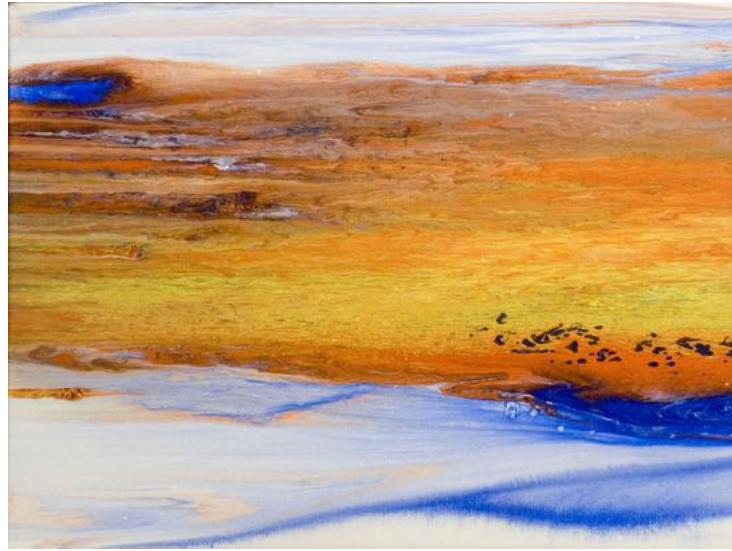


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Featured Stories:

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"The House of Stone and Light"- by Denise Bouchard

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Call Me Scheherazade

By Nels Hanson

"I don't understand what you mean," Kate said.

She flicked her head, shaking out her long copper hair so it shone like leaping fire, like my hair once.

"Why did he care so much about a butterfly?"

I'd told her already about Scheherazade, how each night she'd told the sultan the next part of the endless story. His first wife had been untrue and after that each new wife was put to the death with a sword, the morning after the wedding night.

"Do you know the story of Chuang Tzu?" I tried again in the hot upstairs room the tired fan couldn't freshen, 40 days in a row of 100 degrees or better. In Acacia I'd had air conditioning that cooled the large house with 100 closed windows and 13 bedrooms, a parquet walnut dance floor and grand piano that reflected the wide French chandelier.

"I don't remember—"

At the end of the bed, Kate looked toward the window, at the yellow August vineyard that waited for the raisin harvest, the long rows of Thompson Seedless vines that yearned to lift their roots and hurry toward the Coast Range and the sea, the Pacific.

"He lived in China about 450 B.C.," I began. "One spring night"—I said "spring night" and the stuffy room with the shut window and torn screen was suddenly cooler—"Chuang Tzu went to sleep and had a dream."

"You're going to tell me about a dream?" Kate's glance drifted toward my night table and the silver mirror and brush with the DM monogram I'd brought in May from Acacia, 30 miles south down scorching Highway 99.

My hired driver had finally found the farm, and in the barnyard my long-lost daughter Kyla peered through the steamed windows of the rented Cadillac. Then Kyla had turned and called to the beautiful girl, the perfect glowing ghost of my youth, who stood watching from the farmhouse steps: "Kate, help me get the spare room ready!"

"A very special dream," I said patiently, in the heat my heart pulsing at my arm.

"He dreamed that he was a butterfly, flying high above the rice and barley fields, the rivers and towns. Now Chuang Tzu had marvelous wings and he watched his shadow race across the land, over carts and horses and people on the roads and in barnyards and village squares.

"Wherever his eye saw something shining in the distance, a painted junk on the Yellow River or a temple on a mountaintop above a cold volcanic lake, that's where he flew with the cool wind rushing past him and instantly he was there.

"He was happier than he had ever been or imagined it was possible to be as he glided north and south, east and west, until all of China had passed under his wings.

"When Chuang Tzu finally woke in his bed, at first he was disappointed, before he felt pleasantly confused—now he wasn't sure if he was a man who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly that was dreaming it was a man—"

"That's the way the woman's lover felt?" Kate looked closely at me as I lay back on my damp pillows. "The woman who had the butterfly?"

"Dreaming and awake, here and there, alive and dead—Heaven and Earth—" I rocked my lifted hand back and forth through the hot air.

"Yin and Yang," I said. "Every man was in love with her."

Kate's green eyes grew wider, as green and large as mine.

They were mine, like her thick lovely hair, her shapely mouth and burnished skin, she got them from me, from my daughter Kyla I'd found again after 50 years... Kyla's address still the 8420 Linda Verde Avenue engraved on the wedding invitation I'd forgotten to answer, that smelled of lavender and yellow dust and had slept half a lifetime at the back of my dresser drawer . . .

And from Kyla's father, who'd looked like my twin, a lost brother, the golden-haired peach farmer named Oscar from west of Dinuba, the exiled and illegitimate grandson of the King of Sweden—

"The woman had other lovers?" Kate asked and I nodded, blinking as the falling sun touched the purple dress and the diamonds sewn among the rhinestones winked bright as stars of ice.

"After her lover died, even when she was older," I said, "there were always men coming to her."

"Why?"

"After they had experienced the butterfly, they changed, they weren't the same anymore. You could recognize them on the street."

"Not really—" Kate stared at me in disbelief. "Is this a fairy tale?"

"No," I said. "I told you it was true. Her lovers' eyes had a faraway look, as if the men had traveled to a foreign country, they'd been to another world and come back and this world had altered, become a dim reflection of something else, a torn fragment of some other story."

Now Kate lay sideways across the end of the bed, touching the purple dress with

her fingertips, blocking the different gems when they sparkled and sent colored lights racing across the stained ivy wallpaper.

“What did she look like?” she asked.

“At first I only heard about her from other women. Aaron hadn’t gone to her. I’m sure of that. We were still very much in love. Once I asked about her and he laughed.”

“Laughed?” Kate looked up from a blue diamond.

“I told him I’d heard she was part Japanese, part black, from Africa, the daughter of a king—a great exotic beauty the color of finest caramel. But he’d met her, he knew who she was. Aaron’s friend was her lover.”

“He did?”

“She was Spanish, from a family of sea captains. It was true she was very beautiful, with ivory skin and black hair.”

“But not as beautiful as you—” Kate waited. “You were the prettiest woman in San Francisco. That’s what you said Aaron said, after he found you at the Acacia Harvest Fair and took you to the city to get married—”

At the top of the Ferris wheel, the stranger who had stepped unannounced into my carriage threw back the wooden bar and attacked as the lit circle stopped then came down as quickly I sobbed and hurried to rearrange my stained dress and petticoat.

The man named Aaron led me quickly past my shocked sisters and high school friends down a quiet avenue of the fair—to a striped tent and the chauffeur in blue livery and the long silver car that drove north through the night until I saw the gray Pacific and the whitecaps like the wings of a million drowning birds—

“Different,” I admitted quickly. “Her name was Belle Solar, ‘Pretty Sun.’ Aaron introduced us, the day he gave me that dress.”

“This dress?” Kate touched the bodice of faded velvet.

“Yes,” I said. “From that day she and I became fast friends.”

“What was she like?”

“We talked of travel,” I continued, “...of journeys to distant lands. Of Borneo Taipei, the Dutch East Indies. She loved the sea and ships, she’d grown up on a ship. We enjoyed each other’s company and soon we were meeting every day.”

“In San Francisco?”

“Belle lived in a tower apartment across from Golden Gate Park. One day the maid led me to her room and when I went in she was dressing.”

“You saw it?”

Kate watched me with green eyes as her head lay beside the purple dress.

“That came later. She was standing behind a painted Chinese screen, of two emerald dragons green as your eyes, riding on a blue cloud. She asked me to sit in a chair by the bed.

‘Have you heard of my secret?’ she asked.

‘I have,’ I said, I couldn’t lie to Belle Solar.

‘I want you to know the truth,’ she said. ‘I value your friendship. I don’t want any shadow to come between us.’

“She stepped from behind the screen in a beautiful silk gown patterned with flying cranes, asking me to come sit beside her on the daybed. She touched my hand, looking me in the eye with her large dark eyes, then told me her story—”

“Tell me,” Kate asked, sitting up on the bed.

"I will, in Belle Solar's own words—

'Ten years ago, after a too brief engagement, I married a sea captain, a Spaniard and mariner like my father. Together we sailed the Pacific and Indian oceans in his ship, The Manifold. I touched land only in his presence, he was jealous of my beauty. The few men I saw were members of his crew: Malays and Africans who spoke no Spanish or English.

For six years I lived only with Eduardo, completely separate from others. I had my books and paint box and my diary, the journal that I kept, but the wide ocean was my world. I suppose in my enforced loneliness I was almost happy. I loved nature with all my heart. With my telescope I studied the sea birds and blue dolphins, the greenery of islands and at night the moon and southern stars.

One evening in late March, in the bay off Jakarta, an old man, a European from one country or another, came aboard for dinner.

All his long life, from the time of his youth, he had lived in the East. He spoke of his travels in far, unexplored countries, his collecting of exotic zoological specimens, and his painting. For years he'd trekked through jungles and across high-mountain passes, following rivers to their source, alone or living among primitive peoples who had never seen a white man.

When the dinner plates were cleared he carefully placed a ragged leather folio on the table.

One by one he brought out pictures of white and Bengal tigers, pygmy elephants and deer, crimson lizards and coiled mosaic snakes, orange monkeys and wildly patterned parrots and macaws. Each animal was truly wonderful: the breathing spirit of the beast or bird present in the avid eyes and vibrant colors and the volumes so fluidly rendered that the creatures seemed captured for an instant, reduced and trapped in mid heartbeat on the paper's flat surface rather than drawn by a brush.

As I marveled at the brilliant paintings that seemed alive and more than paintings I recalled my poor attempts with watercolors—my sad albatross perched on the mast's cross-tree and the three, winged flying fish above the wave—and felt a stinging shame.

I looked closely at my white-haired visitor, at his worn clothes and frail shoulders and hands, at his sun-wrinkled face and fallen mouth. He resembled beggars I had seen through my telescope, aged men who wandered about the ports begging alms. I remembered my father's constant admonition about the deceptiveness of appearances, a warning I ignored when I met handsome Eduardo and plighted my troth.

I realized our guest was a genius, an unknown and unrewarded master of masters. He sat at our table on our ship in the harbor and ours were the first Western eyes to see his life's splendid work.

Finally, he set out the last picture.

The other paintings had been truly striking in their perfect artistry of detail and realistic animation, but now I felt breathless and more amazed, suddenly I'd been transported to an undreamed of realm of experience and understanding.

I also felt afraid.'

"Why?" Kate asked.

I smiled and continued:

"The picture was of a different order. I leaned forward, like this, as if an invisible hand gripped the back of my neck and pushed me toward the table—before I pulled back, anxious that the painted image would lift its wings and leap from the paper."

"What was it, Belle?" I asked.

'It was a butterfly, an exceedingly rare, almost undiscovered species the mariners had seen high in the Himalayas, beyond Nepal near the border of China and

Tibet. He spoke the insect's Latin scientific name, then the word the local people knew it by, that meant 'Wonder of Heaven.'

My husband stared at it, bending close over the painting.

"It's magnificent," he whispered at last, "don't you think, Belle?"

I agreed that it was exquisite, like some living jewel.

The intricate butterfly had begun to make me apprehensive, I wanted to look at it for hours and days, for the rest of my life, and I wanted to turn and run away, to forget that I ever knew it existed. There was something frightful about it, as if we'd come upon a sleeping god and opened his hand and found the butterfly.

"Yes," said Eduardo, radiantly he smiled in agreement. "A living jewel."

'And then suddenly I felt terribly fatigued, watching the butterfly's gaze and its myriad vivid markings had drawn something from deep inside me, some private vital energy that now belonged to the emerald-eyed insect.

I said goodnight, thanking the elderly man for sharing his collection. As he rose and bowed, taking my hand and lowering his lips to my skin, I shivered, but not with disgust at his ruined age and homeliness. He no longer seemed noble and pathetic, now I felt that he was somehow sinister, that his art was not his own but a stolen gift he'd gained by stealth or magic—or in trade, by conjuring dark forces and bartering his soul—

For a moment, I imagined he was young, no more than 20.

With an effort I stood and excused myself, then stumbled to my cabin and without undressing fell down on my berth and plunged into asleep.

'Immediately I dreamed that the butterfly had escaped and flew above the ship and its white sails, then swooped toward the blue waves and through my open porthole. The butterfly circled above my uncovered body, watching me as I watched it and realized I couldn't move my arms or legs, I couldn't tense my smallest finger or speak or cry out as the butterfly held out its great colored wings with curving stripes and swirling spots and started to descend.

Then I dreamed that Eduardo and the painter had entered my door and that I didn't rise from my bed to object but only closed my eyes and slept more deeply—'

"Now Belle Solar looked at me closely, as if her large eyes touched every pore of my face and looked through me, before she continued—"

'The way you're looking at me now,' I thought as Kate listened.

'Later, when I woke and regained my senses, I realized that what had happened was planned from the first, that when I left the table and returned to my cabin they had followed me and slipped off my clothes as I slept.'

"How?" Kate asked.

"How?" I asked Belle Solar, just as you're asking me now, and she answered:

'At dinner my husband had drugged my wine, the artist had given him a pill that contained opium, a potion made of several powders that slowed the heart and breathing and caused a false but apparent death, a deep dreamless faint that lasted a week or more.

One morning I woke alone and instantly I understood that many days had passed from the night I lay down after seeing the butterfly. I looked out the porthole and the open sea stretched to the horizon. The sun's latitude showed several degrees south of Jakarta, we'd sailed hundreds of leagues.

