoulder. That's a full sleeve, thought Melanie, wondering where she had heard the term before. The little girl was tugging on Melanie's skirt with one hand and pointing at something on the ground with the other.

Melanie looked and saw that during her previous transfixed state she must have upended her purse, for its contents now lay scattered about the sidewalk, and this was what the child wanted her to know. She lightly touched the girl's curly hair and thanked them both. The woman nodded and smiled and Melanie caught the flash of something silver set in the middle of her tongue. She hunkered down and quickly swept the spilled contents back into her purse and when she stood and looked across the street the follower was gone. These are the moments, thought Melanie, that no one would ever believe, most especially Jeff. These are slasher movie moments, bad tales to tell after too much wine and a lull in the conversation following dinner with friends (my god, when was the last time they had *friends* over?).

Unnerved as she was, she had to continue. She went to the grocery store and gathered supplies for one of Jeff's favorite meals: Marie Callender's chicken Pot Pie with green beans sautéed in garlic and olive oil on the side, a meal even you can't f#\$% up, Jeff had said, with a bright wink in his eye and clear animus in his voice. She moved cautiously between the aisles, fingering items lightly, her mind frantically alert like something wild and subterranean, her eyes not missing a thing, darting toward any nearby motion, registering every person within ten feet of her as a potential threat: the old man reaching for a can of soup, the gangly teenager sweeping the floor, the pregnant woman stopping with a hand pressed to the small of her back, the couple sorting through a stack of coupons.

Out in the parking lot things were not much better. Sunlight bounced off the glassy fronts of a hundred cars. Her neck was almost pained by the constant twisting and turning, and if her eyes continued to blink with such force and speed she was convinced they would pop from her skull and roll along the heated tarmac like discarded fruits. But he was not there, not that she could see, and after she placed her groceries in the back seat she leaned against the driver's door and commanded herself to breathe, slowly, deeply, steadily. She closed her eyes and put a hand to her belly. She thought of her child, boy or girl, and was flooded with images of both, and of how life would blossom anew for her because of parenthood; Melanie Williams, rising from the ashes, dusting off her wings, at long last confident and filled with purpose.

Later that night, after she had scraped the plates free of gummed pie base and shriveled green beans, she brought Jeff his third dark beer and sat

beside him on the couch. He was channel surfing, the fifty-four inch plasma screen filling the room with flashes of bright light and a cacophony of speech and music. She put a hand on his wide knee, but she was not thinking of procreation tonight. Jeff gave her a cursory glance, then turned his attention back to the screen. He was trying to recall a joke Terry had called to tell him earlier in the day, something about nuns and a very horny monkey, but he couldn't get the words in sequential order, and the punch line was only a blur. But just the thought of the joke, unformed as it was, made him chuckle.

Melanie saw the follower one more time, about three months after her street encounter. Of course she was not pregnant, and Jeff was right, she had by this time slowly begun to lose focus with the entire enterprise. She had sunk into a deep depression after her gynecologist examined her and ran blood tests for the third time in two months, the small Asian specialist telling her there was nothing apparently amiss she could detect, and that it was more likely that the issue lay with Jeff and a low sperm count. Jeff continued with his deception and steadily began to work on Melanie's dour state of mind.

Within a week or so he believed he had her back on track, telling her that it was just not in the cards for her to get pregnant, and what with the world being so grossly overpopulated like it was, perhaps that was a good thing. Maybe in a year or so they could talk about adopting some European white kid, or possibly getting that Pomeranian she was always going on about. He would not for a minute humor the idea that the problem lay with him (as it wasn't technically a problem at all, of course), and steadfastly ignored Melanie's pleas for him to get tested (pleas Jeff knew would dissipate and then vanish entirely within another week or so, which they mostly did).

Following her final visit with the gynecologist, the sex stopped altogether, but Jeff was not concerned, for he was now sleeping with a married woman from work. He was also fishing every other weekend with Terry, and there were always girls to be had at the end of these trips. Jeff had no idea how Terry knew so many "working" women, most of them fairly attractive too, but he was happy to take full advantage of the fact. It sure was good having a friend like Terry.

It was a Monday, the last time Melanie saw the follower. The weather had turned decidedly cold and she had called Jeff to ask if he would pick up

some firewood on his way home from work. Jeff told her to just turn the heat on instead. What the hell did she need to see real flames for anyway, heat was goddamn heat, wasn't it? Sure, she told him, heat was goddamn heat, and in fact, why didn't he just forget about the goddamn wood, forget every goddamn thing that ever mattered a goddamn, and then go fuck himself. She shattered the phone against the fireplace and uncorked her second bottle of Riesling.