As I sat up, throwing back the sheet, I saw something else had changed—

I kept trying to wake, praying that I dreamed, in the dream wetting my hand and rubbing and rubbing to erase the colored ink that had sunk beneath the skin. I shouted and beat my fists against the bed's wood frame, I studied my face in a mirror, to make certain who I was, then threw it down and tore my

hair and bit my fingers but when I looked again the nightmare wouldn't stop.

I remembered that a cabinet held a Turkish dagger. If I opened the drawer and found the knife, I would know beyond doubt that what I saw on waking was real and would never disappear, I wasn't dreaming and there was only one escape.

I pulled the brass knob and stared at the knife, at its gleaming crescent blade and ivory handle and silver guard.

I grasped the ivory and held the curved steel just above my heart, looking askant at my body, at what had been my body before my husband had brought the old man.

I lifted the knife, ready to bring it down with all my strength, then let its tip fall slowly until the point touched and drew a single drop of blood less red than three scarlet spots drawn across my breast, on the white skin that had turned to magenta and Prussian blue.

It was then that I decided to wait, to pretend to continue my long sleep, until Eduardo came to my cabin to enjoy his handiwork.

I'd stab and kill him—he was never my husband, he was a monster, a hateful fiend!—before I took my own life.

I lay back and as I waited for his step in the passageway I slowly examined the butterfly, every farthest part and reach of it, the manner in which it was all woven and interlaced and deepened into itself, altering as one color opened inward and shaded to another and another, without end, like the blue eye of a peacock's feather, like the darker, richer lines within a tiger's broader stripe.

The butterfly was exactly the same, identical to the painting in the folio, only now it was alive, not etched on dead paper but part of my own breathing skin, but not just my skin, it was Belle Solar.

'I had become the butterfly...'

"Did she kill Eduardo?" Kate asked, almost catching me off guard in the hotel room.

"Belle Solar wasn't a murderer, but she had a keen hatred for cruelty and a sense of rightful justice like a compass needle, Simple Truth was her True North. She was good and very intelligent, much brighter than the dreadful man she had married, and instantly she understood the perfect punishment."

"What was that?"

"Each night she allowed him to come into her cabin, to sit in a chair as she lay on the bed. She never let him touch her again, she said she'd kill herself first. He pleaded with her but each time he began to stir she lifted the knife, holding it above the heart of the butterfly, then lowering the blade until it nearly touched her and he sat back again."

"Then what happened?"

"Six months later he caught a fever off Bombay."

"*'I suppose,'* Belle had said while still clasping my hand, *'the butterfly killed him.'*"

"With herself as captain, Belle and her crew sailed the Indian Ocean around Africa, crossed the Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, Brazil and Argentina, to Chile and around Cape Horn. Her black hair blew loose in the sea wind, her dark eyes read the stars when she took the wheel at midnight and saw the Southern Cross. Then up the coast of South America past Peru to Mexico and California, she brought The Manifold to San Francisco."

"And you saw it?" Kate said.

"As she finished her story she stood before me again, then let the blue silk gown with flying white cranes fall from her shoulders, past her lovely breasts and waist."

I opened my arms, bending my hands.

"The wings flew out, then scalloped in, out, like an hourglass, toward her knees. The antennae were black and finely drawn, close together at first. Then they slowly curved, shading to purple, blue, then black again to make tight spirals about each breast, where the upper wingtips reached.

"And the colors—strange greens and lavenders, burnished golds, swirling pinks and yellow saffron, coral, indigo, now maroon, here a band of crimson, there a carmine, sudden cobalt, now cool azure, violet, ultramarine, on and on—all distinct yet blended, fathomless suggestions of color, wavering back and forth.

'Watch, Dolly,' Belle told me, 'watch closely so you'll know what I saw when I woke that morning in my bed on The Manifold.'

The figure seemed alive, independent yet instantly responsive to Belle's most delicate gesture and breath. Her merest whisper of movement sent a shiver across the length and span of the butterfly, new colors flickering, shining and rearranging, vanishing, the wings trembling, ready to lift from her skin—

'You'll think me mad,' she said, 'at first I thought myself mad, but it changes—'

'I believe you, Belle,' I said, '...I can see.'

'No, Dolly,' she added tentatively. 'With the moon—'

"Really?" Kate watched me, waiting for my answer.

"Truly," I said.

As I tried to describe the Butterfly to Kate—I'd been just her age when I'd first seen it—I saw it again for the first time too, when I woke from the drugged wine in my bedroom in Aaron's house in San Francisco and Dr. Bolger smiled and whispered, "Many men will leave the Earth on the wings of the Butterfly—"

Old and stooped Dr. Bolger had appeared "straight from the court of the Caliph of Samara," Aaron had said grandly as he'd introduced us and we'd gone into dinner.

In a vacant chair the doctor set down his leather satchel—that hid the many needles and the dozen colored bottles like thimbles and the Map of the Butterfly that later he'd unfold across half my wide bed as the narcotics took hold and I slept deeply for a week—

In the room's pressing heat I felt overwhelmed and despaired of finding the exact words to match the miraculous.

I reminded Kate that the Eskimos had 33 names for snow and lived in igloos with window panes of frozen fresh water, that the Hopi had no past or future verb tense, yet their language was supple and complex enough to describe Einstein's Theory of Relativity—once a month they bathed in steam from hot rocks, then ran from the sweat lodge and dived into icy mountain waters before they chewed buttons of peyote cactus to see God.

"Like a hidden rainbow, the entire color spectrum is contained in white light."

I'd read once that Muslim women weaving flawless Persian rugs mistied one knot so as not to challenge the perfection of Allah.

If Dr. Bolger had dropped a stitch, I had never seen the mark—

But then I had never really seen the Butterfly—no one who had seen it had ever truly seen it, never taken the Butterfly's dynamic and infinite measure, not Aaron or Dr. Bolger or 1,000 other men.

And not even Oscar, my one-month true love, my blonde prince in exile, Kyla's father, Kate's grandfather, the farmer from along the Kings River south of Kingsburg—

Oscar was after Aaron my abductor was safely dead and buried and I'd returned to Acacia from San Francisco, to start a new life and entertain and instruct all who heard and came running—

"Have you ever closed your eyes and looked at the sun?" I asked Kate.

Forever and effortlessly the wings and body kept evolving, opening out into a hundred fresh generations and involutions that superseded the last flashing patterns fading always across my green eyes that had turned to mirrors trying to capture fire.

"It was evergreen, like a redwood," I said. "Sequoia sempervirens, like the giants at Kings Canyon."

"And the men were changed afterward?" Kate asked quietly, waiting.

What could I say?

All I could do was quote Shakespeare:

"Full fathom five./ These are the pearls that were his eyes./ He hath suffered a sea change."

"And that was the day Aaron gave you this dress?"

"The same day," I answered. "Not long before he died, of a heart attack."

Now it glowed richly in the setting sun through the closed window. The cooler night was coming and the jewels lit up like the first stars.

"Would you like to try it on?"

"You mean it?"

Our eyes met, like green eyes in a mirror.

"You won't tell Kyla?"

"It's all right—"

I nodded and Kate jumped to her feet, bending her head and pulling the blue t-shirt past the torrent of shining blonde and red and copper hair, past her perfect breasts and shoulders and striking face.

"And when you die," Dr. Bolger had explained as I woke drugged on the bed. "The butterfly will fly away. What a beautiful death—"

But I didn't tell Kate this as she slipped on my purple velvet scattered with the rain of Aaron's secret diamonds I'd taken as he lay with open eyes that looked out at the sea but saw only the fading shadow of the Butterfly.

The End

Editor's note: This story is being published in installments. Part I is featured below and Part II will appear in the upcoming summer issue.

The House of Stone Light

By Denise M. Bouchard

Six hours across the Atlantic, nearly six centuries back in time and I've found my home. Traveling to the Irish countryside for the third time this week from my hotel in Dublin, I realize my life has become a chaotic mess. I'm living out of a suitcase in a foreign country, taking on a blood-thirsty bidding war and risking my busy yet comfortable lifestyle all for a house I cannot bear to lose. It's an emerald with a secret, a piece of my soul, the long lost answer inside and I'm helpless against its spell.

The house comes into view as I pull up the winding drive in my silvery rental car that matches the gray skies overhead. It's raining; forty degrees outside and the fireplace in the common room of the hotel was roaring when I left to go out into the cool and damp. Oblivious to the phone calls and paperwork tying me back to my NYC life, I'm subject to a feverish passion only I can understand.

I reach down into my purse and sort through its contents to find my cell phone with my left hand, never taking my eyes off of the ancient stone

house.

The realtor's number is on speed dial, number four on my contact list. I've pressed that button so frequently in these last few weeks with anxious moist hands, that the four is faded amongst the other numbers. It's more of a suggestion of a number... more like a rune.

When Ryan answers, I release the torrent of urgency, talking quick and hard, a voice belonging to the East Coast literary scene. He laughs, used to these calls from me. His voice is smooth, slow, deep golden and warm like bourbon... his lilt the tinkling ice.

"What is it Terina?" His voice coos and I think of how no one in New York speaks like this. It's one of the many elements that calls to me and even to my husband whenever we're here.

"Any word on the house yet?" I can't help myself even when relaxed by his voice. I have to ask yet again.

"Not yet, but I've got an idea. Where are you right now?"

He knows that I'm in front of the house again.

"Could you meet me in town? I'll buy you a Guinness!"

I'd meet this man in a foxhole and all because he's a pied piper leading me to my dream.

"Give me fifteen minutes."

It takes almost fifteen minutes just to leave the grounds but the little town that serves the picturesque hamlet is just right outside out of it.

Ryan already has a table when I walk in.

"What's your plan?" is all I say as I try to stash my collapsible umbrella somewhere in a dignified manner which isn't happening, hardly looking at him.

"A 'hello' would be nice... I'm beginning to feel used," he jokes.

"Hello, Ryan. What's your plan?!"

"Write the owners a letter." He nods as he says it as though that will do it.

"That's it? That's your brilliant plan?.. Ok. Off the top of my head, here goes: 'Dear Owners, I'm being out-bid by hundreds of thousands of dollars but I like your house more so sell it to me.'"

He shakes his head and grins. A deep sigh follows.

"I thought you were a writer."

"Yes, so?"

"So write what's in your heart. I know these people and we're not really talking hundreds of thousands more now are we?"

"No, but it might as well be if the price keeps skyrocketing and as you well know we already have a property in New York."

"Maybe the owners are not all about the money," he interjects.

"Maybe? What have you heard, Ryan?"

"Good and bad."

"What's the bad news?"

"The English are willing to keep out-bidding you."

"The English?"

"That's what they call them."

"So it's over for the Americans..."

"Not so fast, Lassie! It seems 'The English' are planning to really modernize the place. They're talking right in front of the owners about gutting this, tearing out that, putting in lots of steel and glass... modern art... The outside will have a pool and wet bar as well as an outdoor kitchen. It will no longer be a working farm for the area because 'The English' will hardly ever be there and they can't be bothered."

"Why not?"

"Well, like yourself, they have a big, busy life and two other homes. I can't even imagine the complications of your own life with Jack."

He recites what he's learned of us so far and some of what he hasn't, but gets it right on.

"There's your life as an author... Your husband's as a hedge fund manager who travels internationally at least once a month. A posh apartment overlooking Central Park. The theatre attended at least once a month. Leased homes for summer vacations both at home and abroad which you'd own if you weren't so busy... especially that Nantucket property..."

"That's amazing," I say to cut him off.

"Not really, darlin'- you're not so different from The English."

I feel as if I've been slapped.

"That's not fair, Ryan. I care about this house deeply. I'll be there as often as possible. I'd keep it running as a farm for the town and perhaps even hire more help than they have now. I'd love every careworn surface, nook and cranny because of its age and beauty."

"That's it then, darlin'! Now you're talking."

He slams his hand on the table. I jump because he's not usually this enthusiastic and then his wise words make me melt again as I begin to see what he's been trying to tell me.

"See now, that's exactly why I thought that a letter to the owners of why you are the best candidate to love and care for a home which they still clearly love but can no longer care for would help to sway them. You just convinced me, so maybe you can convince them."

"Wow- did I say how good you are? You should've been a lawyer!"

"I'm too rugged for the little suits."

I laugh but he doesn't. He's looking at me so seriously. He reminds me of Sean Connery. Older, rugged, still good-looking.

"What?"

"There's something else isn't there?" he eyes me suspiciously. "Something I need to know? Something you're not telling me? What is this obsession, this desperation for such an old place when you could have a vacation home anywhere- the Caribbean, the Hamptons... Just bring your wet-suits and call it a day. This is a farm and it will make your life even more complicated. I'm just curious..."

He's reading me; he does so skillfully. I wonder if all the Irish are so innately perceptive.

"It's ok," he says after a time. "So long as you're serious about the place. You don't have to tell me your reasons... but Mrs. Finnegan has expressed an interest in you. She has a good sense of people."

How do you describe to someone that you've seen the past and know the future if there's no change to your current lifestyle?

"As you know, Ryan, I'm a writer. My last novel was a re-worked fable. I wrote facets of my own life into it and I then used my imagination to create a manor from the early 1500's. It was a stone house with a warming stone for warming baked bread in the kitchen which also contained a beehive hearth. The surrounding land contained a waterfall, lakefront, terraces for gardens, sheep, cows, horses and apple orchards.

You see, I wrote before I researched, so when I researched and found 'the house' not only existed but was now up for sale and had been built in 1510, the exact same year I'd depicted... I had to see it."

Ryan, who typically holds a loose posture, has the upper half of his body edged forward atop his crossed arms, leaning on the table. I see that he's intrigued and continue what sounds surreal even to me though I've experienced it.

"When I saw a few pictures of the inside of the house, it was positively eerie, Ryan... Yet when we got here and you physically walked us through, I... Somehow I knew what would be in the next room and the next... It was like recognizing a part of myself.

Jack and I had been thinking of a getaway from New York City. In the states I feel like I'm in the movie, *Pelham 123*; our lives are moving faster than our bodies and souls will allow.

I grew up going to my grand-parents farm in upstate New York and I learned to ride. I loved riding on the open lands. I would keep the horses... I would keep everything. It's the kind of house where memories are made and tired souls are healed. I need that more than I imagined, Ryan."

I have Ryan's complete attention, but it is a comfort to see that he doesn't think what I've said is crazy. He reaches across the table to squeeze my hand.

"We have some work to do to get you your house," he says, standing.

That conversation took place weeks ago and I'm left thinking that I went and said too much. The phone rings.

"Meet me at the house. I have something to show you." Ryan's warm and even tone doesn't reveal anything.

"Why? Is it ours or is something wrong?"

"Don't know yet."

Now I'm beyond the point of frustration. I'm angry, feeling that this is an unnecessarily long tease that in the end just might leave me without the house anyway. Jack and I know that we need to get back to the states. What if it's all a big mistake? We're not about to offer any more money-never mind what else they have to show, what game there is to play. I hold my breath- prepared to walk if I must.

He insists. I agree with the notion in mind that I'll make clear the limit of my patience, face to face to determine a final outcome.

I arrive to see the heavily carved wooden doors unlocked. Never having been to the house so early in the morning, I relax in spite of myself, taking in the powerful golden light.

Scanning the driveway, I see Ryan's car, but he isn't outside to greet me. I turn off the ignition and remind myself to be strong.

In the grand foyer, there is a large weathered wooden table with a glass vase filled with newly picked March flowers from the grounds. Clearly this was Ryan's handiwork.

The wide plank floors glow like honey.

Ryan sits at the grand piano, his back to me, trying to play a melody I don't recognize while the fireplace blazes.

"Are you trying to break my heart?" I ask, the disappointment evident in my

voice.

"If we don't get the house, Ryan, then you're just teasing me with all this."

He stops playing and turns to me. He must have seen the fatigue on my face from a series of fitful nights. Tenderly, he folds his hands in his lap and asks, "Do you think I would do that to you, Terina?"

Politely, I say, "No," and it's what I want to believe but he hears the moment of uncertainty.

"The Finnegan's are away for a week. Family business. But they left the keys with me which gives me hope. Also, it seems I've been given some instructions in the care of the house and a bit more of its history. Mrs. Finnegan loved your letter- so much in fact it moved her to tears and she found it very interesting that you took art history in college. What she really found interesting though, was your name."

"My name?"

"I think you'll find this more than a bit interesting. Shall we?"

Ryan takes my arm and leads me into the dining room. I love this room. I love the fact that for such a grand manor, nothing here is ostentatious or stereotypical. No deer antlers on the high walls. Instead there are medieval tapestries that I could never tire of. A long rustic table that calls out to us is perfection to me. Stone fireplaces with carved angels and rustic country hutches filled with beautiful antique plates from Dublin add to the careworn beauty.

There is a large metal box on the table. Its dimensions are wide and deep. Ryan reaches in, taking out all of the family deeds right down to the original owners.

"Mrs. Finnegan wanted you to see these things."

"Does that mean she's leaning towards selling to us?"

"I think she'd like to know your feelings on all of this... This was the family who first owned the house," he pointed out with a tap of his finger.

I read the husband's name, both the first and surname, nothing special there and then the wife's name in lovely script jumps out at me: "Terina".

With thinly veiled excitement, Ryan exclaims, "Look at that! She had your name!"

I meet his eyes and attempt a smile, but suddenly the atmosphere around us seems heavier with a palpable haze that drifts in and out of the golden rays of sunlight. My hands sturdy themselves on the table.

Ryan reaches into the box taking out more items. There are family trees. It seems there were three children belonging to the original owners. Studying it more closely I feel a different sort of heaviness, this one pressing on my heart. I touch the tree. The tree of life. Jack and I had desperately wanted children but for some reason it just had never happened. I think, "This is a house that should have children in it... Painted murals of Peter Pan, starry skies and ships upon the nursery walls. Their own ponies in the stables. Stability?"

"What are you thinking, love?" Ryan asks.

So much is going through my mind but I feel subdued, faraway, and want to keep my thoughts my own. I'm almost nervous. Did Mrs. Finnegan want me to see these things to give me the message that this home was meant for a bigger family, one of substance?

"It is interesting that the original owner and I share a name but I'm not sure what to make of the rest of it..."

Ryan pulls out another box. This one is not metal but rather oak. Heavy and ornate. Ryan slides it toward me.

I don't ask whether or not I'm supposed to simply look it over or whether I'm allowed to touch it. From my years of working with art restoration and antiques, I know how old this piece is. Greedily I run my fingertips over it and with purposeful precision, lift the lid. Inside is a golden necklace with a thickly braided chain and a semi-circle that held three gems. One is missing. I try to imagine how it became loosened from its setting. Had the necklace fallen from the woman's hands to the floor after the telling of bad news? Had there perhaps been a child teething on it? One of my favorite pictures of Jacqueline Kennedy was one where she was laughing, holding baby John in her arms while his chubby fist held her pearls in his mouth...

I feel the soft threadbare blue velvet lining- each fold manifested from the loosening of the material over the ages. As I do so, I feel a hard raised surface. It's a ruby- the center gem that had come loose.

Being clairsentient, I feel the ruby's energy between my fingers. A strong vibration still imbued these stones.

With care, I place the ruby back into its setting. Would she have wanted the stone re-set? Her necklace complete? I had meant to only see for a moment what it would have looked like with all three gems intact; the way that it looked when the woman who shared my name would've worn it. Yet old-world craftsmanship holds it in place so that it doesn't tumble loose when I gingerly lift the edges of the necklace. A sapphire to the left, the ruby in the center, an emerald to the right. Regal and vibrant as though the sixteenth century was not the last time it had been worn against a woman's breast.

Anything could have happened here- I nearly expected someone to reach out and stop me from handling something so precious as though I was betraying a sacred trust or about to bring forth the ruin of a cave of wonders simply for touching this with unworthy hands... Yet as though she were simply in the next room, the vivacious woman who possessed this necklace centuries before had left me with it, certain of my curiosity, knowing in the way a grand-mother knows her grand-daughter, that I could not help but look to the mirror with this beautiful treasure against my own skin... trying on a more worldly identity.

I do not bother with the chain or clasp. I simply cradle the golden half-moon between my hand and chest so that my heart beats against it. Almost instantly the cool of the metal melts and warms with my body heat. I catch my reflection in a wide golden mirror above a banquet table, my pulse racing to match this energy that is stronger than mine.

The stones capture the golden light of morning and refract it into a prism of deep, intense blues, greens, gold and fiery crimson. These colors of light envelope me, surrounding the frame of my body. I think, 'My own aura is lighter than this...' A strange thought.

And I can hear Ryan calling out my name, from a distance it seems, but I can't bring myself to look away from the mirror... The regal colors vivid against fair skin and in contrast to the dark mahogany waves of hair touching down on my shoulders.

I can hear the birdsong outside, though it's fading, muffled by an increasing pressure dulling my senses. I feel myself losing consciousness or at least evolving into another form of one as the colors intensify, blocking out all other imagery as I fall...

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE SUMMER ISSUE

Mute Prince, Clever Orphan

By Robert Wexelblatt

1.

I tried your cell about a dozen times before I realized you'd be in class. Then I sent that text message about why I had to leave right away, hoping you'd understand. Did you get it? Look, if you want to go to Zeke's party on Friday without me it's okay. I mean I can live with it, not that I like it. And don't miss the wiffle ball game on my account. Give Doug and Sonya and everybody my

abject apologies. It was my turn to be umpire, too.

Nobody actually told me she was dying. They didn't say the words.

Grandparents always die when we're in college, right? Actuarially predictable. Circle of life and all that crap.

I remembered to bring my laptop. When I got to the hospital my mother was sitting by the bed. She asked me two questions and the first was, "Think it was blowing into that oboe so much?" Was this a joke? A rhetorical question? So far as I know Nana hasn't picked up the oboe since before I was born.

She's on the fourth floor, the top. The view from her bed is just ceiling and, if she could open her eyes and turn her head, sky. That's why they put the TVs up near the ceiling, of course. This one is blessedly off. If you stand by the window you look down on woods and the river. I can see somebody in a canoe. It's so bucolic it makes you wonder if the doctors here can really know their business.

Nana looks like she's sleeping but the truth is that she's unconscious. There's a difference. It was a big stroke. Fifty-fifty that she'll wake up, they say, and even if she does. . . well.

Don't be mad. I'm reasonably sure I love you. But I'm dead certain I love my grandmother and I've loved her a long, long time. I have to be here.

My mother's second question, the second thing she said to me, was, "But what about school?" What she didn't say was, "I'm so glad you came." It's not that my mother doesn't have feelings, only that she can't express them glibly. Took me roughly seventeen years to figure that out. You're like that yourself, you know: I mean, that you feel more than you say, which is refreshing. This isn't too Freudian, is it? Raleigh had it:

Passions are liken'd best to floods and streams:
The shallow murmur, but the deeps are dumb.

I memorized that. The deeps are dumb. That's good, isn't it? See how lit'ry you've made me?

I noticed that the nurses check in at precise intervals. The ICU has its protocols, monitors, drips, nose tubes, etc. I know it's benevolent vigilance, but somehow it feels like a death-watch. The nurses are polite and efficient, in and out like a flash. I think they're on a different time from us visitors. A minute to them is an hour to us. We're paralyzed in syrup, they're wrapped in lightning. After all, they have useful things to do.

It's odd that Nana doesn't look at all small or diminished, you know, the way people do in hospital beds with all the festooned paraphernalia. She looks just the same to me, only all her vitality is gone, has retreated inside of her.

Apparently my father came last night. But he has to be in court today. First things first. I wonder if he ever told a mother-in-law joke? In some cultures mothers-in-law are taboo. Their daughters' husbands can't even look at them. If I ever get to meet your mother, I'll be thinking of this.

I don't remember Nana ever complaining of being ill or of aches and pains or even about the weather. She had a friend who was quite a gifted hypochondriac, whose bitching seemed to amuse her. People's foibles generally do, amusement being her way of tolerating them. I once asked her how her friend Mrs. Malkin was getting along.

"Oh," said Nana cheerily, "Vivian's enjoying ill-health as usual."

Hospital rooms, airports, train stations, funeral parlors—they all resemble each other in that they're built to be cleared out. In fact, every room that isn't yours, your home, feels temporary. But this one's worse.

Enough for tonight. I'll do a little required reading and so to bed.

Con amore.

2.

They don't permit cell phones or laptops and make you leave the hospital at eight p.m. I'm up in my old bedroom by the way. If you were here I wouldn't feel so much like regressing.

I didn't know you'd lost your cell, of course. Thanks for this email. What did people do in the old days with no cell phones, no phones at all? They wrote letters. It's what I feel like I'm doing.

Nana once told me about a custom from olden days. Train letters. Ever hear of them? Apparently when somebody was going on a trip, their significant other would write a long letter for them to read on the train. She said that declarations of love were often made in these letters. That's how the news was broken, while the beloved was going away.

Now we've gone from eloquence to abbreviation and thumb-generated acronyms. Never out of touch, but how in touch are we?

Nana once showed me a train letter my grandfather had written to her. I didn't read it, of course, but I remember it was handwritten, ran for pages and pages, and that she'd kept it.

I told you that she was a musician and that my grandfather was too, a composer. He taught at the Curtis Institute and died at forty-two. Same age as your favorites, Kafka and Kierkegaard. I didn't tell you how good Nana was at playing the oboe, though. She gave it up when he died, or so she told me.

She made seven records. I have them all right here, though the turntable died somewhere during the Clinton Administration and I can't play them any more. I keep putting off having them digitized. My favorite is my grandfather's Concerto Pastorale, which he wrote for her. It was his first and biggest success. There are different versions of the story. I'll tell you about it eventually but just now I really need some sleep. Visiting hours begin at eight.

Track down that cell, please.

Do I have to say "Wish you were here?" Here's a kiss goodnight.

Buona sera.

3.

She's holding on. A champ. Nothing's changed, say the doctors, but I look into their eyes, I see their slumping shoulders.

My father wants me to go back to school. I assured him I've contacted all my professors and they're fine with it, that it's no problem to keep up through the computer. He rolled his eyes and rhetorically asked, "Why go at all, then?" "Lots of people don't," I said and then gave my a theory of post-adolescent warehousing. Distance learning, even if it improves minds as well as being on the spot, leaves out the really essential function of college, especially for parents: getting unmanageable eighteen-year-olds out of the house, letting them lose then find themselves and—not infrequently—each other. Best of all, it keeps them off the job market for a whole presidential term.

Nana would have laughed. She'd often encouraged me to be what my mother calls "fresh." Irreverence delighted her, even though she was so decorous and polite herself. See how I keep slipping into the past tense? Nana's dying so I'm staying.

Wonderful to hear your voice this evening, get the news and some reassurance. I'm—we're—at a point where even stability feels precarious. At least that's how I feel. I'd love to read your mind but I'm also glad I can't. You're a mystery to me, but more and more a familiar, indispensable one. You once said you were worried that if I keep overestimating you there'll be nothing left but to disillusion me. Well, I'll take my chances. Come on. We're young and there's no better proof of youthfulness than running the risk of disillusionment. I may be an illiterate mind-reader but I think even you have your romantic impulses. Sure, you resist everything sentimental, make fun of the slightest whiff of romance; you mock me and profess disgust for opera, sonnets, sky-diving, chocolate mousse, and Italian sign-offs. But I'm not fooled. That time I told you you're perfect—you blew your stack but couldn't stop smiling—not laughing, mind you, smiling. Okay, so you've got what you call faults. So what? Think I

don't know? Haven you learned it's for their faults we love people, not their virtues? What did you think I meant by perfect anyway?