Some time after seven snow began to fall. Melanie had fallen asleep in an awkward position against the couch, and there was an intense weight and hardness now across the tops of her shoulders and down one side of her neck. The wine bottle was empty and on its side. She could see thick flakes of snow drifting down slowly beyond the living room window, the orange glow of the streetlight giving them an eerie appearance, as if they were tiny alien spacecraft, slowly descending to begin their attack on all the hapless and arrogant earthlings. She called Jeff's name once, but knew he wasn't home, all the lights were off, the TV too, clear signs of his absence.

She got to her feet with some difficulty and the room unhinged itself. Her stomach heaved. Maybe this is what morning sickness is like, she thought, then felt like crying. She set one hand on the arm of the couch and the other spiraled out into emptiness where it waved about aimlessly. Too much, she thought, it's always about too damn much. Too much wine, too much time, too much sadness, too much me, too much all *this*. Her eyes had no desire for luminescent light (too much harsh). She stood to her full height and exhaled slowly. For a second she was sure she was going to vomit. She clamped her teeth together and parted her lips, breathing in and out this way in slow easy measures, the chilly air causing her sensitive teeth a twinge of discomfort.

For a second or two she didn't know what to do or where to go or why she was even alive. This was her home, but the word had no meaning for her, she was merely present within a specific time and space, just like she was at any point in her life. But she did not *belong* here.

The streetlights were starting to annoy her and the spiraling fat flakes of snow were adding to her motion sickness. Draw the curtains, turn on a single lamp, stretch out on the couch with a damp facecloth over her eyes. Maybe some soft music. But that would be all. When her stomach finally settles she should probably get herself something to eat, but for now, she just needed a little more time to recover. She shuffled over to the window

like an old crone, one hand pressed against her empty womb, the other trailing against the backs of chairs. Her knees were weak and her head felt like it was filled with heavy shards of metal. She could feel a deep hot pulse radiating behind her eyes, and her stomach churned unpleasantly.

At the center of the window she stood once more to her full height, and spreading her arms wide apart, she grabbed an inch or so of curtain in each hand and began to draw them in, and that's when she saw him, standing at the foot of their drive, hands at his sides, snowflakes alighting gently on his head and beard. She stopped in mid-draw, her own hands dropping slowly to her sides in unknowing mimicry. They stood this way for easily a minute or more, separated by a distance of twenty feet or so, some panes of thin glass, and that was all. Melanie felt her breath rise and fall softly, she felt no fear this time, and not because she was inside her home, with the phone (now broken) close at hand, or other rooms to run to with doors to lock and hide behind.

She was not afraid because she had run out of things to be afraid of. She had no fear for the well-being of her growing child, for there would be no child. She felt nothing even remotely like fear for the inevitable dissolution of her marriage, for there was no marriage, nor had there ever really been one. She was not afraid of her sadness, nor of her loneliness. She was not fearful of the future because she had yet to give a single thought to its expected approach.

The follower cocked his head ever so slightly to one side, and Melanie did the same. Monkey see, monkey do. And then he smiled. She could not see his mouth for his beard and moustache, but she could see how his eyes creased at their edges and how the hair around his mouth lifted a little as his lips turned upward, and she knew this was a smile. She smiled back and lifted a hand, palm flat, facing the window, fingers pressed together. The follower paused briefly, then did the same. Then he turned his head away and looked up the street. Melanie pressed her face to the window and craned her neck to see what the man was looking at, but the neighbor's fence blocked her view. He turned back one last time, nodded curtly and walked off up the street, a darkened form swallowed in a swirl of orange and white.

Five minutes later Melanie walked out into the cold night wrapped in an array of colorful winter wear. She tamped down the fresh snow on the drive with her booted feet, worked her fingers deep into the warm holds of her

sheepskin gloves and walked off up the street, following the marks he left for her.

Bio- F. X. James is the nom de plume of an oddball writing out of South Dakota. When he's not shivering through yet another brutal winter, he's writing poems and stories and drinking dark ales. He has had words published in *The Laughing Dog*, *Into the Teeth of the Wind*, *Icon*, *Illuminations*, *Art Times*, *Amoskeag*, *Iconoclast*, *Yawp*, *The Rambunctious Review*, *Vagabond City*, *The Dying Goose*, *Empty Sink Publishing*, and *The Milo Review*.

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