Okay, the subject's clearly romance. I have a romantic story to tell you. At least one version of it qualifies as romantic, the one I believe.

Later, later. Just a little later.

I have to go now. Mother.

È tardi. Buona notte.

4.

I never met my grandfather but I've seen plenty of pictures. Photographically, his life was well documented. He came from money, a family paper mill in Maine—long gone, so don't get any fancy ideas. My great-granddad accumulated land, built up the business, took his first two sons into it, married off a brace of daughters to Park Avenue and Beacon Hill. I'm not sure what he made of his youngest son on whom I imagine of his wife doting to excess. The girls had to be dragged to the piano to practice but his third son begged for lessons. Nana intimated that his interest in lumber jacks and flapjacks was limited. The old man probably thought the boy a decadent brat, spoiled, a weakling and/or a queer but I suppose shrugged it off. After all, with two strapping heirs—both with massive mustaches—he could afford to indulge a wife who wanted her little darling to pursue his artistic bent.

Perhaps she was a music lover herself. I'm filling in blanks here. I'd ask Nana more about it now if I could. Still, I'd like to think nothing could have stopped him anyway. He got into the new Curtis Institute, dad ponied up the tuition; he worked hard, impressed his teachers, took a year in Europe (Paris, Rome, Berlin), won a minor prize, met the major talents of his generation, wrote anti-Wagnerian music the critics thought smacked of French neo-classicism. He loved jazz, Spanish guitar, and English string music, couldn't stand Bruckner and revered Mahler.

Nana was showing me an old album one afternoon and she pointed out a formal portrait of him in his twenties. There was a huge potted palm in the background. "In this one he looks a bit like Wilfred Owen," she said, "only with his hair parted on the side instead of the middle." I didn't have any idea who Wilfred Owen was and she didn't tell me. One of the ways in which Nana never talked down to me was to only answer the questions I asked.

I didn't care about Owen but I did want to know how they'd met. I supposed I thought she'd enjoy telling me, would get all dreamy the way adults do when they talk about their love lives. But her version was simple and deliberately unsentimental—unromantic enough even for you.

"By then he was teaching at the Institute. He heard me play and I guess he thought I'd do to premier his concerto. Because I played it well he married me two years later, right after I graduated. He thought that made it more respectable."

And that's all she wrote.

My grandfather was rich, established; Nana was a scholarship student without a family. Her parents didn't prosper the way immigrants mean to. Her father abandoned the family when she was four and her mother worked hard. She died when Nana was in her second year at the Conservatory. Nana said she was really raised by her sister, Rose. It was Rose who saved the money to pay for her music lessons; she who arranged for the audition. When Rose came down with a strep infection she went on working. The neglected illness led to scarlet fever which wasn't properly treated either and turned into rheumatic fever. What killed her was congestive heart failure, carditis. A single shot of penicillin would have taken care of the whole business but her mother didn't grasp how sick Rose was.

When Nana told me all this history I thought she said that Rose had died of romantic fever. I believed there was this lethal romantic fever that made your heart to clog up and stop, believed it for years.

In a way you'll smile at, I still do.

Basta. Baci e abbracci.

5.

I worked on my philosophy paper today. I was sitting next to Nana and did it longhand, if you can believe it, on a legal pad. Now I want to sleep and also to stay awake. The vector of two contradictory desires is paralysis, it says here. As you see, I'm going in every direction at once.

Can't have cell phones in the ICU, so I couldn't pick up when you called. Sorry. But it was so good to talk this evening, even if it was on the fly. I forgot about the auditions. God but you're a busy woman. If you get the lead in Lysistrata I probably won't see you until the seasons change. If then.

Right now is when I'd like to see you.

I have some big news. Nana woke up today. I was writing. My mother was getting coffee. I looked over and saw her eyes were open and I leapt over to the bed and grabbed her hand. I'm sure she smiled at me. I didn't know what to do but of course I wasn't going to leave her. I reached over for the nurse button and she was there in seconds but just that quickly Nana's eyes closed again.

"It happens," the nurse said, forgiving my panicky false alarm, my premature celebration. She might not even have believed me and I felt a little like the boy who cried wolf. The poor woman looked done in. I'd heard there were two deaths on the floor shortly after dawn. You know DNR? It's about the opposite of LOL.

Sorry to come at you with all this. Do you even read these emails? Humor me; they help me in a way even the phone can't. They're train letters without the trains.

I'm crashing. I finished a draft of the Mill paper this afternoon. Twelve pages. You know about Mill and Harriet Taylor? Turns out the Utilitarian was a thoroughgoing romantic. In fact, the feeling's what cured him of his horrid education, saved the pure broken-down grind. Rx: 25 mg. Wordsworth plus 500 mg. Ms. Taylor.

Think a little of me, but not when you're auditioning and chewing out the men. Afterwards.

Break a leg, so to speak.

Buona fortuna, attrice fragola!

6.

Finally a fine day. I'm sitting outside in the courtyard. Sunlight in the trees, grass, benches, birds. If you don't turn around you could almost forget about the hospital. Unlike you, the woods and the river aren't too far off.

So glad the audition went well. Two questions: when do you find out and is Harmony going to be stark naked?

I hope these emails aren't a burden to you. I'm sorry not to be there, but it's here I have to be. Today Dr. Schuster shook his head. "Not long," it meant. "I'm surprised it's not over yet."

My mother had a different version of how Nana and her father got together. It has a good provenance; she claims her father told her.

The facts aren't any different; just everything else.

According to my mother's version, it was love at first sight—on my grandfather's side, that is. In love with a student. Without knowing anything about her except how she looked and the music she made. The kind of lightning-bolt love you find in the Metamorphoses: bang! No, I haven't forgotten your opinion on the matter: it's just nature tricking us into getting what it wants by making us think we're getting what we want. But why can't the two be the same? Aren't they, in fact? How does Lysistrata end? Not just with a happy ending but the

prototypical one. Make love, not war. Perpetuate families don't end them. Mutual need acknowledged, mutual loathing put aside. A truce in the perpetual war? Isn't all drama governed by biology: about either how we get here or how we get out?

My grandmother's dying and I keep thinking about how she got married. Maybe it's because I'm implicated in the story, one of its consequences. Or perhaps it's just writing to you.

The Concerto Pastorale is a lovely thing, by the way: caused by, steeped in, abetting young love. I'll make a copy for you. In Nana's version, he wrote it then found her to play it. In my mother's (or grandfather's), it's the other way around. The piece was a tribute, a love-token, an outpouring—maybe even a seduction. She was his muse but no passive one. Mother says they collaborated, Nana pointing out what the oboe could and couldn't do, making all kinds of suggestions, playing for and with him. I imagine he was ecstatic, like John Stuart Mill writing about women's rights with Mrs. Taylor sitting at the same desk.

In my opinion, there was even more to it. My impression of my grandfather at that point in his life is that he was indecisive, shy, submissive, pampered by his mother and cowed by his father and brothers. Not a lot of manhood there, in other words. The Concerto Pastorale was his first work to be widely performed. My opinion's that Nana saved him, helped him win his spurs. That's what I think, anyway. What? Too romantic?

I find it easy to enter into his feelings—even though I didn't know him—and hard to guess at Nana's, though I've always known her. There's a lot I don't understand about my grandmother, like why, as a young widow, she didn't go back to performing. My mother says it was because she was left a good deal of money and didn't need to and because she was afraid of playing in public. I don't believe it. I've never known her to be scared of anything.

Did I mention that when my mother isn't in the room I talk to my grandmother? The nurse said she can't hear and even if she could wouldn't understand. I don't care. I've told her all about you, at least everything I know. I intend to learn more. Love's aggressive; it starts as curiosity, liking the outside and wanting to find out what's on the inside. I'll bet that's how my grandfather was when he laid eyes on that young oboist.

Talking to Nana is a lot like writing you these emails. Think of the intimacy and distance of a train letter (lettera di treno, in Italian), going away and coming near.

Nana told me things indirectly, as you say your Kierkegaard does. She told me stories. There's one I've been thinking about and I want to tell it to you. I'm just realizing what it's really about. If I have time I'll write it out for you tonight. You like fairy tales?

I'll call too, of course. Twenty times if necessary. Fifty.

Nobody's come into my courtyard except a single orderly walking back from the cafeteria with his coffee. There's wind up in the trees. That sound. Pastoral.

Okay. Break over.

Addio.

7.

Huzzah! Hooray for Lysistrata, that blessed potty-mouthed peacemaker, forty times smarter than any assembly of men, even Athenian ones. Loved how excited you were on the phone, telling me. I have an urge to hand out cigars and make people look at pictures of you. Well, it's type-casting, in my opinion. Since you don't care for phillerphobby I'd like to cite what the playwright whose heroine you're about to incarnate said in his speech at a famous drinking-party:

*Mankind . . . judging by their neglect of him, have never, as I think,
at all understood the power of Eros. For if they had understood him
they would surely have built noble temples and altars, and offered*

solemn sacrifices in his honor; but this is not done, and most certainly ought to be done: since of all the gods he is the best friend of men, the helper and the healer of the ills which are the great impediment to the happiness of the race.

And still you disagree with me about romance? Maybe you'd prefer the Black-Eyed Peas' version?

My love for my girl gonna shine
 She the one occupyin' all of my mind
 She the one that make my life feel complete
 'Cuz I be like the lyric and she be the beat

Amen to Plato and the Peas. Selah, I say. Except that you're pretty lyrical and I'm pretty beat. Been honing my already impressive skill at evading serious conversation with the parents. We chat just fine, don't get me wrong. Just no Serious Conversation. The best tactic is distraction, sleight-of-hand: work needing doing, speculation on Nana's condition, news of extended family, the national debt—anything will do.

Nana didn't look at all well today. You know, gray. Her breathing's didn't seem regular either—kind of judders, like a stalling car. The day nurse came more often and looked grimmer.

I sat by her bed and studied. Got through four of the eight chapters of Civilization and Its Discontents and read the juicy parts (Freud's footnotes are more interesting than what they're footnotes to, I noticed) aloud to Nana. Her eyes didn't open (could I have imagined it yesterday?) but she seemed to listen with equanimity, the way one does to fairy tales.

I stopped by the nurses' station on the way out and made them promise to phone if there's any change, if there's a crisis. They think I'm awfully sweet, of course.

So now, the promised fairy tale, thou Dissolver of Armies. My grandmother told it to me when I was little and I've never entirely forgotten it. My memory isn't so clear though, so I'm afraid it'll be like one of those skeletons with missing bones that the paleontologists replace with plaster bits and wire together, a reconstruction riddled with guesses.

Prologue. Nana and I were on a screened porch of a summer rental by the ocean. I remember that Nana was in a big armchair and myself on a floor with hooked rugs and wide boards that smelled like railroad ties. It had been raining for days. Flies buzzed up against the screens and everything had begun to feel a little soft. I can't recall why my parents weren't there. I was probably eight because after that I spent my summers away at camp.

I suppose she told me the story to distract me from the rain, my parents' absence, missing my friends at home, the shambles foul weather was making of our vacation by the sea. The story's long and complicated and she didn't rush it. In my memory, it took the whole day. She'd ask me questions and I'd interrupt her with mine. We may have stopped for lunch. She didn't give the story a title, at least if she did I can't remember it, but we can call it, "The Orphan Girl and the Prince Who Lost His Tongue."

Prince Peremon is an only child and still a little boy—not even as old as I was then. He's reticent by nature and shy around his big father and his coarse vassals who speak only of hunting and war, rough men who drink too much and despise the common people. The Prince tries his best to please the King but always fails. His mother defends him intermittently, sometimes hugging him to her and calling him pet names, at others coldly driving him away. Peremon's was not the happiest of childhoods.

One day the boy, off on his own as usual, was walking down a corridor in a little-used section of the castle when he heard terrible wails and yelps. As he rushed toward the noise he smelled something that alarmed him even more. In an otherwise empty room he found a fire burning in a brazier and his older cousin, Arnulf, with two of his pals, torturing a dog. His cousin was heating an iron poker up in the brazier.

Arnulf calmly looked up from his work. "What is it, Your Highness?" he asked with open contempt.

"What . . . what are you doing?" stuttered Peremon in a little voice.

The other boys laughed. "Obviously, we're practicing," said Arnulf who was anxious that he might be punished and wanted to terrify the boy. "Now watch this closely, cousin," he said, and swung the poker away from the brazier and with it blinded the poor animal, whose yelps became maddened, was held down by the other boys.

The Prince, shocked, took a step back. Arnulf, five years older and a full foot taller, approached the Prince, poker still in his thickly gloved fist. He spoke calmly, reasonably, smiling all the while. "Now be so good as to listen to me, cousin. You don't want to be known as a tattle-tale, do you?" He glanced over his shoulder where the writhing dog was being held down by his henchmen. "This is the way the law deals with traitors and heretics; it's how they are questioned. My friends and I are merely perfecting our skills for when we come of age and can serve the crown, which is to say you." Then Arnulf drew close; his tone changed and his face contorted. He squeezed the prince's arm painfully and whispered into his ear, "If you ever say a word I'll use a poker on you too. I'll kill you. So keep your mouth shut. Understand?"

From that day on the Prince fell mute. The doctors poked and clucked over him, tried everything from bleeding to leeches to amulets, but all ended by throwing up their hands and confessing they could do nothing. The chaplain advised the King and Queen to accept the boy's dumbness as the will of God which, as everyone knew, was beyond human understanding and always worked for the good.

Peremon's life did not change much; it only became worse. The King frowned when he saw him, turned furious or quietly depressed when he made signs or tried to write notes. Before he had only neglected the boy, now he avoided him. His mother continued as before, alternately crying over and shunning him. Peremon's only refuge was with his tutor and his books, all of which were very dull.

When the Prince was fourteen his father was killed in a hunting accident. The nobles of the kingdom gathered to proclaim him the new king but before they could act Arnulf made a powerful speech. "Are we really going to put the kingdom and our fates into the fumbling hands of a dumb weakling? Servile as they are, the peasants are more numerous than we are. They need a strong hand over them. They want one too; they're used to it." Arnulf's men had already done their work of seeding money, threats, and promises and so it was he rather than Peremon who was put on the throne.

Half-an-hour later the widowed Queen pressed a pouch of golden coins into Peremon's hand and told him to flee at once or Arnulf would surely kill him.

And so the Prince went out on the roads of the kingdom and saw how people suffered. He tried to keep apart, not being willing to trust anyone. Meanwhile, Arnulf confined his mother to a tower and sent two assassins to track down Peremon.

Nana was gentle in the telling but also relentless. She included plenty of episodes showing the diffident, sheltered prince getting a feel for the oppression in the kingdom which, under Arnulf, was worse than ever. There were whipped serfs, sick and starving children, beggars, banditry. I suppose I felt as shocked as the prince in the story at these visions of human misery. Her story wasn't anything like *The Wind in the Willows* or *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. But, I was impatient when she asked if we should stop for lunch. The story brought us closer, even physically. I remember climbing up on her lap. I listened with the kind of fascination that's a combination of repulsion and attraction. I was horrified not only by the brutality my grandmother was imposing on the fairy-tale world, but that it was she who was doing it. I was afraid for Peremon and at the same time exasperated with him for being weak, cowering, and voiceless. What a wimp, I thought, even as I identified with him.

The plot began to pick up steam. Passing through a market town, unaware that a pair of assassins were hot on his heels, Peremon spied a tinker beating a dog. He grabbed the tinker's arm, gestured at him to stop, angrily threw a gold coin

at his feet, and took the dog away. I liked this. It made up a bit for the prince's cowardice at the castle; the fellow was finally showing some spirit. I felt the balance, too. Dogs, of course, are traditional emblems of faithfulness and this one stayed by the Prince's side throughout the rest of the tale. Nana was aware how I'd been pestering my parents for a dog.

A poor orphan girl, the same age as the Prince, watched the rescue of the dog. This was Rose the Spinner. Nana spent some time on Rose's background: how the plague had carried off her family, how she kept herself alive by spinning and knitting, carrying her work to market; how smart she was, though uneducated, and compassionate, despite her hard life. When I asked if she was pretty and Nana said that Rose was very pretty indeed but nobody noticed because of her shabby clothing and dirty face. Besides, she said, the poor girl would bring no dowry. This was a concept I needed explained. It was the first time I heard of the connection between love and money (about which you so love to expatiate).

Anyway, Rose the Spinner determined to keep an eye on the prince. Being so sharp a girl, she'd guessed his identity. By then everybody had heard of the doings at the castle, though few cared; in their experience, one king was as bad as another. Rose took note of the arrival of two horsemen demanding to know if anyone in the market had seen a well-dressed mute boy.

Rose saved the Prince by a clever stratagem. This was one of my favorite parts of the story. She put herself in the way of the two assassins and when they asked her about the dumb boy she told them yes, she knew exactly where he was to be found.

A band of robbers, desperate cutthroats, had set up their headquarters in an abandoned farm two leagues from the town. Rose had to pass by the place regularly but always kept well off the road when she did. Now she told Arnulf's men that the mute boy had taken refuge with the people on this farm. All they needed to do was go there and offer the farm folk twice whatever the boy was paying them. She pointed to the heavy pouches hanging from their belts. "But you must be sure to show them your money first," she cautioned them, "or they'll deny everything."

Rose knew that the robbers, seeing the money, would make quick work of the killers. And so they did.

Having dispatched the would-be murderers, Rose bought some millet cakes and ran after the prince who in the meantime had left the town, accompanied by the dog. When she caught up with them Rose told the prince she knew that he was Peremon the Mute, lawful heir to the throne. The Prince shook his head vigorously but Rose just laughed. "For Heaven's sake, look at your clothes," she said. With this she took out the millet cakes and invited him to lunch with her. As they sat under an oak, she stroked the dog's head and told the prince about the assassins. Peremon's face went chalky. Now that she had his attention, and ought to have his gratitude too, Rose laid out the plan that had come to her as she was running after him. This plan was precisely the opposite of what the prince was intending to do. But the girl's bravery and resolution made him ashamed. Moreover, as she spoke of what Arnulf and his men were doing to the people he recalled what he had seen of it with his own eyes. With those same eyes Peremon saw through the grime and the rags, saw that Rose was not only good but beautiful.

Rose conducted the prince back to town where she showed him to the people and made a rousing speech. People, she said, would flock to their cause and together they would march on the castle and put Peremon on the throne. He would be a good king, their king, a voice for justice even if a mute one.

At first the people hooted at Peremon, mocked her, and raised objections; but a few spoke of hope and this spark of hope Rose fanned so expertly that finally it spread more quickly than the plague.

As hope breeds hope and crowds attract crowds, Peremon and Rose gathered more followers as they marched through the countryside. Peasants deserted their lords' field, bringing with them pitchforks, hoes, and scythes. Whole families came, old and young. Priests and monks joined the procession too, even a few of the oldest lords who resented Arnulf's high-handed tactics and even higher taxes.

The throng arrived at the castle just as dusk was falling. Arnulf was prepared for them. Outside the castle walls stood ranks of mounted knights with shields and lances, and behind them rows of archers and pike men. Everyone halted and

there was a sudden hush. Then Rose climbed a hill, turned around three times. She spoke, not to the people behind, but to the armed men in front of her.

"Arnulf is a usurper," she said. "You all know your true king is Peremon whom God Himself has appointed to rule."

This elicited cat-calls from the troops, which quieted when Rose motioned toward the numerous clergy among her followers. Then the girl took a daring step. She audaciously announced that the proof of God's election would be confirmed by a miracle. "At cockcrow tomorrow," she promised, "Peremon the Mute will speak for all to hear."

A low cheer ran through the crowd. As for the prince, he was horrified. He gesticulated wildly at Rose but, of course, it was too late.

People lit fires and settled down. All the talk was of the miracle in the morning—would there really be one?

Rose took a torch and led the gloomy prince away from the crowd. He took her to his favorite beech tree, the one he had climbed so often as a child, and there they sat down with the dog.

"Your Majesty, please open your mouth," she said.

Peremon frowned, but opened his lips little.

With her forefingers Rose yanked open his mouth and peered right down his throat. Then she lay on her back and the dog laid his head on her chest.

"By now I thought you ought to trust me, Your Highness. Don't you? Yes? Very well then. Stop worrying. I can see you'll be able to speak in the morning."

The Prince sat miserably against the tree as she stroked the happy dog. He raised his hands in protest then let them fall.

"I understand. You're not sure what to say. But that's simple enough. You just tell Arnulf's men to surrender or be annihilated."

Good Lord. I've been typing for hours. It's after two and my eyelids are drumming their fingers, so to speak.

Buono sonno e sogni d'oro.

8.

I was with her when she died. Mid-morning, around ten. I was telling her the story she told me and that I've been telling you when she slipped away. I don't know precisely when, but it could have been at the point where I left you last night. If so, I can pretend I'm finishing it for you both. Somehow that's consoling.

The funeral's tomorrow and I'm leaving straight from the cemetery. I'll be with you tomorrow night, if Lysistrata can spare the time for me.

So, here's the end of Nana's story, my story for Nana, which I think is truly her story.

In the morning the mute prince reluctantly took his place on the same hill from which Rose had spoken the evening before. Dawn had broken and sunlight flashed from the blades and shields before him. Peremon trembled, overlooking his cousin's host. Arnulf himself, fully armed, looked down from the battlements.

Peremon glanced reproachfully at Rose who smiled and waved twice. At the bottom of the hill, the priests and monks knelt and chanted a Paternoster, as Rose had asked them to do.

When they were finished, the Prince opened his mouth and spoke.

A month later, in his parents' bed, Peremon turned to Rose and posed a question that he'd put off asking, being busy with all the punishing and rewarding, then the coronation, the wedding and, in general, the toil of laying

the foundations of a reasonably happy kingdom.

In the sweet and gentle voice she so loved, he said, "Rose, what did you see when you looked down my throat?"

Rose laughed. "Why, what I saw, Your Majesty, what I saw was the inside of a prince."

Cara Lysistrata, what's the meaning of comedy? What kind of ending is happy and what can make happiness an ending? Perhaps comedy teaches us that because the war between the sexes is perpetual it's one with an infinite number of truces.

A happy ending—lieto fine. Fortunatamente.

I miss Nana but I'm so glad I was there, telling her story.

Fino a domani.

Picking Berries

By Noelle Sterne

"Top o' your hill is full," our neighbor reported as Stephen and I stopped at dusk Friday on the lane to our weekend cottage. Coming up the road, we had just seen the bushes. They were so weighted with fruit they brushed the sides of the car.

"Yep," Trevor continued, "wineberries all over . . ." his voice trailed off. "Real good pickin' this weekend." He stared at us from under his old straw hat.

"Right, Trev," Stephen replied, turning into our driveway.

No thanks, I thought. Every Friday night, we fled the city's overloaded schedules, incessant phones, and meals gulped in tandem. All the time-saving technology seemed only to add to the daily imperatives. By Thursday, I craved our cottage—an oasis of simplicity, minimal duties, and open-ended time.

Trevor and Elsie, living in the country all their lives, probably couldn't figure us out. We didn't plant, pick, harvest, can, cut wood, or keep chickens. Stephen mowed our intentionally small patch of grass, and I occasionally brought in sprigs of high grass from the edge of the lane.

Saturday we slept late and had a leisurely breakfast. I washed the dishes by hand, savoring the water's sweet soapiness. Stephen sorted the modest pile of magazines by the fireplace.

Soon I felt the unmistakable click inside that signaled the city's pace finally draining. We spent the day at small, satisfying tasks, not having to talk, in that special comfort of a long relationship.

Toward evening, Stephen took the garbage to the end of the lane. When he returned, he said, "Just met Trevor at the trash cans. Elsie's made twelve jars of preserves from those wineberries. This weekend's about the last of them."

"Really."

"Of course," he said, "he more than hinted again that we go out picking."

I laughed. "A jar of Elsie's jam will do me just fine."

But that night, every time I woke in the unaccustomed quiet, I saw the wineberry bushes, swaying and arching out over the road, laden with fruit.

Sunday arrived clear and breezy. I opened the windows wide, and the air smelled fresh as mountains. At the edge of the woods, hanging between two trees, the faded hammock beckoned.

But with a shock at my unconscious decision, I began to get ready.

I put on my long-sleeved plaid shirt and tucked it into an old pair of overalls. Then I put on thick socks and my worn oxfords, grabbed my wide-brimmed hat—garage-sale find—from its peg on the wall, and took a plastic pail from

under the sink.

As I opened the door, Stephen said, with a quick kiss, "Have fun, and bring me back a handful, at least."

Behind the cottage, I tramped through the woods and out into the neighboring field. The grasses grew almost waist high, and with every step, the brush thickened and became more tangled. I was forced to slow down.

By inches, I parted the grasses and came to a stonerow. Footing was tricky, and it took concentration to step over the uneven rocks. I made my way slowly up the hill. Stopping to catch my breath and steady myself, I peered through the tangles.

And saw them.

Bush after bush of delicately saw-toothed, triangular leaves on tiny-thorned vines. They stood utterly still, heavy with brilliant dark red fruit. I felt like an intruder, or a pilgrim.

I stepped nearer. From a filament-like stem, a cluster of the berries hung before me. They were exquisite--multifaceted circlets, perfectly segmented, of richest crimson.

I couldn't remember ever picking berries. Only on rare, self-indulgent occasions in the supermarket had I even stopped in front of them. From easy shelves, I'd plucked a neat cardboard pint, cellophaned tight by green-aproned workers.

But now, as if guided, I adjusted the pail handle on my left forearm and cupped my left hand under a cluster. With the tips of my right thumb and first two fingers, I gently loosened a berry. It yielded into my palm.

On the stem, a soft pointed cone of bright orange remained. When I turned the berry over, the space in the center exactly fit the cone. Hardly a revelation by city-logic standards, but I couldn't stop staring from the space left to the cone and back again.

I kept picking, but the berries dictated the pace and touch. Grabbing too greedily, you'd get badly scratched. Pulling too hard, you'd crush them between your fingers. If you rushed and threw a berry at the pail, it ended up in the brush underfoot.

You had to separate the branches with a fine patience. Several times, in weekday haste, I nearly lost my hat to irate vines. You had to curve between the vines, lift the clusters without hurry, coax each berry, and wait to receive.

Finishing one bush, I turned to see where next to gather—and gasped out loud. From ankle to shoulder, clusters surrounded me . . . nine, eleven, fifteen berries on a stem.

I didn't have to move or turn. Time faded into a seamless present of sky, sun, and shining boughs, giving freely.

Suddenly the pail felt heavy on my arm. I glanced in and sighed. Almost full.

Picking the last few, I extricated myself reluctantly from the bushes' embrace. As I inched down the hill, I turned several times to keep them in sight. A waxy stickiness clung to my hands, and I relished it on the long hike back through the field.

Stephen was stretched out on the sofa, reading. He looked up from his book. "How'd you make out?" he asked.

The jewel-laden bushes gleamed before my eyes, and I didn't want to speak. But I held the pail up.

He peered in. "Hey, they look good enough to guzzle!"

Then, catching my mood, he closed his book and got up. "Had quite a time up there, didn't you? We don't have to eat them now."

"No," my words surprised me, "they'd want us to." I brought the pail into the kitchen.

As if performing a rite, I took down the colander from its hook over the stove, gently shook the berries into it, and placed it in the sink. I turned on the cold water and picked up the sprayer.

And stopped, almost laughing. What would rinse off? Pesticide? City grime? Tobaccoed sweat from truckers' hands?

I replaced the sprayer and turned off the water.

Stephen brought two bowls and spoons to the table. In the center, like an offering, I set the colander.

Always attuned to me, he took my hand and said, "Thank you, Lord, for Your bounty."

"Amen," I whispered.

Stephen scooped a few berries into my bowl and then his own. Together we lifted our spoons.

The berries burst forth in my mouth—a glory of soft fruit, crunchy seeds, tart-sweet fullness, fragrant mossy woods, summer rains, and cleansing winds.

Stephen made a low appreciative sound and took a second helping. He pushed the colander toward me.

I shook my head. A wave of sadness rose as I thought of the hill and the bushes swaying undisturbed. One day, maybe two, was all they had left. It was time to say goodbye to the berries, their lessons, and their gift of themselves.

Crazy Dog

By Mark Barkawitz

I painted for a living. Houses, not pictures, I sometimes had to explain. And even though I'd first scrubbed old Mrs. Jason's kitchen with TSP, the coat of paint I'd rolled on hadn't covered the years of smoke and assorted food stains. I'd have to put on another coat tomorrow.

When I got home, I let my dogs in from their yard. As always, Joy and Atom wanted to be fed, but I was too beat to start dinner just yet—theirs or mine. So I gave them each a big dog biscuit and the promise of dinner scraps in their kibble later. I grabbed a pillow from my bed, tossed it on the couch in the living room, and collapsed. I was just about to doze off, when a fly buzzed me.

I tried to ignore it. But it was no use. It zoomed around the room, circled over me, and then swooped down at me.

I swatted at it with my hand, so it took off to the other side of the room. I got up and from the coffee table, grabbed a *Sports Illustrated*, folded it in half, and started after the fly. I swung as it turned towards me. It doubled back and I swung again. It flew higher and faster. I took a few more wild swings, then opened the front door, hoping to attract the fly to the fading daylight at the screen door, where I could let it out or smash the aggravating little sucker to bits.

As if I had opened it for her, Joy approached, then stood looking out the screen door. She was a big golden retriever with the broad head of a Saint Bernard. Atom, my older dog who was losing his hearing, was probably asleep on the back porch and wouldn't miss her till he woke.

"You want out?" I sometimes chained her on the front lawn, so the neighborhood kids could pet her and she could bark at passing dogs without getting into trouble.

She looked up at me, then back outside again, waiting.

"Okay." I put down the magazine, opened the screen door, and followed her out. The sun was already setting, which left a golden-red glow in the approaching storm clouds over L.A. But before I could get Joy chained, she spotted Delilah, my neighbor Suzy's cat, and bolted after her. The Chase was now a ritual about which Suzy had expressed concern for her cat's safety.

"Get back here!" But Joy was already tearing across the lawn, not more than six feet behind Delilah and gaining. I ran after them. "Damn it, Joy. Get back here!" But she kept chasing Delilah across the lawns and up Suzy's driveway. I followed but by the time I got to the house, which was off the street in the back, neither cat nor dog was anywhere in sight. Suzy's front door was open. I jumped up the porch steps just as Joy came galloping back out the doorway, crashed into me, and knocked me backwards off the porch and into the cactus garden Suzy had recently planted.

"Ah-h-h-h-h!" I jumped up almost as fast as I'd fallen, cactus needles embedded in both hands and my backside as well.

Suzy stood in the open doorway with a broom in her hands. "Oh my goodness, are you all right? I was just chasing your crazy dog out of my house. I didn't see you."

My crazy dog was already halfway down the driveway—hightailing it for home.

Because I was in no condition to drive, Suzy took me to the hospital. I knelt over the back of the car seat with my riddled rear in the air like a wasp's, picking cactus needles out of my hands, while Suzy told me over and over how sorry she was.

"It wasn't your fault." I shook my head and bemoaned: "Crazy goddamn dog."

Suzy parked near the emergency entrance at Huntington Memorial Hospital and started to get out of the car with me.

"That's okay," I said. "You don't have to come in. I'll call you when I'm through."

"I'm sorry," she said again.

As a kid, I'd broken my arm, split my head open a few times, and even caught a large fish hook in my leg that had to be surgically removed, so a visit to the Emergency Room was nothing new for me. As Mom used to say, Trauma was my middle name. I walked up to the receptionist at the front desk.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"I sat on a cactus."

She smiled, had me fill out a form, and sent me to the waiting room. "They'll call you," she said.

The waiting area was packed. I couldn't sit down like all the other banged-up, sickly patients who were waiting their turns, so I passed the time leaning against the wall, watching a re-run of "Everybody Loves Raymond" on their flat-screen TV while trying to pick more of the needles out of my hands, hoping the guy next to me, who was telling the whole room how he'd been shot in the arm (it was wrapped in a bloody bandage) while foiling a burglary, wouldn't bother to ask what had happened to me. Mine was no Red Badge of Courage, though it hurt like one. Luckily, before he finished telling the room how brave he'd been, he was taken off to surgery.

After a few, very long hours, it was finally my turn. An old, motherly nurse with white hair and pudgy ankles that disappeared into squeaky, white shoes led me to a room with an operating table under a large, overhead light.

"The doctor will be right in to see you," she said. "He's just finishing in surgery. We're a little backed up tonight. Three-car accident. A shooting victim. The sick and the injured. Try to make yourself comfortable."

I nodded and stood next to the examination table. The doctor came in a few minutes later, a middle-aged guy with a small mustache, wire-rimmed glasses, and a surgical mask hanging limply from his neck. Under each armpit, his green, hospital garb was soaked with sweat. He had me drop my pants and lie face down on the table. He turned on the overhead light and moved in closer.

"Looks like a dart board." He removed his glasses with one hand and rubbed his eyes with the other. "Nothing serious. A nurse will take care of you." He laid a green, towel-sized cloth over my bare butt and left.

I expected to see the same white-haired, motherly nurse with her pudgy ankles and squeaky shoes. Instead, I walked a shapely, young nurse with large brown eyes, high cheekbones, sharp features, and dark hair tucked neatly under her surgical cap.

"Had a little accident, did we?" The tone of her voice reminded me of grade school, when my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Trapp had caught me eating Jujubees in class. I wanted to explain to this young nurse that it wasn't my fault that I—a grown man—had sat on a cactus plant, but before I could exonerate myself, she removed the towel, exposing my bare derriere.

"My, my." From a drawer of instruments, she removed a large, gleaming pair of plier-like tweezers. "This might hurt a little." She closed in on me. I buried my face in the hard pillow. But it was like having a row of teeth extracted—one at a time—without Novocain and it seemed like hours before she'd pulled out the last cactus needle from my bare cheeks and hands. She swabbed my wounds with an orangish-red Mercurochrome-like antiseptic.

"I think that's it," she said, then smiled. "But I wouldn't go horse-back riding for a while."

I pulled up my pants.

What with the cost of the Emergency Room, the surgery (that's what it was called on the bill anyway), and the antibiotics they gave me to lessen the chance of infection, the whole, stupid thing cost me two-week's pay. Being self-employed, I didn't have medical insurance, and because I only had sixty-two bucks in my checking account, I put it on my credit card. What else could I do? Wash dirty specimen bottles? To make sure there was no infection and complete my humiliation, I was to come back in three days for a check-up.

Outside, it was dark and even though I'd told Suzy I'd call her for a ride home, I decided to walk instead. Considering my condition, standing upright suited me better. Besides, I didn't feel like talking. But with each step, my Levis rubbed my shorts against my aching cheeks. I kept my sore hands in my pockets. Peeking between unsettled storm clouds, a full moon mooned me. It was a long walk home and past eleven o'clock when I finally got in and flipped on the living room light. Atom was asleep in the corner; he hadn't heard me come in. Joy had her head under the coffee table, where she tried to hide like an ostrich.

"You better stay there."

I got a beer from the kitchen, chugged down half of it, and turned on the TV. The news was on. Then I heard it again—the buzzing—that goddamn fly! This time I wouldn't swing wildly. Like a Hemingway hero tracking his prey, all I wanted was one, clean shot. I grabbed the already-folded Sports Illustrated on the coffee table and opened the front door once more with the screen door closed. I switched on the porch light and waited. Just waited. Joy started to come out from under the coffee table. "Back under there." She froze. The fly zoomed around the room, getting closer and closer to the screen door and the yellow light outside. Finally, it landed. I moved in and smashed the magazine against the screen. When I lifted it, the fly was squashed flat on the magazine cover, like blackened gum on the sidewalk. I dropped the magazine into the waste basket, chugged down the rest of my beer, and eased myself, face-down, on the couch in front of the TV, where Joy under the table and I on the couch watched a cleavage-baring weatherwoman predict enough rain for tomorrow to wash away the coastline. But tomorrow I still had old Mrs. Jason's kitchen, an inside job, to finish before she would pay me, before I could earn what I'd already spent at the hospital. Joy started out from under the coffee table again, wagging her tail slowly, as if to explain what had happened. Sashaying closer, she licked me on the cheek.

"Crazy dog," I told her. Then my stomach growled and I remembered that none of us had had dinner. So I roused Atom in the corner and we followed Joy's wagging tail into the kitchen for our late-night supper.

Three days later, I could sit again. So I cut my losses and never went back for that check-up, thus breaking my date with the nursing staff at Huntington Memorial Hospital. Crazy, huh?

Amber Moons and Sunshine

By Nicole M. Bouchard

In Mystic, Connecticut, a town worthy of its name due to the wealth of scenic nautical spots and eclectic shops full of unusual treasures, she walked up the hill toward the sunset in search of direction. Her steps toward the horizon seemed to bring the darkness with them and her eyes drew the sun down with her concentrated stare. Most of the shops had closed their doors for the day and despite the summer crowds sprinkled down the sidewalks, she felt the isolation walking past dim store windows displaying things she might have wanted if she was the person that she used to be... or perhaps if she had a different life. Yet it was past six o'clock and the doors were closed to her. If she had come at the right time, she might have browsed and touched the fabrics with possibility in her timid fingers. The right time. There was time, but nothing felt right about it to her now.

A faint yellow glow on the pavement caught hold of her curiosity. She watched a thin man with a disproportionately thick wool sweater breeze past her and open the door of the bookstore with ease. Finally, an open door to a safe harbor amidst the night.

Having no desire to find a book, she collapsed herself into an antique chair toward the corner to rest her feet for a moment. Though she was petite, the chair buckled slightly with her weight. Too weary to take up one of the uncomfortable stools, she remained where she was with caution. Very carefully she shifted enough to cross her legs and prayed that the faded slate blue wood wouldn't give way beneath her. A table of books sat behind her and the man with the wool sweater came over and carelessly tossed one down near her head. The sudden breeze of the fallen book near her neck caused her to turn ever so slightly on her delicate chair and a glinting gold compass emblazoned on an emerald green leather cover caught her attention. She was indeed in search of direction, but what someone who couldn't swim would do with a yacht log, she didn't know. Scanning the pages for some sort of cosmic hint, she started filling out the log like a journal in her mind.

'Log of yacht... Day of week-Saturday... Time-7pm... Date-June 16th...Position-seated in unsteady chair... Course-unknown... Navigator's Choice-' She paused there for a moment. It had been difficult making decisions in her recent past few of them easy, but to think of herself as a navigator, to be asked to fill in a choice... finally made her feel as though she had one. Tucking that thought behind her ear for later, she moved on down the page. *'Person at helm-Me, I should hope... Current-Strong, far too strong in one direction... Wind-Wild like I remember... Weather-Tempest... Conditions- Systemic Erythematous Lupus... Sky- Darkening... Visibility- no longer clear... Maintenance- Anti-Malarial Medication- Plaquenil... Water taken on- Too many salty tears... Passage- from one life to another... Passengers- one... Vessel name- Icarus...'* As she underscored the ship's name in her mind, she watched helplessly as the image of her flying carefree in the sky turned into an outstretched hand and body burned alive by the sun's light.

Jerking her head up with a sharp inhalation of breath, she found herself no longer alone in the corner of the bookshop. A handsome old man with a neat gray beard set against tanned skin and the bluest eyes she had ever seen stood over her peering at the volumes on seafaring. Every single detail down to his blue and white pin stripe shirt and navy captain's hat made him the perfect image of a real live sailor. He glanced down at her and smiled warmly.

She realized the yacht log was still open in her lap. They both laughed a shy laugh. She was an invader in his corner of the world, but he wanted to let her know that she was welcome anyway. The warmth of day lingered, distilled or his clothing with the smell of the beach emanating from their crisply clean lines. She wanted to stay idling in the safety of his confident wake, but she feared that if she stayed too long breathing in the breadth of his happiness, that it might desert him and cling to her, not making her feel the wondrous things that he did but simply sticking to her back as another symbol of what she believed she couldn't have.

After the girl with the large, sad but polite eyes had deserted the chair near him he stared in the direction she had left with a mix of fascination and concern. Dreams hung in the air around her like fragile, star-shaped paper lanterns, but a heaviness anchored her heart so far beneath her that he guessed she had trouble finding feeling anymore.

The wind took up her hair like a black pirate flag as she leaned on the cool gray stones of the bridge overlooking the water. There was a full moon that reflected

its amber light into ribboning streams of torn scarves on the water's surface. If she could've bottled the scene and worn it around her neck, it would've looked like liquefied tiger's eye and smelled sensual like a bon fire on Midsummer Night's Eve. Reaching down into the multi-colored Tibetan bag at her side, she drew out her tarot cards and shuffled them an odd number of times. The Moon. It was the dissolution of old ways. *Beware of illusion and wait for the light of day.* Exasperated, she tossed the card into the water. The pale moon on the face of the card was milky and faraway. Nothing like the strange amber-hued moor that drew close to stare back at her on the bridge. Face to face they studied each other. They were both rare. They had secrets.

'Why are you here?' seemed to be the question the moon asked.

Searching her mind for an answer, her attention was drawn to the embroidered material of her bag which her right hand held so tightly. The day she purchased it from the Tibetan gift shop was the day the rash started. They had been walking in the sun for an hour.

"Babe, what the hell is with your face?" She was caught off-guard by the question.

"What?"

"It's like some weird rash. Look- it's starting on your arms too."

The heat was creeping underneath her skin. She felt strange suddenly. The violent rash scared her enough to make her nauseous. They made their way over to a bench.

"Samantha, did you touch something, eat something you could be allergic to?"

Later, she would intimately understand why the Latin translation of inflammation meant "set on fire". With no answers, the rash faded and in its place, a dark stream of black vapor swept across her mind in the form of a depression that she couldn't explain or understand. To tell Eric about it was the equivalent of wearing a pentagram in seventeenth century Salem. He made of to the world that he was open-minded like she was, but the only one exempt from his judgment was himself. Samantha had called him to say that they needed to talk about something. He texted back that she could come down and meet him at the club with their friends.

She had thrown the phone at the wall. It was made clear that this was something intimate that she needed to discuss. To have it torn out of her in front of people who were far more his acquaintances than hers felt like betrayal. Falling into whatever was closing in on her had made her feel vulnerable enough. Not able to wait until the following Friday to speak with him, she grabbed her keys and got in the car.

The fuchsia and lime beams of light streaking bright, bold and bare across the dark interior of the club made her feel dizzy as she made her way to Eric's table. He was an upscale club promoter and kept company with the kinds of young men and women whose emotional maturity had capped off somewhere in junior high. Samantha had fallen into step with Eric's life through her love for music and the art world. Initially, everything had seemed exciting to a girl from the country. He had a certain way that he set his shoulders, a certain scent, and a certain smile of power and prestige. They met through the advertizing agency she worked at.

At the moment, she was busy stirring her pink straw around in her drink to avoid the table's conversation of recent hook-ups and petty internet smear campaigns. The word "like" was only used a hundred times in the span of five minutes. But who was counting? A girl named Rhea with a clear caramel complexion and wild auburn hair had slid into the booth with them wearing hot pink earrings and tall black boots with a chic vintage sheath dress. Eager to change the conversation a bit, Samantha sat forward to pay Rhea a compliment on her fashion. "I love your outfit tonight; it looks great with Bridget Bardot hairstyle. You look beautiful." Rhea smiled with the venom hiding behind her lips, and narrowed her eyes in Samantha's direction. "Damn f*&\$ing straight, I do." With that she edged closer to the other girls present and turned her back.

Eric patted Sam's thigh under the table. "So what did you need to talk to me about?" The table fell silent and all eyes fell upon her.

"It's not important."

"I thought you said-"

"I mean that it obviously isn't important to you." Amidst the murmuring and stares, she rose to leave. She needed the cold air outside like a drink of water after a week in the desert. Eric followed close behind.

"So what was that all about? Did you come down here just to embarrass me in front of them?"

Sam whipped around and in doing so nearly flung her purse at his head. "Embarrass you?!"

The amber moon was still listening as she stood on the bridge thinking back to everything that had led her up to that moment. It was getting cooler and the thin sweater she was wearing over a white tank top wasn't enough to keep her warm. Still, she hadn't answered the question yet. *I'm here*, she whispered to her sole audience, *because Fate put me here...*

It was almost nine when she put her key in the door. Her first appointment was with June at ten. With a flourish of her hands, an indigo scarf floated up into the air and landed squarely upon the small round table in her living room. Carefully, she coaxed out the scent of the patchouli incense with the licking flame of her lighter. White candles on the table surface called out the moon through the skylight above. She knew that she needed to clear her mind before she was able to read. Also, she needed to pull out a replacement deck on account of tossing the Moon into the river. Water filled the sink quickly. Just a dash of sea salt would do to rinse the past away tonight. First her hands, then her mind, felt lighter washed clean of memories. It was now nine-thirty. She dried her hands on the amethyst colored towel and consulted her date book. It would be a full night. Bedtime wouldn't come too soon at sunrise.

June shuffled her feet outside on the lit doorstep of the small white cottage with the dusky purple hydrangeas chasing up the trellis. She dropped her son Austin off at soccer five days a week. Loral, her five year old, did tap dance. June served on the PTA. It didn't seem quite right that she would be standing outside at ten o'clock at night with a thin denim jacket thrown over her pj's waiting for a tarot reading. Her light carnation hued bunny slippers bumped heads with one another as her feet jumped around. Yes, this was strange at first glance, but then again it wasn't, June reasoned. Samantha was something special. She had known that ever since she'd first hired her to work at the ad agency. If it hadn't been for the disease and all of the damage it had done...

The door swung open. Samantha had an ethereal beauty about her in the candlelight. June stepped over the threshold and stood off to the side clutching her jacket and staring in Sam's direction.

"June... You know I love you, but you're doing it again. Pity equals shitty-remember?"

"I know, honey, I'm sorry. Um...you look gorgeous. As usual. How are things?"

"I think I'll take up yachting."

"What?!" June stood bug-eyed and incredulous with all of the serious reasons against such a thing ready to burst from her throat until she realized that Sam was kidding.

"Right. And Bill and I want to take up parasailing. All my cellulite will be flying high visible to the world and my sixty year old husband can watch his reddened beer gut reflected in the waves."

"Now there's a thought... Here, June. Take a seat and get comfy. Did you know it was a full moon tonight?"

"No, can't say that I did. Where do you find out that sort of thing?"

"It's very mysterious. My Lang calendar tells me."

They burst into a fit of giggles until Sam took on a more serious look and got up to set the time on the stove. She shuffled the cards once, handing them to June. June shuffled them seven times, her lucky number and handed them

back to Sam who held them for a moment and then spread them out on the table. June chose one card at a time as Sam took them and placed them into her nine card spread of choice.

“Are we asking specifics tonight or is this an ‘en general’?”

June hesitated. “You choose, Sam. I... I don’t know if I want to know.”

Sam went card by card, assembling a picture in the air in front of her with each puzzle piece. In the way that they say those who lose a sense have stronger sensory perception in their other senses, she gained strengths from the night when she lost the day. Vibrations, auras, and other people’s energies made themselves available to her in a tangible way that she had never quite experienced to that extent before.

Sam sighed. “Not this year, June.”

June’s shoulders slumped. They had been aggressively trying to get their son Austin into a prestigious prep school.

“...and tell Bill not to go on the trip up North.”

“What trip?”

Sam just looked at June. “When it comes, and it will, say no. Trust me.”

June got up quickly and grabbed her keys. “Thanks, sweetie. I’ll call you.”

Sam didn’t always like what she saw but she had always had the gift. When she was a child, it started with her dreams. As she matured, she could call on it during the day. On her first day of work at the ad agency, she and June were heading toward the elevator for an early lunch. June had hired Sam, but they didn’t know each other very well yet and each was headed in different directions for lunch, except for the elevator to the lobby. June looked at her watch and sighed. Finally, the triangle on the wall turned red on the fifth floor. The elevator doors opened. June went to step forward, but a small, firm hand on her shoulder stopped her. Embarrassed and flushed, Sam tried to explain her “feeling”, but June wasn’t sold until the front desk called to say that some worn cables had come loose and an empty elevator car had crashed all the way down to the basement from the fifth floor. Sam begged June not to tell anyone about her ability. It seemed to June that she was almost ashamed of what was in her eyes an incredibly rare, life-altering talent.

Sam did her keep her gift a secret for most of her life, having been judged harshly already by a few hypocritical church goers in her small town. The same people who sat side by side on Sunday would hurt each other all week long. She didn’t understand it so she stopped attending services and kept God close to her in her own regard. She depended on faith and the divine to help her protect and use her gift in the world. She prayed for guidance the day she was diagnosed.

Eric had stayed the night and was there when she received the phone call that would change her life. A full blood count revealed the reason behind the fevers, the aching joints, sudden anemia, the rashes, the behavioral changes and the drastic sun sensitivity. It was a predisposition in her age, gender, and hormones that had made her more susceptible. However, the condition was blamed on her body’s reaction to the sun. It was very rare, they explained. Only thirty percent experienced a Systemic Lupus like this.

During the hours when the sun was strongest, even a sixty second walk to her garden and back had to be prohibited. She felt like Persephone, the daughter of the Greek goddess Demeter, taken by force to the darkness of the Underworld to be a bride of Hades. They worried about the high fevers...inflammation of brain’s blood vessels...complications.... She had to quit work. They would start her on Plaquenil. If it worsened, there were high dose corticosteroids, and immunosuppressive medications with serious side effects. Clinical trials involved stem cell research, DHEA, and Rituxan.

The condition was a result of the body not being able to discern foreign substances from its own cells and tissues. The body would make antibodies to fight itself. War was declared inside of her and she hadn’t even known about it. The phone was on the floor and the doctor was still speaking. She had her arms wrapped around her legs as she lowered her head to cry. Eric took up the phone. It was a mistake and she knew it, but she didn’t care. He wouldn’t stick

around for this anyway.

"Babe- I don't know what to say. This is... I mean... I work night shifts..."

"You work night shifts? That's what you have to say to me right now when I don't know if I'll live to see thirty?.. You're an idiot. I don't even mean it in a malicious way. You're a selfish idiot and this is hard so I have complete compassion and understanding for you. Now get out."

He looked as if he might've kissed her goodbye in the confusion, but elected not to and retreated as though she had the plague. Without his paying half of the living expenses and her with no job, all she had to turn to was her hidden gift that could be accessed in the dark hours of the moon and still give her a connection to the outside world. Developing a tarot reading business out of her living room wouldn't be easy, but she came fresh faced from the advertising world and her creative mind was resourceful. If all she had was a piece of cardboard and the red lipstick in her purse, she'd find a way to drum up business out of it. That was how her world turned itself over to its new nocturnal incarnation.

It had been two hours and many customers since June. The next appointment on her list was surprising. Connie Wilder. Connie had come at midnight the second week Sam was in business. Full of optimism and hope in her wide brown eyes, she placed the money to the side and told Sam that she wanted a reading on her future. Family, in particular. Sam handed her the cards. Once they were handed back, she spread them out in a fan shape and let Connie's hand guide her to the predicted outcome of her fate. Connie smiled broadly. Sam scanned the cards even though she already knew the wish of the woman seated in front of her. She also already knew the answer.

"Are you certain you want to know?"

"Absolutely." The smile didn't waver.

"No."

"No to what?" The fear had entered her eyes because she understood the answer better than she was willing to admit.

"I know what you came to ask. You won't conceive children."

"Oh, but that's now. See, my husband and I just started looking into fertility experts and different methods...you wouldn't believe the medical options out there...it's so advanced... Just- just do it again."

The timer had rung and time was up but Sam obliged her. Connie shuffled again with the same smile but her hands shook.

Sam re-read the cards. She didn't want to look up but she had to.

"When?" Connie asked clasping her hands tightly.

Sam had tears in the corners of her eyes. She shook her head.

At first the woman jerked forward as though she was choking. She shivered even in the heat of summer. Sam went to embrace her. The woman stilled. Quite suddenly she pulled away and slapped Samantha in the face.

"It isn't true!" she exclaimed, grabbing her things and running out the door.

Sam mused that she just might need a good slap in the face so Connie's visit wouldn't go unappreciated. Again, she rang the bell at midnight. Sam opened the door to see a thinner, paler version of the woman she'd seen last year. Connie flashed an apology in her eyes and shyly brushed past Samantha to go into the living room.

Once settled, Sam set aside the cards and asked Connie to give her her hands. The woman hesitated but eventually obliged. Both women closed their eyes. Sam smiled. A three year old boy with copper hair and brown eyes was running across an expansive lawn in front of a white Victorian house. He had an old-fashioned sled trailing behind him with a teddy bear tied onto it. He couldn't wait for the snow. He'd never seen it before.

Sam released Connie's hands. Connie regarded her nervously.

"Sometimes, when you release one desire, another one comes to take its place. One more meant for you. I see a little boy already born. He's three years old with reddish hair and he's never seen snow before. He's taking an old-fashioned sled across a huge yard in front of a white Victorian..."

Connie was laughing and crying with her hand over her mouth. "That's my house!"

"He's never seen snow before..."

"My husband's family lives in Florida. We're teachers going there on sabbatical for three months..."

"Try an adoption agency while you're there. You may need to stay with your husband's family longer during proceedings even if your husband has to come home here first."

"I'm... I'm sorry about-"

"You don't need to be. There are few of us who can immediately accept the changes we're forced to make."

Connie rose with extended arms. Sam pushed back her chair and stood to walk over to her. Everything faded to black as she fell, Connie catching her head just before it hit the hardwood floor.

June was there every day for the week that Sam spent in the hospital over her first seizure. Sam had to have a special room because the florescent lights would set off the rash. Nurses were forbidden to draw back the curtains until sunset.

Ever since June had come home with the story of the young girl saving her from the elevator, Bill had learned to refrain from analytical comment or judgment when it came to Samantha. His wife trusted her and that was good enough for him even though he didn't put much stock in things of that nature. Thus, when his boss asked him to go to Vermont and his wife screamed that he couldn't, he didn't bat an eye. It was an unnecessary trip that he didn't particularly care to go on and he had enough seniority in the company to get out of it.

It was heading swiftly toward July and Bill was happy to be home with June. She was tired and even though Samantha was recovering at home, it was still a trying, upsetting time for them. He wanted to support his wife and in his removed male way, he also secretly wanted to have a little part in Sam's recovery. He thought that he might drop off some groceries to Sam's house after he went to the garage to check on his car. He'd take June's SUV because he'd dropped off his BMW for its annual inspection.

Pulling out of the auto garage parking lot, the engine of the SUV started to buck. Pink fluid was leaking out. The mechanics had a good laugh at the circumstance of a car breaking down right in the garage lot. Bill was shaken as he climbed out and slammed the door. A young man in a blue oxford button down saw the incident through the large glass window of the waiting room adjacent to the garage and walked over to Bill to offer him a cup of coffee from the waiting room's steady supply. Bill accepted and mumbled his gratitude. With June home asleep on the couch, his BMW in the shop, and, what luck, his cell phone resting at home on his dresser, he had no idea how he'd get home. He swore. The stranger beside him laughed.

"Do you need a ride or something?"

At sixty, he was a cautious man, wise, he guessed, of the world's ways and it was not a normal inclination of his to accept a ride from a stranger. Nonetheless, he said 'yes' with an "Oh, f#\$% it!" attitude.

Kyle explained to the older gentleman that his car would be ready in five minutes or so they had told him. He could see that this man clearly wanted to get home and get the day over with, so he made sure to stand in the door of the waiting room dangling his keys to speed up the process. As they took off in Kyle's vintage T-bird convertible, Kyle saw the man beside him gripping the hand-holds of the door, tight fisted. He slowed down to just below speed limit and asked for the remaining directions toward his passenger's home.

Bill knew that it was beyond foolish to want even for a moment to hold back his address from the man driving him home. Why walk five extra blocks out of paranoia when he was already so tired? He surmised with a solemn shake of his head that he was getting old.

June looked out the window from her comfortable place on the provincial blue damask couch when the sound of the engine came into the driveway. It didn't sound like her Ford. When she saw Bill with a scowl on his face getting out of the vintage convertible with a stranger, she bit back a laugh and understood that this must be attached a good story. She opened the door and leaned against the frame with the hint of a smirk on her face.

"What has he done and how much will it cost?"

Kyle joined the woman standing against the doorway in a momentary chuckle which died out with her husband's frown.

"He rescued me, but you'll never guess what happened..."

June imagined she might, but wanted to let Bill tell the story in his aggravated fashion.

"Lemonade for all parties involved?"

Kyle said yes before glancing at Bill to see if it would be alright. Feeling a touch presumptuous, he hung back. Bill waved him forward. They made their way to the couple's sunroom as June prepared the pitcher and selected the glasses with the hand-painted sailboats on them. She sat across from Bill in the wicker chair against the wall facing the windows and asked the men to share their tale.

"I swear, June, I'm so glad I didn't go. Your SUV might've done that on the highway... What if you had been in an accident? I wouldn't have been home... What if you had been stranded?"

"I told you, I trust Sam with my life."

Kyle waited for a polite pause and then interjected with the question of who "Sam" was.

"Is he your mechanic?"

Bill and June laughed together at the image of the petite girl working in an auto repair environment.

"No... She is my reader. A former employee of mine but now she runs her own business out of her home working with her incredible gift. I can't imagine her doing more meaningful work. She's helped so many people. I'm not as skeptical of those things as Bill is, but she's the real article and I love her for it."

"Wow," Kyle reclined back in his seat and took a deep swig of his lemonade as he contemplated the questions he had in his mind about finishing his degree or taking off with the band he had formed back at the beginning of college. They weren't spectacular musicians, but they had something. "Could I have her card? I've never heard of anyone being good enough to go to. Normally you hear about it like it's a Halloween novelty. I'd love to see someone who's seriously into it."

June let him leave with her gratitude about Bill and Sam's phone number. It seemed fitting in a way she couldn't understand.

Ten past one and her appointment still hadn't showed. If it hadn't been for June calling ahead and praising this guy, she wouldn't even have scheduled him till next week. A soft breeze came through the window brushing the long bangs off of her forehead just as a noisy engine came roaring up the driveway. Thank God her immediate neighbors were so old that they were mostly deaf.

His hands were trembling as she held them. He couldn't look her straight in the eye or else risk becoming completely spellbound. Whatever happened to the image of a ninety year old Madame Zulahoop with the jewel tone scarves wrapped around her head and thick, cakey black eye-shadow?

Her skin was warm to the touch and her eyes stared straight inside of him. For

propriety's sake, he prayed she couldn't read minds.

"I see two snakes intertwined. The cards say you already know the answer to the question your heart asks."

She released his hands quickly because she could see the red and orange light streams flowing from them. He regarded her passionately and the red manifested itself outward in the form of a blush on her cheeks.

He swallowed nervously with wide, horrified eyes as she shyly turned away from him. Could she read his mind?

"Thank you... um... for what you said. It totally resonates with me. I know I want to be a doctor and this really just helps clarify everything. I mean... what you do ...it's amazing... You can really see all that?"

"It's not only what I see, but what the cards say."

"Do the cards say that maybe I'd like to take you to dinner... sometime... anytime... at all?"

Her blush deepened as she smiled with her eyes turned away. She'd felt hidden from the world all this time and wondered if she remembered what to do and say.

"Well, let's ask, shall we?"

She shuffled the cards three times for luck and fanned them out on the table. Drawing her fingertip to the inevitable, she drew out a card. She didn't have to turn it over to see what it was. It wasn't the Lovers card. It didn't have to be that plain. It was the World. The world was coming back to her. It's definition included a redressing of wrongs, joy after pain and hardness.

He waited with the anticipation boiling inside of him until she whispered that the cards were in his favor.

It took her awhile to reveal her illness to him, but in time he accepted the changes to his life with open arms. She was eligible for clinical trials and was doing well with treatment thus far.

Standing with her hand in his aboard the yacht a friend had lent him for the evening, they stared at another amber full moon. She reflected back on one of her favorite moments during the beginning of their relationship before he knew about her particular ailment. He had bought her a musical card for their two week anniversary. When she opened it, the chorus sang, "You are the sunshine in my life..."

It was ironic but humorous in a way that allowed her to cope with what she'd been through. At her instance despite his deep apologies once he knew about the disease, that was their chosen couple song. It was playing softly in the background now as they danced beneath the moon that remembered how she'd once told it that Fate had put her there. Now she had the Navigator's Choice and was aiming fearlessly at the horizon.

Kiss Me

By Lisa Rusczyk

She's got the whiskey bottle over her head and I'm worried she's going to spill it. I should know better. Kacey was a dancer in school, never lost that balance. She's spinning in a circle singing some song about California. It stopped playing out the car windows five minutes ago and the only sound in the parking lot is her voice and the clicking of her clogs on the pavement as she dances. She says, "Come on, Pinker, you're not tired, are you?"

The bar closes soon and the go-home lights are on inside, which Kacey says makes everyone look like zombies. That's why we're out here. I say, "Sick of dancing. Let's get out of here."

"We have half a bottle. Let's go out to the wildlife refuge."

She's carefree riding shotgun with the open whiskey balanced between her thighs and we make it out to the spot on the gravel road in what feels like no

time. She's been playing that same California song over and over, singing off-key now and grinning with what I call her Kacey glaze-face. She's got some plan. It will just take a few more tips of the bottle and the sound of the woods and its night critters to get it out her lips.

"Let's go down to the river tonight. I don't want to sit in the car," she says, opening her door, feet crunching on the road.

"Thank you."

"You think you can escape the song that way. But I can sing it all night, remember that." But she doesn't sing it anymore.

We walk holding hands down the trail we know by heart. Don't need flashlights. We have the half-full moon and the light of memory to take us there. We stop on the bridge over the river, a little red wooden thing with names and dates etched from walkway to railings, and on one day-trip Kacey hung her head over the edge of it and carved her name on the underside with a beer lid. She was disappointed the mark had been claimed by someone else, but only one name. "Who is this 'Kiss Me?'" she'd asked, and one of her games when we were out here and there wasn't anything to talk about was to try and figure out who'd had the same idea as she'd had and why they'd signed with that tag.

Tonight she sticks her legs out through the railing posts and swigs the whiskey, hands it to me. I hit it up too, feeling warm and happy. I sit next to her and she's quiet, unusually so. I don't ask why. The silence is nice and I light up a smoke.

After a while, the glaze goes away and she's sharp as ever, changed once more. Like she always does. Her changing is so usual that were she to stay the same I'd be worried. And, I admit, a little bored.

"California," she starts. And on it goes. She talks about the West coast, L.A., San Diego, wonders if the ocean is purple, even. I think she's trying to get me to laugh with that one, but I can tell there's something behind all this and I'm waiting for it when she says, "Let's go. Let's just go tonight. Let's get back in the car and take all our money out of the ATM and go."

"To California?"

"Sure, to Cali."

"Cali, now, is it?"

"You know you want to."

I think about that. My gut pulls on me to jump in the driver's seat, but there's something different to her moonlit eyes tonight. She's asking something for real and I'm not sure what it is.

"What about our jobs?"

"My job is shit. Your job is, too. We could just go. Come on, Pinker."

My job isn't shit, although I might complain about it to her sometimes. But that's what people do. We complain. We talk about stuff that doesn't really matter just to fill air. I'm talking to Kacey, though, I have to remember, and maybe Kacey doesn't do that much like other people. She means what she says and it's what she's thinking one hundred percent. It's something she doesn't get about other people, how we are all fine. We complain and it's as simple as that. I tell her so here on the bridge and she spits in the river.

"Come on," she says. "Don't you want to be somewhere where things happen differently?"

"I'd like to visit," I tell her. And that's the truth. I don't think much more about it and we split the rest of the bottle talking about people we know. Gossiping. We gossip, sure, and it's nice. I've never gossiped with anyone else and probably never will. Still, she keeps staring out at the water and it's like her heart's not in it.

Soon we take off back up the path, but she's not holding my hand on the way up. She plays the California song again and again on the way back to her apartment. I pull into a parking spot and kiss her neck and wonder if this will be one of the

nights we mess around, but it isn't. I'm a little frustrated, but amused. That's just Kacey. You never know.

She says, "Pinker, remember that cat you used to have?"

"Moses?"

"Remember how he would ignore you then you'd wake up with him on your chest every morning?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you think he didn't pay any attention to you when you were awake?"

"I thought he was a typical cat. That's the kind of thing cats do."

"No," she says, "That was him. That was his personality. I think he was afraid you wouldn't want to pet him so he never came up to you when you were aware of him. Wouldn't it suck to be ignored?"

"He was just a cat."

"Kiss," she says, smiling slightly, and leaves the car. I watch her walk away.

The next morning I'm tired and the whiskey's made my mouth taste like I licked the inside of a cheap bottle of bathroom cleaner. I get ready for work and go out to my car. I feel pretty good and under the wiper on my windshield I see a CD. It's got to be from Kacey. She does stuff like this.

I pull out of my parking lot and pop in the CD. It's the California song and I have to grin, thinking of her flat singing. Then the song ends and I don't know how she did it - she knows about computers pretty well - but there's her voice and she says, "I'm blowing this town, just like I said I was. You know I'll miss you most, Pinker. I'll call you from Cali."

Has she really gone? Kacey's impulsive, but I guess it's some kind of joke.

I call her after work and her roommate answers. Kacey's really gone. Took off with a suitcase and a wad of cash. Her roommate's pissed. Left all the bills and a vacant room and can I tell Kacey to go to hell when I hear from her?

It's a week later when she calls and I'm so mad at her that I hang up when I hear her voice. She calls back and I listen this time and she says I was the only one who would understand, and why was I being so cold, and I was supposed to go with her, didn't I get it?

I tell her, "This is your home."

"That's it?" she says. "That's all you've got for me? That's not my home. I have no home."

Kacey has family and friends here, and I point all that out to her, but she's a hard wall now. I have become one of the enemies that made her want to go off and find some new world. Soon she hangs up with a distant, "Call you again, and don't be so mad at me, okay? You'll get over it."

It's been months and I haven't heard from her. I know she's okay because her sister is in touch with her and tells me what she's up to. She's working at some club and doing free art work for one of those local entertainment magazines. Maybe Kacey found whatever it is she's looking for, but I can't know until she comes back here and tells me about it. She says this isn't her home, but what am I?

I keep thinking about the time we met in art class in high school. We were paired together to do a model of the city bridge. She wanted to do it with toothpicks and I said it would take too long, that I just wanted a grade the easiest way possible. She said I was lazy, but she grinned and looked like a little devil. Those pretty lips and those crooked teeth. There was always something about her. We built our bridge out of toothpicks and it was a disaster. The whole time we worked on it I hinted I wanted to take her to prom, but whenever I brought it up she'd say prom was for dorks. Now I think she didn't get what I was saying, but that's for the best. We wouldn't have become such good friends if we'd gone that way. It's weird how different I felt about her when I first met

her and then it changed. I guess I changed, but she never did.

Tonight I'm going out to the wildlife refuge alone. It's late and there's a full moon and I just want to get out of town for an hour or so.

Out at the bridge, I smoke and sip a beer and watch the stars, wondering about Kacey. I fiddle with the lighter in my pocket, then hang upside down on the bridge and light the flame to read where she wrote her name. I fiddle with the lighter in my pocket, then hang upside down on the bridge and light the flame to read where she wrote her name. Yet instead of finding 'Kacey' carved beneath the bridge, I see the infamous 'Kiss me' with my name following it and a date from ten years ago. 'Kiss me, Pinker..' It's the first time I ever actually bothered to look under the bridge. The blood rushes to my head as my body is suspended and it seems that the entire world is upside down with me. Now I get it and she's gone. The flame is out.

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